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Problems with Comparative Poetics

Earl Miner has written a *Comparative Poetics*, perhaps the first sustained attempt at a truly intercultural account.¹ His subtitle, *An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature*, focuses more closely on the matter and manner of this innovative book, since it announces a preliminary discussion of existing theories of literature. These theories are themselves understood in terms of explicit but also of implicit poetics, and viewed across a range of cultures.

This is therefore not an attempt to propose a new intercultural or universal poetics nor to consider a comparative poetics in the light of recent developments in literary theory. It is, instead, an historical and comparative account of long existing poetic systems, though these are in part teased out of their literary practices or, as I will argue, imposed upon them, rather than based on or abstracted out of systematic analysis.

Such a comparative poetics can perhaps be regarded in two ways: as a historical account of how writing has been shaped, or how theorists believe it ought to have been and, secondly, as a guide to reading that writing. In this intercultural account, the poetic systems themselves derive from what Miner calls "foundational" genres. These genres therefore shape the nature of all expression and hence the fundamental expectations of what is culturally possible. Miner's perspective therefore implies a universal history of the culturally imaginable. Reading is dependent on the generic assumptions that have shaped the writing. But in Miner's account, this reading is then given no space to contest those assumptions. Reading therefore becomes a function of the assumptions and hence we have to ask what they presuppose and what consequences they produce. The major contrasting examples are taken from Western (mostly English) and East Asian (mostly Japanese) writing.

The book is full of specific insights gained through a lifetime of comparative literary study, but it also raises at least two particular and rather troubling sets of questions. One of these sets is internal and the other external to the arguments in the text. The internal problems derive from the structure of Miner's

1 Earl Miner, *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. Pp. 259. Paper US\$37.50.

arguments and specifically from the fundamental premise which sustains that structure, from linking all Western drama to the foundational mimetic expectations governing Western poetics and literature which are derived from drama. I believe this foundational premise to be flawed, and since this flaw occurs on so basic a level, its consequences spread through the whole of his book. The external problems relate to the nature of the whole enterprise: the assumption that literature can be best explained by formal, normative, conscious, clarified poetics based on an apparently universal principle of philosophical realism.

We cannot deny that such poetics exist, but their relationship to the production of writing cannot be so easily taken for granted and they themselves, since they are not self-generated, stand in need of explanation. If a poetics does not properly clarify or explain, it is simply another theory of literary production or interpretation that rationalizes a preference without an adequate awareness of its own determinants. An explicit poetics implies a deductive procedure, arguing that writing is shaped according to certain acceptable preestablished criteria, while an implicit poetics suggests an inductive gathering of insufficiently theorized principles from particular examples of writing.

This study does not ask: how do these activities of writing and reading, of representation and interpretation cohere, what ends do they serve in Western culture, unless those ends are assumed to be mimetic? Nor does it sufficiently test a range of exemplary writing in relation to those preposited, foundational genre-based theories, preferring, instead, to see it either as illustrations of them or as unsatisfactory infringements of their normative expectations.

So we need to ask two kinds of question: firstly about the internal consistency of the arguments deployed in this intercultural poetics and, secondly about their anthropological status, which is to say about their usefulness in describing and interpreting the human behaviour we encounter, which is this writing and reading of texts.

Miner's fundamental argument, salutary in particular for a Western-trained critic, provided of course that it is true, holds that the dominant Western understanding of literature is the exception rather than the rule, if we contemplate a global poetics. Instead of being universal and hence necessarily at the centre of explanation, such Western presuppositions are particularly to their culture and marginal in global terms. I find this approach analytically attractive and the marginalisation of the presumed centre impeccably deconstructive. Miner, however, views the implications of deconstructive analysis for the security of authorship and of subject positions as quite incompatible with his own views.

Another attractive corollary to his supposition is that all attempts by non-Western critics to justify their own culture's literary practices in terms of Western criteria, considered either universal or representing a desired modernity and for that reason automatically more prestigious, are based on a shaky

premise. This might help to question all those books and articles which try to prove that there is, indeed, a Chinese form of tragedy or pastoral or post-modernism etc. and that they are all naturally no less worthy of attention than their Western counterparts.

We have seen that the poetics which help to organize macrocultural systems, such as Western literature, themselves derive from generic forms of writing whose principles they theorize. A dominant and unexamined assumption in Miner's study is that these theories correctly describe the formal properties which structure that writing, since literature is an autonomous aesthetic realm, but that they also establish and define the relationship between writing and referent.

The basic distinction between Western and East Asian poetics is said to result from the fact that Western poetics are governed by mimetic assumptions, formulated by Aristotle, which are derived from and also constitute the genre of drama, while most of the world's other poetics rest on the affective-expressive assumptions which are seen as shaping the genre of lyric: on the one hand, truth primarily to an independent and objectifiable external reality and on the other, to the internal emotions of the reader or writer.

Behind these propositions which should in theory be capable of empirical verification, though this is never simple because of the difficulty in establishing the full implications of culturally specific critical attitudes and terms, lies however this other agenda: Miner's supposition that "philosophical realism" is a necessary precondition to meaningful writing and reading. My main objection does not lie with the principle itself, which can be very abstractly envisaged, for example as a simple assertion that there is a world beyond the writing or the subject and without which neither subject nor writing can exist, but with the way the doctrine of the real is understood and used as a means of reading texts.

I believe there are consequential and serious confusions about the nature of writing and reading and they stem from a *preference* for a particular interpretation of philosophical realism, which sanctions a conventional and restrictive practice of reading and a view of literature that obscures its own ideological investment. This agenda becomes visible in the form of surprising assumptions about the capacity of certain forms, about necessary attitudes towards appreciating them and in particular judgments about individual works. Let me therefore begin this critique with the particular, with specific assertions and readings, in order to determine what suppositions have produced them and how those suppositions relate to the fundamental premise of the foundational genres.

Mimesis implies imitation of a pre-given external referent. One can only imitate what is already there. But drama *pretends* to represent. Its representation *pretends* to be this referent. An actor plays a character. Miner cites Brecht's alienation theory as evidence for the estrangement which is necessarily the consequence of drama's inevitable fictionality, since its representations always

pretend to be what they are not, namely reality itself. Estrangement is essential to drama because it visibly fictionalises fact or reality. Estrangement is therefore a condition of *mimesis*. This analytical move both stresses the underlying importance or inevitability of *mimesis*, as the imitation of reality, while assuming that it is perpetually condemned to fictionality or mimetic failure. Aristotle's *mimesis*, imitation or representation of reality, is the principle that both structures the foundational genre of Western poetics and secures the efficacy of such representation, because it is based on philosophical realism.

Though Western poetics, resting on dramatic *mimesis*, may be the global exception, the affective-expressive poetics of other cultures, based upon the lyric genre, are also, for Miner, characterized by philosophical realism, and by a belief in the factuality of reference.² So we could say that for Miner there are apparently paradoxical consequences. The inevitable fictionality of dramatic *mimesis* is saved by the presumption that it is always located in relation to a theoretically "knowable" reality, even if it fails itself to be that reality, while the presumption of factuality underlying a more transparently fictional or adventurous East Asian poetics automatically secures this necessary relationship with the real. I must pursue these questions, but let me first return to Brecht.

It seems surprising to call on Brecht as a witness for the efficacy of Aristotelian *mimesis*, since Brecht developed his theatre in conscious opposition to Aristotle's theories. Brecht called his an *anti-Aristotelian* theatre. He opposed the Aristotelian insistence on the need to arouse pity and fear in the spectator and by the process of *catarsis* to purge or purify the emotions. Brecht was also suspicious of the related mimetic ends of the conventional theatre, the employment of psychological verisimilitude, the careful imitation of actual behaviour, which so arouses these emotions. This imitation of the surface of appearances or events almost always conceals deeper structures of feeling, covers up the workings of the unconscious and so fails to uncover the complexity of the social and cultural structuring of subjectivity.

To recapitulate, Miner sees the estrangement of drama as operating like this: it offers as real what we know to be only fictional, therefore it estranges, even as it represents. It is, he argues: "a cognitive, potentially pleasurable violation of the real by the fictional" (40). Therefore for Miner dramatic performance depends upon the convincing recreation of a preposited reality, and not upon an exploitation of its acknowledged, or I should better say repressed, fictionality because to acknowledge openly this fictionality would be to destroy *mimesis*. Though we connive at the pretence we secretly know this representation to be false, but constantly strive to ignore this fact. Drama, according to these

prescriptions, must find its philosophical justification in mimetic realism and offer as exact an imitation of actual behaviour as possible. Anything which interrupts this dramatic illusion is therefore automatically a source of distress. Miner observes: "The soliloquy, the stage whisper, the aside are perpetually in danger of sounding false. The closer we are to the front seats, the more the paint and wig and saliva are obvious" (40).³ My point here is not that Miner does not know that these suppositions are culturally relative, because he argues this quite eloquently, but that he supposes they are fundamental to Western drama. In the process, *mimesis* has also become equated with exact replication, with that theatrical style which has been so influential in film and television (48).

He argues: "Brecht realized that the conventional estranging of the theatre he inherited might continue to distance audiences from what they beheld and heard" (49). Brecht wanted to see things afresh and, Miner adds, "properly, as he thought" (49). By this analysis, Brecht's method or practice was right, even if his politics were wrong, because he wanted to estrange that estrangement, which consists of a fictional (mis-)representation of reality, and to distance audiences from the performance in order to show them reality itself, which in his case unfortunately took the form of an erroneous political truth.

But none of this is right. Brecht found the Aristotelian theatre not too estranging but all too familiar for the audience. He wanted to shift that sense of the familiar. The paradox is that Miner believes in the mimetic credibility of fictional representation: it is an illusion but you believe in it and it shows you a truth. Whereas Brecht's position implies: because representation is not an illusion, because it is not fully mimetic but rather an acknowledged artifice, because it does not hide this artificiality, it may enable us to discover something useful. At issue here is both the nature of that discovery and the relationship between text and reader.

Miner's contradictory mimetic assumptions — a repressed fictionality of performance uncovers objective truth guaranteed by philosophical realism — are apparent in the observation that representation in the media cannot produce the effect of theatre which depends on this secret knowledge of its inauthenticity. In radio, television and film: "we simply are not in the players' immediate presence, participating with them in the estranged shock of present awareness that 'they' are not who *they* are but 'we' are who *we* are" (48). We are coming closer to what seems to me the central issue: the nature of the relationship

3 Miner also disapproves of eating chocolates when watching Shakespeare. But these disruptions of the illusion of reality in the theatre have nothing at all to do with philosophical realism, with the belief that the world exists objectively beyond our consciousness and can be adequately grasped through language. Miner confuses philosophical realism with a particular representational style, with naturalism in the theatre and the all-consuming creation of an illusion of everyday life controlled by the presuppositions of ego-psychology.

2 "It is striking that the affective-expressive and the mimetic poetics do share what may be termed a prior presumption. Both have traditionally held to the philosophically realist ground that the world is real and knowable" (Miner 25).

between text, interpretation and subjectivity, which is to say the politics of reading that structures Miner's analysis.

It is clear from the passage I have just quoted that for Miner the position of the audience or interpreting reader of a play is secure. If the ontological status of those characters who are really actors is dubious, if "they" may perhaps not be "they," at least "we" know that "we" are "we." It is this security of subject position that gives us the authority and ability to place the representation or text and judge its mimetic credibility, which is put in hazard by its fictionality but is ultimately anchored by its truth to an objectively verifiable reality. Aesthetic pleasure or displeasure derives from this tension between fiction and fact.

But in this mimetic realism the fictionality always threatens the truth of representation. It is the representation which is endangered, not the observing reader whose position is secure, and this representation is measured against the truth of the represented. This capacity to represent the truth, an objective reality which lies beyond the representation, constitutes the basis for *mimesis*. Its credibility depends upon this closeness to reality. What matters is the relationship between representation and represented, between language and reality, between an imitation and an imitated. What seems to have been forgotten or repressed here is the position of the interpreter, viewer, audience, reader or subject, and the relationship between them and the representation, whose illusion is a function of the fact that it must always remain merely an approximation, and hence inadequate, to the objective truth.

Brecht's anti-Aristotelian assumptions indeed threaten the mimetic conventions of representation but they do so primarily in order to unsettle the audience. A switch of perspective has taken place. What is at issue is not the truth of the represented, endangered by an always inadequate representation, but the security of the interpreting audience or, we could say, of the reader's subject position which is itself perceived as constructed by the mimetic conventions of representation.

So to ask about the politics of reading is to question the politics of representation that conventionally and unconsciously constructs its interpreters, because it is complicit with and itself perhaps directly engaged in a game of power. A new dynamic is thereby introduced by Brecht into the static position of the reader whose task, as conceived by mimetic theory, is merely to ascertain the closeness of representation to a preestablished truth and to be rendered more secure in the knowledge of that truth. Brecht's plays put the audience in jeopardy because that audience is forced or enticed into examining how it is itself constructed by representation. The method whereby the reader's understanding is created by the parameters of representation is called into question.

If we think of it in this way, such a theatre and its drama are not governed by mimetic credibility but, if we were to use Miner's terms, more by

affective-expressive criteria. What matters is how the interpreter is affected — and I do not mean emotionally excited — or structured and perhaps changed by the performance. We could say that in a play by Brecht the centre of attention is neither the represented, nor the representation, but the audience. Any reading must take these interrelationships into account.

Miner's text is rich in detail and does contain, inevitably, a number of mistakes. Some of these lapses are strange though trivial, as when he confuses the *Bhagavad Gita* with the *Mahabharata* (141). He compares the *Bhagavad Gita* and *The Tale of Genji*, observing that neither has a "neat, clear resolution" (141). We might perhaps expect in one, the Japanese *monogatari*, what we should not of the other, since it is merely a section of the longer narrative. He asserts that rhyme in Chinese poetry "is a distinction between level and deflected tones" (106). Of course such distinctions helped to structure Chinese verse, but rhyming syllables were also employed. There is another textual mistake that a Freudian reading of his text would have to consider deliberate, when Miner refers to Hamlet who "hopes to catch the conscious of Claudius" (97). Others are more evaluative in character and therefore do bear on the solidity of the general thesis. He employs Aristotelian typology, for example, in the context of a discussion of Japanese literature in asserting that narrative is "a nonperformed genre" (100). Novels are certainly nonperformed writing but narrative is not. Story-telling is narrative and it is also performance. Story-telling, *ping tan*, Japanese *joruri*, leading through to *Bunraku*, can only engage with narrative through performance. And it is precisely the breaking down of generic expectations, or the fact that they cannot be sustained except as prescribed ideal types, that makes writing and representation so unsettling and uncertain.

More significant are the following readings which all depend on the universalized generic presupposition of mimetic credibility which, even if we allow it an abstract validity, is then confused with particular stylistic expectations. Discussing Shakespeare's plays, Miner remarks: "Interpolations of lyrics or narratives abate the action of the play, whether we take action to be Aristotle's *mythos* or what the players usually do — act, as opposed to sing or narrate" (101f).

It is clear from this kind of language that Miner is discussing ideal types, not the actual practice of theatre and the effect and interpretability of that practice. What is here called "the action of the play," that is to say *mythos* or plot and acting, is interrupted by "lyrics or narratives." So dramatic performance regularly exceeds or contravenes the demands of *mimesis* which are fulfilled by the imitation of an action in the theatre, by Aristotle's plot which is, in a famous definition, the "end and purpose ... the life and soul" of drama (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450a). There is evidently something untoward here which should not be happening. *Mimesis* is jeopardized by performance, not because it is not, nor ever can be, what it seems to be, since performance is fictional and inadequate

to what it purports to represent, but because it contains components that cannot themselves be explained in mimetic terms, not even as a failure of *mimesis*. The foundational mimetic presuppositions are put at risk by the very genre which embodies them.

If the action of the play is so abated or delayed by interpolations and if that action is the mimetic essence that, starting from this dramatic genre, informs the whole of Western poetics, then the thought must occur that these poetics do not perhaps rest on a very secure foundation. If mimetic representation cannot easily bear such interruptions because its recognizability suffers, then the credibility of the realist premise must suffer too and its foundation in philosophical realism seems likely to be affected. Alternatively, that philosophical realism may be mismatched with the aesthetic activities it is supposed to ground.

Some of these interpolations which interrupt *mimesis* are also, and significantly, direct interpellations of the audience. They, as it were, face the other way, not into the play but out to the audience. Not part of the *mythos*, always according to this strictly mimetic reading, they are therefore separate from it. They do not remain within the plot; they speak directly to an audience that is otherwise supposed imaginary, meant to think it is not there, to consider itself merely the interpreter or function of the unfolding story. They draw attention to the artifice of representation, to what you are supposed to forget but never quite can.

Of course drama contains many such interruptions and plays embody various levels of action. Miner cites, for example, the several strands or levels in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and these levels must, he says, "retain their distinguishable identities." But these "integral and distinguishable, separate" parts are all "inserted into ... the general comedy of the high-born people" (101) and at that moment we are back with a *mimesis* that discretely governs the separable parts, and a need to integrate the whole work, instead of seeing those levels as questioning the politics of a mimetic coherence and the need of Theseus the Duke to insist on such coherence and to assert his authority over what threatens to dislodge him. In Miner's very formal analysis, the audience or readers have been forgotten. Their job in this poetics is to follow the play as it is allegedly unified by that "general comedy" of the high-born, implying a traditional reading, a ruler's view of events, and not to question themselves and their construction of it. But that is precisely what Shakespeare's text invites us to do, as it relativises the Duke's version of reality, which Puck dissolves into something much darker and less comic at the play's end. A nonmimetic reading does not allow the hierarchy of levels which underlies Miner's interpretation and shapes it, without his realizing it.

Miner defines narrative as "fulfilled continuity" and takes this as a universal demand of the genre which moves itself and the reader "to a replete fulfillment" (140). Does this not recall the aesthetically regressive epic wholeness which the

poetics of Lukács vainly pursued through the novel in a nostalgic attempt to unify experience and to recapture that integrity or repleteness which guarantees the meaning of a realism deemed philosophical? The critical language at least suggests a completeness guaranteed by the author and the unity he secures for the work, though such suppositions contrast oddly with the actual account Miner gives of the complexity of Japanese narrative, which seems to exceed or refute the evaluative criteria preferred by the critic.

Such "fulfilled continuities" in narrative and subordinated "distinguishable identities" in drama unify the work and place a demand upon the reader to attend to and decipher these formally organized perspectives. In this process, the reader is given the space necessary to recognize and reproduce these preestablished relationships. The text is accorded no unconscious which would elicit a reading against its apparent procedures and radical rereading of the texts becomes impossible since they are governed by the objective criterion of verisimilitude.

This criterion also governs the control of time, place and characters in narrative. This sequence follows an increasing order of complexity in respect of the requirements of plot: time being the simplest and character the most complex. The logical priority of each is discussed and there is speculation that you can have change in time without change in character or place, whereas a change in place requires a change either in time or characters, "who cannot logically be in different places at the same time" (149). Once again, the realist premise of his analysis is obtrusive, though in narrative any of these supposedly illogical things can and do happen. Miner states the principle and follows it with the uncomfortable paradox: "Since these are logical matters, they are true of any culture we can conceive of. Yet handling of them may differ from one age or culture to another..." (150). But if one believes that character in a narrative is always three-dimensional and hence cannot logically be in more than one place at a time or in different times simultaneously, then a rather strange view of the capacity of narrative emerges and one is in fact confusing narrative or representation with empirical reality. It is apparent that there can be a narrative without characters or without characters of the kind Miner supposes necessary to narrative, ones who always know their place. Modern narrative, from Joyce on, is full of examples of characterless or, by these criteria, imperfect fiction, and this is so because such narrative is self-evidently writing and not empirical reality. What kind of character in what kind of narrative is Anna Livia Plurabella in *Finnegans Wake* or Billy Pilgrim in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*? The central character in Goethe's epistolary novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* is an effect of writing and he is nowhere and everywhere at once, because the character constructs himself and everything else through his own narrative. The one thing he is not is Goethe's acquaintance, the historical figure Jerusalem, who really committed suicide in Wetzlar. "Fact," Miner tells us, "is

logically prior to fiction" (223). Or to qualify the statement somewhat: "presumed fiction is impossible without presumed fact" (223). But what is "fact"? It does not exist, Goethe reminds us, without a theory. Goethe observes that "alles Faktische schon Theorie ist" (432). And theory is another word for narrative. Facts are not visible to us, unless they are structured by a reading. It is then that they become facts. Before that there are premonitions and shadowy observations of discrepancies. The order of priority between language or representation and "reality" is not so clear-cut an affair.

It is interesting, and characteristic, that Miner shows considerable irritation with one writer, Beckett, who consistently flouts the Aristotelian norms. This Aristotelian animus also extends to those modern critics whose theories of reading deny priority to conventional concepts of authorship and refuse to accept that texts offer readers unified representations of reality. The oddity is that his reading of Japanese writing has not encouraged a more tolerant regard for the procedures of this modern criticism which rejects mimetic models. The arguments in his book reveal a dilemma. On the one hand Western *mimesis* is the exception in this global survey of poetics while, on the other hand, its principles and the suppositions which sustain it are preferable to alternative or opposed positions. Miner objects to "the antimimesis of Beckett, which seeks to exclude reality by means of meaningless words" (66). To earlier dramatists like Kleist, the world is real and knowable and so, we are told, they remain within the mimetic fold. Beckett does not stay there and Miner is disapproving, as he is of other writers with similarly unfocused tendencies: Rabelais, Swift, Lewis Carroll (155). Taken together, this might be considered a significant body of writing, sufficient to constitute a query about the extent of the applicability and the efficacy of the normative mimetic principle.

I wish to pursue this question in respect of drama, from the foundational genre of this poetics, because what is ultimately involved here is a general politics of reading. Beckett, we learn, is engaged in an "antimimetic crusade against the doctrine of the real..." (155). Comparing Shakespeare and Beckett, Miner finds the guarantee of *mimesis* in Shakespeare's plays reassuring. Beckett's writing, which appears reductively minimalist, in fact constitutes a whole referential compendium or memory of Western culture. Beckett quotes Hamlet more or less directly both in *Waiting for Godot* and in *Endgame*. But in Miner's reading, "another, spiritual world existed" for Hamlet even if, in the famous soliloquy, he hesitates to enter it, whereas in Beckett's more allusive text no such supposition is possible (57f). Therefore Miner sees in Beckett's text, "wordiness emptied of meaning" (58). Furthermore, "His aim is to deny the prior premise of *mimesis*, philosophical realism, and to challenge *mimesis* itself by demoting mythos, character, and thought and by substituting for it the central lyric concern with language, which is of course now all but meaningless" (58). The problem obviously lies in this rupture of that otherwise secure link between

language and reality. By this argument, meaning is denied to a lyrical use of language in drama if it is not grounded on mimetic representation that is justified by philosophical realism. It seems, though most paradoxically as we will see, that Beckett can do almost nothing right because in *Waiting for Godot*, he "employs the very mimetic presumption he rejects, which is a fundamental reason for his power and our engagement" (68). As evidence of such saving mimetic moments, he cites "the raw sore caused on Lucky's neck by the rope Pozzo pulls him with" (68), and Estragon's "real boot," and the naturalist criterion is again evident (69).

Miner's fixation with *mimesis* as a standard for judging Western drama, and I mean evaluating rather than defining, is obvious in this final summarizing passage which rests on the assertion that "the fact-fiction distinction is a *differentia* for drama, as it is not for lyric and narrative" (74). He states that

Beckett's "void" may not entirely fill his plays, but the degree of its dominance is such that the presumption of reality is no longer feasible. Beckett apparently feels the pain of the loss but is led by a conviction beyond a desire to innovate, a conviction that reality is lost to art, because it cannot be presumed in the world. (74)

In Beckett, the lyrical moments are, as we have heard, either "all but meaningless" or, when compared with the non-mimetic Noh theatre, at most "touches of smeared colour" (68). The normative demands of drama require that Beckett's text be mimetic and when it is, against his intentions, with those boots and bowler hats, Miner approves or, rather, dislikes it less. But the affective-expressive Japanese *Noh* plays, with no normative obligations to *mimesis* in their different cultural tradition, can delight him with lyricism and the "lovely little" symbolic theatre props. In the *Noh* theatre, compared with the world of Beckett's plays, "there is a shift from suffering itself to its beauty" (71), for the *Noh* "transforms the agonies into refinement" (72).

What we encounter here is, I believe, an unfolding illustration of normative poetics playing cross-cultural havoc with interpretation. Which of the two, poetics and interpretation, is then more important? In *Waiting for Godot*, we learn that "the suffering is as real as its meaninglessness is comic" (70). There exist evident and acute contradictions in Miner's rhetoric since, on the one hand, the play is antimimetic while, on the other hand, the suffering is "real." But whose suffering is this? It appears, from the quoted passage, to be the author's. Can the text be said to suffer? Are the characters separable from that text? In what sense do the characters suffer? They are effects of writing and performance. These contradictions point to a hidden ideological origin: the evident desire for "meaning" of a particular kind, for the security provided by an assured *mimesis* of something beyond the text. It is this denial of *mimesis* that troubles him. Where, as in the *Noh*, it is not even attempted, where we deal not with *anti-* but with *unmimesis*, you can relax and enjoy the performance. But

what does such a supposed denial of *mimesis* involve?

We have to surmise that on the personal level this denial and the visibly contradictory readings derive from a repressed fear in the interpreter, the unacceptable possibility that Beckett might perhaps be right, that his *antimimesis* might be the most accurately "mimetic" representation of all. And on the level of conscious analysis of the text, we might say that the antimimetic practice naturally upsets the presuppositions of the foundational genre and the poetics derived from it. The Japanese aesthetic is acceptable because it, as it were, fudges the issue and so we do not have to face it. The interpreter must not, in Miner's unconscious agenda, be called into question and that is precisely what antimimetic writing most obviously does, which is why it must be marginalised and rejected or only tolerated to the extent that it breaks with its own presuppositions. Adorno's contextual reading of Beckett as a refusal of commodified language is beyond Miner's interpretive horizon (Adorno 109-35).

Because the *Noh* theatre does not aspire to embody mimetic practices or represent or challenge an objective reality, it can be savoured in the form of aesthetic pleasure. Here I must register my own disagreement. My objection is not to the acknowledgment of aesthetic pleasure in the *Noh* theatre, but rather to the supposition that this pleasure somehow mitigates the agony. This agony is so compellingly conveyed that it becomes, paradoxically, inseparable from a form of pleasure, from the pleasure of discovery. Aesthetic pleasure is a function of the discovery of a truth. Distancing this agony, as in Brecht's theatre, renders it more intense. It is not aestheticized or "refined" by the sophistication of the formal means so much as made visible to us for the first time and the shock of this estranging but compelling recognition constitutes the pleasure we call aesthetic: a fascination produced by the concentration into a moment of an experiential truth, the encounter with ourselves, the moment of self-discovery. Mere "refinement" is by itself a shallow satisfaction.

This moment of self-questioning ties everything together, including my arguments. It is this moment which *mimesis* seeks to conceal because it calls upon the interpreter to look through the representation at the albeit imperfectly imitated world. This is also why Miner insists upon the originating presence of the author and on locating the meaning of the work in a relationship that derives from an estimation of that author's mimetic success or failure.⁴

We have seen that in Miner's *Comparative Poetics*, any account is suspect which de-realizes the relationship, especially in Western literature, between representation and represented, which questions the connection between language

and reality, which draws attention to the artifice or semiotic nature of communication as something that must be studied on its own terms, existing in separation both from an author who has become a metaphor for an authorial or unified reading and from a referent to which *mimesis* gives us sometimes imperfect access. Any such account that does not deal with the terms Miner establishes as necessary to a general poetics is declared "partial because of the restricted evidence drawn on" (19). He warns of the "fallacy of the single explanation" (19). Peter Szondi, the pre-eminent postwar theorist of dramatic form, holds views on drama which imply a totally different poetics and he is therefore taken to task for conferring "unusual powers on literature," when he declares that "Drama is primary. It is not the (secondary) expression of something else (primary); instead, it represents itself, is itself" (Miner 19; Szondi 16). Szondi's extended essay offers an account of formal developments in modern drama through a Hegelian historicization of aesthetic form. In his particular context, drama stands for the classical Aristotelian model which breaks down under the twin pressures of modernity's objective forces, which offer the individual no self-determining space, and of the accompanying turn to subjectivity and inwardness. Yet Szondi's statement is true in a wider sense than his intended assertion of a privileged rhetorical structure in classical drama, of the absolute contemporaneity of self-sufficient dialogue, which can no longer contain contemporary problems, since even a totalising, narrative or epic form is itself a representation which must be situated or decoded and can never itself simply give us the real. In drama, representation is always quotation, never the thing itself, hence displaced and therefore primary. The authority of an author is perhaps at its shakiest in the case of drama because of the semiotic complexity of performance, which can turn a text into the opposite of a conventional reading, whether or not you think that reading can be sanctified by authorial intention. For this reason drama is particularly suited to remind us of what we do in every engagement with a work of art, namely interpret or decode its semiotic complexity. *Mimesis* encourages us to think the dramatic text transparent, the vehicle for something else, which is the real object of attention, whereas Szondi is right: the dramatic text is primary, not secondary, and its representation represents only itself.

In the foundational poetics of *mimesis*, the author plays a central part in locating the meaning of a text. The author is conceived as the source of conscious intention, the means whereby a certain reading is privileged, which is why Miner can speak of Beckett suffering, rather than the character in his play apparently doing so. Therefore the recent assault on the concept of the author has to be dismissed, but the terms of this dismissal tell us the issue has not been understood. As an example of this "contrary poetics" which has "abstracted, from the world, language as the centre of a sceptical poetics": "we may take the distinguished and distinguishable author whom it is appropriate not

4 No matter that Miner introduces a five stage model which seems to allocate the determination of meaning in the interpretation, the consistent demand for *mimesis* undercuts this model which also, and puzzlingly, distinguishes between text and work in the following sequence: poet, work, text, poem, reader (cf. 16ff).

to name even anon, the author who proclaimed the death of the author (in a work to which he attached his name as author)" (19). Roland Barthes is the target but the issue has not been addressed. This sarcasm misses the point. The death of the author merely proclaims the birth of the reader, of a text which is always in excess of an interpretation that is located in authorial consciousness. Of course every text originates in a brain, but the author is the site for this passage of language. It is the discourse itself and the resulting discursive practice which matters, and then the author disappears into the text. For Miner, this is not good news, indeed it is "bad faith," because "Language has been rendered into the perpetually deferred meaningfulness of 'textuality'" (125). In such a world the author, for Miner, "cannot be trusted either to say what is meant or to mean what is said" (125). He believes to refute this silliness by pointing out that while the author cannot be trusted in this contrary poetics, or does not even exist, the reader expects confidence in his interpretation and therefore perversely attaches his name to a book about reading. But the reader's text is no more sacrosanct than the author's. It too is part of a discursive practice.

In the alternative model, Miner's mimetic poetics, the reader is constructed as a function of the text and the psychological process through catharsis demonstrates its efficacy in adjusting the interpreter to its perspectives. However, "textuality" is not meaningfulness, it is merely a metaphor for plurality; it is incapable of singular meaning; it has the capacity to free the interpreter from the constrictions of ideological single readings. Miner will have nothing of this, believing that "The effort to separate literature from the rest of life has required the recent battle to prove that narrative fails to make sense" (136). Literature is not of the same order as "life," therefore it cannot be separated from it. Beholden to conventionalist theories of meaning, literature simply makes another kind of sense. And "life" is an abstraction that can only be addressed through texts and readings.

It is apparent that the exposition of this mimetic poetics must itself be selective. Aristophanic fantasy is as undiscussed as the problematics of representation which characterizes Renaissance drama. It is no accident that the minimalist Beckett so frequently echoes Shakespeare and that the main character in *Endgame* is called Hamm. Beckett's text is no more meaningless than Shakespeare's, and it is as rich in cultural allusions, even if it seems less certain about the location of a spiritual world. Hamlet inhabits a world where nothing is what it appears to be, where nothing also is but what is not, where certainty is nothing but an old man's platitude, where all is performance and uncertain representation, just as in *Endgame*.

Shakespeare's play turns into a continuous enquiry into its own methods of representation. The language games of the comedies where the word-breaking clowns and the verbal transvestism of the women challenge the semantic

naturalism of the men and their claims to power, now turn into fencing matches with poisoned swords, where the rules of the game are always changing (cf. Eliam). Hence Hamlet's fascination with all forms of acting, for behind each mask lies another mask and behind each representation another text. Hamlet turns into ever-shifting representations of himself, switching roles and language strategies in an instant, when words give shape to clouds. He becomes a sequence of possibilities and can scarcely distinguish anything which was once "himself." He becomes an actor of his own entanglement.

Hamlet is fascinated how the actors' roles are more persuasive than anybody's reality, for they are framed by acknowledged convention, whereas reality has become pure performance. When everything becomes performance, except performance itself, then no value is certain, all knowledge is doubtful. Natural order disintegrates, is revealed as convention, and identity turns into a series of subject positions. Subjectivity becomes a question of discourse. Hamlet has to face the fact that there may be no truth behind appearances, that the only truth is appearance and that what matters is control of appearance, is the game of power. This is what Beckett's *Endgame* also shows: that nothing is certain except the semblance of control through language.

The acknowledged fictionality of drama does not somehow jeopardize representation, the supposition that runs through Miner's arguments, it is not the inhibitor but rather the condition for the production of meaning. Aristotle's *mimesis* was developed to counter Plato's total rejection of art as a distracting caricature of the ideal. Aristotle argued that, unlike history which dealt with uncertain particulars, the *mimesis* of drama engaged with universals and was therefore philosophically more acceptable. But it is the acknowledged, not shamed, artifice of theatre, its nonmimetic imagining, which enables us to see what is otherwise invisible: the unconscious of a culture and the relativities of our own positioning. Such imitation of the invisible could be understood as mimetic of the repressed, of the surreptitious and unconscious, of the apparently unreal or inadmissible, which is why theatre has retained a disruptive potential and, as event in public social space, has so frequently attracted official censorship through the ages.

We can trace these effects from the very beginnings in the plays of Aristophanes whose fantasies uncover the repressed fear of generative failure and social disintegration, through the farce of Plautus, whose twin brothers in *Menaechi* represent the invisible, repressions of one man, which Shakespeare recreates in *The Comedy of Errors*, down to Pirandello's denial of mimetic credibility in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* who does not exist, who has absconded, leaving his characters to fend for themselves, and to Brecht's *Mann ist Mann* in which the central character delivers the oration over his own grave because his personality is potentially multiform, as identity is infinitely malleable and *mimesis* has become once again a weapon for implementing an authoritarian

politics. The effect of these representations is to undo the certainties by means of which we internalize an identity that has been constructed for us.

My last example of how drama investigates the rupture between representation and reality is a Japanese kyogen play from the Noh theatre, entitled Fumi Yamadachi, *wen shan zei* (*Literate Highwaymen*):

FUMI YAMADACHI

Characters: Gendayu (G), Chobei (C).

G: (*As if in fright, he walks backward and shouts*): Get him! Get him! Don't you dare to let him go through here!

C: Let's go! Let's go! Hey you there! Why didn't you get in action?

G: Because you shouted, "Let's go! Let's go!" I thought the fellow was either your friend or relative, and let him go unharmed.

C: I said, "Let us go!" Don't you know the password of highwaymen? It means the fellow is rich and we should rob him.

G: If that was what you meant, why didn't you say so? Look! How fast the fellow flees!

C: Who would not? But alas! This all comes from your being so cowardly. My bad luck began when I became your ally. No more of this. (*So saying, he throws his spear on the ground.*)

G: If you do not want to be with me, that's all right. But why did you throw your spear?

C: I did it purposely. If you do not know what I meant, I will tell you: "Out with you!"

G: Hum! You dared, did you? (*He throws his bow and arrow.*)

C: Hey! Why did you throw your bow and arrow?

G: To trample you under.

C: I am a man. I am not going to be trampled under. (*They begin to fight.*)

G: Stop! Don't push me so hard. There is a bramble bush behind me.

C: What of a bramble bush to one who is to die in a few minutes?

G: All right.

C: Wait! Wait for a moment.

G: What?

C: Don't push me so. I shall fall off a precipice.

G: What of a precipice to you who is to be killed?

C: Say!

G: What?

C: The way we are grappling with each other must be a wonderful sight.

G: Ah indeed. I should like to show it to all the manly men.

C: If we should die now, no one will see this heroic scene. Moreover, who is going to notify our wives and children of our tragic end? Our dying is utterly wasted, I fear.

G: What you say is very true. No one will let our families know about it.

C: We might leave a note of farewell. What do you think?

G: That is an excellent idea. But our arms are locked tightly. There is no way of unlocking them.

C: That's simple. Let's say, "One, two, three," and at "three" we'll both unlock them.

G: Very well.

Both C and G: One! Two!

C: The last one, and I am not going to be beaten.

G: Look here! We no longer are fighting. Let us withdraw our arms peacefully.

C: Very well. By the by, have you a brush and ink?

G: No, I have not.

C: I have. I brought them in case we get many valuables and have to make out a list.

G: You are a clever fellow.

C: You compose a note and I will write it.

G: Very well. But what shall we say?

C: Indeed, what shall we say?

G: "At this auspicious occasion of the New Year...." How about that?

C: When we are about to die, we can hardly call the occasion auspicious.

G: What you say is true enough, but how shall we begin?

C: I wonder.

G: How about, "I beg your pardon to write a few lines?"

C: No, No! The occasion is much too acute for that sort of rhetoric. Never mind. I will compose a fitting message.

G: Please do so. Oh, how he writes! The tip of his brush is actually dancing.

C: Here! I have finished it!

G: What did you say?

C: I started out, "To get back to the very beginning...."

G: That's good.

C: (*reading*) "To get back to the very beginning, by a strange mishap I ran away from my family and became a highwayman who robbed innocent travelers and priests. But alas, I had quarreled with my fellow highwayman, and after a long and hard grappling, I grabbed my sword...."

G: (*jumping up*) Oh, you betrayer!

C: What is the matter?

G: You said, "Grabbed hold of my sword," and I thought you were going to attack me.

C: That was only a sentence.

G: Oh, only a sentence! Why didn't you tell me? I nearly fainted with fright.

C: I am sorry. Then let us read this together.

Both G and C: "I grabbed my sword. But wait! Should I die here without witness, people may think I was killed by unworthy fellows. But, my dear wife, I want you to remember my story, and honor and narrate correctly my tragic fate. Alas, when I think of my wife and children whom I leave behind, I cannot keep back my tears...." (They both cry.)

C: What a tragic affair this is!

G: It is.

C: How about postponing our dying for a little while?

G: Five days?

C: That seems too short. A little longer perhaps?

G: How about a year or two?

C: A year or two pass away in a dream. Really, come to think of it, no one has seen

our altercation, and if we two agree, we can give up this idea entirely. How about it?

G: What you say is very true. Let's be friends again.

C: This certainly is felicitous. Let us chant the adventure of the day and return home together.

G: Excellent.

C: Realizing that to die is utter waste...

Both G and C: Hand in hand the two highwaymen / Wend their way to their home.

C: Listen, my friend!

G: What is it?

C: You and I shall live five hundred eighty years.

G: Ah, indeed! To the end of seven incarnations.

Both: Oh, happy day! Happy day! (90-94).

In this play we encounter a pair of comically timorous bandits, two inseparable incompetents, so a version of the comic duo in Beckett's plays where each questions the other's existence yet must define himself in terms of it. One of them, Chobei, is brighter than the other or else there would be no dynamic between them. Their "problem" is that they question the relationship between language and meaning and then confuse narrative and reality. A robber must be able to act decisively but these ones cannot even agree about the meaning of words.

Perhaps we can think of it as philosophical slapstick. This hapless couple get so locked in combat with each other that they have great difficulty untangling their arms and extricating themselves. They need to do this in order to write about what is happening to them. This comic matrix clash is implied in the title. The audience/reader watches the actors as characters deny the "reality" of actual events because, although their incompetent attempts at robbing may have taken place, they have not yet been "narrated," they have not yet been composed and organized by memory, and therefore do not properly exist. This, of course, reminds us how we construct versions of ourselves, of our past behaviour, by a careful, selective and mostly unconscious arranging of events into a suitable narrative in accordance with the internalized narratives of our culture. But if the narrative has not yet been properly composed, then neither have the characters. It appears these bandits are highly self-conscious. Not only afraid of brambles, when fighting for their lives, they fear they can only truly exist in the knowledge of other people. They can only see themselves in terms of figuration, as heroically figured, not as heroes. They do not exist except as the object of interpretation. These characters in a play also wish to incorporate within themselves, as participants in a spectacular encounter, an aesthetics of representation. Indeed, they cannot conceive of themselves except as the embodiment of such an aesthetic or the object of interpretation. They cannot, therefore, properly exist unless they are mediated by language. Constructing their narrative then produces for them an effect of reality which was previously

lacking and which confuses the slower one because he takes it for reality itself — he is told it is "only a sentence" (*Fumi Yamadachi* 93) — but which finally absolves them of the necessity of completing the narrative which they set out to tell.

Reality is an effect of narrative, of recollection, not of a direct experience, at the very least this is true for reality in the theatre. They can exist as figures in a narrative but only if it is being interpreted: "Two characters in search of an audience." But if they could find one, which they must in order to come properly into existence, then, for the sake of their honour, they would have to die. But since they cannot find anyone who would be able, or constrained, to "narrate correctly my tragic fate" they can avoid it and live forever (*Fumi Yamadachi* 93). They set about constructing a myth of their own behaviour, of their own existence, according to the prescribed cultural expectations. But this enables them to reject the behaviour necessitated by that guiding cultural narrative or myth. Only the creation of the narrative can lead to an alteration of the behaviour it was supposed to explain and justify. They only perceive their "comedy" through the parody of a "tragic" myth. They have transformed themselves through the power of reflection. They have unwritten and rewritten themselves, they have written their way to happiness.

This awareness of the mediation or structuring of the cultural conventions, which are both represented and constructed in the narratives of myth and literature, enables a self-transcendence when it offers the reader the opportunity of escaping from the trap of its own artifice. The highwaymen do not "see" this, for after all they are characters in a play. They simply do it. They are at the same time the actors, writers and readers of their own self-absorbed narrative. And of course the readers or audience whose absence they first regret, but then turn to their own advantage, are watching their every move in the theatre and this demonstration of the deconstruction of *mimesis* which consequentially and simultaneously enables them to reinvent themselves.

The whole story shows the potential for a form of self-transcendence, for escaping from a "self" that has been trapped by language, by narrative or by convention, because that self has acquiesced in its own apparently inescapable structuration by these binding cultural mediations. Zen Buddhism was virtually invented to deal with this problem. That is why it dispensed with theology and with the conventions of grand philosophical narratives, preferring jokes, riddles and any form of communication that fractured the stereotype, undermined the convention, loosened the grasp of the dominant matrix, allowed the mimetic matrices to clash and so questioned their reliability.

This is the Japanese equivalent for that suspicion of *mimesis*, of mimetic doctrines and their constraining political and intellectual implications, a suspicion which has structured so much of the best Western dramatic writing. *Mimesis* is enmeshed with power claims; that is why the nominalist text critics within and

outside the play have always challenged the mimetic realists. An essentially formalist poetics, which argues from the primacy of mimetic theory, ignores too much of the historical evidence in the writing for which it is prescriptive. Such a poetics is itself often unconsciously complicit with those intellectual and social structures of power, which always know what reality is like and wish to see it reflected in representation. Interpretation is expected to internalize both representations and power structures until it has become a function of them both. That is what anti-mimetic writing resists as it frees the reader's imagination from the constraints of *mimesis*.

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Q.S. TONG

Myths About the Chinese Language

I.

In 1786, Sir William Jones disclosed his famous discoveries of the historical kinship of Sanskrit with Greek, Latin, and the Germanic languages. As is generally agreed, this "marked an absolute beginning to historical linguistics" in the West (Robins 134). Subsequent interest in comparative studies of Sanskrit with European languages not only opened the horizon of contemporary comparative and historical linguistics, but also led to a reconsideration and revaluation of the inflectional phenomenon in language. Language was conceived as a closed organic structure evolving from a definite origin. The very concept of the "Indo-European Family" was formulated primarily on the basis of some observed linguistic features shared by these languages, in particular, grammatical inflection, as F. Schlegel claims: "Wir müssen uns damit begnügen, daß jene Sprachen, in denen Flexion herrscht, auch den Wurzeln nach in eine gemeinschaftliche Quelle zusammengehen" (52).¹ The validity of this taxonomy, however, is questionable, for it is, to a certain extent, hypothetical in nature.²

It is in this context that the Chinese language received unprecedented critical attention from some prominent German writers, who could find no better example than Chinese as a contrast to Indo-European languages. For them, the Chinese language, monosyllabic, isolated, non-inflectional, incapable of generating prefixes and suffixes, and divided between speech and writing, was very much a primitive form of a linguistic system. In the discourse of German transcendental organicism, the evolution of language, like that of history, points back to a starting-point of human civilization that often defines Europe, or rather, Germany, as its centre. Chinese was thus radically marginalized and was

1 "We have to accept that languages which are governed by inflection also belong to the same source according to their roots" (Schlegel 52).

2 In his *Indo-European Linguistics*, Schmalstieg argues that "most of what is commonly believed about Indo-European derives from a certain set pattern of approaching the subject and that the foundations of Indo-European grammar are on much shakier grounds than is commonly supposed" and "linguistic methodologies are largely metaphors" (1).