

Dust Motes

Stephen Owen

Preliminary Note: In Which the Author Confesses to Boring Himself and Seeks Remedy

By its impressive title and history, this floating conference is a serious enterprise. Always respectful of my charge, I set out to perform my duty with all due seriousness. After three dense pages of theoretical argument on the “contemporary” and its consequences for the institution of the humanities, I at last reached a point that I had so bored myself that I could not bear to go on. I immodestly believe that the arguments I was making were good ones, and fresh; I saw where they were leading; the short paper was written; but I lost interest, and the argument simply petered out. On reflection, I realized that what was missing was a text, a poem that would hold my interest and serve as a rubric for thinking.

“Close reading” is not, as some suppose, one among many critical and theoretical positions. It is, rather, a form of discourse, as pure theory is. Though not in itself a position, like the choice of pure theory, the choice of this form may have theoretical implications; but any theoretical position can be realized (and challenged or nuanced) through close reading.

To prefer close reading is to respect, without embarrassment, the particular humanistic profession I have chosen—being a literary scholar, rather than pretending to be a philosopher without being held to the rigorous protocols of that discipline. And whether my arguments about a text are good or bad, my readers at least get to read the text and have their attention called to it. Close reading can be dialogic in a way different from the dialogism of responding to other critics and theorists. In the latter case one has a strong vested interest to disagree with or propose significant modifications to an argument (too perfect agreement disables such discourse); this troubling issue of agreement does not arise when offering a reading of a literary text, particularly when the text in question comes with no pressing history of previous readings. Of course (making the requisite profession of contemporary faith), we always come to reading with an agenda; however, it seems that in the best cases of literary reading, the unexpected often happens, and the reflective reader is less staking out a position than “coming to terms with” the unexpected. All agenda can be derailed or redirected.

I am not averse to theorizing, historicizing, new-historicizing, politicizing, or even simply annotating—so long as I have a good text. The text is, somehow, a point of contact with the world and external determination, a point of intersection for history and thought.

One further confession is required for honor. Often, I am asked to write on a predetermined topic; as I consider what I will say, a particular text comes to mind. In many cases it is not at all obvious why that particular text seems to so insistently demand consideration. The paper that finally gets written becomes a process of naturalizing the apparent catachresis. Never was this more true than in the present case, when a most

unlikely text from the early sixth century and my summer's readings invited itself into my paper.

A Poem

劉孝綽，和詠歌人偏得日照 Liu Xiaochuo, A Companion Piece to “On a Singer In a Spot of Sunlight”

獨明花裏翠，	Singularly brightened, kingfisher feathers among flowers,
偏光粉上津。	caught alone in the light, sweat in her powder.
屢將歌罷扇，	Often she takes her fan, the singing done,
迴拂影中塵。	and turns to brush away the dust motes in the beams.

Before considering this poetic bonbon, let me offer some contextualization in the critical issues of the period. Zhong Rong, a critic roughly contemporary with Liu Xiaochuo, addressing issues of intended meaning and representation, used the antithetical conditions *shen* 深, “being deep,” and *fú* 浮, “being adrift.” “Depth” is the consequence of strong governing intention behind the words; these intentions achieve their displacement underground (to “depth”) by a tendency to make all representations *bi* 比 (comparison) and *xing* 興 (affective image); the former is a figure of thought and the latter a figure of the affections. When *bi* and *xing* govern, the text is “grounded”: representation is rooted in the preexisting concerns of the author; all in the text at last refers to those latent concerns. The alternative, in Zhong Rong’s conceptual universe, is *fú* 賦, unfigured representation, which has a propensity to go “adrift”; this is an ungrounded text, not rooted in any “deep” concern, but which is open to accident, to what is encountered on its own terms, rather than being filtered and subsumed by prior interior motives. Characteristically, Zhong Rong advocates something intermediate between the two, neither bogged down and immobile (for intense concerns tend to simply repeat themselves in figures drawn from the world) nor floating freely. Although Zhong Rong saw excessive lushness of detail as the expected consequence of being “adrift,” I think there is little doubt he would have found Liu Xiaochuo’s quatrain an example of an extreme of drifting. This text is “not serious.”

In Liu Xiaochuo’s time and ever after, Chinese critics would direct intense opprobrium to little poems like this from the early sixth century—an opprobrium out of all proportion to the poem’s apparent harmlessness. But lest we grant those critics too much importance, it should be said at the same time that many Chinese poets continued to produce such “poetry adrift.” The intensity of hostility—such poetry was held responsible for the downfall of dynasties—can only lead us to wonder what threat such a poem posed; perhaps it is not so harmless after all.

The poet is “playing,” *nòng* 弄, just as the singer is playing (without any of the philosophical freight of *παίζειν*). The notion of “drifting” is appropriate—it is the encounter with the accidental, the momentary spot of sunlight that reveals the gratuitous gesture. The motes of dust are literally *fú*, “drifting” in the beam of sunlight; and the futile act of brushing them away pretends to be purposeful, though we know it is only play. The

fan here is the singer's prop; to be precise, it is *ge bà shan* 歌罷扇, a “fan after the singing is done,” an object leftover from its primary purpose, which was to gesturally illustrate a song, probably a song of love-longing, which was also playing at meaning.

Signifiers are adrift. In the first line we are given kingfishers among the flowers, which is not impossible; but we know enough from the title and such scenes to know there are no living birds here. In a different context we might want to take the “kingfisher,” *cui* 翠, as the blue-green color of foliage, new leaves coming out. But we know that these must be only kingfisher feathers, the singer's ornament. This spot of light reveals things that have been plucked loose from their proper nature and function. For example, if a thing belongs to the category *qi* 器, “implement,” what a thing “is” is defined by its proper utility. What then is a fan?—it is a means to cool oneself off in the sun. Here, however, while the singer sweats in the beam of light, she uses the fan for other purposes: the performance of song and brushing away dust motes. Both of these secondary uses are playing, playing at purposefulness, while swerving from the “proper” purpose of the act and object. The sweat runs out over her facial powder, again ornament, the counterpart of the “dust” that she pretends to brush away.

No Chinese reader of the period would find it entirely unjustified to recall Consort Ban of the Han, to whom was attributed a poem on a fan, in which the fan is a figure for the loved woman, prized in the heat of summer, but put away when the cool of autumn comes.

新裂齊紈素，	Newly cut, fine plain silk of Qi,
鮮潔如霜雪。	fresh and pure as frost or snow.
裁為合歡扇，	It was cut into an acacia-patterned fan,
團團似明月。	perfectly round like the bright moon.
出入君懷袖，	It goes in and out of your bosom and sleeve,
動搖微風發。	stirring in motion, a gentle breeze comes.
常恐秋節至，	It ever fears that the autumn will come,
涼飈奪炎熱。	and cool gusts will eliminate blazing heat.
棄捐篋笥中，	It will be cast away in the storage box,
恩情中道絕。	grace and love broken midway.

Here indeed the object is both figural and understood in terms of its original purpose. This is *bi*, “comparison”; it is, in Zhong Rong's terms, “deep,” the representation governed by an underlying motive and every bit as purposeful as the figurative fan. Nothing is adrift here. The critics admire this poem. And we often find lyrics about Consort Ban in the early sixth century; our singer might even have been using her fan to perform such a song earlier.

In Liu Xiaochuo's quatrain, however, there is neither the supposedly real care of Consort Ban nor the pretended care of the song lyric in which singer can retell Consort Ban's cares; at last the fan is used ineffectively and whimsically. This is militant play—not even, to borrow Plotinus, playing at being serious, but celebrating the the humor and beauty of the chance, gratuitous moment. The moralist critics, who disapproved of such

poetry, linked it to what we usually translate as eroticism—but there is certainly no erotic passion here or seeking ties of commitment that we find in Consort Ban’s poem. The flavor of eroticism that this represents is heedless absorption in the sensuous surfaces of things, without any drive to consummation: it is eroticism adrift.

As Paul Rouzer points out, there is voyeurism in such poetry: the woman is caught in the “spotlight” of the sun and the attention of the poet. We do not know if she knows she is being observed. But even the category of voyeurism must break apart between the “deep,” the Peeping Tom, and the drifting gaze that lingers a moment, only playing at erotic interest.

And perhaps too there is a Buddhist dimension, the dustmotes of worlds and the dust that we would translate as the staining filth of the sensuous world—something of the vanity and emptiness of illusion on sensuous surfaces, which is also the illusion of the passions and also of the so-called “serious” matters that for Zhong Rong gave poetry its ground. Perhaps these images adrift are closer to the truth.

Being Serious

By now my readers are quite properly asking what this has to do with the current state of the humanities and its institutions. My paper was supposed to be *shen*, “deep” and grounded in a topic of shared concern, the grand issues of culture; instead it seems to have gone adrift, finding a small thing of delight and focusing on it. I suppose I have to moor this discourse.

Perhaps the little poem presented itself to me because I was thinking about our seriousness, our constant reiteration of the “crisis” in the humanities, and the anxiety about their usefulness in the contemporary world. It matters to us that they matter. The poem came, perhaps, as a small resistance and critique of seriousness. But we can take that farther, without letting these serious puposes carry us too far from the frivolous text.

Zhong Rong saw a problem in excess of “depth”:

若專用比興，	If one uses comparison and affective image exclusively,
患在意深，	the problem lies in [excessive] depth of intended meaning;
意深則詞躓。	when intended meaning is too deep, then the language stumbles.

The “stumbling” is the sign of impediment, getting “bogged down.” Everything means. Bugged down in deep concerns, one never gets anywhere, only repeats.

Until recent decades the university, like other institutions in society, retained a strong measure of historical inertia as their accepted condition. Humanistic discourse, which is another institution, did likewise. Change still occurred continuously, and there were phases of intense, self-conscious reform. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the significance of the explanation for institutional forms: “that is just how things are done.” Institutions, by their very nature, are received. The humanities had general and largely unexamined pieties about cultural and moral education, but they did not constantly worry about why they existed, what social purpose they served, and whether they were going about it in the right way (and let me reiterate: they *did* worry sometimes; they simply were

moderate about it). They saw themselves in a general way, as preparing a young person for adult life within the community—which, as an unreflective claim, is no more than to announce their position in a sequence of phases in the life of elites.

This is an age of intense critical thought (however habitual and predictable its questions and their form may be). When we look back to the university before the Second World War, we see its educational and social forms as playing a role in the reproduction of elites; in the same way we can see the way an older humanistic discourse reinforced dominant social values: colonialism, gender and social hierarchies, and so on. We turn just as intense a critical scrutiny on contemporary institutions and discursive forms (which still serves for the reproduction of elites). To be sure the late 19th and early 20th century university engaged in critical activity; this is nothing new. What has changed, however, is the disappearance of a measure of acquiescence to historical inertia, that sanctity of habit that kept certain forms effectively concealed behind “that’s just how things are done.”

Such inertia was productive; it offered the resistance that made reform and revolution possible. Without such effective resistance, change, under the aegis of critical examination and reform, becomes no more than a change in fashion. I often hear scholars pondering what the next “turn” in criticism will be: such urgency of prediction is the desire to be “in fashion,” not the urgency of response to a real problem, which can present itself only through resistance. In the course of this critical process, real social and conceptual problems have been addressed; it detracts nothing from such real gains to suggest that the desire to find a worthy problem transcends any particular discovery. To embrace continuous critique and change in this way means that each changing form has no meaning in itself; it becomes, rather, a radical stability (befitting one of the oldest relatively stable polities in the world, which has discovered stability through the theater of continuous correction and change).

Acts of criticism (in the large, cultural sense, and also applying to institutions and institutional forms, like those of the humanities) keep change going. There are many factors that can contribute to an explanation of why this large cultural transformation took place; among these is the academic overproduction following WWII, leading to an institutional pressure for an intense and ongoing search of new objects of critical reflection (including the critical reflections of immediate predecessors and contemporaries) [although that institutional pressure is one of *our* habits that is resistant to being raised to critical reflection]. Our academic culture bears some relation to Chinese land-use patterns, where the hungry farmer turns his eyes to that last stand of trees.

I am certainly not nostalgically recommending a return to the past—I’m not recommending anything, and it would be impossible in any case.¹ Nevertheless, the culture

¹ I have noted that when I describe some past moment as having had very serious problems, but also as having had some good or useful cultural form we no longer have, I am inevitably criticized for nostalgia—even when I go out of my way to say that the benefit far outweighs the cost (as is the case here). The critical reader does not hear the critique of the past, only the segment in which the present is compared to the past at some disadvantage. Critics who are genuinely nostalgic tend to approve such comparisons, likewise ignoring the critique of the past. The consistency of such responses is, I think, a good indication of a significant issue in cultural politics, in which the antagonism between the parties is so deep that they cannot see all the possible alternatives. In this case, for the progressives any intelligent critique of contemporary culture is acceptable

of continuous criticism itself deserves the scrutiny of a critical eye. All these acts of cultural criticism play at being serious; they all presume that something ought to be done, or, if the object of attention is in the past, that something should not be done any more. The form of the critique indicates what the better course should be. The critic seems to care—and when I say “seems to,” I am leaving the question of whether the critic does indeed care undecided. This is the problem with the institutionalization and hence formal reproduction of “seriousness,” which includes serious criticism. We can never know if the critical interpretation of some cultural phenomenon is given because it matters to the critic personally apart from institutional advancement and esteem or simply serves to win the critic tenure and respect. And, of course, we can never take those two motives apart. We no longer have the inertial resistance that gives critical intervention any depth of necessity.

The courtesan-singer says: “I love you; I really mean it this time.” And the paying listener never knows if the singer “really means it” or if she knows that she will be more successful in her profession if she says that she “really means it.” We may pretend—on solid theoretical grounds—that this is a non-question, that it can never be decided. But, of course, it does matter immensely in discourse: this is why “I love you” is not enough, and the declaration “I really mean it this time” becomes necessary. For the courtesan-singer-as-critical thinker, “I really mean it” takes the form of an array of discursive signatures of conviction, dismay, and outrage. It seeks to prove its seriousness rhetorically. Because even though we can never really know if the critic is serious, value lies in “seeming” serious (which, of course, includes the possibility that the critic indeed *is* serious).

We are, of course, back to our singer caught in a spot of sunlight. Consort Ban presumably “really meant” her poem of longing and fear of rejection figured in the fan; it was not a performance in a social context.² When she sang prior to the moment of the poem, Liu Xiaochuo’s singer performed such poetry and seemed to really mean it. We like the performance of “serious matter” and are moved by the show of conviction. But Liu Xiaochuo’s poem focuses on the “fan after the singing is done,” when the interval of serious matter is over. We are forced to see the fan, the figural focus of seriousness hollowed out, turned into pure toy.

Fans

except one that appeals to the past as having some advantage over the present. The conservative alternative is that no critique of contemporary culture is acceptable *except* one that appeals to a past (though such “pasts” as usual fantasies). Past and present are alike in having terrible wrongs and good things. Every gain is simultaneously a loss. If I have to make a political choice, I have no problem affirming that what was gained far outweighs what was lost. But if we cannot affirm that and still recognize that something important and irreplaceable was, necessarily lost, we are hiding our expenditures as a culture, and we will have to face our concealments in the long run.

² Here it is an important irony to point out that even though, for the entire premodern period and still for many scholars today, the poem attributed to Consort Ban is the essential example of “really meaning it,” the attribution of the poem is certainly fictive. Once upon a time, a long time ago, people “really meant it”; ever since then, it has never been certain. But the presumption that once upon a time people “really meant it,” remains a real and important part of the later world.

Let me digress on fans. Fans are artificial makers of “wind,” *feng* 風. This is an intensely loaded term in Chinese critical vocabulary. *Feng* is the term for the first half of the *Classic of Poetry*, those poems that originate from individuals (繫一人之本) in the domains, which arise from the “spontaneous overflow” of feeling in response to current cultural conditions. *Feng* means “influence,” the capacity of the singer to “sway” an audience by stirring the moral affections. *Feng* is also sometimes translated as “satire,” but “indirect critique” is probably a better term. The critique is “indirect” because it is figured in some particular—the motivation is “deep.”

The fan of Liu Xiaochuo’s singer produces a “wind,” *feng*, that blows around the motes in the beam of sunshine. After the artificial wind stops, the sunlight is still filled with them.

Serious Matter Again

I confess to trying to show that the frivolous is serious, thus doing harm to play—like those psychologists who interpret the significance of child’s play, παις παιζων. Yet even brought back into the realm of the serious, the notion of the accidental and the “gratuitous” (the lightness of a gift of grace) remains something that cannot be entirely controlled, that outwits agenda of pain like Consort Ban’s, of moral reform that is the constant promise of contemporary cultural critique, and even of advancement as courtesan or critic through the persuasive performance of pain or moral engagement. The problem with such agenda, as Zhong Rong knew well, is that they subsume everything encountered, so that everything new becomes the figure of or vehicle for the repetition of what we already know and agree upon.

Innovation in this mode becomes ferreting out sin (or leftist leanings, or rightist ones, or incorrect attitudes). We and our world are under constant critical review, looking for failings and errors.³ The children of the Cultural Revolution have emigrated and found themselves at home again. And when we discover and expose error in either, the discoverer is cleansed through the act. The Non-conformists of the British Isles need yield nothing to the Chinese in this (who found poems like Liu Xiaochuo’s so troubling), and one does not need to think long to find the same passion in other cultures. It is hard not to quote the famous passage from Samuel Butler here:

Call fire and sword, and desolation,
A godly thorough reformation,
Which always must be carried on,
And still be doing, never done;
As if religion were intended
For nothing else but to be mended.

When Butler wrote this, it was supposed to be humorous and satirical. Some words may be substituted for “religion,” and the critical process easily claims our assent, rather than our scorn.

³ I grant to the founders of our legal code a compensatory genius. The “presumption of innocence” has, of course, never been the norm of American society—rather the “presumption of sin.”

I've Boxed Myself Into a Corner From Which It Is Hard to Advocate Anything
Nevertheless, I will do it anyway.

I take the term “university” very literally. It should be a space where new things can happen and fresh thoughts. Any claim to ideological totalization must fail, if only because it cannot include its own negation (and that simplistic theoretical formulation has quite pragmatic and startling realizations). In the same way the contemporary claim to totalization as the potential for continuous change fails for much the same reason—it is incapable of lingering. The university can be itself only as a venue for contradictions (and while that might exclude unification, it can exist as a possibility). Foxes and hedgehogs must lie down together, which is more difficult than the lion lying down with the lamb.

The institutions of the humanities are driven by machinery of critique and supersession; we are tied to this machine, though we have long ago forgotten how and why it was made. And even if we turn critique against itself, we still cannot escape operating and being operated on by the machine—for it *is* an institution, with the inertia of institutions, though inertia against the claims of inertia. Outside and on the fringes are the intellectual equivalents of Luddites, who listen hopefully to any sound of disaffection from within the shop. Inside we reproduce “progress.”

Seriousness is worthy; I am often serious and I come to seriousness here, thus attempting to fulfill my obligation in the current enterprise. But we should recognize the limits of seriousness—it tends to repetition, because new things become nothing more than the figures or material for existing concerns. And because seriousness is taken so seriously and valued by our communities, pure seriousness blurs indistinguishably into the very different seriousness of self-service.

But the humanities in a university must be open to things that engage without being subsumed into mere lessons of what we already know. It must be a place where the unexpected can happen.

Again we come back to our little poem, watching the singer in the spot of sunlight. She has just performed a song of passion; now, indifferent she stands there to the side. The sun catches her; she sweats. Seeing the dust-motes in the beams, each a world of worldliness and the very figure of sensual contamination, she wishes them aside, knowing they will still be there after the fan blows some away. In that moment of gratuitous play, which is the gift of grace, we see something new—and meaningless.