# Ruined Estates: Literary History and the Poetry of Eden

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Preface: The Return of the Dead

> "Rome was a powerful ally to many states; antient authors are our powerful allies; but we must take heed, that they do not succour till they enslave, after the manner of Rome. Too formidable an idea of their superiority, like a spectre, would fright us out of a proper use of our wits; and dwarf our understanding, by making a giant of theirs. Too great awe for them lays genius under restraint, and denies it that free scope, that full elbow-room, which is requisite for striking its most masterly strokes."
>
> Edward Young, "Conjectures on Original Composition"

"And this, Sir, calls to my remembrance the beginning of your discourse, where you told us we should never find the audience favorable to this kind of writing, till we could produce as good plays in rhyme as Ben Jonson, Fletcher, and Shakspeare had writ out of it. But it is to raise the envy of the living, to compare them with the dead. They are honoured, and almost adored by us, as they deserve; neither do I know any so presumptuous of themselves as to contend with them. Yet give me leave to say thus much, without injury to their ashes; that not only shall we never equal them, but they could never equal themselves, were they to rise and write again. We acknowledge them our fathers in wit; but they have ruined their estates themselves, before they came to their children's hands. There is scarce an humour, a character, or any kind of plot, which they have not used. All comes sullied or wasted to us: and were they to entertain this age, they could not now make such plenteous treatments out of such decayed fortunes. This therefore will be a good argument to us, either not to write at all, or to attempt some other way"

. . .

"To begin, then, with Shakspeare. He was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and perhaps most comprehensive soul. All the images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them, not laboriously, but luckily; when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read Nature; he looked inwards and found her there."

Dryden, "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy"

That the world is growing steadily worse and ever shedding its former glories is an intuition of far greater antiquity than noisy claims of our collective progress. The latter requires continual reassertion on the part of our public

officials; the former has a way of cropping up again and again despite all official reassurances to the contrary. There may be something fundamental in that sense of vanished possibilities, something so profound that no rational exposition of the betterment of our condition can finally weigh against it when set in the balance.

This general intuition of loss is chiefly confirmed by our experience of older poetry. We read, we admire, and uncomfortably recognize that whatever excellence we find there, it is no longer within our reach—not merely because of the individuals involved, however great they may have been, but because they speak for and from some past world, some age of possibilities and a condition of being that is no longer possible.[1] Reason may remind us of the pragmatic unpleasantness of those past worlds: harsh lives, blindness, and injustices that should make us recoil from any attraction. But this is scarcely the point: our attraction is not rational choice, but desire for what has a deep allure (hence reason always finds itself in the position of "reminding" us of the disadvantages). It seems an affront that we can envisage and feel ourselves in close proximity to such a world, yet at the same time be so utterly excluded from it.[2] This peculiar experience of the return of the dead in art is one of the most basic encounters with human limitation: what such works bring back before us in art is precisely what we have lost.[3] The encounter is dangerous, intimidating; and we often revenge ourselves on the older writers by pointing out their limitations: we contextualize their work, place it historically, make it less embarrassing for us.

In the two passages from "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," Dryden feels the acute pressure of competition and comparison with the dramatists of the preceding age. Dryden-Neander begins by conceding defeat: the older dramatists—Jonson, Fletcher, and Shakespeare—have entered the canon; moderns may contend fiercely with one

[1]Unlike the illusions created by the historical imagination in the art of our own era, in older art we encounter the age presenting rather than the age presented. In "Anthony and Cleopatra" the sense that this world is beyond us is attached to Shakespeare as embedded in the Elizabethan age, not to the end of the Roman Republic. We are speaking here of something altogether different from the sentimental attachment to the past evoked in the "historical" genres from the age of historicism; e.g. the historical novel. Such genres are versions of the general historicist project by which the past is mediated, subsumed, and re-presented in a safe form.

[2]In the "Essay" the interlocutor, Neander, understands this sense of proximity as a possibility that would have been easily within his reach, if only the forerunners had not used it up. Not yet fully within the grip of historicism, he does not confront his inherent incapacity due to his historical position.

[3]As always, Nietzsche uses ironic condescension to undermine whatever exerts a threatening attraction upon him; but when he speaks of the return of the dead in art, the power of the lure becomes almost palpable in his writing. "Art incidentally performs the task of preserving, even touching up extinct, faded ideas; when it accomplishes this task it weaves a band around various eras, and causes their spirits to return. Only a semblance of life, as over graves, or the return of dead loved ones in dreams results from this, of course, but for moments at least, the old feeling revives and the heart beats to an otherwise forgotten rhythm. Because art has this general benefit, one must excuse the artist himself if he does not stand in the front ranks of mankind's progressive *maturation.* He has remained his whole life a child, and has stood still at the point where his artistic drive came upon him; but feelings from the first stages of life are admittedly closer to feelings of earlier ages then to those of the present century. His unwitting task becomes the juvenescence of mankind: this is his glory and his limitation." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human,* translated by Marion Faber. Lincoln, 1984, p. 104. Note that in place of Dryden's model of legacy and succession, we have here the historicist model of childhood and maturation; in historicism time becomes a structural whole, in which any place, moment, or part has significance only in relation to the totality.

another, but the older dramatists are now our "ancients," dead and above the contest. Yet Dryden immediately takes his revenge on their greatness by a strange move, imagining their rebirth into this new world of the late seventeenth century, where they would find themselves, on their own merits as individuals, at no advantage to the rest of us. Their talents were never tried by the harsh demands for sophisticated innovation in the art, demands imposed upon our age straitened by their very prodigality. Their greatness was not due to their particular capacities, but to a moment, a context, a place, a gift of chance.[4]

In fact, as he reflects on the question, they were, in certain ways, worse than we are: they used up what was given them, and not always wisely; they ruined estates that should have been conserved for us, their descendants. Had they possessed any foresight surely they would have been more modest in the scope of their work, leaving a bit of nature's gifts of dramatic possibility for us. But they were prodigal. And such blindness to the needs of the future may well be the consequence of standing at the beginning of a history.

"This therefore will be a good argument to us, either not to write at all, or to attempt some other way." In face of their greatness, the only choice left is between silence or devising something new (recall that it is "Neander," the "new man" hidden in an old Greek name, speaking at this point in the dialogue). Yet he, and we his readers, all know from the tenor of his speech that whatever sophisticated novelties he may devise will be shadowed by a melancholy sense of their being second best: mere compensations. The use of rhyme in drama is a novelty that satisfies the audience's hunger for novelty: it fills a void. All the skill of art must be devoted to making the most of the meager gleanings left over from the forerunners' great harvest.

What is implicit in the first passage becomes explicit in the second: Shakespeare possessed Nature within himself, so that his work was less an imitation of Nature than an extension of it. It was "genius," *ingenium,* an inborn gift that led him to write "luckily."[5] The remarkable presumption is that nature is not present in us any longer; what came "naturally" to Shakespeare requires great effort and close scrutiny on our part. And our efforts are greatly complicated by the fact that in their plots and characters and scenes, the older dramatists have virtually used up everything that nature offered immediately.

These passages from Dryden stand on the margins between an edenic view of our relation to earlier poetry (the underlying structure of the "ancient" and "modern" controversy) and the historicism, which would develop in the next century. It is this juncture, or more precisely, the forces and motives working at this juncture to produce the idea of literary history and all historicism, that I want to examine in this paper.

Before proceeding with our discussion, it is essential to clearly understand the historicity of our concept of literary history. Located ourselves within an age of historicism, we tend to treat literary history as if its assumptions were not open to question (or we occupy ourselves with a series of essentially banal issues that give the illusion

[4]Compare Schiller's revenge on the "naive" poets in *Naive and Sentimental Poetry*: their genius is "not to their credit"; it is a gift of nature. The sentimental poets at least achieve what they achieve on their own power.

[5]Jonson, of course, was "lucky" not because of Nature within but because he was the first to write by the rules.

of addressing questions fundamental to historicism).[6] But literary history, as a version of historicism,[7] makes assumptions that are themselves historical. And the only escape from historicism is, paradoxically, to reveal historicism's own historicity.[8]

It should be stressed that a genuinely historicist viewpoint is not merely any structure of temporal relations; it differs from the cyclical structure of such temporal relations, such as "norm," *cheng* 正, and "deviation," *pien* 變, in Chinese literary thought.[9] Nor is historicism the binary structure of "ancient" and "modern," *ku* 古 and *chin* 今, although that is the structure in opposition to which historicism is generated. Historicism, as it manifests itself in literary history, is the articulation of a corpus of texts into a sequence of categories and periods, each of which has particular determinate characteristics and whose relations are presumed to be determined by an underlying order of history, which it is the task of the literary historian to discover.[10] These structures are ultimately based on *serial* differentiation (of which the dialectical structure of serial negation in German romanticism is one, but not the only possible model); and although they lay great stress on the freedom of possibility, the illusion of linear openness to the future is shadowed by one governing taboo: recursion and return.

Since all historicism tends to totalization (that any particular phenomenon can be understood only in relation to some absolute whole), there is an inherent disposition to reconcile literary history with some more comprehensive structure of all human history (as in Hegel and Marx);[11] however, such a reconciliation is not essential to literary

[6]Historicism has produced complex internal arguments that serve to reinforce rather than lay bare its basic assumptions. In the great interpretive structures of the species (historicism being one of the most powerful), what passes as "controversy" is, in fact, the primary means for ideological indoctrination: to participate in the established arguments on either side forces acceptance of the assumptions of the conceptual structure. The faithful always find the refusal to accept a question far more distressing than an answer that opposes their own. What appear to be questions of the deepest significance are, in fact, means to evade putting the question to the assumptions of historicism. For example, there has been a pseudo-critique of historicism based on the necessary arbitrariness of all historical description, and in more recent times based on the historical determination of all such descriptions; both of these "critiques" are themselves arch-historicist positions and in no way speak to the assumptions of historicism. However, the most striking evasions are to be found in those modern interpretive structures that pretend to be anti-historicist, but whose assumptions are, at their core historicist.

[7]However, I would argue, as should be clear from the following discussion, that because of its immediate relation to an edenic past in the experience of old art, the invention of literary history is the paradigm of all historicism.

[8]This move is only a beginning, a historicist commentary that becomes trapped in its own circularity, yet looks for the beginning of the circle to escape from it. This is possible when we discover that historicism not merely produces the conditions for its own validation, but that it is the very system for generating any new set of validating conditions.

[9]However, Chinese theorists of literary historicism, such as Yeh Hsieh, will have to reconcile a true sense of literary history with these received terms.

[10]For the necessity of "period" and other clearly delimited categories in historicism, see note 32.

[11]In this historicist age bourgeois thought finds itself in a most uncomfortable position, at once driven toward totalizing interpretation while at the same time forbidden to do so by the laws of categorical autonomy that are the essential bourgeois defense against the Marxist critique; i.e. to preserve the illusion of the autonomy of institutions and disciplines prevents the exposure of the internal relations of late capitalist society and the relations between society, art, and thought. From this contradiction modern bourgeois thought produces the wondrously oxymoronic move of "partial totalization," in which relations are established between a strictly limited set of autonomous categories. The most obvious examples in recent times are structuralism and semiotics. These intellectual movements in the human sciences begin as ostentatiously anti-historical

history. Historicism creates categorical divisions in order to subsume them within larger sets; and it is the form of that process as a general law, rather than any particular act of subsumption, that is essential to historicism.[12] Historicism insists that all literary works can be understood only through this structure of literary history: each work has a *determinate* "place."[13]

I would like to show here that the assumptions of historicism are a function of their motives, and that those motives are inextricable from an edenic view of the literary past, a sense of loss and fallenness that is inherent in the immediacy of our meeting with past art. I would further suggest that historicism began as and still remains an ingenious hermeneutic defense against what Schiller called our sense of embarrassment in confronting our ancestry, nature as it seems to be embedded in early poetry. Historicism's character as an interpretive defense against loss and humiliation appears with wondrous clarity in early historicist writing, both in China and in the West; and though to trace its development is beyond the scope of this paper, one can observe the erasure of all reminders of those uncomfortable origins in the unfolding of historicist writing through the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The dispassionate neutrality often assumed by historicism is nothing more than a mask; and the totalization towards which it aims is an attempt to exclude or subsume a threat. As a structure of understanding it has the consuming rigidity and closedness that suggests the degree of pain it attempts to assuage.

It may well seem that I am historicizing (and thereby relativizing) historicism, that the critique is based on the very assumptions it criticizes. There is no question that historicism appears as an event in time: in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in China, and in the second half of the eighteenth century in Europe. But historicism is not a genuinely historical event; i.e. an event in an extended linear structure of

(compensating for the late capitalist taboo against violating the categorical autonomy of disciplines). Yet as these intellectual movements dissolved in their own unfolding, some of their practicioners were content to rest complacently in the "partial totalization" provided; the more intellectually courageous either continued their work and ended up as Marxists, or they recoiled into the more subversive world of deconstruction.

[12]This is a difficult point. While the structure of subsumption of all particular categories into larger wholes will necessarily lead to totalization, it is the form of the act rather than its logical end that constitutes the essential historicist move. Thus totalizing systems, such as those of Hegel and Marx, are not "more" historicist than those which attempt to limit totalization (i.e. the bourgeois humanities and social science); rather the great systems of totalization are more honestly able to face the consequences of the historicism they have adopted.

[13]Historicist literary studies have a particular horror of anarchy (a horror that has clear counterparts in the evolution of the totalizing state in the nineteenth and twentieth century) There is a deep anxiety lest works cross national, categorical, and period boundaries, lest they be read without their "proper" context, mix indiscriminately with other texts (nineteenth century theories of the purity of race and nation, and a deep anxiety about pollution remain very strong beneath the surface, just as the study of one's own national literature is strongly linked to nationalist ideology and the study of "other" literatures is linked with power relations of imperial conquest and submission; the national past is a well-subdued empire of periods that contribute to the glory of the present). Even those who reject the imperial model instinctively retain the taboos of historical propriety and the fear of miscegenation. In this regard, it is particularly interesting to note how new developments in literary criticism tend strongly to focus on modern literature (Jauss, an admitted historicist, being a notable exception); critics who protest loudly that they are not historicists will often, in the next breath, speak of their interest in "modernism" or "post-modernism"; they are even more intensely aware of the periodization of their particular interpretive "approach." Such critics often feel uncomfortable with earlier literature, as if the questions they pose were not quite "appropriate" to it, out of place. In contemporary criticism a deep historicism lies just beneath the surface of a vaunted anti-historicism.

origin and consequence, cause and effect that can be totalized.[14] Historicism is the attempt to subsume permanent, personal, and binary relations into a complexly articulated sequence, where they can be relativized and "understood"; i.e. it is an act of defensive distancing, "putting things into perspective" by removing oneself from them. It is the means of protecting oneself against powerful Others, who display themselves for us in art but are unreachable.[15] The historicist hermeneutic (and the attendant cultural project of producing phenomena to support historicist interpretation)[16] reacts against

[14]For theoretically obvious reasons historicism has always found it difficult to place itself within its own structure of history. Explicitly in its early phases and implicitly later, the historicist understands that true historicism must be the end of history: it must be history given as object for understanding, something like Hegel's phase of Mind knowing itself. However, history shows a stubborn disposition to continue, and previous historicists must be cast back into the swill of particular historical determination: their work is relativized, understood by "placing" it in the context of its age and within the sequence of works within a given field. The later historicist who thus historicizes his predecessors may be forced to an ideological declaration of his own relative position in history, but he is compelled by inherent assumptions of historicism to write "as if" he were able to stand outside history and to understand it as object. To internalize personal relation and to expose one's own historicity are among the strongest taboos in historicist writing. Imagine for a moment the historicist who prefaces a statement: "Since I speak from late capitalist society and therefore tend to place value on continuous acquisition and disposal of commodities..." The relative historical "place" of acts of interpretation is always most apparent in the writing of others, not in one's own (and even in my playful example we immediately understand the deceit of such an appearance of self-exposure, how "understanding" removes the speaker from the relativized position announced). The great exception here is the Marxist critic, who will always reveal his own ideological presumptions: but these will always be stated as permanent, ahistorical truth, never as historically relative (even Jameson, the most ingenious defender of Marxist dialectics, is committed to the ahistorical truth of the process of dialectics, though he avoids commitment to any particular position attained through dialectics). The model of Marxism lies behind the recent insistence that a writer reveal his or her ideological assumptions (as if that were an easy thing to do!): such declarations inevitably veer towards statements of some ahistorical truth rather than a self-destructive confrontation with one's limitations. To speak about the past from the age of historicism is to pretend to speak from outside of history.

[15]I would like to make a somewhat unorthodox move at this point, a move made necessary because of the assumptions of persuasion that tend to accompany an argument like the present one. When I say that historicism is the means for negating the power of the Other by subsuming the Other, I am not suggesting that this is the model we should adopt in place of historicism for "understanding" (the historicist term whose contemporary assumptions already commit such "understanding" to the laws of historicism) literary works or human society. In fact, such uncomfortably immediate relations are a powerful force in our experience of both, whether we like it or not. My own personal views on how to describe literary works and social phenomena are more militantly anarchic. What I am suggesting is that historicism and the more personal, binary relation are a bound pair that are mutually constitutive, with the personal, binary relation as the possibility that historicism is given to exclude, forget, ignore. Historicism could not exist without this excluded alternative; and even though the personal binary relation existed prior to historicism, it always carried the seed of historicism within itself. When that personal, binary relation achieves a certain degree of force , which is to say when it caused sufficient pain, it produces its negation in historicism and relativism. However, it can be argued that once the personal, binary relation produced its negation and they became a mutually constitutive pair, the primary term (the personal, binary relation) was irrevocably changed, becoming that which was to be excluded, forgotten, ignored.

[16]We must not overlook the fact that historicism as a hermeneutic is inseparable from historicism as a cultural project; i.e. the rise of historicist interpretation was accompanied by the production of ideas and other forms of social display that supported historicist interpretation. If we take literary thought as an example, in China before the Ming and in Europe before the eighteenth century literary thought has no "history" in the proper sense; i.e. there are "truths" that are reconfirmed, elaborated, and added to, but there is no serial replacement whereby the ideas of the recent past are discarded simply because they belong to the recent past—the overwhelming bias that the last generation, whatever it believed, must have

this essentially ahistorical and personal relation: it is the consequence of the very nature of art and its special claims on our fantasies and desires, with the unique capacity to pose threat that such claims entail.[17]

If one reads the early writings of true literary history, both in China and the West, one cannot avoid noticing the importance of the issue of decline. In itself this was an ancient question for both traditions, an anxiety regarding some permanent falling away from former glory (consequent to the paradoxical "unreachable closeness" of the past text). Literary history initially presented itself as a way to understand decline and thereby as a way to redeem literature from decline. The interpretive form by which literary history opposed the threat of permanent loss was to relativize and localize decline, confining it to one of its various categories, such as period, historical genre,[18] or national literature. Literary history is a means to make value relative to a set of conditions that literary history itself determines, conditions that are never absolute and always subject to change. However, such acts of relativization of value are not neutral discoveries: they are motivated constructs that must be understood as a response to intense concern for the question of value.[19] If old values can neither be reached nor dismissed, the only possibility is to create new and potentially equivalent criteria of value.

These descriptions of decline in early literary history, are often in terms of the familiar myths of some Fall, versions of which are common to most civilizations: the loss of Eden, alienation from a state of Nature, or the dissolution of the perfect polity. In literature the edenic world is what Schiller called the "naive." The "literature of Eden" occupies a privileged position, always standing on the margins of history: by this we mean that we can locate that literature in our history, but within its own

been wrong. There is no question that cultural and intellectual history now exist, but they are, quite literally, the invention of historicism.

[17]I hope it will not seem too extravagant to subsume all historicism under an event in what is essentially literary interpretation. However, if one reads the early cultural historians, such as Herder, those who invented modern historiography, one can see quite clearly that the past they understand was a function of its imaginative presentation in art, especially in poetry. The move in nineteenth century historicism to transmute texts into "data" is quite clearly understood by its practitioners as a negative move, the attempt to escape the seduction of the "merely literary." Thus the project was bound in a determinate relation to that which it attempted to negate. As is characteristic of historicism, they see their task as suppressing whatever has an uncomfortable allure.

[18]A clear distinction should be maintained between an ahistorical, idealist notion of genre and the historicist's use of the concept of genre.

[19]Value and determinations of the criteria of value have always been a struggle in writing literary history, as in all historicist writing; this is wonderfully explicit in the early stages of historicism, but in more recent literary thought the issue of valuation is usually repressed. Although the claim is sometimes made that literary historical judgments are "value-free," the intense value placed on being "value-free" should reveal the degree to which such discourse is still governed by a rigid system of values. One can easily distinguish systematic repression from mere disinterest by the taboos that surround the former. There is a species of late nineteenth and twentieth century literary history (and here I include virtually all criticism as struggling with problems of historicism) where terms such as "decline" and "decadence" are taboo. The critic who uses such terms is recognized (and indeed usually presents himself or herself) as "conservative," invoking a special (value-laden) model of intellectual progress in which valuation is supposedly superseded by increasing relativization (this is the paradox of historicism: the value of relativism or the permanent value assigned to the capacity to create new structures of valuation). To state that modern criticism tends to repress the question of value is so much a trope of conservative criticism that I hesitate here—not wanting to be looked on as reactionary and retrograde. Yet this very response is the clear sign of ideological taboo.

world and from its own point of view that literature had no history; it stood at the beginning of a sequential process that came into being only by departure from the original state. The writers of Eden are part of a history of whose existence they are not yet aware.[20] To put it in other terms, they could see without imagining themselves being seen.

It should be stressed that this is a structure of relations that can be imposed on various sets of texts irrespective of their dates: it is a temporal structure, but also an ahistorical structure. One may locate the naive in Homer, or in Greek literature as a whole, or (miraculously) in the Italian renaissance, or in Shakespeare. Literary history generates increasingly complex categories by which it is possible to reenact the myth: Defoe can represent the novel's "naive" at the same moment that Dryden views the drama as being past its prime. In American literature the naive tends to migrate westward with time. Historians of rock and roll tell the same melancholy story, with the naive of the 1950s passing into sophistication and decline before our very eyes.[21] In China the moment of naivété can be the High T'ang or the "Nineteen Old Poems," or the *Shih ching*. For late Ch'ing and modern writers on Chinese drama, it is the Yüan (Yüan drama will be described with the same language of honest innocence that was a cliché of criticism of the "Nineteen Old Poems"). I have had discussions with scholars about vernacular literature in which the prose of the "May Fourth Movement" is a stylistic Eden from which *pai-hua* has subsequently fallen. These are all points of origin in a sequence, after which, despite fluctuation, things went inexorably downhill.[22]

Although literary history manages to confine the myth of decline within categorical boundaries, the myth itself is one of the oldest and most powerful in both Chinese and western literary thought. There are countless statements of it in both traditions, but one of the simplest and most powerful expressions of it is the one given by the unnamed philosopher at the end of "On the Sublime": *tosautê logôn kosmikê tis epeiche ton bion aphoria,* "To such a degree has some universal barrenness of words taken hold of life." The central word is aphoria, a barrenness and inability to produce—a ruined estate whose fertility has been used up, the impotence and infertility that come with age to a person, a genre, or a national literature.

[20]This is close to Schiller's observation about the naive poet, that he cannot know he is naive: naivete is something that appears only to the "sentimental" poet.

[21]Modern critics of culture are fond of trying to give the "post-modern" world some distinction in the sheer rapidity with which it runs through historical sequences. This, of course, cannot be dissociated from the desperate demands of consumption and disposal to support the hyperproduction of late capitalist society; however, the peculiar historical structure of continuous novelty is a function of the cultural project to produce products that validate historical interpretation. While this is not the place to explore the question fully, historical relativization is essential to the state's total control over individuals in the capacity to assign determinate place and to create new criteria of value.

[22]Late Edens, such as the High T'ang or the Elizabethan age, often require ingenious devices on the part of literary historians to wipe the slate clean for the new beginning. In the discourse entitled the "Epochs of Poetry" in Friedrich Schlegel's *Dialogue on Poetry,* the barbarian invasions serve to wipe clean the classical slate. The High T'ang is an Eden with far too much poetry before it, so Ming archaist critics placed much stress on the restriction of the High T'ang's flourishing to regulated poetry, thus making the High T'ang a beginning after which everything else was decline. Note that in order to preserve the edenic model it was absolutely necessary to discredit T'ang old style verse, which was done with several famous catch-phrases, the most famous being "There is no old style verse in the T'ang [worth reading]." The association of the High T'ang with regulated verse is still a commonplace of Chinese literary pedagogy, despite the fact that at least half, if not most of the famous High T'ang poems are in old style verse rather than regulated verse.

In this *aphoria* the old (the later born), for all their social power, feel humiliated in face of youth (the older writers who worked while the world was still young). Dryden almost admitted it—the embarrassment that the moderns could no longer write drama as had been written less than a century before. To go back and achieve what had been achieved before—recursion and return—seems to be the one thing forbidden to us: it seems "used up." And the one thing forbidden will always take on a sweetness and desirability and importance that make a thousand things possessed dull and unimportant.

The movement toward literary history and toward historicism begins in the countermotion against the embarrassment that the moderns feel in face of ancient fecundity. Unable to attain what the ancients attained, the imperative is to not to want to attain the same thing, to radically restructure the criteria of value whereby we moderns can be as good as or better than they.

The text in which this countermotion is most perfectly articulated is Schiller's *Naive and Sentimental Poetry,* which is perhaps the last great work that stands outside of historicism (and, from the historicist viewpoint, must be understood as being, to some degree, opposed to the new historicism). In the first few pages of *Naive and Sentimental Poetry* an interesting move occurs, turning around the key word, "to put to shame," *beschämen.* He begins describing our love of nature and observes:

> But this type of interest in nature occurs only under two conditions. For the first it is absolutely essential that the object which influences us in this way either be nature or at least be taken as such by us. The second is that it be "naive" (in the broadest meaning of the term); i.e. that nature stand in contrast with art and put it to shame. Once the latter condition is conjoined with the former, and not before, nature turns into the naive.[23]

Our interest in the condition of nature and our love for it (nature here including writers like Homer and Shakespeare) is predicated not merely on our alienation from nature, but on our sense of falseness and diminishment in that alienation—that we perceive nature as something that was and should be in us (as Dryden knew it had been "within" Shakespeare), but which has been lost. Soon afterward Schiller speaks of these objects of nature appearing to us; we belong to the fallen world of "art," but:

> What we were, they are; they are what we ought to become again. We were nature just like them, and following the path of reason and freedom, our culture should direct us back to nature.[24]

The banner of reason and freedom offers him some way to rise above the humiliating perfection of nature's self-subsistence; and in the paragraph that follows an interesting change of sentiment has occurred: we and our freely produced art need no longer be ashamed.

[23] *Diese Art des Interesse an der Natur findet aber nur unter zwei Bedingungen statt. Fürs erste ist es durchaus nötig, daß der Gegenstand, der uns dasselbe einflösst, N a t u r sei oder doch von uns dafür gehalten werde; zweitens, daß er (in weitester Bedeutung des Worts) n a i v sei, d.h., daß die Natur mit der Kunst im Kontraste stehe und sie beschäme. Sobald das letzte zu dem ersten hinzukommt, und nicht eher, wird die Natur zum Naiven.*

[24] *Sie s i n d, was wir w a r e n; sie sind was wir wieder w e r d e n s o l l e n. Wir waren Natur wir sie, und unser Kultur soll uns auf dem Wege der Vernuft und der Freiheit zur Natur zurückführen.*

> But they gain no credit for their perfection because it is not the accomplishment of their own choice. Thus they furnish us thereby with the entirely singular pleasure, that they are a model for us without putting us to shame.[25]

Out of this twist, occurring at the very beginning of *Naive and Sentimental Poetry,* Schiller's argument becomes altogether different from the conventional eighteenth century appreciations of nature; Schiller creates a new set of values involving freedom and the nobility of imperfection by which the later writer can stand as equal to the earlier writer.[26] The pivot of that turn is the glaring reversal of shame: first we are "put to shame" by nature, but with this new set of values by which our very imperfection is to our credit, we can admire the naive without being put to shame.

Perhaps the most remarkable blindness in *Naive and Sentimental Poetry* is precisely the claim of freedom. It is clear and explicit throughout the work that the "sentimental" poet is driven by compulsion, a permanent pain at his own lack of nature within and a pain constantly renewed at every encounter with the naive. Freedom is radically restricted to the instrumentality for achieving unfree ends; those ends themselves are, however, not with the scope of human freedom. This sets the model for the historicist concept of freedom, in which a multiplicity of supposedly free possibilities are generated to compensate for and conceal one determinate prohibition and impossibility.

Similar forces were at work on the tradition in late sixteenth and seventeenth century China: the already ancient reverence for antiquity and the acute sense of how modern poetry had fallen from that former perfection were beginning to acquire a new sharpness (perhaps, in part, because of the patent failure of the Ming archaists to return to antiquity in their poetry). In the description of temporal relations in poetry, we begin to see models of innocence and deep corruption that should make any modern writer feel shame facing the past.[27] Consider, for example, the Ming critic Hsieh Chen in his *Ssu-ming shih-hua* writing on the "Nineteen Old Poems":

> The "Nineteen Old Poems" say things straight out, without making any effort in the choice of words. It's like a young candidate for the imperial examinations talking with a friend in ordinary speech about family matters. An example [in fact, from *yüeh-fu*]:
>
> A visitor came from far away
> and gave me a pair of carp;
> I called to the boy to cook the carp,
> and there was a letter within.

[25] *Aber ihre Vollkommenheit ist nicht ihr Verdienst, weil sie nicht das Werk ihrer Wahl ist. Sie gewähren uns also die ganz eigene Lust, daß sie, ohne uns zu beschämen, unsere Muster sind.*

[26] Schiller's opposition between "naive" and "sentimental" is, of course, an ideal rather than a historical opposition; but one need not read far in the book to realize the temporal model that lies beneath it, as should be obvious in the tenses: "What they are, were were" (i.e. we are in history; they live in a permanent present tense outside of it). One reason for Schiller's making it an ideal rather than a historical opposition was the question of Goethe, the "naive" artist in a "sentimental" age; however, the acknowledgment of a sentimental age and the recognition of Goethe as an anomaly exposes the underlying temporal model.

[27] The following passage might be contrasted with the sharp denunciation of Sung poetry in Yen Yü's *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua* in the late thirteenth century. Yen Yü felt strongly that modern poetry had fallen far from High T'ang greatness, but in his eyes Sung writers had failed because of terrible mistakes; he proposed a poetic *paideia* that would mitigate their degree of fallenness. This is similar to Longinus' offer of a *technologia,* a "technical manual," of the sublime, which he admits is, in its essentials, beyond *techné,* instrumental craft. Perhaps neither Longinus nor Yen Yü fully believe that their programs can entirely redeem poetry from its fallen condition; but the attempt is still worth making. In contrast Hsieh Chen offers a model of irreversible corruption.

But once he has passed the examination, the young man learns the dialect of a state officer (*kuan-hua*) and shows affectation in his speech; he becomes conceited and no longer the same as he had been at home. An example of this is Ts'ao Chih's:

> Swimming fish hide in green waters,
> soaring birds touch the skies in flight;
> when first I set out, stern frost was forming,
> now I return and the clear dew has dried.

The tones are well balanced here, and the passage is sonorous; but when one recites it, one can't help noticing the affectation. Among the poets of the Wei and Tsin the dialect of a state officer and ordinary speech are found in about equal proportions; but by the time we reach the Ch'i and Liang, whenever someone opens his mouth, it's always the official dialect. The official dialect requires energy; ordinary home speech is sparing of energy; the official dialect is forced; ordinary home speech is natural. But if a person fails in modeling himself on antiquity, then he drifts into what is low and vulgar. People these days who work at recent style verse worry only that it not be entirely in the official dialect and that their affected tones lack magniloquence. This is an unfortunate example of getting stuck in the High T'ang and ultimately being unable to go beyond the Wei and Tsin back to the Han.

As in similar Western examples, the purely temporal relation to early poetry is superimposed on the process of corruptive maturation; through elevation in status and sophistication, natural relations disappear and the poet becomes a public person with the attendant self-consciousness. The most painful clause, hidden in this brief passage, is the observation on those who unsuccessfully attempt to model themselves on antiquity: they are in danger of producing only what is "low and vulgar." As with the Ming archaists (and in a different way with the Yüan brothers), the attempt to recapture lost innocence and naturalness is particularly disturbing because the product inevitably exposes the impossibility of the project.[28] Facing such impossibility (equally obvious in neo-Classical drama) the conventional response will be that of the proto-historicist Dryden: "This therefore will be a good argument to us, either not to write at all, or to attempt some other way." Schiller offered a more complex solution: that the return to the natural was an "ideal" that was, of necessity, infinitely deferred; the quality of the attempt itself was to become the focus of value rather than the degree of approximation. Chinese critics were equally aware of the contradiction: that the natural, which is the unself-conscious, cannot be a product of self-consciousness. The willed "natural" produced only a parody of the natural, the "low and vulgar," as in the works of the Yüan brothers in the late Ming.

The "shame" we feel in face of the ancient and natural must ultimately produce defiance. We resent the intimidation. We feel that we should be able, like Shakespeare, to look within and find original nature within us. Edward Young's "Conjectures on Original Composition" of 1759 refuses to accept the *aphoria,* the "barrenness" of the ruined estate; he resents the capacity of antiquity to intimidate us:

[28] The reason for the failure is, of course, that the project to return to some ancient simplicity incorporates its own intentionality, which immediately separates from a poetry whose determinate characteristic is precisely the absence of such intentionality.

> "But why are *Originals* so few? not because the writer's harvest is over, the great reapers of antiquity having left nothing to be gleaned after them; not because the human mind's teeming time is past, or because it is incapable of putting forth unprecedented births; but because illustrious examples *engross, prejudice,* and *intimidate.* They *engross* our attention, and so prevent a due inspection of ourselves; they *prejudice* our judgment in favor of their abilities, and so lessen the sense of our own; and they *intimidate* us with the splendor of their renown, and thus under diffidence bury our strength. Nature's impossibilities and those of diffidence lie wide asunder"
>
> Many a great man has been lost to himself, and the publick, purely because great ones were born before him... Let not the blaze of even *Homer's* muse darken us to the discernment of our own powers; ..."

We find similar expressions of resentment against the intimidation of antiquity in late Ming writers such as the Yüan brothers. There was a growing awareness that the problem lay in the very fact that such values were received,[29] and further in the association with nature of values that had been corrupted by the process of transmission and reception itself. The only solution—the same solution proposed by Young and the pre-Romantics—was to dissociate nature from received values and to rediscover nature (as "originality," that which follows from the basic self) in the process of production rather than in the determinate qualities of the product.

> Must we then, you say, not imitate the antient authors? Imitate them, by all means; but imitate aright. He that imitates the divine *Iliad,* does not imitate *Homer*; but he who takes the same method, which *Homer* took, for arriving at a capacity of a work so great. Tread in his steps to the sole fountain of immortality; drink where he drank, at the true *Helicon,* that is, at the breast of nature: Imitate; but imitate not the *Composition,* but the Man.
>
> "Conjectures on Original Composition"

Yüan Hung-tao (1568-1610) says much the same thing. The natural in poetry can only be produced; it can never be transmitted so that it can be re-produced. However, this rather obvious commonplace has serious consequences: the same process, now the locus of value, can be observed to bring forth products with very different determinate qualities, which now must be considered equal in value. A famous passage by Yüan Hung-tao, writing a preface for his brother's poetry, is perhaps the most beautiful example of the perplexity of that first confrontation with multiple criteria of value:

> For the most part he wrote only from his natural *élan* and was not restrained by forms (*ko*). He was willing to set his brush to paper only if something flowed out from his own breast. From time to time his feelings and the scene would meet in perfect accord, and in an instant there were a thousand words, like rivers pouring eastward, causing people's spirits to be swept away. Among these writings there are both excellent spots and faults, but even his faults are full of phrases of his own making and his original color (*pen-se*). Thus for my part I find the greatest delight in his faults; what are called his excellent spots cannot avoid being in some way repellent by their adornment and imitative qualities—these, I think, have not entirely escaped the manner and practice of literary men of recent times.
>
> Yüan Hung-tao from "On the Poems of Hsiao-hsiu" (Yüan Chung-tao)

[29]This is particularly clear in the opening of Kant's famous essay on "What is Enlightenment," which proclaims the end of human "tutelage," its subordination to the past.

Despite his attempt to radicalize his position at the conclusion of the passage, the initial formulation more perfectly embodies the sudden experience of two sets of values: on the one hand, Yüan Hung-tao reacts immediately to his brother's violation of received poetic norms and recognizes them as "faults"; then he can shift to another point of view (value as process) by which the "faults" have value and the norm is flawed.[30] Deviation from received norm (now beginning to be understood as obsolete form) is recognized precisely as nature breaking through false learning.

To reveal one's nature involuntarily, by accident, as Yüan Chung-tao seems to do in his poetic flaws, may most perfectly embody the desire to return to nature. But for the next, more sophisticated move in the relation, the move in which literary history begins, it will be necessary to account for self-consciousness and will. As in Schiller, this new world (Dryden's "something new,") must be based on understanding and choice. Deviation from the norm must be an act of will, a courageous refusal to be intimidated by the past. In "The Origins of Poetry", while recapitulating the commonplace requirements for a writer—judgment, talent, energy—Yeh Hsieh (1627-1703) adds a fourth requirement: courage. To write is frightening and inherently intimidating: it is to set oneself up for comparison with the great masters. Yeh Hsieh, like Young, felt the necessity of enjoining writers to act on their own, not to be intimidated:

> The Way of literature (*wen-chang*) is based on the free, unfettered joy of expressing oneself. If instead there is something in it that puts a person in shackles, then there are obstacles everywhere. In such a case the stronger writer will say: the work of such and such an older writer was thus and so, and I am the only one who has grasped his method (*fa*). The weaker writer will say: "The work of such and such an older writer was thus and so, and I have heard that such and such a contemporary writer transmits his method thus and so, and I too do it thus and so." The crafty types agree in their hearts but keep it secret and say nothing; the ignorant types don't understand how it is, but make hollow boasts to others, thinking they have some true basis in themselves. Moreover, it sometimes happens that when organizing a whole work, a person will have said everything he could and can't come up with anything else; but afraid that the piece won't be long enough and that it won't fit the formal structure (*ko*), he extends it haphazardly in many directions: this is called "adding feet to a snake." In other cases there is still more to say and the person could easily keep on writing, but in his fear of transgressing the formal structure (*ko*) and missing the measure, he brings it abruptly to a conclusion: this is "cutting something off in the bloom of life." Cases of this sort come from a lack of courage which follows from a lack of the capacity for judgment; this causes the brush to be unable to act freely. One cannot help but observe that this is a tribulation for writers. Long ago a wise man said, "Completion depends on courage" [Han Ch'i]. 'Literature is a deed of eternity' [Tu Fu], but if one lacks courage, it is impossible to attain eternity. For this reason I say that if courage is lacking, brush and ink will shrivel up [in fear]. And if a person's courage is humiliated, how can talent be able to extend itself. Only courage can engender talent. It is commonly understood that talent is only received from Heaven, but do people realize that talent also depends on being extended and made full by courage?

[30]It is no accident that Yüan Hung-tao also represents one of the earliest examples of a true literary historical viewpoint in China, in which the old notion of each dynasty having its own genre is radicalized to the position that each genre is potentially equal in value to all the others, and that a past dynastic genre is not an immutable norm but a dead genre. In short, Yüan Hung-tao is the first to suggest the essential historicist position that the past is "superseded."

Our shame and intimidation before ancient greatness can be opposed by courage and by the transposition of value away from particular determinate qualities in a text to the process of production itself.[31] This process may, of course, bring about quite different determinate qualities in the product. However, since the form of the productive process is essentially unknowable except through the determinate qualities of the product, this shift in the locus of values must remain a hypothetical construct that will ultimately compel admission of the relativity of value in particular texts.

This was an exceedingly dangerous juncture. Those poets and critics who sought to break the intimidating monopoly of antiquity and the received values it imposed had no intention whatsoever of proposing a structure of radically relative value in which any poem might be just as good as any other. Their intent had been to equal the greatness of the ancients, not to destroy the very possibility of greatness. They needed a temporally open structure that permitted a sequence of coherent systems of value.[32] That structure was historicism.

In historicism everything has a place within the historical structure of the whole and must be judged according to its place. However, to recognize the propriety of place requires a complete interpretation of history. How can we know if what a Mid-T'ang poet is doing is good unless we have a clear sense of what a Mid-T'ang poet should be doing? And such a judgment is contingent on knowing how the Mid-T'ang differs from the High T'ang and the Late T'ang, and finally contingent on knowing the Mid-T'ang's "place" in an entire history of poetry. Any particular judgment and interpretation implies an understanding of the whole.[33] The sudden and immense growth of literary scholarship in seventeenth century China and in late eighteenth century Europe is the immediate consequence of historicism, and the intense relation grows up between new literature and literary scholarship in both civilizations.

Let us take as a hypothesis that every great system, such as historicism, is driven by one point from which the eyes are always averted, one ultimate taboo, the avoidance

[31]This is most obvious in Yeh Hsieh's radical revision of the concept of "rule" or "method," *fa*, which had in earlier poetics been the conceptual means by which conformity to norm had been enforced. For Yeh Hsieh *fa* cannot be given before the act of composition, but it can be adjudicated in regard to a particular piece after it has been completed. His is a "meta-*fa*" in which the determinacy of the "rule" is the form of necessity rather than in any determinate qualities that can be isolated from the particular relation of particulars. This, of course, breaks the possibility of transmission, which had been the basic structure of temporal relations; the new relation to the past is historical "understanding."

[32]Note that the nature of valuation is necessarily synchronic and atemporal. Any radical concession to the nature of temporality undermines the grounds of commensurate comparison that make valuation possible. One cannot judge one work by different criteria simply because it was written five minutes after a predecessor. Historicism evades rather than addresses the deepest issues of temporality. A means was necessary whereby to incorporate essentially synchronic structures of valuation into complex, linear history. To accomplish this, historicism produced a structure of periods and categories whose internal relations were atemporal; and within these judgment and interpretation are allowed to operate much as they had before the advent of historicism. The difference was that, freed from received values, historicism made possible the generation of new and multiple criteria of value within its local categories. Bound up as it always has been with the progressive achievements of will, historicism is a hermeneutic form that enables the production of new criteria of value; and its complicity with valuation makes it inherently incapable of addressing temporality in any radical way. We might further observe that the kinds of relations historicism posits between periods and historical categories—the relations where we should expect some attempt to address issues of temporality—are in fact nothing more than variations on the gross relations within synchronic systems.

[33]Schleiermacher's "hermeneutic circle" is inevitable in a theoretical hermeneutics that presumes historicism.

of which governs the system's elaboration. In the case of historicism the great taboo is recursion, return, repetition. It is the pain of an impossible desire which historicism finds increasingly ingenious ways to avoid. Yet the traces of this taboo are scattered throughout the texts of historicism: to be "ahead of one's time" is the sweetest praise; to be "behind the times" is the ultimate condemnation. There is an illusory promise of perfect freedom, open possibilities and "experimentation"; yet no one may mention the one freedom we are denied—to stay where we are or to go back. Literary historical understanding subsumes the past, not only permitting us to judge earlier poetry, but also teaching us what territory is now taboo—even if, like Dryden, we may sigh at what fertile territory it was, now gone to waste as ruined estates.

The early historicist, building on the changes outlined above, had a series of tasks, and these tasks had to be performed with the received vocabulary of temporal relations. First he had to destroy the model of permanent decline, shifting the negative value in the concept of decline to cases of repetition and recursion. Second, he had to declare that literary history was a necessary sequence of conditions, and that any particular period could be itself only by orderly and necessary differentiation from preceding periods. The third task followed from the second: present literature could be redeemed only by knowledge of literary history. Most interesting, knowledge of literary history did not merely permit the modern writer to avoid what had been done before; it allowed him to actually subsume the entire past, to make it a field upon which all variation is possible: the past must seem to be a series of synchronic possibilities through which the historicist can move freely.[34] There is a secret apocalyptic vision in the early historicist (especially the Western historicists): that by knowing history one stands somehow outside of history, transcending it.[35]

We may follow these tasks in the "Origins of Poetry" (*Yüan shih*) of Yeh Hsieh. To carry out the first task, the reinterpretation of the theory of decline, Yeh must work with the received terms of cyclical relation: *cheng,* "norm," and *pien,* "deviation." They are in Chinese as fraught with value as their English translations suggest.[36] In its

[34]In these three tasks are embedded what I would take to be the three essential characteristics of historicism, all closely related: first, the principle of supersession, by which one identified kind of writing becomes, at some time or place, no longer valid, "superseded"; second, totalization and the orderly mapping of sets within the whole, the drawing of boundaries, so that all particulars become "parts" that must be understood in relation to the whole (note the connection between this and notions of "organic unity"); third, the position of the historicist outside the whole, where he can both "understand" it and freely guide its extension.

[35]The transcendent position achieved by historical knowledge is both the position of divinity and that of the audience of a literary work. Thus Herder invokes the venerable metaphor of the "theater of the world" to describe the divine experience of human history: "Thus the history of man is ultimately a theater of transformations, which He alone can review, who animate all these figures, and feels and enjoys in them all." (Johann Gottfried Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind,* translated by Frank E. Manuel, Chicago, 1968. p.5.) Coming early in his famous *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind,* this is the transcendent model of historical understanding to which historicism aspires. The twentieth century has worked only one great change upon historicism: except in Marxist criticism it has lost its ideological faith in the apocalyptic promise (most obvious in Hegel), that historical knowledge places one outside of history. However, modern bourgeois historicism has shown itself to be utterly incapable of acting on this new understanding.

[36]The history of these terms is exceedingly complex; I refer the reader to Maureen Robertson, "Periodization in the Arts and Patterns of Change in Traditional Chinese Literary History." Susan Bush and Christian Murck, ed. *Theories of the Arts in China.* Princeton, 1983.

initial phase Yeh's argument is a simple one, treating the *Book of Songs* (in terms reminiscent of Aristotle's argument in the *Poetics* that the good of *mimesis* is indifferent to the good of the thing imitated): by changing with the times (deviation), poetry remains within its norm:

> In the *Feng* and the Odes of the *Book of Songs* there is both norm (*cheng*) and deviation (*pien*). When they speak of norm and deviation as being contingent on the times, they are referring to the way in which government and customs pass from success to failure, from splendor to corruption. This is speaking of poetry in terms of the times, that there are [social and political] deviations in the times and that poetry goes along with these. But when the times undergo a deviation and fall from the norm, poetry undergoes a deviation and yet does not fall from its norm. Thus flourishing without decline is the source of poetry.

Note that here in Yeh Hsieh's early historicism (as we will see again in Friedrich Schlegel) the edenic view of literature is preserved as a vestigial form. In this case, the *Book of Songs* embodies the perfect theory of "reflection" (the Marxist term applies perfectly to Confucian poetics), in which literature undergoes deviation with the times and thus remains in a state of permanent flourishing. However, after the *Book of Songs,* poetry falls from its bond with social history into purely literary history; i.e, it acquires a history of its own. By this event of the fall, the possibility of decline appears for the first time. However, now on the structural model established by the *Book of Songs* (deviation is poetry's norm), decline must now be understood as a failure to undergo deviation and change.

> I would say that in the poetry of later ages there is both norm and deviation; but here the way in which norm and deviation are tied to poetry refers to differences in formal models (*t'i-ko*), in tone (*sheng-tiao*), in the ways in which concepts are formed (*ming-yi*), in diction (*tz'u*), in novelty versus archaism, in movements upward and downward. Here we are discussing the times in terms of their poetry [i.e. history as literary history]: poetry undergoes a deviation and the times follow along with it. Thus we have had alternations of flourishing and decline in the Han, Wei, Six Dynasties, T'ang, Sung, Yüan, and Ming; and only by a deviation were people able to redeem the decline of the norm. Thus an alternation of flourishing and decline occurs in the streams (*liu*) of poetry.

This is the quintessential historicist move: instead of change as a falling away from ancient perfection, decline occurs in the failure to undergo internal change. It is precisely by an act of deviation that literature is redeemed from decline. Having now established that poetry's norm is continuous deviation, it remains for him to declare some necessary order in that process. He does this with a supremely vague organic model, in which every stage is intelligible only in terms of what its preceding ground was and what fulfilled it later.[37]

[37]In the following passage Yeh Hsieh states these serial preconditions quite baldly, and (consonant with one pedagogic mode of late clasical rhetoric) repetitiously. "If you don't read the archaic songs like "Bright and Good" or "Striking the Clay," you can't understand the achievement of the *Book of Songs.* In the same way, if you don't read the *Book of Songs,* you can't understand the achievement of Han and Wei poetry. If you don't read the poetry of the Han and Wei, you can't understand the achievement of Six Dynasties poetry, and if you don't read the poetry of the Six Dynasties, you can't understand the achievement of T'ang poetry. If you don't read T'ang poetry, you can't understand the achievement of Sung and Yüan poetry. What is written earlier opens the way; what is written later carries it on and amplifies it. What is

The final task is to assert the redemptive power of historical understanding. Here, even more explicitly than in Friedrich Schlegel's argument below, the writer may become trapped in repetition (and hence in sterile decline) by the inability to understand history. By history one can know how to write in the present by knowing what has been done before.

> Because those who claim to know about poetry are short on talent and lack energy, their judgment is also blinded and they lack an intuitive sense. Since they are incapable of understanding how the source and streams, the roots and branches, the normative (*cheng*) and deviant (*pien*), and flourishing and decline all operate in cycles, they are further incapable of discerning the thought (*hsin-ssu*) of either ancient or modern authors—neither their thought, nor the energy of their talents, nor the relative depth of their work, nor their relative levels, nor their strengths and weaknesses. They cannot tell which ones were followers and which ones made a break with the past; they can't tell which were innovators and which were derivative; they can't tell which ones sunk into decline and which ones saved literature from decline and made it flourish again. They make analyses in minute detail and combine them with unifying syntheses, followed by vain boasts about what they have achieved: their discourses are a barrier to understanding, and in deceiving others they are themselves deceived. Thus we have a hundred voices all talking at once, each setting up its catch-phrases against the others, each stuck in some one-sided position which is rounded out by plundering others. Their younger followers have swallowed most of it, with the result that their sense of what is right is confused and their natural responses (*hsing-ch'ing*) are hampered. And we cannot help feeling discouraged at how the art of poetry (*feng-ya*) continually sinks lower and lower.
>
> It is generally true that if a person lacks talent (*ts'ai*), his thoughts (*ssu*) don't come out readily; if the person lacks courage, then pen and ink shrink back in anxiety; if the person lacks judgment, then he doesn't know what to keep and what to discard; if the person lacks force, he can't establish himself as a fully independent figure. However, some people think that the older writers can be feigned and the present deceived: such people make much of formal structures (*ko*) and regulations (*lü*), and in trying to get good lines and phrases, they always apply the most rigidly strict rules and weigh them by the most minute measures. Lacking what is necessary within themselves, they put themselves under the protective authority of one of the older writers, and use him to impress the crowd to awed silence. But if we look a little more deeply, we realize that these poets have never really seen the true appearance of the older writers, nor do they understand the relation between source and stream, roots and branches, or flourishing and decline. But to go further and rob the last tatters of flesh from those older writers, to discuss poetic theory in grandiloquent tones, and to set up these lineages of master

written earlier founds something; what is written later follows and broadens it. If there is something that the earlier writers have never said, then a later writer can become like the earlier writers in being the first to say something. On the other hand, if the earlier writers have already said a certain thing, then the later writer can develop what the earlier writers said and say something else. If I may put it in general terms, if later writers lacked predecessors, they would not have any point to start out from; and if those earlier writers didn't have any successors, there would be no way to complete the processes they set in motion.''

The most remarkable thing about this passage is the Chinese counterpart of the closure of historical understanding that we find in Western historicism: the earlier text is incomplete without the later text to fulfill it. In this, and more explicitly in other passages, Yeh Hsieh clearly sees that poetic history is now complete. A revitalized poetry—which is Yeh Hsieh's stated aim—is possible only through historical understanding. This is very similar to Friedrich Schlegel's position in the ''Epochs of Poetry,'' discussed later.

> and transmitter—these things suggest that the fate of poetry is in a very dangerous situation. We must scrupulously examine how norm and deviation and flourishing and decline have taken place in the past few millennia; by clarifying this in general terms we may hope that the kind of poetry produced by the older writers will rise again.

Beneath the intensely polemical surface of this passage, there are a remarkable series of historicist assumptions. The first of these is the link between a received, authoritative tradition of poetics and the attempt to "feign" older poets (i.e. the formal identity of the pedagogic past and the literary past). What disturbs Yeh Hsieh in both cases is the humiliating subordination of the later writer to the authority of the forerunner, whether he is teacher or poetic model. The antithesis to the subordination to authority (Kant's "tutelage") is a remarkable conjunction of historical understanding and autonomy. Historical understanding relativizes predecessors, thus freeing the later writer from subordination to any particular predecessor. From a dangerous servility and awe one is rescued by a blander admiration in which each predecessor is understood in his proper "place." Both the substance of the argument and the polemical tone reveal the degree to which the nature of understanding is a defense against personal threat.[38]

The dissertation on the "Epochs of Poetry" (*Epochen der Dichtkunst*) in Friedrich Schlegel's *Dialogue on Poetry* is no less explicit regarding historical understanding as the means of remedying permanent decline.[39] Schlegel begins by describing the orderly structure of literary history, not following the Chinese organic model but according to the dialectical model that later was fully developed by Hegel. He begins with the *Iliad* as the "common undertaking," producing in negation the *Odyssey* as the private epic, then the mythic epic as a whole negating itself in the anti-mythic poetry of Archilochos, etc. etc. Anyone familiar with the mechanisms of German dialectical argument can write the rest of Greek literary history from these initial moves. This, however, is the true historicist vision: a linear sequence of orderly change in which each moment is comprehensible only in terms of the total structure.

Yeh Hsieh's description of poetic history had three (and if we incorporate the historicist vision of the transcendence of history, potentially four) major stages of poetry: the first was the golden age of the *Book of Songs,* "flourishing without decline"; the second was literary history proper, poetry between the *Book of Songs* and the Ming, in which every threat of stasis was salvaged by a deviation; finally there was the archaist vision of return in the Ming, the age of authority, that produced an extended period of decline, which could be redeemed only by literary historical knowledge. For Friedrich

[38]Polemics is the sign of insecurity and threat; the necessary polemical attacks on received authority had already been carried out by Yeh's late Ming predecessors (as the historicists among the English Romantics could build on the attacks on authority carried out by the pre-Romantics, and the German Romantics could build on a similar foundation by the *Sturm und Drang* writers). Yet Yeh Hsieh was as deeply opposed to late Ming vitalism as he was to their archaist predecessors, and he felt the necessity of the polemical voice, which was already a weary commonplace of the Chinese theoretical tradition. Yeh was perhaps acutely aware of the forces against the development of a true historicist point of view; and although true historicism became a powerful factor in Yeh's eighteenth and nineteenth century successors, historicism never achieved the complete intellectual monopoly in China that it did in the West.

[39]One cannot say that the "Epochs," a discourse delivered by Andrea within the *Dialogue,* and disputed by some of the *Dialogue's* other interlocutors, reflects the whole of Friedrich Schlegel's position; indeed the beauty of the *Dialogue* is its anarchic inclusion of all possible positions. However, it is a good account of early European literary history and is particularly close to the kind of work done by Friedrich's brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel.

Schlegel the edenic phase of poetry is a complete historical sequence, played out among the Greeks; after that first history everything is repetition; in one particularly beautiful passage in the "Epochs" he is still very close to the earlier vision of a lost poetry of Eden:

> This first corpus of Greek poetry—the old epic, the iambics, the elegy, the celebratory songs and plays—this is poetry itself. Everything that followed, up to our times, is remnant, reverberation, solitary surmise, approximation, return to that highest Olympus of poetry.[40]

If Yeh Hsieh subsumes cyclicality into some infinitely complex larger structure of linear change, Schlegel is contemptuous of the very idea. He speaks of "golden ages" declared in later times and comments:

> . . . from that time on no nation wanted to be without their own golden age; each one that followed was emptier and even worse than the preceding one . . .[41]

In every way the "Epochs of Literature" anticipates the more copious marvels of nineteenth century German literary history. Where it differs is in this admission of the model of absolute decline and in the closing explicit statement of the way in which literary history promises redemption from decline. Note how the passage begins with "understanding" antiquity, then moves out to the example of Goethe, not confined to the Greeks but moving out to subsume the literatures of all ages and nations.

> Nevertheless there was here preserved at least one tradition, that one must return to antiquity and to nature, and this spark took flame among the Germans after they had gradually worked through their prior models. Winckelmann taught the consideration of antiquity as a whole and provided the first example of how an art should be founded on the history of its formation. Goethe's universality casts a soft reflection of the poetry of virtually all nations and periods: an inexhaustible and exemplary series of works, studies, sketches, fragments, and experiments in every genre and in different forms . . . The translation of poets and the recreation of their rhythms has become an art, while criticism has become a form of knowledge that has obliterated old errors and opened new points of view in the understanding of antiquity, against the background of which a perfect history of poetry appears.
>
> Nothing is wanting but for the Germans to carry these means further, that they follow the model that Goethe has set before them and to pursue all the forms of art back to their source, in order to be able bring them back to life or combine them anew.[42]

[40] *Diese erste Masse hellenischer Dichtkunst, das alte Epos, die Jamben, die Elegie, die festlichen Gesänge und Schauspiele; das ist die Poesie selbst. Alles, was noch folgt, bis auf unsre Zeiten, ist Überbleibsel, Nachhall, einzelne Ahndung, Annährung, Rückkehr zu jenem höchsten Olymp der Poesie.* While *Ahndung* here must be the old form of *Ahnung* ("surmise"), one cannot help noting its meaning from a different root: "revenge" or "requital." For Schiller the sentimental poets were nature's "avengers"; and the substratum of hostility cannot be entirely ignored.

[41] . . . *und keine Nation wollte fernerhin ohne ihr goldnes Zeitalter bleiben; jenes folgende war leerer und schlechter noch als das vorhergende. . .*

[42] *Indessen erhielt sich doch hier wenigstens eine Tradition, man müsse zu den Alten und zur Natur zurückkehren, und dieser Funken zündete bei den Deutschen, nachdem sie sich durch die Vorbilder allmählich durchgearbeitet hatten. Winckelmann lehrte das Altertum als ein Ganzes betrachten und gab das erste Beispiel, wie man eine Kunst durch die Geschichte ihrer Bildung begründen sollte. Goethes Universalität gab einen milden Widerschein von der Poesie fast aller Nationen und Zeitalter; eine unerschöpflich, lehrreiche*

A careful reading of this passage reveals what wondrous slight of hand Schlegel has performed here, first returning to antiquity (which he has demonstrated not to be an edenic moment but a complete historical sequence), then in that return to have comprehended the full range of historical change; following that, in the comment on Goethe, mastery of the past extends beyond antiquity to the total corpus of earlier literature. The secret goal of historicist art is here: by knowing history, one removes oneself from history; the literary historical artist, like Goethe, who founds his art on the knowledge of the history of art, has that art available as a set of synchronic possibilities, as T.S. Eliot was later to articulate in his own derivative way.

The historicist's promise of subsuming all history by understanding is the great evasion of human temporality, the pain of our historical limitation that was so strong in the edenic theory of poetry. A tragic vision of our limitation is replaced by a fraudulent and brittle optimism.

Historicism and the modern museum made their appearance together; and the museum is perhaps the embodiment of the historicist vision: temporal relations are reorganized in an orderly spatial configuration, with portals and signs to inform us of our passage from one period to the next. We can take all in and compare, insulating us from the powerful otherness of any particular work or moment in the past.

Historicism is totalizing and totalitarian; anything outside its control is a threat to the entire system, a dangerous rebel that must be brought to submission. Historicism's terror of what cannot be incorporated has always been embodied for me in one particular museum experience. In the jade room in the Palace Museum in Taipei, there was a case in which there was a magnificent piece of uncut jade in its natural state. It was labeled, on the model of the other pieces in the room, "Uncut Piece of Jade: Ch'ing Dynasty."

Coda: Giotto reflecting on Greek art

Growth came when, looking your last on them all,
    You turned your eyes inwardly one fine day
And cried with a start—What if we so small
    Be greater and grander the while than they?
Are they perfect of lineament, perfect of stature?
    In both, of such lower types are we
Precisely because of our wider nature;
    For time, theirs—ours, for eternity.

*Suite von Werken, Studien, Skizzen, Fragmenten, Versuchen in jeder Gattung und in den verscheidensten Formen . . . Das Übersetzung der Dichter und das Nachbilden ihrer Rhythmen ist zur Kunst und die Kritik zur Wissenschaft geworden, die alte Irrtümer vernichtet und neuen Aussichten in die Kenntnis des Altertums eröffnet, in deren Hintergrunde sich eine vollendete Geschichte der Poesie zeigt.*

*Es fehlt nichts, als daß die Deutschen diese Mittel ferner brauchen, daß sie dem Vorbilde folgen, was Goethe aufgestellt hat, die Formen der Kunst überall bis auf den Ursprung erforschen, um sie neu beleben oder verbinden zu können . . .*

Goethe's subsuming the past became the seductive ideology of the collapse of historical distance, as in the famous passage from *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (14): "A feeling, however, that gained ground within me powerfully and could not be expressed wondrously enough, was the sense of the unity of past and present . . ." *Ein Gefühl aber, das bei mir gewaltig überhand nahm und sich nicht wundersam genug äussern konte, war die Empfindung der Vergangenheit und Gegenwart in Eins* . . . While this seems superficially like an anti-historicist position, it is in fact the fruit of historicism: the closure, mapping, and subsumption of history, which is altogether different from the past's threatening otherness.

To-day's brief passion limits their range;
    It seethes with the morrow for us and more.
They are perfect—how else? they shall never change:
    We are faulty—why not? we have time in store.
The Artificer's hand is not arrested
    With us; we are rough-hewn, nowise polished;
They stand for our copy, and, once invested
    With all they can teach, we shall see them abolished.

Robert Browning, from "Old Pictures in Florence"