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Hurly-Burly

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Adrian Price

On Lacan's Remarks on Chinese Poetry in *Seminar XXIV*

"...it is hard alone to wring song from philology."

H. Kenner in *The Pound Era*, 1972

In *L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue, c'est l'amour*¹, Lacan's twenty-fourth Seminar, delivered in 1976-77 following on from the year's Seminar dedicated to Joyce, Lacan makes two successive extended references to the art of poetry, the second directly concerning Chinese poetic writing.

Take a leaf out of this book

Chinese Poetic Writing is the title of the study by Lacan's friend François Cheng, published that same year.² Cheng recounted the working relationship Lacan forged with him, first in *L'Âne* issues 4 and 48³, and later in the collection Rose-Paule Vinciguerra brought out in 2000: *Lacan, l'écrit, l'image*.⁴ Much as with Lacan's lengthy involvement with Joyce, which would come into its own in the very last period of his teaching, Lacan's interest in Chinese thought is already attested much earlier on, well prior to the first years of the Seminar. During the occupation he enrolled at the *Institut des langues orientales* where he sat in on the lessons of the sinologist Professor Paul Demiéville (whom Lacan calls his

"good mentor" in *Seminar X*, and whose "clodhoppers" we meet in *Seminar VII*, Lacan's wife having met them in a hotel corridor in London).⁵ By the seventies, Lacan would be referring back to this wartime period to claim that, "perhaps I'm only Lacanian because I did some Chinese back in the day."⁶

Jacques-Alain Miller has noted that Lacan takes up Joyce's hand as he lets go of Freud's. Joyce plays Virgil to Lacan's Dante. And where Dante winds his way down through the circles of hell and upward around the cornices of purgation, Lacan navigates his course along *Finnegans Wake's* "commodius vicus of recirculation" that brings us back to best, the finest, says Lacan, of what may be expected at the end of analysis: the opaque jouissance of the symptom.

It is not just Freud's hand that Lacan has let go of. Lévi-Strauss⁷ and Roman Jakobson⁸, the two great pillars of structuralism, have also fallen by the wayside. Indeed as Miller reminded us in March 2007, during his address at a Study Day at the University of Paris VIII in Saint Denis devoted to Lacan's forays into other fields of knowledge that over the decades have informed psychoanalysis, the late Lacan ended up severing all of these ties that the early Lacan had followed Freud in so patiently fortifying. By the end of the seventies, all interdisciplinary bonds have been broken. All bar one: the fine and rarely explored link that Lacan maintains with Chinese poetry.

So, it was François Cheng's hand that Lacan clasped in the seventies to re-visit the ancient Chinese texts he had studied, by his own admission in drone fashion and with an ass's ears, back in the forties. Cheng explains that the work had two phases. A first period from 1969 up until 1974 was dedicated, with a few exceptions, to studying the *Dao te Ching* by Laozi; the teachings of Mencius that Lacan cites in *Seminar XVIII*; and Shitao's *Remarks On the Art of Bitter-Pumpkin the Monk*. Éric Laurent pursues these references from the first period in depth in his paper on "The Purloined Letter" and the Dao of the psychoanalyst.⁹ Cheng broke off the relationship to turn to researching the book that would become *Chinese Poetic Writing*, leaving Lacan to exclaim, "what will become of me?" Looking back, we might say today that the Joyce Seminar provides the answer to that question.

The first edition of *Chinese Poetic Writing* was published early in 1977. Three days after the lesson from 18 April of that year, Lacan wrote to Cheng saying, "I mentioned your book at my last seminar, saying that interpretation – namely, what the analyst must do – has to be *poetic*."¹⁰ They resumed working together for a second period, though on a less regular basis, with the specific aim of studying the poems included in the anthology at the end of the book. Cheng informs us that the 1996 edition of his text boasts new passages drawn directly from these exchanges with Lacan.

Lacan's use of Chinese poetry in *Seminar XXIV* is modest but solid and precise.¹¹ If you are a psychoanalyst, then "take a leaf out of this book" he urges. Hitherto Lacan's references to art tended to be specific to an author and generally to a particular work. I fancy this is the first time Lacan enlarges his scope not simply



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to a movement or school, but to an entire tradition, and indeed one that stretches
back some two millennia at that.

The imaginarily symbolic

In the lesson of 15 March 1977, Lacan says that poetry "appears to stem from the
signifier's relation to the signified." This leads him to approach poetry in terms
of the *imaginarily symbolic*. To clarify this, we may refer to what Jacques-Alain
Miller has developed on the *symbolically real* and the *really symbolic*, likewise
introduced by Lacan in this same lesson.

Miller touches on this at the close of the 1996 Barcelona Seminar. The
symbolically real is the presence of the real in the symbolic. When this real
appears in the symbolic it appears as anxiety. Anxiety is the name of the real in
the symbolic.

To say that something appears in the symbolic does not mean simply that there
is an intrusion, a breakthrough, though of course anxiety does possess these
characteristics, it also means that it appears framed. Lacan insists on this in the
Anxiety Seminar. Anxiety is framed and in this sense, for all its affective force, it
conforms to some extent to the symbolic. That is why it can be taken as a sign.
A sign of desire for example.

On the other hand there is the *really symbolic*. This bears the name of the lie.
The symbolic in the real, like the real in the symbolic, means the symbolic in
conformity with the real. What can this "in conformity" mean here? It cannot be
in conformity with the laws of the real, because at this period in Lacan's teaching
the real is being defined as lawless. It is the symbolic in conformity with the real
in the sense that it always comes back to the same place, to employ a definition
of the real that comes from an earlier period of Lacan's teaching. The *really*
symbolic is thus the lie that always comes back to the same place. Hence its
profound affinity with the symptom.

In 1996, Miller acknowledges that this is far from being the last word on the
subject. The seminar ends with the question, "when Lacan says that the
symptom is real, which schema are we dealing with exactly?" On one hand, the
symptom lies, whereas anxiety, according to the *Seminar X* definition, is what
does not deceive. On the other hand, the symptom is real, and can be dissolved
in the real by psychoanalysis.

Miller comes back to the distinction in much greater detail in his lesson of 21
March 2007 with some very important considerations on the interpretation in
Lacan's very last teaching¹². This time, Miller accentuates another observation of
Lacan's from this lesson, that the symbolic in the real is a real that maintains a
"meaning effect". Miller specifies that this meaning effect fails to give an account
of the real, and in this respect, with regard to the real it is but a lie.

As for the *symbolically real*, Miller is more categorical here in 2007 in situating the symptom on this side, but while still maintaining the aspect of a necessary connection which transports meaning into the real.

"It is on this basis" says Miller, that Lacan "tries to situate what a renewed concept of interpretation should be, touching the symptom." On the side of the *really symbolic*, interpretation is also a lie, one that operates on the semblants but is powerless with regard to the real. On the side of the *symbolically real*, the interpretation touches on a new mode, a new existence of the signifier: one that does not entail any meaning. As Miller points out, this is where Lacan's reference to poetry comes in.

Miller situates poetry between the *symbolically real* and the *really symbolic*, to the extent that poetry is "doubly articulated". It produces the meaning effect on the side of the *really symbolic*, and another kind of effect, which we shall consider below, on the side of the *symbolically real*.

Lacan's placing of poetry in the register of the *imaginarily symbolic* does not stand in contradiction with this. Rather it foregrounds another aspect of poetry that should be considered in terms of effect: the truth-effect. More *varité* than *vérité*, it is not the truth as such, but an effect, one amongst others, that mediates between meaning and the *symbolically real*.

Lacan introduces the reference to Chinese poetic writing in his Seminar through the question of truth. "Does truth awaken or does it lull to sleep?" he asks. Spoken poetry tends towards the soporific. Poetic writing on the other hand, "can get to the dimension of what analytic interpretation might be." And conversely, "It's in so far as a correct interpretation puts paid to a symptom that truth is specified as being poetic."

Two metaphors in a relation of metonymy

Considering the interpretation in these terms marks an advance with regard to the conception of the interpretation as a purely symbolic operation that employs the figures of metaphor and metonymy to achieve dialectical effects. François Cheng, curious as to the status of these rhetorical figures in poetry, asked Lacan how he defined them. "I'm careful not to", was the reply this enquiry met with. "The important thing" Lacan added, "is to observe the link between the two figures in their *functioning*."¹³ This is directly in line with what he puts forward in Seminar XXIV: "Metaphor and metonymy only have any impact with regard to interpretation in so far as they are capable of making something else function, and this something else is precisely that through which sound and meaning come to be tightly united."¹⁴ At this point in the conversation with Cheng, Lacan picks up Cheng's book, turns to the anthology of T'ang dynasty poems translated into French at the end, and after thumbing through and pausing over a few examples, picks out a poem by the eighth century poet Wang Wei, titled "Lake Yü."



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Wang Wei is one of the most illustrious poets from the second period of the T'ang dynasty when poetic creation had reached what is largely considered to be its apogee of subtle vigour and intricacy. Wang Wei's mother was a fervent Buddhist, an adept of Ch'an Buddhism and a major influence over his life. When she died, he obtained authorisation to convert part of the Wheel-Rim River Villa into a monastery, where he would spend much of his later life. He is said to have excelled as a musician and a painter, and his brilliant studies led to several appointments in the civil service culminating with his appointment as secretary of state. Like many of the poets of the classic era, he led a life that brought him into contact with the full strata of society at large, travelling widely throughout the empire.

The poem "Lake Yi" is the eleventh from a set of twenty quatrains (*jue-ju*) known as the "Wang-ch'uan Sequence" inspired by scenic spots on Wang-Wei's estate. There are various translations of this poem in English, the following one fits closest to the Chinese, at least for my purposes here¹⁵:

Breath into flute, reaching far shore,
Sundown seeing husband off.
Out on the lake, glancing back once,
Green mount wrapping white cloud.

A farewell scene according to Cheng, relayed by a woman accompanying her husband to the edge of the lake while playing her flute. As the man drifts away in his boat, she remains on the bank. The third verse may be taken to mean that, at one moment, the man, now far off in the middle of the lake, turns *his* head back, though the absence of any personal pronoun also permits of reading this backward glance as *hers*. There is thus an equivocation, suggestive of a reciprocity, but one in which the two subjects take second place to the apparition of what is abruptly consolidated in the final verse: "Green mount wrapping white cloud." Cheng proposes that the two spouses, having lost sight of one another in the failing light, see themselves again in the image of the green mountain and the white cloud reflected in the lake. "Two metaphors" says Cheng, "green mountain and white cloud, in a relation of metonymy."

"At the first degree" says Cheng, "the mountain, stable and loyal, figures the one who remains there on the shore, the woman; whilst the cloud, symbol of wandering, figures the one sailing away, the man." Here the image is pure metaphor, devoid of allusion. But Cheng goes on: "In the Chinese imagination, the mountain has always stemmed from the Yang, and the cloud from the Yin. In this case, the mountain designates the man and the cloud the woman." He goes farther still, stating that, "according to the Chinese, cloud is born in the depths of the mountain, initially in the form of steam, which as it rises to the sky condenses into cloud. It can drift a while in the sky as it pleases, but comes back

to the mountain to wrap itself around it." To quote Cheng again: "At this degree of intimacy, nothing is static anymore, no role is fixed. The woman on the shore seems to murmur: 'I am the cloud that drifts and that will wrap around you without end'; the man on the lake pledges: 'I am the mountain that remains and that shall carry you without falter'."¹⁶

The fluidity is compounded by the word "*juǎn*", which as a verb can be both active and passive, at once "wrapped" and "wrapping around". As a noun, it indicates something like "nostalgia", or "longing". This equivocation encapsulates the entirety of the equivocation in the subject-object binary, along with the equivocation at the level introduced by the coded allusion where the metonymic shift operates at the level of the man-woman binary.

Apophantic

Why, having devoted so much to the structure of metaphor and metonymy, is Lacan here playing down their importance? Laying the emphasis on the rhetorical figures in interpretation amounts to foregrounding the technical aspect of the analytic intervention to the detriment of its functional aspect. As opposed to a standardising technique, Lacan is developing functional principles of analytic interpretation.

In contrast to a dialectical version of interpretation grounded in the symbolic, Lacan argues in "L'Étourdit" for an "apophantic" version of analytic interpretation. This Aristotelian term, resurrected by Husserl and Heidegger, describes the examination of an entity in itself as opposed to through comparison, indicating the shift away from appearance to ex-sistence. The efficiency of the equivocation in analytic interpretation amounts to this raised finger pointed towards ex-sistence. In Ch'an Buddhism, we meet a like concept in the mechanism of *tzu-jan*, which as David Hinton explains translates literally as "self-ablaze" adding that it may be understood as something like "occurrence appearing of itself"¹⁷.

In Wang Wei's poem, the mountain wrapped in cloud in the reflection on the surface of the lake is rendered enigmatic and allusive by the signifier's equivocation. Appearance and equivocation emerge simultaneously, with imaginary morphology disturbed by the amorphy of language. This equivocation rescinds the subject, to use Lacan's expression in "L'Étourdit," opening up the space of the enunciation.

Grammatical equivocation and allusive value

We are at the level of interpretation as an equivocation "seconded by grammar", even if, in Chinese, and especially in Chinese poetic writing, the grammatical aspects are, as François Jullien notes, "particularly inconsistent"¹⁸. Standard



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punctuation too is entirely absent: nothing that would approximate a full-stop, a colon, a comma; no equivalent to the capital letter. Irving Yucheng Lo points out in his introduction to *Sunflower Splendour* that "the non-inflectional nature of Chinese and the terseness it permits are matters of linguistic convention rather than poetics: readers should not assume that poetry lies in brevity alone."¹⁹ Thus poetic invention too lies at the functional, and not technical level.

Take for example the line break, this most discreet of literary devices, a kind of contra-punctual quilting point, at once a marker for breath and the potential close of a unit of signification. In "Lake Yi", each line break coincides with a new possibility for a change of grammatical subject. In the first verse, most often interpreted as implying an "I", the woman accompanying her husband, no "I" is mentioned. Indeed, the subject may be the breath itself, moving through the flute, reaching the far shore. The line-break between first and second verse renews the possibility. This time, most often interpreted as the wife again, it could equally be the setting sun which is seeing her husband off. The next line break – frequently rendered as a full-stop in translation – is most often figured as a move from the woman's perspective to the man's, though the poem does no more than indicate: "on the lake, a backward glance". A glance that could equally be hers. Finally, the last line break indicates the point beyond which neither one nor the other of the two spouses can be grammatical subject, and their continued presence depends on metaphorical interpretation.

The poem does not aim at an isomorphic interpretation of a reality, it is resolutely allusive, and at each moment appeals to the reader's responsibility of interpretation, inviting one to associate, as Jullien puts it, "one's own subjectivity with the poetic textuality in the most intimate way."²⁰ We interpret in the wake of the poem, like the analysand or the analyst interpret in the wake of the unconscious.

In privileging line-break over punctuation, the implied subject of enunciation over the grammatical subject of the statement, compression over expansion, poetry, Chinese poetry especially, foregrounds the gap between the written, with its capacity to shake up the reader, and writing systems or orthography, which aim at smoothing out language. Chinese poetic writing is no less grammatically correct, but it accommodates the violence of language, and demonstrates a determined handling of what Jullien calls "allusive value".

The "hole effect"

We have examined two references to poetry in *Seminar XXIV*. There are others, the last of which I should like to consider by way of conclusion. In his lesson from 17 May 1977, Lacan repeats that poetry entails a meaning effect, but this time he adds that it also entails a "hole effect". Jacques-Alain Miller furnishes us with the

key to reading this remark in his lesson of 21 March 2007. There he integrates the "hole effect" into the elements proper to the *symbolically real*, to explain that what is at stake is "an effect of emptying out, of voiding". Rather than a use of the signifier that plays on tonality to absorb meaning, the hole-effect depends on a modulation of counterpoint to force something to ring out, to hum, to resonate. This amounts, says Miller, to "a use of the lie, a forcing of the lie, in the sense of the real."

Ultimately, as Cheng implies, Wang Wei's poem opens onto the logic of sexualization. The codified symbolism does not exhaust this logic. It merely invokes, allusively, what Lacan in "L'étourdit" calls "a kernel of paradoxes" – the term he uses to designate the logical equivocations present at all levels of the efficient analytic interpretation.

1 The spelling of the title here conforms to the one announced by Jacques-Alain Miller in his Communiqué from 9 September 2008.

2 Cheng, F., *L'écriture poétique chinoise, suivi d'une anthologie des poèmes des Tang*, Paris: Seuil, 1977. Hereunder all references are to the reworked and corrected pocket edition published by Seuil in 1996. The first edition of the book was translated into English by Donald A. Riggs & Jerome P. Seaton as *Chinese Poetic Writing* published by Bloomington/Indiana Uni. Press in 1982.

3 See *L'Âne* issue 4, February-March 1982 & issue 48, December 1991, « Le docteur Lacan au quotidien », interview with Judith Miller, pp. 52-54.

4 Cheng, F., « Lacan et la pensée chinoise », in *Lacan, l'écrit, l'image*, Paris: Flammarion, 2000, pp. 133-153.

5 For a further anecdote on Lacan's education in Chinese, the reader might care to look up Patrick Monribot's presentation to the Strasbourg Clinical Section in 2001, where he leaks "a scoop that hasn't made it into Madame Roudinesco's archives." Monribot, P., "Les psychoses et le trou" in *Carnet Cliniques de Strasbourg*, Issue 4, 2002, pp. 143-144.

6 Lacan, J., *Le séminaire, Livre XVII, D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, Paris: Seuil, 2006, p. 36.

7 See for example the reply to Question II in Radiophonie, *Autres écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 2001, pp. 407-415.

8 See for example the reply to Question III in Radiophonie, *Ibid.*, pp. 415-20.

9 Laurent, É., "The Purloined Letter and the Tao of the Psychoanalyst" in *The Later Lacan*, Suny, especially pp. 37-44.

10 Cheng, F., "Lacan et la pensée chinoise", *op. cit.*, p. 151 [A slightly different version was given in the interview with J. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 54: "I tell you: from now on, all analytic language must be poetic."]

11 All references to: Lacan, J., "Vers un signifiant nouveau" [Lessons of 15 March, 18 April, 10 May, 17 May 1977] in *Ornicar ?*, Issue 17/18, Spring 1979, pp. 7-23.

12 Miller, J.-A., "Cours du 21 mars 2007", L'orientation lacanienne III, 9 (2006-07) Le tout dernier Lacan.

13 Cheng, F., "Lacan et la pensée chinoise", *op. cit.*, p. 151.

14 Lacan, J., "Vers un signifiant nouveau", *op. cit.*, p. 16. The question of metaphor and metonymy in Chinese poetry has been tackled by a number of English poets, from Ezra Pound to J. H. Prynne. See for example the latter's "Image and Figure in Twentieth-Century English Translation of Chinese Poetry".

15 Compare "Lake Qi" on p. 394 of *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*, edited and translated by Stephen Owen, New York/London: Norton, 1996; "At Lake Yi" on p. 28 of *Laughing Lost in the Mountains*, Hanover/London: New England Uni, 1991; and "Vagary Lake" on p. 64 of *Mountain Home*, selected and translated by David Hinton, London: Anvil, 2007.



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16 Cheng, F., *Entre source et nuage, Voix de poètes dans la Chine d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1990, p. 233.
 17 Hinton, D., "Introduction" to *The Selected Poems of Wang Wei*, New York: New Directions, 2006, p. xiv.
 18 Jullien, F., *La valeur allusive, Des catégories originales de l'interprétation poétique dans la tradition chinoise*, Paris: Puf, 1985, pp. 154.
 19 Liu, W & Lo, I (ed.), *Sunflower Splendour: Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry*, Indiana: 1975, p. xv.
 20 Jullien, F., *La valeur allusive, op. cit.*, p. 152.

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