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Shifting Perspectives on Text and History: A Reflection on Shelly Errington's Paper*

TU WEI-MING

The purpose of Shelly Errington's "Some Comments on Style in the Meanings of the Past" is to explore the relation between Classical Malay *bikayat* and the events of the past. Instead of approaching the subject in some unmediated way, she proposes to deal with the past through its representation in the mode of historical writing of the post-Renaissance West. Her intention is not, however, to bridge the gap between *bikayat* and history, but to make a deliberate contrast between them. It seems that her primary concern is to show that "the relations between the past, the text, and the audience must be profoundly different in the two genres" because orientations that are considered essential to the genre *history*, such as temporality and subjectivity, are not assumed in *bikayat*. In her discussion of the background assumptions necessary for an adequate appreciation of *bikayat*, she compares the "non-compulsive" Javanese *wayang kulit* with the persuasive intention of the Florentine rhetor; the continuous unfolding of the Javanese *wayang beber*, which in no way conveys a sense of "meanwhile," with the causal-temporal-logical argumentation of historical narrative; and the experience of listening (in which feeling and meaning are one) with the purely cognitive experience of reading a historical text.

The contrast between *bikayat* and history takes on different shades of meaning when read against the background of new insights in the discipline of philosophical hermeneutics. In a thought-provoking article on "Maranatha: Death and Life in the Text of the Book" (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 45: 4 [1977], pp. 419-49), Walter J. Ong approaches the Bible in the light of recent studies on the nature of textuality as such. He argues that "[a]lthough individual parts of the Bible have oral antecedents, the Bible as a whole has existed only as a text." To be sure, "as a unique kind of text, folded back on itself out of communal memory as no other book has been" (p. 419), the Bible is a document of great significance. But spoken words are exchanges between living persons; the Bible, inevitably allied to past time, must convey its message to the living from the realm of the dead. Indeed, writing and, in a more restricted sense print, are intimately related to death. And, paradoxically, this alliance with death also provides them with limitless fecundity. Ong observes that "[t]he fecundity of writing and print, like other fecundity in human existence, is achieved by passage through death" (p. 419). An important contribution of studying the textuality of the Bible, he maintains, is the student's recognition that God's word, so long as it is part and parcel of a written text, must be resurrected. The interpretive art is therefore charged with the sacred mission of

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inserting that which must be resurrected into the experience of living people. This, he believes, gives new contours to old questions about theology.

If we examine Errington's stimulating essay in the light of Ong's mode of questioning, the strategy of juxtaposing the known form (history) with the unknown (*bikayat*) raises many fascinating questions about the art of interpretation. But to borrow an expression from her, "the limits of our ignorance" are so severe that even the shape of a perceived gap between the two forms is far from clear. This is one reason I characterize my tentative reflection as "shifting perspectives."

While Ong stresses the difference between oral speech and written texts, Errington insists that the tenseless verbs, the unmarked sequential relations, the "paratactic" style, and other features of the *bikayat* make the distinction between oral and written a hazy one. But speaking and writing are not parallel operations. Even if we set down in writing something actually spoken, we perform an act significantly different from speaking. For one thing, the text relates writer and reader differently from the way speech relates speaker and listener. The absence of the reader from the writing of a text and the absence of the writer from the reading of a text are taken for granted, whereas speaker and listener are unavoidably circumscribed by the dialogical situation. Errington asserts that *bikayat* hardly have boundaries. But, if "they consist of stories or episodes which floated around the Malay world, and were on occasion caught, as it were, by a scribe, and given a name," they are here and now inescapably caught and named in the sense of being fixed or frozen in a text. Otherwise, how can we, students of Asian cultures in America, talk about them as "literature"?

The issue is of course much more complex. We are sometimes tempted to think of a written text as a limitation, an imprisonment of something fluid and vital. We feel, for example, that once the floating episodes are caught and named they are no longer the "real things." They are, at most, reflections of the feeling and meaning of real things without accompanying sounds, colors, or movements. The true re-enactment of an episode, it seems, depends upon the dramatic art. The full audio-visual impact can never be recaptured by the printed word. Errington suggests, however, that *bikayat* seem capable of translating dead letters into living images. To be sure, the medium in which the episode is told is words. "But the words function not as abstractions explaining events which they are not intrinsically attached to, but, rather, they bring into being images drawn from the visible world. The images of which the narrative consists have no existence outside the words which bring them into being. They are, actually, *made of* words, not just *told about* in words." One wonders why the images that are piled up one after another paratactically are not more appropriately presented by Javanese shadow-puppet plays, even though there are as yet no pictures or puppets to give a visual dimension to *bikayat*. Is it possible that *bikayat*, as texts, can present a literary world which consists of generalized functions of hero, king, minister, and traitor in a way that the images of the shadow-puppet plays with imitated dialogues, idiosyncratic voices, and individual characters cannot?

The end of a dialogue means the termination of an immediate personal encounter, but it also signals the beginning of a symbolic exchange—more complex and virtually unpredictable—which requires the art of interpretation. Paul Ricoeur reminds us that a written text, unlike spoken discourse, is addressed to an unknown reader, and potentially to whoever knows how to read: "This universalization of the audience is one of the more striking effects of writing and may be expressed in terms

of a paradox. Because discourse is now linked to a material support, it becomes more spiritual in the sense that it is liberated from the narrowness of the face-to-face situation" (Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* [Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976], p. 31). It is crucial to bear in mind that the universalization of the audience in this sense enlarges the circle of communication and initiates new modes of communication. The very fact that "repetition and detachability" can become a feature not only among *bikayat* but also within a single *bikayat* clearly indicates that the context in which they function is as much a literary world creating images as a visual landscape captured in words.

The danger of collapsing the distinction between oral and written is familiar to students of hermeneutics. The deliberate attempt to bridge the gap between word and image may also lead to subtle difficulties that are still puzzling to practitioners of the interpretive art. The intimate relationship between poetry and painting in traditional Chinese culture seems to suggest that since pictorial vividness in literary description is highly valued, poetic competence is often shown in one's ability to depict an entire scene in highly compressed diction. As Errington tells us, we do not find in *bikayat* idiosyncratic personalities, competing voices of subjective characters with different versions of the world, working themselves out in a dynamic called "plot." As a result, "the same figures recur with different names in different *bikayat*," and yet "there is nothing to attach a particular figure to a particular voice or name." Furthermore, the narrator's "voice" is as invisible as that of the *bikayat*'s figures. One wonders if the notion of "structural anonymity" is not a case of "the fallacy of hypostasizing the text as an authorless entity" (Ricoeur, p. 30). Surely it is diametrically opposed to the intentional fallacy, which holds that any valid interpretation of the text must depend on a correct reading of the author's intention. But are we here really challenging the view that "a text remains a discourse told by somebody, said by someone to someone else about something"? Do we really believe that *bikayat* are reducible to "natural objects, i.e., to things which are not man-made, but which, like pebbles, are found in the sand" (Ricoeur, p. 30)?

A more serious issue is the naturalness and flexibility with which, according to Errington, the images have been transmitted and repeated in the *bikayat*. The temporal and pictorial flatness of these images, in Errington's characterization, is in sharp contrast to the double or multiple meaning of symbols in hermeneutic studies. While the image as a picture tells us something in a direct manner, the symbol, with its subtle semantic structure, introduces us to a complex world laden with mythical, cultural, and historical values. Even in the theory of metaphor, which can be taken as a preparatory analysis leading up to a more sophisticated and comprehensive investigation of symbol, the emphasis is on comparison, contradiction, and ambiguity. Since the functioning of a metaphor is a "calculated error," a conscious attempt to play with a "category mistake," it can bring together things or images that do not normally belong together; and by means of a well-devised mismatch, it establishes a new relation of meaning between two distinct terms (Ricoeur, p. 51). "Words flow from Hang Tuah's mouth sweet as honey when he visits distant lands, and those around him feel love" may not be a metaphoric phrase; but it is difficult to imagine that a "thick description," in Clifford Geertz's sense, will not reveal hitherto unnoticed literary features of the culture which has produced rich symbolic representations in other forms of art.

The heuristically effective methodology that Errington has employed to articulate her argument is most instructive in this connection. Her brief discussion

of coherence and perspective in the Western post-Renaissance style of history provides a useful background against which the idea of the past or, more accurately, a sense of history evaporates, as it were, in the Malay context: "The past is just like noise; for traditional Malays it did not have an objective existence which had to be investigated in itself, but it stood, rather, as the material, the raw substance, which could be converted into sensible form." As Errington seems to imply, however, it is wrong to assume that the Malays do not have a communal memory, folding back on itself as a continuous re-enactment of truth and beauty. After all, *bahasa* is, among other things, a symbolic interchange among those who share a language, and thus, a culture. We can be reasonably sure that the ear must be attuned to appreciate the ordered sounds and that "the inner spiritual power" must manifest itself in commonly recognizable ritual acts. This is, I suppose, anthropologically relevant; but it is historically significant as well.

Drawing on the interpretation in Nancy Struever's *The Language of History in the Renaissance*, Errington contends that the modern historical style that originated in the use of rhetoric in the Italian city-states of the Renaissance is an argument, an art of persuasion. Like the professional rhetorician, the historian presents his case with a view to influencing the reader's perception of the past. The historian arranges events in an imaginary causal-temporal continuum, appealing to a mode of reason which gives him a detached point of view. And it is precisely the practice of making the present into a privileged stance that enables the historian to maintain a distance from the past in order to see it as a whole despite its confusion and multiplicity.

It is true, as William J. Bouwsma has noted, that during the Renaissance rhetoric came fully into its own for the first time since antiquity, by attaching a particular value to "graceful, persuasive, and effective verbal communication, both orally and in writing" (*The Culture of Renaissance Humanism* [Washington, D. C.: American Historical Association, 1973], p. 9). It is one thing, however, to emphasize the importance of rhetoric as the art of effective communication, and quite another to stress the usefulness of argumentation as a purely cognitive endeavor. Bouwsma tells us that the rise of rhetoric actually paralleled a decline in the value accorded formal logic. The paradigmatic rhetorician was the lawyer, not the logician. Indeed, the main concern was the use of language in a broad sense rather than the application of arguments narrowly defined. Petrarch, for example, was a learned grammarian as well as a skilled rhetorician; "he made language into an increasingly creative, flexible, and versatile instrument of communication" (Bouwsma, p. 13). Petrarch was, understandably, highly critical of some of the tendencies in Scholastic speculation that diverted attention from "the concrete world of actual human experience and human needs" to the "abstract order of the intelligible universe" (Bouwsma, p. 14). His new historical perspective, far from being a quest for mere cognitive understanding, was a recognition that change is "a significant condition of human existence." By implication, "circumstances and perhaps also culture change from age to age"; it is therefore necessary "to understand the men of other times in their terms rather than ours" (Bouwsma, p. 18). Rhetoric so conceived involves profound assumptions about symbolic interchange in the human community.

Yet, as Errington argues, "historical narrative has a 'meanwhile' . . ." and "[o]nly a lofty distance allows this 'meanwhile.'" A sense of historical distance was undeniably essential to the rise of modern historical consciousness. In fact, history as a judgment as well as an argument requires a transcending perspective. Ricoeur's

comment on tradition—“understood as the reception of historically transmitted cultural heritages”—is particularly pertinent:

A tradition raises no philosophical problem as long as we live and dwell within it in the naïveté of the first certainty. Tradition only becomes problematic when this first naïveté is lost. Then we have to retrieve its meaning through and beyond estrangement. Henceforth the appropriation of the past proceeds along an endless struggle with distanciation. Interpretation, philosophically understood, is nothing else than an attempt to make estrangement and distanciation productive. (Ricoeur, p. 44)

In the light of this background understanding, the Renaissance rhetorical mode can perhaps be seen as a dialectic interplay between the appropriation and distanciation of the Classical tradition.

It would be misleading, however, to assume that the Renaissance rhetorician was motivated only by a desire to influence the audience with his argumentative skills. Bouwsma reminds us that a true rhetorician was not only a craftsman with words, but also an ethical philosopher:

Petrarch found in Cicero, therefore, not only a model of style but also a fund of ethical wisdom. Thus the study of rhetoric included a concern with virtue, especially in its social dimensions. And since virtue bore a close relation to piety, rhetoric presented itself as an ally of Christianity, and the moral philosophy of the ancient orators as a reinforcement for the Christian life. (Bouwsma, p. 16)

This view of the function of rhetoric and the role of the rhetorician in society brings us closer to the Malay world of *bikayat*, where meaning is inseparable from feeling. The rhetorical ploy that enabled the rhetors to say what they wanted because the language they used could be divorced from actual events and true feelings was therefore propaganda, undeservingly given the good name of rhetoric. This is, in a sense, comparable to “The Speech of Lysias” in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where a disinterested non-lover is considered more qualified than his opposite to present a discourse on love (R. Hackforth, *Plato’s Phaedrus* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952], pp. 27–31).

Needless to say, the general conflict between the maintenance of historical detachment and the raising of ethical-religious concerns has undergone major transformations in the West since the Renaissance. The Enlightenment view of classical philology, the art of direct experiencing in German Romanticism (not to mention the Hegelian project to overcome historicism with the idea of the Absolute Spirit), have all contributed to the complexity with which we approach broad issues in the philosophy of interpretation (Ricoeur, p. 44). More recently, the inability of some of the most brilliant minds of the twentieth century to recapitulate past cultural heritages and radically different contemporary forms of life in an all-embracing system of thought have led to fundamental changes in traditional disciplines. Significantly, the increasing difficulty the historian has in perceiving the past as a linear, time-bound artifact, and the problems facing the anthropologist who studies a foreign psychic life from a culture-bound perspective, have opened up many new frontiers of research. Not long ago it would have been inconceivable for a seemingly non-symbolic and pre-linguistic heritage (some of the salient features of *bikayat*, for example) to provoke us to examine critically our own historical consciousness and, by implication, our methods of logic and reasoning.

An obvious danger in this openness toward the past and the traditions of other cultures is the implicit dichotomy of setting up the modern West, a nebulous

concept in itself, against the rest of the world. The strangeness of a remote past or a distant culture often serves as a critique of things near at hand, as if the modern West were deficient in such basic human traits as empathy, feeling, and a capacity for non-cognitive understanding. More serious, I suppose, is the tendency to accept without critical examination any form of radical otherness as truly liberating. Michel Foucault's contemplation of "a certain Chinese encyclopedia" imagined by Borges is, as a heuristic device, most inspiring, but if we really believe that a highly sophisticated culture did manage to divide animals into "embalmed," "suckling pigs," "frenzied," "having broken the water pitcher," "et cetera," and "that from a long way off look like flies," we are not only naive but irresponsible. Yet it is vitally important to note that the task of going beyond a limited temporality and, for that matter, a culturally constrained subjectivity is not at all easy.

In my recent study on "The Historicization of Politics in the Perspective of the *Ch'un-ch'iu* (*the Spring and Autumn Annals*)," I concluded that the historian, in the classical Confucian sense, assumes responsibility for the continuation of human excellences in culture. The act of historical writing is as much a message for the future as a memory of a selected past. The legitimizing authority of the historian so conceived does not derive from a political system, but from a much broader supply of symbolic resources, in which the worth of politics itself is determined. If Mencius is to be trusted, the emergence of *Ch'un-ch'iu* as a historical mode of articulation was a re-enactment of a long-standing ritual which assumed that politics required continuous correction. He suggests that after the decline of the age of poetry, which for him had been evidence of the authentic possibility of internal resonance in the human community, history became inevitable. In other words, to the extent that politics was alienated from the feelings and aspirations of the people, the historian had to assume the responsibility for transforming politics from an arbitrary distribution of authority based on brute force to a ritualized act, understood in the language of cultural and social norms.

In Confucian thought, the historian does not historicize merely to describe politics, but to criticize with a view to transforming it. The historicizing spirit lies as much in its shaping influence on politics as in its commitment to a critical appreciation of the actual state of government. The historian is, therefore, supposed to possess an extraordinary power of self-knowledge and self-direction, for the historian's inner strength comes from the source of authority, where cultural identity, social solidarity, and personal integrity converge. The paradigmatic historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien (145–86 B.C.), emulating the perceived intention of *Ch'un-ch'iu*, characterized his task as "probing the limit between Heaven and man, penetrating the change from ancient to modern, and completing the words of a unique tradition." The modern Confucian thinker Hsiung Shih-li (1895–1968) may indeed have a point in suggesting that history, as *Ch'un-ch'iu* conceives it, is not merely a comment on politics, but a fundamental transformation of the meaning of politics.

This apparent digression should bring home the point that it is not only *bikayat* which "do not create monuments of either stone or of literature," and which must be continuously renewed to endure. The historian in the Confucian tradition who has created an impressive written record must also try to bring order to meaningless sound and fury, lest the hallowed values remain forever inarticulate. Similarly, the theologian must time and again resurrect God's word from the decontextualized dead letter into a living message. It may not be farfetched to suggest that the rhetor,

in the spirit of Renaissance humanism, can “speak to the hearts of men, quicken faith, and transform lives” (Bouwsma, p. 26) primarily because he takes verbal eloquence as a constant ethical-religious concern. This fusion of horizons impels us to understand comparative cultural analysis not only as “the conflict of interpretations,” but also as a mode of sharing good reason and common sense. After all, as gamelan music converts isolated sounds into sensible form, different forms of life can be mutually enriching through open-minded communication. Eliade is reported to have said that if it is nonsense, even though it is stated in Sanskrit, it will still remain nonsense. Perhaps; but the great promise of interpretation is that it may reveal, in what had seemed to be nonsense, both meaning and beauty.