

In Double Harness

“My hunch was,” writes Robert E. Carter in sketching the hypothesis of *Becoming Bamboo: Western and Eastern Explorations of Life* (McGill-Queen’s UP, n.p.), “that my North American culture was extrinsically oriented—that is, was adept at utilizing nature for our own life-purposes rather than at opening to nature’s delights and gaining intrinsic value-experience by sitting in the midst of it, responding to it rather than controlling it.” His testing of this proposition, in an unusually personal work of comparative philosophy, is a rich repository of the trans-Pacific dialogues to which this issue of *Canadian Literature* is dedicated. Chapter Five, for example, titled “Where is Here?,” meditates on the ideologies (and puzzles) implicit in Northrop Frye’s paradigmatic question by placing it against the awareness of environment achieved in Zen Buddhism’s “transparency of ego-ness.” Carter calls our attention to concepts linking Shintō shrines, Heidegger, the legendary potter Hamada Shōji, and Jake Thomas, hereditary chief of the Cayuga nation. Read in the context of this lineage, my use of the preposition *against* to position Carter’s comparative methodology is, in one sense, fundamentally inept. The central hypothesis of comparison is immediately undone by a recognition that a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic value would not hold—either in Japanese philosophy or culture.

In one of the personal journal entries which punctuates his more concentrated philosophy, Carter marvels at the pink sky of Japan’s cherry blossom season. What stands out as meaningful cultural difference, however, is not the familiar symbolism of fragility and changeability, but the natural necessity of poetry:

Special lanterns are hung from the trees, and even hand-painted and inscribed strips of paper are attached to the branches, with poetry on them. The strips are reachable and more or less at eye level so you can read and enjoy the poetry as you view the blossoms...

This seamlessly integrated reading of nature's images together with linguistic images is something Western poets have been dreaming after at least since Pound. A hefty source for pursuing such thinking is *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting* (Metropolitan Museum of Art/Princeton UP, \$75.00 US). In 24 essays by various hands, its almost 600 folio pages present intricate arguments about the integration and interdependence, of language, word-characters, and landscape in two art-forms—poetry and painting—which can be thought of together as “visual thinking.”

In a reciprocal gesture to hanging poems from the petalled black boughs, the Chinese painter will often brush a poem into a painting to express something beyond image. In this problematic relationship between language and visual image, trans-Pacific cross-cultural comparison can perhaps contribute most to extending our understanding of Canadian poetry. This book combines an impressive range of historical and disciplinary perspectives on the specific functions and cross-overs of Chinese poetry, calligraphy and painting, “known as *san-chüeh*, or the three perfections.” Ch'ao Pu-chih (1053-1110) circles the artist's responsibility for appropriate relationships in a neat quatrain:

Painting depicts a form beyond the object,
and yet the form of the object must not be changed.
The poem expresses a meaning beyond the painting,
but should still contain the pictured scene.

“The poem depends,” writes Sam Hamill, “upon a kind of parallelism, often moving two ways simultaneously through the deliberate use of ambiguity.” This description of the “Double Harness style” helps to introduce Hamill's translation of *Lu Chi's “Wen Fu”: The Art of Writing* (Milkweed Editions, US \$6.95), a precise and subtle guide to the principles of good poetry, written around 200 A.D. This elegantly readable little book hardly seems dated. Indeed, its principles guide many of the 66 poets in Michelle Yeh's *Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry* (Yale UP, US \$33.00) as they define some of the experiments and trends outlined in Yeh's introduction, such as the inflection of Taiwanese writing, and the growth of a feminist poetry. Hamill's book is a revised edition of a work originally published in Canada,

at Crispin and Jan Elsted's Barbarian Press, and it could serve as a fitting guide to the collected works of Robert Bringhurst, or to the translations of Wang Wei by Roo Borson, Kim Maltman, and Andy Patton which appeared recently in the *Malahat Review* (Summer 1993): "Know when the work/should be full,/ and when it should be/ compacted./ Know when to lift your eyes/ and when to scrutinize."

For this blinkered Westerner, schooled, and then often poorly, in European languages, all this intricacy of the contained and the beyond is summarized in the mystery of calligraphy. When the aesthetic and literary ideal is simplicity and economy, Chinese characters (and the meaningful nuances of style and brushstroke by which they are variously rendered) have the ultimate advantage of containing a whole poem within a single character. To extend an appreciation of this extreme compression a most delightfully helpful book is Cecilia Lindquist's *China: Empire of Living Symbols* (trans. from Swedish by Joan Tate; Addison-Wesley, \$51.95). Using the evidence of characters on antique bronze objects and oracle bones (where diviners inscribed questions to, and answers from, dead ancestors), Lindquist gives us a glimpse of the development of the Chinese writing system. Because she concentrates on particular characters, their analogues and compound forms, the book gives to those of us who cannot read, the illusion of capability for translation.

Lindquist shows us a primitive pictogram, outlines its represented logic, and narrates its evolution into more abstract, less imagistic characters. She accomplishes each fascinating explanation with the help of clear text and abundant illustration, not only of the calligraphy, but also of objects, animals, street scenes which demonstrate the origins of the characters. Using a quasi-dictionary format (with a very helpful index) organized by semantic field, Lindquist develops chapters, for example, on "Wild Animals," "Farming" and "Books and Musical Instruments." The character for "self," we find, stood originally for "nose." "Population" is expressed by the characters for "human" and "mouths". But such reductions hardly suggest the resonance and implicit interest of this introduction to cross-cultural etymologies. Here is a brief sample:

"Cloud and rain" is an old poetic expression for intercourse. In the past, without rain there was no harvest in northern China. Rain and fertility were connected: the cloudburst that fertilizes the earth. The expression is said to go back to a legend about a prince of Chu, or perhaps it was the king himself. Anyhow, one of

these gentlemen was visiting the mountain of Wu. He left his hunting companions, grew tired, and lay down to sleep. In his dream, the Queen of the Mountain came to him, and they spent the night together. When she rose to leave him, he asked her who she was and where he could meet her again. "In the morning, I am in the clouds; in the evening, in the rain," she replied, fay as she was, then vanished.

Because it subtly informs, the book tells such circling stories as this at every turn, delicate with surprise and flickering with intelligence.

The story of Canada's East Asian connections has frequently, and most noticeably, been a West Coast story. This Pacific tilt may not be so definite in contemporary Canada as it once was; certainly recent western histories are going a lot further to take account of the East Asian role in Canadian development. Geoffrey Molyneux's breezy tabloid history *British Columbia: An Illustrated History* (Polestar, \$14.95) notes that the first Chinese had come to British Columbia with John Meares in 1788, the beginning of those two century's of influence uncertainly chronicled in Sky Lee's ambitious novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990). Jean Barman's *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (U Toronto P, \$49.95), noting that "as of 1881, over 99 per cent of all Chinese in the country lived in British Columbia", makes ties to China and Japan one of the defining features of the province's identity. Her history of course, like Molyneux's, is frequently a narrative of shame—of race riots, and poll taxes, of 'internment and exclusion' acts. But it is also a history of a search for understanding—and the evidence of that theme (however tentative) often lies, as Barman discovers, in the literary artists, in Emily Carr and Daphne Marlatt, for example.

That the primary story of Canada's East Asian connections has been a war story and a women's story might be suggested by the political prominence of the problem of the 'internment,' and the rapid canonization of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* reiterated, albeit obliquely, by the books touching on Asia which have, often accidentally, been sent to us for review while we have been planning this issue of the journal. *James Ricalton's Photographs of China During the Boxer Rebellion: His Illustrated Travelogue of 1900* edited by Christopher J. Lucas (Edwin Mellen P, \$99.95) reminds us of that earlier war in which the U.S. and China were allies. The old photographs are poorly reproduced, but Ricalton's usually straightforward (if now more obviously racially clichéd) commentaries add detail and ways of viewing. Much of Ricalton's travel was prompted and enabled by a commission from Thomas Edison to search for varieties of bamboo that might provide the perfect fila-

ment for the incandescent lamp: this sidelight adds a dimension to becoming bamboo as intriguing as the early travelogue itself.

Two other books touch more directly on Japan and the Second World War. *Legacies and Ambiguities: Postwar Fiction and Culture in West Germany and Japan*, edited by Ernestine Schlant and J. Thomas Rimer (Woodrow Wilson Center P/Johns Hopkins UP, \$13.95 US) brings together 13 papers from a 1988 conference considering the cultural and intellectual impact of the Holocaust and the nuclear bomb. This is a book whose most obvious unifying theme emphasizes the place of the novel in cultural witnessing. Anamnesis, the undoing of forgetting, might have given the book a more memorable title, and focussed its problematic of the writer as public conscience. In the exchange, the editors situate the United States between Germany and Japan as something of an interlocutor and enabler (even an “*éminence grise*”). To Canadian readers of Kogawa, in particular, this position will have provocative echoes, as will the arguments by several writers about how Japanese novelists have aestheticized the war. Concentrating more on the enabler, but quite sensitive to the differences between Japanese culture and a North American *nisei* culture, is Susan Schweik’s *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (U Wisconsin P, \$14.50/39.50 US). Chapters 6 and 7 focus on Nisei women poets and their response to the war. I found this section to be worthwhile reading for its contrasting women poets, especially their “war poems,” to the Anglo-American male tradition of *dulce et decorum est*... (however ironic). Although Schweik emphasizes political and historical significance rather than poetics, even to the point of incorporating a considerable defense of ‘bad poetry,’ I found the discussions of the slippage between European and Japanese literary forms, and the impetus provided to poets by their mothers’ writing, to be particularly rich in implications (again, Kogawa, of course, came to mind). Schweik presents a fascinating analysis of an essay in “Topaz” (an internment camp literary magazine) on alinguality. Here she shows how an understanding of the obscured Japanese intertexts gave the passage political bite and point, which the camp censors would not have perceived. “The war and internment,” notes Schweik, created alinguality—it made writing impossible for Japanese-Americans. It also “made not writing impossible.”

This paradox might nicely describe a woman’s poems in a different, more recent war. Lâm Hồ’ Hiệp’s *Poèmes d’un coeur en exil/Poems from a Heart in Exile* (TSAR, \$10.95) is a first collection from a woman who emigrated from

Vietnam in 1980 and is now teaching in Toronto. The poems are written in French with English versions facing. The impossibility/necessity of speech is expressed in various ways. The absence of verbal play, of unusual metaphor, of 'decoration' suggests a writer tempered to face the bleakness of her past. She proceeds more by repetition with variation, as if to push herself to the undoing of forgetting. Another alingual strategy is to shift into other voices. In "Identification", the horror of identifying her soldier-husband's dead body is blunted by the rote bureaucratise of the military official who proceeds blandly through his checklist inured to the emotion crowding around him. These are frankly sentimental poems, whose lamentation finds shadow and echo in the irony that appropriating the speech of others provides a means both to hide and to discover one's own politics.

Bill Holm's *Coming Home Crazy* (Milkweed Editions \$10.95 US) has no such problem with speechlessness. It's an account of being transformed by two periods spent teaching English in China—of being transformed into someone not angry or bemused, but freed into a wider imaginary world. Holm writes movingly of the genuine receptiveness and curiosity shown by his Chinese students in the face of literature, a marked contrast to his grudging, reluctant U.S. students. Holm's subtitle, "An Alphabet of China Essays," does not simply indicate a means of organization, but a shift in perception such as I touched on in discussing the Lindquist book. For Westerners, he notes, the alphabet is a theology governing so much of the organization of our own lives: "I mean here also to praise living outside the alphabet for a while in some interior China of unknown sequences—even without sequence." This objective provides a good enough reason to push our understanding of Canadian literature to where it is randomized by "a civilization without closure."

Holm's is a travel book that gives great pleasure. It is zesty, tart, bemused and bitchy. It is frankly, even preposterously American, but it is generously open to difference. Canadians are important mediators in Holm's China—a benign, slightly naive 70-year-old grandmother and grandfather from Manitoba. The book is even laugh-aloud funny at some points. To try to know China is to get out of ourselves:

No Westerner ever really knows anything about China.... For a Westerner, literacy in Chinese means five years of intense drudgery and, without that language, nothing real can be known. But, after surviving a plunge into Chinese craziness, your mind opens in a different way to your own country, and having "seen" China, you are able to see what is in your own house or your own everyday life, with new "crazied" eyes. The view is peculiar and not what you expected.