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論文名 | Pun and Metaphor: To Reinstate the Auditory Imagination
論文のタイプ | Journal or publication title
号 | 6
巻 | A155-A163
年 | 2005
URL | http://id.nii.ac.jp/1160/00000546/
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Pun and Metaphor: To Reinstate
the Auditory Imagination(1)

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During the past twenty years or so, the focus of interest in literary and cultural studies has definitely shifted from a search for generality and universality to a recognition of diversity and difference. This is no wonder, because past attempts to establish a general theory, especially in the literary field, suffered from the scanty attention paid to the multiple and diverse forms literature and culture have taken outside the “central” Euro-American area—perhaps with the exception of Slav and, occasionally, Indian regions. The recent change of direction is thus a welcome indication that, at long last, non-Western cultures will receive their proper due. Despite all the talk of particularities and idiosyncrasies, how-
ever, distinguished treatises on and introductions to “literary theory” still make no serious
attempt to justify their ostensible field, which has no limiting modifier such as “Western”,
by incorporating non-Western literary facts and theories into their general schemes.
Eminent writers on “theory” such as Culler and Eagleton—and, admittedly, non-Western
authors under dominant Western influences—usually discuss literature and literary theory
as if they were a Western monopoly, handed down from Plato and Aristotle on, and did not
exist anywhere else. From a theoretical perspective, however, can one rightly talk of
“poetic function” and “literariness” without even a passing glance at Du Fu’s and Bashô’s
poems or Liu Xie’s and Zeami’s theoretical treatises, or other monumental works from
Chinese, Japanese and other literary traditions?

I am not charging Western theoreticians with willful neglect, however, nor am I suggesting
that there is an unbridgeable chasm between East and West. Rather, I would claim
that, to get an all-round view of any subject, one must obviously begin by collecting as
many and different samples as possible. To the extent a theory is based on incomplete
data, it loses some of its validity. In fact, by not taking cognizance of non-Western litera-
ture, Western theory runs a heavy risk of misconceiving its own literature, or at least
unfairly overlooking some of its striking features. As every comparatist knows, one can
gain a proper understanding of oneself only through watching and mixing with others. It
will therefore be profitable to place Western and non-Western literatures and literary theo-
ries side by side and observe the former by the norms and standards, conventions and
expectations, of the latter, and vice versa. This will serve not only to shed fresh light on
the particularities of each but also help us work our way towards a general theory worthier
of its name, more well-informed and well-balanced.

The following is just an inadequate, preliminary attempt at such a synthesis. I regret to
say that, on the non-Western side, my samples are limited to Chinese and Japanese litera-
ture. I hope you will allow me, for sheer convenience’s sake, to represent East Asia by
China and Japan. I am fully aware that this commits me to the same fallacy of attributing
universality to the local. The dominance of Chinese culture in East Asia throughout the
premodern ages, however, may somewhat justify my dangerous generalization.

My starting point, then, is the extreme shortness of East Asian poetry. This is a well-
known fact whose theoretical implications, I believe, have not been fully explored yet. The
famous three poetic genres of the West, epic, dramatic, and lyric, do not apply to China
and Japan. East Asia has no epic in the first place, and no dramatic poetry in the strict
Western sense of the word. It has produced no Iliad or Oedipus Rex, no Divine Comedy or
Phèdre. Contrary to the Western tradition, moreover, these genres, or their remote counterparts in East Asia, were regarded as unworthy of the interest of intellectuals, probably the possible exception being Noh drama, which, nonetheless, differs significantly from European dramatic poetry. Apparently, therefore, lyric poetry is the only genre East and West share to a large degree. There are conspicuous differences, however, not the least of which is length. Most classical poems in China are either four or eight lines long, each line consisting of a mere five or seven syllables, and, at any rate, rarely exceed fifty lines. It is superfluous to go into detail about the 31-syllable waka and 17-syllable haiku, the predominant forms in premodern Japan which are still in general use today side by side with Western forms. On the other hand, short forms in the West never enjoyed the same prevalence and distinction as in East Asia, for they were not taken quite seriously. Genuine lyrics needed a certain length, it was felt, to allow for a full development of thoughts and feelings. Even the fourteen-line sonnet, the shortest form from the Western standard, has a rigid logical structure made of four stanzas, somewhat similar to syllogism.

I will refrain from asking why this was so, for historical contexts do not concern us here. Instead, let us examine what are the manifest features of “serious” poems of minimal length. What makes a short poem stand as a genuine lyric, as against a light, witty, comic, epigrammatic or occasional verse? This query bears upon the fundamental nature of “literariness”, as Russian Formalists call it, the “poetic function”, in Jakobson’s terms. For, obviously, within the limited scope of a little over one- or two-dozen syllables, there is no room for emotional effusions, detailed descriptions, or extended narratives, not to mention well-developed lines of thought, which, after all, are not vital elements of a poem. What business do these short pieces have, if not just being poetic? They are nothing if they are not poetry itself.

Curiously enough, the most striking feature of waka, the supreme poetic genre in Japan for more than a thousand years, is the kakekotoba, or pun. In a sharp contrast to the very low esteem in which the pun is held in the Western tradition, where it is regarded as merely witty or humorous, it is highly valued in Japan as a captivating device in serious poetry. There are often cases, indeed, where pun works as the sole “poeticizing” factor in a poem which enjoys universal acclaim. Take, for instance, an anonymous love poem from the first royal anthology, the Kokinshū, compiled around 905 (all the translations of Japanese and Chinese poems are mine):

我が袖にまだき時雨の降りぬるは君が心にあきや来ぬらむ

— 157 —
An unseasonable cold shower falls on my sleeves;
Is it that autumn has come to your heart?

The rain falling on one's sleeves is a long-established metaphor for copious tears. The main interest of this poem is the pun on "aki", which both means "autumn" and "weariness". Thus, the verse can also be interpreted:

Unexpectedly bitter tears fall down on my sleeves;
Is it that you have grown tired of me?

This poem has a relatively simple structure, but it is typical of the waka genre in that it juxtaposes two different texts purely and simply on the strength of a single punning word. Although it is only the second text that makes perfect sense, the first text runs parallel with the second, strongly suggesting an ineffable semantic affinity with it. It should be noted that the first text does not exactly work in a metaphoric manner on the second: metaphor, after all, does not need homophony for its justification. Instead, the semantic affinity between these two texts united by pun might be said to be either vaguely analogical or contrastive, precisely like the effect achieved in a small way by rhyme. "In poetry", as Jakobson says, "any conspicuous similarity in sound is evaluated in respect to similarity and/or dissimilarity in meaning." (1960: 377) Rhyme, however, usually does not affect the whole text. Kakekotoba like this can be found everywhere in classical Japanese poetry, as well as in poetic prose. Other eminent poetic figures such as makura-kotoba (pillow word), jokotoba (introductory phrase), and engo (associative punning words) are also more or less based on pun, and their chief function is to create a double context, solely by virtue of homonymy. Moreover, it is also characteristic of waka poems that, of the two juxtaposed texts, one evokes a human state of mind and the other a natural scene, creating an overall impression of vague mutual correspondence.

Haiku, another dominant genre in Japan, which derived from waka and linked poetry, abound in similar punning devices, at least in its first and second stages called the Teimon and Danrin schools respectively. The great master Bashō changed all that single-
handedly, making haiku more realistic and symbolic at the same time. He and his disciples, as well as later haiku poets, however, endeavored to find some other means of creating interesting parallelism, as can be expected of the composers of short poems. This resulted in the well-known dual structure of haiku, which basically consists in the opposition of two heterogeneous parts. For want of time, though, I will not dwell upon this matter here (See Kawamoto 2000: 65–79).

Pun in the strict sense is not a major device in Chinese poetry, though it is found here and there in serious poetry and, especially, in folk love songs. In a broader sense, however, pun is ubiquitous. Apart from the basic principles of versification which govern the 5 and 7 syllabic count, tone accents and rhyme, the most conspicuous poetic devices in China are alliteration (双声: shuangsheng), rhyming compounds (叠韵: dieyun), reduplication (叠字: diezi), onomatopoeia (see Liu 1983[62]: 34–38), and, above all, antithesis (对: dui) (see Liu 1983[62]: 146–50). All these devices, except for antithesis, relate to word sounds, and their poetic effect is usually ascribed to their musical quality and expressive power. It should be pointed out, however, that their chief function is to juxtapose two monosyllabic words or disyllabic compounds, by sheer dint of homophony, so as to attract attention to the strong affinity between them, either analogous or contrastive, just as in the case of rhyme. Alliterative compounds such as “gujin” (古今: old and new) and “sisheng” (死生: life and death) are obviously oppositional, and rhyming compounds such as “zhanzhuan” (辗转: roll about [in bed]) and “yinqin” (亲爱: cordially) are analogous. Simple reduplications like “qingqing” (青青: blue, blue) can be seen as an extreme case of analogous pairing.

Even in cases where alliterative and rhyming compounds don’t comprise such “equivalent” (similar or opposed) semantic elements in themselves—e.g. “shanse” (山色: mountain color [or scenery]) and “shuisheng” (水声: the sound of the flowing water)—they often occur in pairs, in antithetical couplets:

鳥去鳥来山色裏
人歌人哭水声中 (杜牧「題宣州開元寺水閣閣下宛溪溪水故人」)
(Ichinosawa 1983[65]: 240)

Birds go, birds come amid the mountain greens;
Men sing, men wail to the sound of running water. (Du Mu)
Thus, the two alliterative compounds again make up a parallel context by virtue of their shared alliterative quality, all the more salient here because they both alliterate on the same consonant “sh” (arguably, “山色” was pronounced “shanshui” in Du Mu’s time). Their affinity is both contrastive, in pitting color against sound, and analogous in evoking a rural landscape.

From this, it can be safely surmised that antithesis (dui), which is the foremost rhetorical device in Chinese poetry, serves the same purpose as alliteration and rhyming compounds. Unlike the loosely antithetical parallelism of classical Hebrew poetry (see Yoder 1972), Chinese antithesis requires an exact word-to-word equivalence between two lines, in terms of parts of speech and semantic classes. In the above couplet by Du Mu, for example, “birds” and “men” are both subject nouns but contrastive in meaning, and the same goes with the verbs “go, come” and “sing, wail”, the postpositions “amid” and “to” (different words both meaning “in” in the original Chinese), and the nominal compounds “mountain color” and “water voice.” Each parallelism between the coupled words, as well as the overall parallelism between the two lines, can be of any shade from a sharp contrast to close similarity. In a way, this closely resembles a pun, except that, in this case, the two texts are juxtaposed not on the strength of similar sounds but chiefly by identical syntactic structure. The Jakobsonian principle of parallelism naturally applies here, but the correspondences required of an antithetical couplet—phonologic, syntactic, semantic and even metric—far exceed in their thoroughgoing nature any of the examples given by Jakobson.

In fact, there is not so much difference between pun and antithesis as is usually imagined. Rhyme, kakekotoba and alliterative compounds abuse the essential linguistic principle, according to which different sounds have different meanings and vice versa, thereby claiming, under the plea of mere phonic coincidence, a semantic equivalence between two unequal words or word sequences. Antithesis, on the other hand, deliberately takes advantage of a mere coincidence of form, that of word order, to intimate an affinity of content.

From the above observations on short poems in China and Japan, it can be inferred that, if the poetic function is activated by an intense attention paid to the “message” itself, as Jakobson says, it often takes the form of a pun in the fuller sense of the word. In a way, this view is a corollary to Jakobson’s (1960: 358) definition of the poetic function, “the principle of equivalence” projected “from the axis of selection into the axis of combination,” but hopefully it has the virtue of being more specific and well-defined. At the same time, it can be more general in its application, too, as will be seen later. The dual context
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created by homophony or, more generally, by isomorphism puts a temporary halt to the linear and temporal progression of a verbal sequence. Jakobson’s (1960:357) prime example of a “poetic” message, “I Like Ike”, is highly significant in this sense. In the last analysis, I wonder if poetry cannot be boiled down to an attempt to compensate for the inevitable linearity of language and the narrowed, or even deceitful, perspective it imposes on us. It is well-known that Saussure devoted several years in later life to research on the anagram, a sort of concealed pun. This seems strange, since Saussure is the one who established a general linguistics based on the principle of difference, according to which every verbal unit has its own clear-cut space, or semantic value, allotted to it by its sheer difference from the other active units in the language. Thus, a sentence is a linear arrangement of those different units. Pun, on the other hand, constitutes an eminent breach of this principle because, as I mentioned, a punning word plays a trick on language by intentionally confusing difference and sameness. I dare suspect that, not wholly satisfied with his own conclusions, Saussure was trying to redeem the unilateral, unequivocal linearity of language as he sees it by exploring the potential of poetic language for creating parallelism of meaning through that of form.

In addition to pun, rhyme, antithesis and anagram, there is a sense in which metaphor—the preeminent poetic figure which enjoys a far greater repute in the West than the East—also partakes of this bent for double contextualization, making it fundamentally poetic. Metaphor, including simile, suspends the linear flow of words by superposing one verbal segment on another. Take, for instance, the following two lines from Shelley’s (1977:221) “Ode to the West Wind” : “The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low, /Each like a corpse within its grave, ....” The second half of the adverbial clause led by “where” (“Each like a corpse within its grave”) harks back to the first half (“they lie cold and low”) and runs parallel with it in the same manner as in pun. The same goes even with a metaphor in which the “tenor” is not explicit : e.g. “The weakening eye of day”, from Hardy’s (1977[74]:14) “The Darkling Thrush”; where the implied “sun” overlaps the “eye of day” in the reader’s mind as in a kakekotoba. Metaphor differs markedly from pun, however, in that it depends on the alleged analogy of the concepts or images it juxtaposes. A similarity between the contents or signifieds warrants the superposition of two texts, thereby launching the to-and-fro movement in the reader’s mind as he or she looks for its meaning. With metaphor, therefore, everything proceeds within the boundary of the signified, and the signifier, or the form of words, has nothing to do with it. By contrast, the pun and other similar devices which I have discussed give the initiative to the whole words,
both signifiers and signifeds, for they justify semantic parallelism by isomorphism, or a similarity of form or sounds, thereby enabling the words to regain the full vitality they tend to lose in everyday use. From this perspective, it might be tentatively proposed that pun has a greater potential as a genuinely poetic, or “poeticizing”, figure than metaphor.

The prevalence of pun and the like in East Asia might be seen as a mere accident of cultural history. I suspect, however, that there is more to it than that. The overpowering presence of parallel contexts in East Asian poetry reflects a world, real or imaginary, where man and nature communicate with each other in harmony and where subject and object, self and other, are freely interchangeable. The indefinable analogy between the untimely shower and falling tears, or between autumn and the pain of love, are typical examples of personal feelings evoked in conjunction with external scenes. Characteristically, the verse has no subject—we don’t even know for sure whether the poet is a man or woman. The antithetical couplet from Du Mu is also remarkable for its pairing of “birds” and “men”, and its stress upon their identical existence within, and in perfect concert with, Nature. This is a typical manifestation of the “qing-jing 情景（feeling-landscape, landscape of the emotions）” (Cheng 1988: 89:17) tradition in Chinese poetry. What, then, about the Western pun? This, however, would call for at least another article to investigate adequately.

Notes

1 This is a revised version of the article “Kakekotoba, Antithesis, and Metaphor” appearing in Literary Research/Recherche Littéraire, 28.36, 2002.

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