

## Correspondence

David Knechtges' review of *Major Lyricists of the Northern Sung*

I wish to reply to some points made by Professor David Knechtges in his review of my book, *Major Lyricists of the Northern Sung* (*JAS*, XXXIV, 2, Feb 1975). First, he deplors my occasional use of words that he considers vague—such as “elegant,” “unaffected,” “pedantic,” and “artificial”—and asks what they mean. While I share his disapproval of impressionistic criticism, I don't see how, since there is no meta-language in which we could discuss the language of poetry, we can entirely avoid using descriptive epithets that may sound vague, unless we are content to use such “scientific” language as “the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination” (reference supplied on request). Actually, when seemingly vague epithets are accompanied or preceded by concrete examples, as they generally are in my book, no attentive and unprejudiced reader will find it hard to know what they mean.

Secondly, Professor Knechtges thinks the distinctions I make between “world” and “language” in poetry, and between “simple” and “compound” images, are “rather arbitrary and artificial.” (Incidentally, what does *he* mean by “artificial”?) Perhaps they are; but so are other distinctions, such as those between “mind” and “body,” between “matter” and “energy,” and even between “masculine” and “feminine.” However, can we really do without them? Furthermore, in expressing doubt as to whether an image “is really ever simple,” he is attributing to the word a meaning I did not intend. My distinction between “simple” and “compound” images is analogous to that between “simple” and “compound” sentences: when I call an image “simple” I mean that it does not involve two terms, not that it is “simple” in significance or effect, any more than anyone would mean by a “simple sentence” one that expresses “simple” ideas. Perhaps we should use the term “mono-image” instead.

As for his comments on the simple images in one of Liu Yung's lyrics (which he kindly describes as having been “beautifully” translated, but then what does he mean by “beautiful”?), they are perfectly valid and welcome additions to my own; and no doubt someone else could easily add to his. No critic can possibly describe everything he perceives in a poem but can only point out qualities and features that seem to him most significant or least obvious, just as no speaker can possibly “attend to” all the meanings a word is capable of having. (See E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, pp. 21–23.) By the same token, no one can be expected to deal with all the questions that can be raised about a particular literary genre, and it seems inconsistent to recognize that my book is not intended to be literary history and yet regret that I did not attempt to answer certain questions pertaining to literary history. A reviewer's task, I believe, is to assess a book for what it is, not to criticize it for not being something else.

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