Review of “In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics”

Steven Schroeder
Shenzhen University

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.pacificu.edu/eip

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
In her introduction to this volume, translator Paula Varsano quotes Jullien’s description of his “lifelong foray into Chinese philosophy” as “a never-ending detour” (8). That is a perceptive starting point for this essay, first published in French in 1991, which is itself an appropriate prelude to Jullien’s comparative study of “strategies of meaning in China and Greece,” later expanded and systematized in Detour and Access (Zone Books, 2000, originally published in French in 1995). Here, detour is an effective strategy of meaning, and Jullien is a master. The object of his study has been Greek philosophy--the “West,” and Chinese philosophy has functioned as an “outside” from which to see it more clearly. Jullien describes many Chinese analogues of this strategy of indirection, but his practice of it, even more than his description, is instructive.

In this essay, he takes up a single word, dan, which he translates into French as fadeur and which Varsano renders in English as blandness. Translation of translation poses serious problems for meaning, but the process of distancing it involves can be turned to advantage in a philosophy of detour. Jullien’s starting point is the “paradox” of honoring fadeur, valuing “the flavorless rather than the flavorful,” which “runs counter to our most spontaneous judgment (and elicits a certain pleasure in thus contradicting common sense)” (27). The paradox simultaneously creates a space for thought and infuses a word that signifies the absence of taste with “a certain pleasure.” Jullien turns immediately to the observation that dan “is recognized as a positive quality--in a class, in fact, with the ‘Center’ (zhong) and the ‘Root’ (ben)” (27). Varsano confronts this as a problem of translation, noting that she “would have liked to find an English word that signifies a lack of flavor and that at the same time benefits from the positive connotations supplied by a culture that honors the presence of absence,” but she wisely notes that, had she been able to make such a choice, “there would probably be no need for this essay” (18).

That is the point, exactly, of Jullien’s argument, the rationale of the essay; and it is what makes his work particularly instructive for Western readers learning, slowly, to see nothing.

Jullien insists in the prologue that “all currents of Chinese thought--Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism--converge in harmonious accord” on the “common ground of the bland” but that this convergence does not make of it “an abstraction” in the service of theory or an “ineffable” in the service of a “mystical calling” (25). Instead, it makes nothing of it but takes us “to the limits of the perceptible, that place where perceptions assimilate and nullify each other... But this movement does not open up onto another,
metaphysical world, cut off from the senses. It simply unfurls and expands this world (the only one): drained of its opacity, returned to its original, virtual state, and opened up--forever--to joy” (25). The language skates on thinly mystical ice, but the point is that this is an essay in perception, “proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics,” as the English subtitle would have it, to see the only world there is. So, properly speaking, the object is not “the West” surveyed from the distant perspective of China, but the only world there is surveyed at different times from different places by different strategies of meaning--an essay, then, in method as much as meaning or perception.

The strategy is more artistic than academic: Jullien does not explain, he points; and for that he needs a particular kind of distance. “In order to convey this quality of blandness, whose sole characteristic is to elude characterization--to remain discreet and unobtrusive,” he writes, “I have had to attempt to avoid engaging in the usual weighing and measuring. This is why I have refrained from developing this intuition into an object of scholarly inquiry...” (23). Eschewing “scholarly” distance, Jullien sets out to get us “as close to concrete examples and original texts as possible” so that we might experience “a bland sound, a bland sense, or a bland painting” (24). In other words, he does not point at instances of dan so much as he invites us to hear it, taste it, see it. That is the point; and where it works, Jullien steps aside and lets it point.

From the perspective of “Western” philosophy, Jullien’s strategy stands in a tradition that rejects Hegelian System: “Isn’t what had been judged ‘insipid’ from a speculative standpoint (that is, the Hegelian standpoint) thus revealed as the most savory? We see here how a characterization that seemed at first blush decidedly bland (and therefore unworthy of our extended consideration) can give rise to the richest variations and the farthest-reaching applications” (33). Jullien’s rejection of Hegelian System is simultaneously a rejection of both “theory” and “mysticism” in favor of the concrete--an emphasis on the particular rather than the universal for reasons somewhat akin to those articulated by Kierkegaard. “Meaning,” Jullien writes, “can never again be conceived as closed and fixed but remains open and accessible” (33). This leads him to a strategy of reading that is inherently anti-System: “It is wise, then, to train oneself in this art of reading: an approach that allows for an infusion of meaning, a far cry from the imperious enumerations of (demonstrative) discourse and all its unrelenting classifications and distinctions. Such a mode of reading allows the full potential of meaning to gradually infuse the reader as he puts himself at the disposal of its secret urgings and embarks on an endlessly renewed journey” (33).

An endless detour.

In this case, the detour passes through a discussion of landscape painting with reference to Ni Zan (Chapter Two) that turns in Chapter Three to Daoism, and, in Chapter Four, to a discussion of Daoism and Confucianism that emphasizes “the Chinese motif of blandness” as a means of transcending rigid distinctions between the two (47). For Jullien, this is particularly evident in the concept of the Sage, which cuts across ideological and religious distinctions in Chinese thought to define a political ideal: “the leader to whom all things in the world appear of equal blandness can, because of his interior detachment, renounce intervention, preserve his regulating immanence, and thus cause peace to govern the nation” (45). Common to the discussion of art and philosophy is a conviction that the best one can do is get out of the way. The great leader does not govern the nation with peace but lets peace govern the nation. This ethical-political-psychological insight, Jullien maintains, becomes “a unifying vision of the real--at once cosmological, moral, and political” beginning around the third century in China; and it moves “in the direction of an aesthetic sensibility” (63).
Jullien discusses this developing sensibility in terms of music in Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine, with particular attention to the idea of musical restraint (a word that might, in fact, be offered as an alternative translation of dan). Near the beginning of this discussion, he writes of the “leftover” or “lingering” tone: “The most intensive sound is not the most intense: by overwhelming our senses, by manifesting itself exclusively and fully as a sensual phenomenon, sound delivered to its fullest extent leaves us with nothing to anticipate, nothing to look forward to. Our very being thus finds itself filled to the brim. In contrast, the least fully rendered sounds are the most promising, in that they have not been fully expressed, externalized, by the instrument in question, whether zither string or voice. And it is thus that they manage to sustain (as formulated in this lovely expression) a ‘lingering’ or a ‘leftover’ tone (yiyyin)” (66, 67). These tones, which remain “heavy with promise,” are highly prized and become the basis of both tuning and performance. Aesthetically, it is important that the promise lies equally at beginning and end: music is “caught,” Jullien writes, between “two aspirations”--“to refrain from even beginning to play or to allow the last notes to deepen into the inaudible” (75). Put another way, music is enfolded in promise, and performance is in the middle, here, now.

This same aesthetic sensibility shapes poetry, with “blandness” being openly acknowledged as an ideal in the creation of poetry, according to Jullien, by the beginning of the Song Dynasty in the 11th century (95). In aesthetic matters, Jullien taps a Chinese tradition of literary theory in which “blandness” is the poetic quality opening to transformation (106). It is the opening that matters most, and that is caught between not beginning (which, though silent, is neither music nor poetry) and lingering toward silence at the end. Poetry leads Jullien to calligraphy and back to landscape. In each case, he carries us as close to dan as he can, seeking in the spirit of the art to open the possibility of transformation: “painting and consciousness evolve together in harmony” (133). Art, in this aesthetic vision, is a kind of clearing.

And this is where Jullien concludes, drawing a contrast with Gide’s striving for banality, Fauré’s “rejection of great Romantic flourishes,” and Verlaine’s “wilting flower that refuses to die” (142). In the end, Jullien’s is a Buddhist sensibility in which the “common” does not stand opposite the extraordinary but encompasses it (132), and this is why he insists on a “neutrality” that is not erased (as in Verlaine) by contrast that reestablishes certainty (143). It is a transformation into the common, represented, he says, “by the limpidity of water (the basis for all flavors)... a transformation--a conversion--the ‘beyond’ of which is already contained within, leading consciousness to the root of the real, to the center from which the process of things flows. It is the way of deepening (toward the simple, the natural, the essential), of detachment (from the particular, the individual, the contingent). This transcendence does not open onto another world, but is lived as immanence itself; viewed from this perspective, the two terms finally cease being opposites. Blandness is this experience of transcendence reconciled with nature-and divested of faith” (144).

No doubt, there are readers who will want to argue with this vision of transcendence reconciled with nature, divested of faith. But in a world where “faith” has been repeatedly deployed with disastrous consequences toward a transcendence predicated on mastery of nature, this is a vision worth a second look.

**Steven Schroeder**
Shenzhen University