
Paul Rouzer builds *Writing Another’s Dream* around an unusual premise for these times: Wen Tingyun’s poetry is good, and there is value in explaining the particular qualities of that poetry. Rouzer has no theoretical agenda, nor is he a poet manqué who seeks to use Wen to express his own values in writing. Instead, Rouzer focuses on what one needs to know in order to read Wen Tingyun’s poetry well.

The first chapter, “Fraudulent Verses,” sets the scene with a discussion of Wen Tingyun’s reputation in the later literary tradition. As Rouzer explains, Wen was not highly esteemed by later literati:

For later imperial readers, then, Wen’s poetic voices could be summarized as twofold. First, when he wrote of morally dubious experiences, he brought into question the important role poetry was meant to play in society. Second, and more important, as a historical actor he was often “unreadable” for later generations. Frequently he left behind only the poem (a morally ambiguous aesthetic artifact) or, at most, an image of a sophisticated versifier manipulating language for pure entertainment. Poetry of surface, when written by men like Wen, is not just empty; it actually conceals the immoral mind that frames it. It is deceptive and fraudulent. (p. 10)

Rouzer seeks to redeem Wen Tingyun from this double damnation. His strategy is not to deny Wen’s guilt but to show that the charges themselves are anachronistic and miss the point. In *Writing Another’s Dream*, Rouzer attempts to recreate a historically situated poetic as the proper context within which to read and appreciate Wen Tingyun’s poetry. This is an important and difficult task and presents a model for reading that has implications far beyond Wen’s poetry in particular. Rouzer succeeds wonderfully: he says what needs to be said about diction, thematic conventions, and generic expectations. Rouzer’s patient explication of such topics as *huai gu* 懷古 and *Late Tang regulated verse* should be both invaluable to non-specialists who seek a better sense of the texture of reading poetry and a reminder to us all of our responsibility to be lucid in our presentation.

After introducing the central issues of the study, Rouzer briefly sets out what can be known of Wen Tingyun’s life. Rouzer is perhaps undecided about his intended audience here: he seems to assume that his reader is generally knowledgeable about ninth
century China and thus does not give an overview of the major political, cultural, and social shifts of the period. Rouzer does introduce little pieces of the story as they are needed throughout the study, but a clear presentation of the historical setting — i.e. the larger contexts for poetic practice in Wen’s lifetime — would have been useful. At the end of the first chapter, Rouzer turns to Wen’s poetic oeuvre and to the themes to be explored in subsequent chapters:

The best approach is not to compare Wen’s work as a whole to the work of any other single poet but to take his poems by generic and subgeneric groups and locate them within poetic developments of their time ... [E]ven though Wen’s poetry in each genre has its own distinctive qualities, there is obviously a single creative intelligence behind all of them. Although we may not be able to read Wen the way a Chinese poetry lover reads Du Fu (as a man reacting to events) we can sense a personality in search of a more objective and aesthetically distanced art, a personality fascinated by the attractions that language holds for a poet, and a personality in flight from the dangers and disasters beginning to overtake his age and his social class. (pp. 16–17)

The remainder of the study divides Wen Tingyun’s poetry into sets of genres: the second chapter (“Words for the Singing”) discusses yuefu 楽府 and ci 詞. The third chapter, “Watching the Voyeurs,” focuses on Wen’s erotic yuefu in particular. “Patterns of History, Failures of History,” the fourth chapter, looks at Wen’s poems on history (historical songs, huai gu and yong shi 詠史), while the final chapter, “Small Ambitions,” turns to his regulated verse. This approach via genres works well. The chapters on yuefu and the historical poems contextualize Wen Tingyun’s most distinctive writings while still delineating the particular qualities of Wen’s style. The last chapter — in which Rouzer concludes that Wen’s regulated poems were not especially individuated — is an excellent and much needed introduction to the real center of Late Tang poetic practice.¹

Rouzer reads carefully and with a well-balanced awareness of formal, generic issues. That is, he understands the strong shaping power of convention in Tang poetry without reducing poetry to mere exercises in paradigm articulation. He shows how Wen uses genre as part of the aesthetic material of composition. This reading through genre is not easy, and conveying this style of reading is even more difficult, yet Rouzer succeeds admirably. Through his generically attuned readings, Rouzer makes many valuable obser-