

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: EAST

WEST
8

比较文学：东方与西方

Department of Comparative Literature
Institute of Comparative Literature
Sichuan University, China



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INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The Undisciplined Discipline: Comparative Literature and Creative Wandering^[1]

Eugene Chen Eoyang
Lingnan University, Hong Kong

中文摘要: 本文从“美诺悖论”出发,探索一种笔者称之为“创造之游”的质询模式。正如塞思·莱若用“错误”和“越轨”来挑战正统与规范并以此达到某种未知或偶然的洞识一样,比较文学以其非学科的学科身份在过去的半个世纪中显示了旺盛的生命力并取得了丰硕的成果。因而,笔者宁愿比较文学成为一个不守陈规、动态而略显凌乱的学科,而非一块贫瘠的研究领域。而这样的比较文学才能促进“创造之游”,成为庄子所说的“广莫之野”。

Let us begin with Meno's Paradox, from Plato. In a discussion on whether virtue can be taught or transmitted, Meno challenges Socrates with the following conundrum:

Meno. And how will you enquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of enquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?

Socrates. I know, Meno, what you mean; but just see what a tiresome dispute you are introducing. You argue that man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to enquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire.

Meno. Well, Socrates, and is not the argument sound?

Socrates. I think not.^[2]

(Jowett translation)

Socrates's response is an elaborate circumlocution, but it ends with Plato's defense of his theory of recollection. Socrates concludes this exchange with a pragmatic reason for dismissing Meno's paradox:

And therefore we ought not to listen to this sophistical argument about the impossibility of enquiry: for it will make us idle; and is sweet only to the sluggard; but the other saying will make us active and inquisitive.

Like any good teacher, Socrates opts for the conclusion that will make his students work harder. But I would like to co-opt Meno's paradox to make a distinction not about the dynamics of inquiry, as about the different kinds of knowledge that we search for, and to explore a mode of inquiry which I call "creative wandering"—a mode that is not vulnerable to Meno's critique of the futility and the circularity of inquiry. I wish to refute Meno by insisting that the pursuit of knowledge involves not so much a search for answers, but rather a search for better questions. What a critique of his paradox helps us to understand is the nature of knowing and the nature of discovery.

It is true that if we find what we're looking for, there is no discovery, since we're merely retrieving what we are already familiar with. Discovery involves the second part of the paradox: not knowing what it is that one has come upon. The ontology of discovery—what exactly it is—often fails to attract the close attention that it warrants. For example, is it a discovery when other people are already aware of, and familiar with, what is discovered? In science, if one has discovered something that has already been known, about which one has been previously ignorant, then no claim to discovery can be made. Yet, in history, this is precisely what is claimed for the great explorers, who "discovered" the existence of something already known to the natives. Marco Polo discovered China, yet the Chinese were certainly always aware of its and their own existence; Pizarro discovered Peru, yet the Incas were always aware of its and their own existence; Francisco Cordoba is credited with the discovery of Mexico, but the Aztecs had known about Mexico for centuries. And does it constitute a true "discovery" even in this sense, when—as in Columbus's case—what one discovers is NOT what one thinks one discovers? What is really discovered in these instances? Actually, one discovers the fact of one's previous ignorance.

In order to clarify the epistemological problem, the concepts of mere knowing and understanding are insufficient: we need to distinguish between sight, insight, and vision. "Sight" refers to what the eyes see; "insight" alludes to "seeing" more than meets the eye; and "vision" involves seeing beyond the here and now. "Sight" is empirical, and depends on the reliability of the senses; "insight" goes beyond the phenomenal and approaches the noumenal: "insights" illuminate abstract relationships between concrete instances, conceives of universal models that exist only in the mind (Plato's Forms); and "vision" is the ability not merely to foresee the future, but to see how the present can be shaped into enacting a particular future.

The shift of the discussion from "knowledge" (that which is known) to "insight" (that which is understood) effectively bypasses the dilemma posed by Meno's Paradox. It is only in this context, this understanding of the difference between insight and knowledge that we can begin to appreciate what would otherwise be preposterous, i.e., the value of error in the pursuit of truth.

In his wry and suggestive book, *Error and the Academic Self: The Scholarly Imagination, Medieval to Modern*,^[3] Seth Lerer posits the seemingly outrageous if not outlandish notion that academics thrive on error, not just the errors of others, but their own as well. "Narratives of scholarship seem always to take error as their subject," Lerer writes. "They correct the mistakes of others, but they also expose the ways in which the wrong, the errant, the displaced are central to the makings of professional identity" (11). A major focus of Lerer's studies are the exiles and expatriates who embody, in their personal as well as their scholarly lives, the act of going astray, of leaving the straight and narrow, and of leaving—or being forced by circumstances to leave—home. This meditation on the experience of erring, or making mistakes, and of being errant, of departing from prescribed and normative paths (Lerer reminds us that "*Corrigere* means to draw a straight line" [12]), is what informs Lerer's disquisition on the ontology of humanistic learning. "It is the admission of error," Lerer concludes, "that stands as the mark of the professional" (14).

Put it another way, making corrections is not conducive to discovery, merely to maintain standards, but there is a confusion between maintaining standards of intellectual inquiry and maintain standards of normative practice. Normative practice is not likely to lead to new discoveries, since the very orthodoxy of the norm resists that which is unorthodox and abnormal, and will tend to demonize the

deviant and the heterodox. Corrections involve conservations; errors involve liberations. Preserving the straight and the narrow reinforces conservatism; deviating from it permits radically new insights. At some point, the word "error" in Lerer takes on the coloration of "errancy," a deviation from the main road, with attendant overtones of adventure and exploration. Extrapolating from Lerer, we might construct a meaningful difference between "errors," which involves mistakes, where something isn't right, and "errancy," where one ventures away from the safety of orthodoxy and tradition, in an almost blind search for truth.

The notion of "errancy" underscores the lack of ulteriority in the enterprise: one goes in search of something unknown, not knowing what it is one is searching for, thus avoiding the self-defeating logical loop of Meno's Paradox. "Errancy" does not know what it is searching for, so it avoids the first leg of the paradox, and it only discovers what it is looking for only after it finds something, thus avoiding the second leg of the paradox. Different kinds of discovery often take the form of such serendipitous wanderings. Alexander Graham Bell "discovered" the telephone in the process of trying to invent a hearing aid; Roentgen came upon X-rays accidentally, when he was studying cathode rays; the glue used in the hugely successful commercial product known as "Post-its" was at first ignored as a dismal failure in the attempt to develop an all-purpose super glue. Serendipitous discoveries in science are not at all rare. Other familiar artifacts of modern life that were discovered by accident are: Teflon, Velcro, nylon, penicillin, safety glass. And, of course, the most serendipitous find of all: Columbus discovering the Americas when he was looking for a route to the East Indies.

Although Lerer does not mention him, *Error and the Academic Self* pursues a line of inquiry explored earlier by Frank Kermode in "The Uses of Error," his 1986 "sermon," which also provided the title for his 1991 collection of book reviews and essays. In that sermon, Kermode said:

The history of interpretation, the skills by which we keep alive in our minds the light and the dark of past literature and past humanity, is to an incalculable extent a history of error. Or perhaps it would be better to say, of ambiguity, of antithetical senses. The history of biblical interpretation will provide many instances of fruitful misunderstandings. (431)

These “fruitful misunderstandings” may be the grist of humanistic scholarship. Certainly, critics of Derrida and of deconstruction, while rightly decrying the waywardness of some analyses, fail to appreciate the difference between being prone to error (which stems from ignorance and carelessness) and being inclined to errancy (which stems from intellectual venturesomeness). In the first case, merely being “correct” gains in rectitude and intellectual orthodoxy, but it loses in imagination and receptivity to different ways of thinking. In this sense, the psychology of learning and of discovery suggests that knowledge—what we know—may constitute an obstacle to discovering new knowledge—what we do not know. Corrections reaffirm what we do know, but they do nothing to predispose our minds to phenomena, relationships, insights that are different from, possibly antithetical to, what we do know. The difference between “error” and “errancy” is that someone guilty of the first is ignorant of one’s ignorance, whereas someone guilty of the second is eminently conscious of his or her wayward ways.

The first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, titled “逍遥游” which Burton Watson renders as “Free and Easy Wandering,” concerns itself with the psychological impediment that familiarity poses to understanding anything that lies outside one’s experience:

The morning mushroom knows nothing of twilight and dawn; the summer cicada knows nothing of spring and autumn. They are short-lived. (24)

(朝菌不知晦朔，蟪蛄不知春秋。此小年也。)

The immediacy of our own experience, its repetitive vividness, in short, its empirical persuasiveness, prevents us from admitting the existence of that which lies outside our experience. *Zhuangzi* reminds us that “Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding.” (小知不及大知。)

Throughout the essay, *Zhuangzi* regales us with what most of would have difficulty crediting: a fish named K’un (鯀) which is “so huge I don’t know how many thousand *li* he measures” (23). (鯀之大，不知其几千里也。) And, if this were not enough, *Zhuangzi* tells us that this unimaginably large fish transforms itself into a bird of immense size: “He changes and becomes a bird whose name is P’eng. The back of the P’eng measures I don’t know how many thousand *li* across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky” (23). (化而为鸟，其名为鹏。鹏之背，不知其几千里也。怒而飞，其翼若垂天之云。)

Modern readers encounter these descriptions with at least a measure of disbelief (although no one laughs any more at the theory that dinosaurs evolved into birds), thus betraying the very malady, the very incapacities of comprehension, that Zhuangzi exposes. In short, what Zhuangzi attacks is a failure of the imagination, the inability to understand what we have not personally experienced.

At the end of the chapter, Zhuangzi defends against Hui Tzu's (Huizi's) charge that his words are "big and useless." (今子之言，大而无用，众所同去也。) Hui Tzu compares what Zhuangzi says to "a big tree named *ailanthus*" whose "trunk is too gnarled and bumpy to apply a measure, its branches too bent and twisty to match up to a compass or square. You could stand it by the road and no carpenter would look at it twice" (Watson, 29). (吾有大树，人谓之樗。其大本臃肿而不中绳墨，其小枝卷曲而不中规矩。立之涂，匠者不顾。) Zhuangzi's reply, typically, is fanciful, ironic, and enigmatic:

"Now you have this big tree and you're distressed because it's useless. Why don't you plant it in Not-Even-Anything-Village, or the field of Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it? Axes will never shorten its life, nothing can ever harm it. If there's no use for it, how can it come to grief or pain?" (Watson, 29-30)

(今子有大树，患其无用，何不树之于无何有之乡，广莫之野，彷徨乎无为其侧，逍遥乎寝卧其下。不夭斤斧，物无害者，无所可用，安所困苦哉！)

Hui Tzu betrays an intellectual provinciality when he presumes to know what is useful and what is useless,^[4] for usefulness is never the inherent attribute of any object, but stems from the perspective of the potential "user." From the perspective of the tree itself, of course, survival is more important than to be of use, and is not negligibly useful.

For centuries, since Galileo, astronomers have studied the stars—those that they could see, and assumed that what they saw was the known universe. Then in 1783, Reverend John Mitchell thought about the possibility of a star whose size and density exerted such a gravitational pull that not even light could escape it. In 1795, Pierre-Simon Laplace wrote: "It is therefore possible that the greatest luminous bodies in the universe are on this account invisible."^[5] The consequences of this thought meant that the largest bodies in the universe *may be invisible*! And now, since 1968, when John Wheeler coined the term "Black Hole," these not

insignificant celestial bodies are a permanent part of our intellectual as well as our astronomical firmament. There are some who look at the night sky and wonder how many stars we see; and then there are others who wonder how many stars we *don't* see. Zhuangzi reminds us that it is human nature to be misled by human experience into thinking that nothing lies outside it, that what we see is that all there is to be seen, and what we grasp is all that there is to be grasped. The principles of creative wandering are not unknown in science. The distinguished Princeton physicist, John N. Bahcall, was quoted in *New York Times* obituary (19 August 2005, C14) as saying: "We often frame our understanding of what the [Hubble] Space Telescope will do in terms of what we expect to find and actually it would be terribly anticlimatic if we found what we expect to find. The most important discoveries will provide answers to questions that we do not yet know how to ask and will concern objects we have not yet imagined."

These allegories of knowing and of not knowing, of being limited in time and space, and the need—by an act of imagination which cannot ever avoid error—to supersede our experiential provincialities are embodied in the figure of the intellectual exile, epitomized by Erich Auerbach and his magisterial yet error-prone *Mimesis*. In a chapter entitled, "Making Mimesis: Exile, Errancy, and Erich Auerbach," Seth Lerer remarks: "Auerbach and his émigré contemporaries remain touchstones for the literary academic, and one could well imagine rewriting the history of recent literary criticism as a series of reactions to his work" (224). "From its start," Lerer writes, "*Mimesis* is a book of exiles, an account of separations and *errors*..." (224). Auerbach was separated from his native soil, not only the country of origin, but even from the trappings of scholarship. In discussing the "everyday and the real" in Auerbach's life, Lerer asks: "But what precisely is this everyday contemporary reality for Auerbach?" And he answers: "It is a scholar's life without the tools of scholarship: the journals, studies, and editions of the philological profession. As he announces at the opening, it is an exile's life without a nation, a moment when political and military action so challenges relations between truth and falsehood that 'most historians are forced to make concessions to the techniques of legend'" (235). In other words, to situate Auerbach in Zhuangzi's allegories, Auerbach is the morning mushroom who encounters twilight and dawn; he is the summer cicada who must survive spring and autumn. It is part of Lerer's strategy in developing an ironic epistemology that his praise of Auerbach be mistaken for a

condemnation: "*Mimesis* is a book, then, of familiarities upended; of misquotations; or parts ripped from wholes and made to stand for great traditions" (229).

Frank Kermode, makes the same strategically ironic move when he comments on Jonathan Miller's excoriations of Marshal McLuhan: "Miller declared that McLuhan 'has accomplished the greatest paradox of all, creating the possibility of truth by shocking us all with a gigantic system of lies'" (89). But Kermode sees Miller's conclusion as a recantation, "a palinode, a sudden admission that there might after all be something to be said for McLuhan's way of doing and saying things: that his concealments and self-deceptions and errors were almost necessary to getting the truth, or its possibility, across" (90-91). Jonathan Miller points to the truths that McLuhan came upon, but disparages him for constructing these out of a tissue of lies. Both Kermode and Miller acknowledge both the truth and the errancy of McLuhan's research, but where Kermode is, on balance, admiring, Miller is, on balance, censorious.

"No two disciplines have spent more time trying to determine just what they are—and just what their practitioners do," Seth Lerer remarks, "than philology and rhetoric..."(5). One might have added comparative literature to these haplessly underdetermined, undisciplined disciplines. Henry Remak's 1961 attempt to define the field is perhaps the most oft-quoted sentence in the literature: "The study of literature that goes beyond the borders of an individual country; and the study of relationships between literature and other areas of knowledge and consciousness, such as art (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history and social sciences (e.g. political science, economy, sociology), science, or religion" (3). In its repetition of the word "literature" in each of its clauses, it clearly insists on literature as the base, and comparison as the methodology of comparative literature as a discipline. But the word "literature" has certainly become more capacious in the last half century, and includes not only film, but all forms of popular works that would not have qualified as "literature" half a century ago. David Damrosch is both pragmatic and definitive when he writes: "Literature can best be defined pragmatically as whatever texts a given community of readers *takes* as literature" (14). Accordingly, over the years, to the question, "What is comparative literature," I have offered the answer: "Whatever comparatists do." And, if we ask what comparatists have done in the last half century, it is clear that they have not restricted themselves to "literature" as it was defined in 1961. Some (particularly those who objected to the Bernheimer Report), alarmed at the