

T H E

TAO

A N D T H E L O G O S

Literary Hermeneutics, East and West

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To Weilin

Preface

The present study of the nature of language and its implications for both the making of literature and its reading has grown out of my sustained interest in hermeneutics—the art of understanding and interpretation—considered in the perspective of East-West comparative poetics. Not very long ago, hermeneutics as a term was known only to a limited number of specialists in some special fields, but in recent years it has increasingly become a household word in the discussion of various branches of human studies, particularly in theology, law, and literary theory. Most of these discussions, however, are not just informed by philosophical hermeneutics but are also circumscribed by it and are confined within limits of the Western tradition alone. This seems to me quite unsatisfactory because understanding and interpretation are not just philosophical categories designed for a purely theoretical interest; they are rather the *immanent* facts of life: they are, so to speak, part and parcel of human existence. “*Understanding*,” says Hans-Georg Gadamer in reference to Heidegger’s existential analysis of Being, is “the *original form of the realization of Dasein*, which is being-in-the-world. Before any differentiation of understanding into the various directions of pragmatic or theoretical interest, understanding is *Dasein’s* mode of being, insofar as it is potentiality-for-being and ‘possibility.’”¹ That is to say, instead of being a theoretical construct, the hermeneutic phenomenon is ontologically constitutive of human life, for human beings can exist and develop only to the extent that they can adequately understand and work out the relationship between their being and the world in which they find themselves. The relationship of the Self with regard to the Other, which manifests itself everywhere in life, already forms the context in which the hermeneutic problem necessarily arises. Obviously, then, hermeneutics has implications that are truly universal; it is not

and cannot be limited to one particular realm of study, to one culture or one tradition.

It is against the background of Western philosophical hermeneutics that I have come to think about language and interpretation from a perspective that incorporates the non-Western. There is no need for me to dwell on the importance of language, since the problem of language has so often come to occupy the center of twentieth-century theoretical discussions—in analytical philosophy as well as phenomenology, in structuralism as well as poststructuralism—and since the understanding of speech and written texts has always been the hermeneutic problem par excellence. My discussion of the nature of language, however, though grounded in philosophical hermeneutics, eventually departs from it by concentrating on a particular set of problems in understanding literature. In other words, the focus of attention in my study is a specifically *literary* hermeneutics based on an examination of the language poets use, and an inquiry into the implications of such language for the reading and interpretation of literature. Of course, much has been written on literary hermeneutics, notably by Hans Robert Jauss in relation to his theory of an aesthetics of reception. According to Jauss, the hermeneutic process may be profitably separated into a triad of “an initial, aesthetically perceptive reading,” “a second, retrospectively exegetical reading,” and “a third, historical reading,” of which the different horizons, “the hermeneutic difference between the former and the current understanding of a work,” constitute the basis for a new way of looking at literary history, a “method of historical reception.”² In my study of literary hermeneutics, however, I am not concerned with dividing the reading experience into different phases to set up the hermeneutic distance between past and present understanding of a literary work. Indeed, I suspect that the reconstruction of a past horizon of expectations, which for Jauss is a prerequisite for reception theory, can at best be considered as methodologically useful in the study of literary history—especially in delineating changes of aesthetic taste and social norms—but we cannot take such historical reconstruction for granted without being critically aware of its premises and its tentative, hypothetical nature. Without in any way denying the significance of literary hermeneutics for the aesthetics of reception, I am nevertheless more interested in rethinking the metaphorical nature of language, the inherent inadequacy and suggestiveness involved in the use of words as signs and symbols, and the implications of all these for the writing and reading of literature. Such questions are undoubtedly at the center of much debate in

contemporary literary theory, which has to a large extent shaped my discussion of hermeneutic problems in this book.

It is perhaps on the basis of its scope of observation that the present study may ask to be distinguished from what has already been written in the study of philosophical or literary hermeneutics, for my discussion of language and interpretation goes beyond the boundaries of the Western critical tradition to include a more extensive view from the vantage point of *East-West* comparative studies. So far virtually no work has been done in literary hermeneutics that attempts to bring the East and the West to a fruitful mutual illumination, while many journal articles and essays under the rubric of *East-West* comparative literature seem to me deficient either because they juxtapose texts from different cultural traditions without justifying the choice of those texts for comparison or because they mechanically apply terms, concepts, and approaches of Western criticism to non-Western works.³ The ground or justification for comparison has been a vexed question for comparative literature from the very beginning, but the validity of comparative literature never comes so close to a real crisis as when the comparison involves the East and the West, between which there is little *rappports de faits* and for which the only appropriate discourse of critical commentary, many would argue, is the discourse of difference. But comparative literature by now should have outgrown the search for actual contacts between writers of different nations and the influence of one upon the other—the tracing of sources, borrowings, and indebtedness René Wellek once sarcastically called the “foreign trade” of literature.⁴ If direct contacts and relations no longer constitute the only legitimate ground for comparison, it is then possible to see that comparative poetics—that is, the study of critical and theoretical issues shared by the East and the West—may yield much more interesting and valuable results than the traditional kind of influence study.

Literary theory, which by definition transcends national and linguistic boundaries, provides a truly fertile ground for comparison and promises a great deal of insight into the art of literature by examining a variety of culturally heterogeneous and historically unrelated works. Theory opens a new vista for comparative studies, but a theoretically informed study must put different cultural traditions on an equal footing. In other words, a study in comparative poetics must not merely apply Western concepts and approaches to non-Western texts, but must consider and examine theoretical issues from a critical perspective that incorporates both the East and the West. If literary theory is thinking critically of literature and

interpretation, the study of theory must also think critically of theory itself—and not least of the very differentiation of the East and the West.

Perhaps I should make it clear at this point that the word “East” used in this book refers mainly to the cultural and literary tradition of China, though there is also some discussion of the philosophy of the great Indian Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna. Such an arbitrarily synecdochic use of the word *East* is not meant to deny the distinctions among the various cultures of the East, but the arbitrariness of the word serves to call in question the very name of the East as opposed to the West. Once the usually unquestioned meaning of the word is brought to conscious reflection, it becomes possible to dismantle the fixation of a cultural dichotomy we call the East and the West—and especially to avoid the pitfall of ethnocentrism in cultural studies, the bad practice of imposing the values and conceptual apparatus of the one on the other. What I have attempted to do in this book, then, is not to apply Western hermeneutic theory to the reading of Chinese literature but to look into the very concept of hermeneutics—that is, the relationship between language and interpretation as it has been conceived in the Western critical tradition and in classical Chinese poetics. This may on the one hand introduce to readers and literary scholars in the West a dimension of hermeneutic theory from a very different cultural context, while on the other hand help systematize our understanding of the Chinese critical tradition by piecing together insights and utterances that are scattered over the voluminous writings of Chinese philosophy, poetry, and criticism. In this sense, the present study is also an attempt to suggest a consistent line of hermeneutic thinking in Chinese poetics.

Such a study is theoretical only in the sense that it is an investigation of the extent to which the inadequacy and suggestiveness of verbal expressions influence both the writing of a literary work and its reading, that it considers both writing and reading in the framework of a communicative process mediated by aesthetic experience. But it is not theoretical in the sense of providing a model, a criterion, or a paradigm for practical criticism. Literary hermeneutics to my mind is not a set of prescriptive rules or a methodology with which the interpreter is able to solve problems of textual criticism once he has grasped the technicalities and applied them to a particular text. The use of literary hermeneutics lies rather in deepening our perception of the workings of language and our experience of the art of literature; it helps describe more correctly and perceptively what happens when words and sentences are woven into a literary text, and

when they are subsequently reactivated in the process of reading. In the light of such a hermeneutics, we may bring to our conscious reflection those principles that underlie the composition and performance of a literary text, and may thus understand the work of literature better than its author or the uninformed reader does.

Throughout this book, I shall refer to both Western and Chinese sources and put them in a sort of critical dialogue. The justification for such an intercultural dialogue, as I already mentioned, lies in the universality of the hermeneutic phenomenon—that is, the ever-present problems of language and interpretation. Although hermeneutics as a theory evolves out of the German philosophical tradition, it is indeed possible to characterize the Chinese cultural tradition as a hermeneutic one, for it has a long exegetical tradition evolving around a set of canonical texts and a wealth of commentaries, comparable to the tradition of biblical exegesis which furnishes the cornerstone of Western hermeneutic theory. Many theoretical issues in reading and commenting on the canon are common to both Chinese commentators and biblical exegetes, and bear directly on literary criticism in both traditions. In China as in the West, the nature of language and its correlation with literary interpretation are gradually understood in a historical process, but a study of such correlations in cultures as drastically different as the Chinese and the Western precludes comparisons in a chronological order. Many comparable ideas and concepts do not emerge at the same time in China and the West; thus comparisons and parallels in this book are not historically oriented but aim to identify some common themes in the critical understanding that have emerged at various moments in the East and the West. By “themes” I mean certain problems of understanding common to both Chinese and Western traditions, certain crucial ideas and concepts about the nature of language—its inherent metaphoricity, ambiguity, and suggestiveness; its implications for the author and the reader of a literary work; and so forth. Of course, each of these themes develops in its own tradition and has its own history, which must not be overlooked when a point of convergence is located; but what contributes to the thematic coherence of this study as well as to an extensive view of literary hermeneutics is not the self-enclosed particularity of each theme but its broad theoretical implications beyond the enclosure.

My interest in such common themes also justifies my disengagement from certain technical problems, like that of authorship, which can be a pretty thorny one especially on the Chinese side. Almost all the ancient

Chinese works—such as the Confucian *Analecets* and the books named after Laozi or Zhuangzi—are either compiled by the philosopher's disciples or contain some interpolations or spurious chapters, so much so that it seems always questionable whether one can speak, say, of the different chapters of the book called *Zhuangzi* as if they come from the same author and represent the ideas and thoughts of the same philosopher. In my discussion, however, I do not distinguish what are generally accepted as the authentic chapters from the spurious ones, since it is not the authenticity of authorship but the ideas in the book and the actual influence they have exerted in the Chinese tradition that are of concern and relevance here. As the philosopher Zhuangzi himself might argue, the name Zhuangzi is just a convenient denominator that has its meaning or meanings only within certain historically and arbitrarily defined limits.

In bringing together historically unrelated texts and ideas, I attempt to find a common ground on which Chinese and Western literatures can be understood as commensurable, even though their cultural and historical contexts are different. The ultimate goal of such thematic comparisons is to transcend the limitation of a narrowly defined perspective and to expand our horizon by assimilating as much as possible what appears to be alien and belonging to the Other. If the encounter with something alien and unfamiliar is where hermeneutics starts, the enrichment of experience and knowledge in a mutual engagement of the Self and the Other, or what Gadamer calls the “fusion of horizons,” is the final destination it will lead us to. The process of understanding is a process of learning or self-cultivation (*Bildung*), in which the unfamiliar becomes familiar, adding to the repertory of our knowledge, and the alien is absorbed till it becomes part of ourselves. As Gadamer reminds us: “It is the task of philosophy to discover what is common even in what is different. According to Plato, the task of the philosophical dialectician is ‘to learn to see things together in respect of the one.’”⁵ This seems to me an extremely apposite formulation not only of the task of philosophy but also of literary hermeneutics in a truly comparative outlook. Indeed, philosophy and literary hermeneutics are closely related, for the specific problems of literary interpretation are grounded in the nature of language and can be best understood in the larger framework of philosophical hermeneutics. Accordingly, my discussion of literary interpretation is preceded by an examination of philosophers' concepts of language, and my comments on the works of poets and writers—those of Rilke, Mallarmé, and Tao Qian, for example—are not intended to be interpretations of individual works as such, but to

bring out the implications of those works for the theoretical point I try to make. The comparison of their seemingly unrelated and very different works aims precisely to “see things together in respect of the one.”

But what is the nature of the “one”? How do we come to recognize the shared, the common, or the same in cultures and literatures that are definitely different? In an essay on Friedrich Hölderlin, Heidegger makes a fine distinction between the same and the equal or identical: “The equal or identical always moves toward the absence of difference, so that everything may be reduced to a common denominator. The same, by contrast, is the belonging together of what differs, through a gathering by way of the difference.”⁶ For anyone who tries to bring the literary traditions of the East and the West into comparison and find the sameness that underlies different cultural manifestations, it is very important to bear this distinction in mind. As Heidegger says, it is “in the carrying out and settling of differences that the gathering nature of sameness comes to light.” The same “gathers what is distinct into an original being-at-one,” but it does not level everything into “the dull unity of mere uniformity.”⁷ In other words, to find out the sameness is not to make disparate things equal or identical, or to erase the differences that inhabit the various cultural and literary manifestations. At the same time, however, to recognize the distinction Heidegger specifies is also to accept the very possibility of sameness and not to dismiss the same as merely equal or identical. This is of special importance at the present because the goal of this East-West comparative study is unabashedly the finding of the sameness despite profound cultural differences, while so many contemporary or postmodern Western theories are predicated on the assumption of cultural, ethnic, gender, or some other difference. In fact, it is against the background of an overemphasis on difference in contemporary Western theory that the present study has concentrated on the sameness that gathers different literary traditions together and makes intercultural dialogues possible.

The postmodern world, according to Jean-François Lyotard in his influential study of the postmodern condition, is a world of difference and heterogeneity in postindustrial Western societies, and his book on the postmodern condition ends with a virtual call to arms—to “wage a war on totality,” to “activate the differences and save the honor of the name.”⁸ With their eyes focusing on a world of cultural and critical differences, many critics and theorists in the West may view with suspicion any effort to find the same, as if it is merely an attempt to level everything into the dull uniformity of the equal or identical. With the increasing departmen-

talization of knowledge and the specialization of academic expertise, the “original being-at-one” and the “aesthetic non-differentiation” seem to have broken into small pieces, and it is difficult to see what may bring the fragments of the splintered oneness again together. What we find as the same may appear especially suspicious when the intercultural comparison involves the Chinese tradition, for is not China the very symbol of cultural difference for the Western theoretical discourse? For example, when Foucault wants to emphasize the insurmountable gap between the East and the West as mutually incomprehensible cultural systems, it is precisely a passage from a “certain Chinese encyclopaedia” that represents such total and irreducible difference. In that hilarious passage, an absurd “Chinese” method of classification, which puts strangely categorized animals in one locale in spite of their radical incommensurability, reveals the fundamental difference in ways of thinking and naming in language. The juxtaposition of things in such an unthinkable order, or rather disorder, Foucault remarks, is conceivable only in *heterotopia*—the inconceivable space that undermines the very possibility of description in language, a space that repels and attracts at the same time, displaying the “exotic charm of another system of thought,” while showing “the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.”⁹

In an excellent study of postmodernist theories, Steven Conner observes that in this concept of heterotopia, the postmodern world of “pure difference” finds its “most famous image,” “a name for the whole centreless universe of the postmodern.”¹⁰ As I have argued elsewhere, however, the hilarious passage from the so-called Chinese encyclopaedia, which Foucault quotes from an essay by Borges, is in fact a Western fiction; and by citing that fiction as a representation of the Chinese mind, Foucault does not disengage from the tradition of creating cultural myths of the Other—myths which have always presented the Other as pure difference, a foil to the West, either as an alluring and exotic dreamland, a utopia where the West has its ideals imaginatively realized, or the land of stagnation, spiritual purblindness, and ignorance, against which the higher values of Western progress and civilization stand out for everyone to see.¹¹ But “once such a heterotopia has been named, and, more especially, once it has been cited and re-cited,” Conner contends, “it is no longer the conceptual monstrosity which it once was, for its incommensurability has been in some sense bound, controlled, and predictively interpreted, given a centre and illustrative function.”¹² The point is, however, that the heterotopia was never really the conceptual monstrosity Foucault claims

it to be, for the different Other is evoked by and for the West to facilitate its self-knowledge or self-critique, and the heterotopia is created only to be metaphorically colonized from the very start. Therefore, difference or heterogeneity, insofar as it inscribes a contemporary Western desire for cultural critique, does not carry the power of universal legitimation and should not be the definitive last word which critical discourse invariably endeavors to reach as if it were the only and final goal of intercultural comparative studies. Indeed, insofar as Western theory dictates the ways and terms in which critical discourse invariably speaks of the non-Western Other as pure difference, understanding of truly different, non-Western cultures and literatures is virtually impossible. Speaking in the voice of and for the Other, I would reject the designated role of pure difference and attempt to go beyond the Self and the Other in an effort to attain to an expanded horizon of experience and knowledge. And in that effort, hermeneutics with its claim to universality, if only paradoxically the universality of the finiteness of all understanding, may promise to give us the best support.

Given the scope of my project to deal with hermeneutic problems in philosophy and literature, in China and the West, I am constantly aware of the inadequacy of my own knowledge for the task I have willingly undertaken to accomplish. I know that I have often stepped out of familiar grounds and trespassed upon the turf of others who have the right to claim familiarity and solidity of scholarship in those fields. The comparatist may indeed often appear to the specialist as such an unwelcome trespasser, an overreaching anomaly in an academic world that has branched out into such a labyrinth of specialization. But to go beyond the usual boundaries of academic field, to step out of one's familiar bush in order to see the forest, though inevitably a risky undertaking in a highly specialized world, seems to me always worth trying. I remain unconvinced of the claim to uniqueness of any literary or cultural tradition—namely, the view that the East and the West are so distinctly different that ways of thinking and expression cannot be made intelligible from one to the other, and therefore the knowledge of one must be kept apart from that of the other. One of the things I have decided to do in the present study is precisely to pull down the usual barriers between scholarly colonies known as fields or disciplines, surrounded by academic hedgerows and marked out by departmental lines. I would challenge the departmentalization of knowledge and try to show some basic hermeneutic concerns and strategies shared by the East and the West. This is undoubtedly a difficult task

that I am ill-equipped to fulfil, but I feel encouraged by the example of Mr. Qian Zhongshu, whose work always gives me guidance in bringing the East and the West together, though his formidable knowledge and scholarly accomplishment I cannot emulate. Many of the ideas developed here were first generated in my conversations with him in Beijing several years ago and inspired by his masterly comments on Chinese and Western works in his magnum opus, modestly entitled *Guan zhui bian*.¹³

An embryonic form of the argument in this book was first sketched out in a short article I published in Chinese in 1983.¹⁴ Since then, I have been encouraged by many of my friends and colleagues on this side of the Pacific, who generously supported my effort to develop the ideas I had in mind. I want first of all to thank Professor Jurij Striedter for sharpening my mind in thinking about literary theory and for insistently demanding clarity and consistency. My thanks also go to Professor Stephen Owen, with whom I had many enjoyable conversations about Chinese as well as Western poetry. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Daniel Aaron for his warm friendship and for commenting on a draft of the first two chapters. An old friend, Professor Donald Stone, deserves credit for giving me much encouragement. I am grateful to Professor Haskell Block and would also like to thank Linda Haverty, Marina van Zuylen, and Irene Kacandes for reading portions of an earlier draft of this book. I want to thank Professor Eugene Chen Eoyang and Professor Kang-I Sun Chang for offering constructive criticism and suggestions that helped me bring the book to its final form. I also want to thank Reynolds Smith and Pam Morrison at Duke University Press for their assistance and Stephanie Sugioka for her careful editing. And last but not least, I want to thank my wife Weilin for her unfailing support and for her almost blind confidence in me. To her this book is dedicated with gratitude and love.

In chapter 1 I have incorporated, with necessary changes and revisions, an essay first published in *Critical Inquiry* 11 (March 1985). The later part of chapter 2 was published in the inaugural issue of *Critical Studies* (vol. 1, no. 1, 1989). I want to thank Professor W. J. T. Mitchell and Editions Rodopi respectively for giving me permission to reuse the two published essays.

Zhang Longxi
Moreno Valley, California
September, 1991

A Note on Translation and Transliteration

I have translated all the passages quoted from Chinese sources mainly to make the translation part stylistically consistent with the rest of my writing. In the bibliography, however, I have listed, under the heading of a Chinese work, the title of its English version if a reasonably good translation is available. For works originally in German or French, I have tried to use existent English translations where possible, sometimes silently amended for accuracy. When no English version seems to exist or when I feel unsatisfied with the ones I find, I have supplied my own translation. Lines of French and German poems are always cited in the original followed by their English rendition.

For the transliteration of Chinese names and words, I have generally followed the pinyin system, which has a few letters pronounced quite differently from the way they sound in English, but the reader will be able to pronounce them by remembering the following approximate equivalents: c = ts, q = ch, x = sh, z = dz, and zh = j. The name of Tao Qian, for example, is pronounced like Tao Chian, and Zhu Ziqing sounds something like Ju Dzi-ching. There are a few exceptions, however. The names of Confucius and Mencius are already familiar enough to many Western readers, and a changed spelling according to the rules of pinyin orthography may only lead to unnecessary confusion. For the same reason, the term *tao* and its derivatives (*taoism*, *taoist*) are not spelled as “dao,” “daoism,” and “daoist.” A problem may arise when we put the poet Tao Qian and the philosophical notion of *tao* together, because, in addition to being pronounced differently, Tao and *tao* in the Chinese original are two completely different characters. Throughout this book, the philosophical notion of *tao* is kept in lowercase and italicized, and the reader is advised not to relate it to the name of the poet Tao Qian, even though he was himself very much interested in the philosophical ramifications of the *tao*.

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