theories and methodologies

Against Historicist Fundamentalism

ERIC HAYOT

NO DIFFERENCE IS FUNDAMENTAL.

The rest of this essay devotes itself to an elaboration of that claim. Along the way I review the claim's implications for the study of literature in the world. I argue that assertions of fundamental difference, whether genetic or historical, reproduce the worst habits of Eurocentric thought.

It is 1981. Alongside any number of major events—including the marriage of Prince Charles to Lady Diana, the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II, and Nintendo's release of *Donkey Kong*—the year sees the publication, in the journal *CLEAR*, of "Metaphor and Chinese Poetry." Written by Pauline Yu, the essay brilliantly compares and analyzes the effect that cosmological patterns of belief have on poetic form in China and Europe.

The essay's argument moves in two steps: first, Yu shows that Chinese cosmology is correlational and immanentist, while Western cosmology is metaphysical and dualist; second, she argues that this difference means that Chinese poetry does not have or use metaphor and cannot therefore be described or understood using the traditional languages of European poetics. While in the "dualistic universe" of Judeo-Christian theology, "the conception of the poet as a maker or fabricator" produces an emphasis on *ex nihilo* creation of the metaphorical, world-building type (210), in the Chinese case "the things in a poem . . . do not just mean 'what they are,' they refer to something other than themselves, *but that other is part of the same world*, and often a very specific part of it. . . . [T]he presence of both objects within the same line bases the connection more on metonymic contiguity than true metaphorical substitution" (217). Though Chinese poetry has figures, and Chinese poetics a language for describing figuration and forms of substitution and contiguity, it would be a mistake, Yu argues, to translate these terms into simple Western equivalents.[1]

Yu's argument occupies one major pole of an ongoing debate in contemporary Chinese poetics. It is echoed in sentences from a 1987 essay by Michelle Yeh—"this notion that all things (including

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human beings) are informed by one universal principle or share the same ontological reality is essential to our understanding of the Chinese world view and Chinese poetics" (247)—and in the work of Cecile Chu-chin Sun, who opposes (in a 2006 essay) "a [European] mode of conceptualizing reality in terms of a hierarchical way of thinking with its distinct anthropocentric privileging of human beings over external nature" to "a [Chinese] cultural orientation in which everything in reality, including human beings, is perceived holistically and as organically related" (326). In short, Europeans think vertically, the Chinese horizontally.[2] And a poetic concept like the Chinese *bi* 比, a figure that Chinese classical poetics designates to describe the act of comparing one thing with another, refers—in this analysis of Chinese cosmological thinking—only to comparison within a general plane of similarity, a "same world," a single "ontological reality," or an "organically related" whole in which the act of comparison never broaches the horizon.[3]

We are dealing, then, with a distinction between a figuration that displaces meaning exclusively through differences of degree and one that displaces meaning through differences of kind. To be persuasive, a distinction this fine must rely on the forcefulness of its language. Yu, referring to Chinese images and Western makers of metaphor, says, "Although all of these images, then, refer to something other than themselves, the referents are not *fundamentally* 'other' . . ." and "The metaphor-maker looks and thinks in a *fundamentally* new way" ("Metaphor" 206, 207). Similarly, Stephen Owen argues, "Between systems, correlations were made by a principle which might be called analogy, if analogy did not presume some *fundamental* difference . . ." (18); Yeh says, "It is clear that there is no *true* equivalent of metaphor in Chinese poetics" (252). Sun remarks, "Consideration of these issues will . . . lead to a better understanding of the *fundamental* distinction between the metaphorical 'tenor-vehicle' relationship . . . and the 'scene-feeling' relationship"; "This Western anthropocentric thrust . . . is *fundamentally* different from the aesthetic penchant for natural spontaneity implicit . . . in Chinese poetry"; and "The Western notion of correspondence is *fundamentally* distinct from the Chinese in at least two crucial aspects" (328, 329, 334; all emphases in these quotations are mine).[4]

What is the distinction between a difference and a fundamental difference? Is it a fundamental distinction? How would you know?

I understand the desire to interpret Chinese poetry on the basis of categories belonging to the history of Chinese poetry. Like most folks I sometimes believe that aesthetic objects ought to be read and evaluated, at least as a first step, from within the framework of the contexts from which they emerge. My faith borrows from the long elaboration of Viconian historicism, which I understand to be the "discovery," more or less, that human thought and aesthetic practice develop not only in specific social spheres but also in specific temporal ones, as well as from a Kantian impulse to respect the other's choice of the other's ends. To understand a poem it helps to understand the culture and modes of thought that produced it and to inhabit those modes of thought in the poem's analysis.

These relatively common critical assumptions constitute a kind of epistemological limit on the possibility of world literature, since there cannot be one world whose perspective would illuminate any given example of the literary from, as it were, the inside. There can likewise be no one literature, but only literatures operating in various historical modes, even under other rubrics and names, literatures that may not be known as literature at all. The best one can hope for in such a schema is a literature of many worlds, a literary field constituted by autarchies, operating each in its particular epistemic and sociological sphere, each to some large extent (fundamentally, purely) impervious to the others, except where

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direct lines of influence and historical evolution justify, from inside the system, the mode of resemblance we call tradition.

This point of view, this faith, has a few conceptual problems.

To understand certain kinds of difference as fundamental, we must assume that other kinds of difference are nonfundamental. To make claims about Chinese or European poetry in general requires collapsing distinctions across several thousand years of poetic and metapoetic activity inside China or Europe. Differences between Han and Tang poetry or classical Greek and modern English poetry, though visible, are apparently not fundamental enough to keep categories in one area from applying legitimately to another. Some distinctions are fundamental; others, equally distinct, are not.[5] The distribution of the fundamental and nonfundamental is not, however, arbitrary. Its arrangement separates (what someone believes is) legitimate intellectual inquiry from unacceptable kinds of cultural meddling.

All arguments concerning similarity and difference are susceptible to critiques that alter the normative field or scale of analysis. Such critiques can be atomistic: if I make claims about French poetry, someone may say, "That's ridiculous; the poetry of the nineteenth century differs radically from the poetry of the twentieth century." So I make claims about twentieth-century French poetry. But the poetry of the first half of the century differs from that of the second half. And in the second half, surely we have to break things at 1968. So I make claims about the poetry of Dominique Sorrente. But even Sorrente's poetry must be thought of in periods! I make claims about a single poem, a single word. But is any poem really selfsame? And so on. (Or I make claims about the United States. But New Mexico differs from New Jersey.)

Reversing the operation, we surf the vector of the universal: I say something about French poetry. "But that's true of all European poetry," someone says. "You've confused the specific for the general." As for European poetry, it is a subset of the lyric tradition. And these claims go back in turn to the species-level impulse toward making, itself a function of an even more universal zoogenic impulse.

Nelson Goodman had it right: "If there is but one world, it embraces a multiplicity of contrasting aspects; if there are many worlds, the collection of them all is one. The one world may be taken as many, or the many worlds taken as one; whether one or many depends on the way of taking" (57).[6] The distinction between multiplicity and singularity, in profane space, is essentially a matter of the distribution of available categories and a set of preferences for analysis at a certain level. Apples and oranges are only fundamentally different if one groups them by taste, color, or species; classed as fruit they resemble each other more than either resembles the Taj Mahal or a goat. Whether things are the same or different does not depend on a fixed idea in the world. It depends on the way of taking.

Fundamentalist thinking collapses certain forms of ambiguity in its conceptual field to magnify conceptual differentiation outside it. Does a concept called the West have any clear or simple theory of what metaphor is or any special capacity for distinguishing it from metonymy, synecdoche, or irony? If it did, no one would be arguing about what metaphor is. And yet in the last decades we can find theories that make metaphor a subset of metonymy, that make metonymy a type of metaphor, or that subordinate both to synecdoche.[7] The history of Chinese poetics is likewise littered with attempts to distinguish once and for all among three major features of poetic activity, the descriptive (and undertheorized) *fu* 賦, the comparative *bi* 比, and the affective *xing* 興. No one ever finishes the job, because the job cannot be finished.

There are two ways of thinking in the world, we are told: one that divides everything into two and one that does not. My locus clas-

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sicus is Tu Wei-ming, who writes, "The modern West's dichotomous world view (spirit/matter, mind/body, physical/mental, sacred/profane, creator/creature, God/man, subject/object) is *diametrically* opposed to the Chinese holistic mode of thinking" (201; my emphasis). Tu Wei-ming's statement is possible only if one already thinks dichotomously; the inside of the distinction generates its outside. If one thinks in a "Chinese" way, the differences collapse; the question disappears; we must imagine that "this characterization of the distinctiveness of Chinese poetry is unavailable to those Chinese of whom the theory speaks" (Saussy 34). In whatever sense the West is metaphorical, then, it cannot be fundamentally so, since all it takes to undo our belief in that idea is to think like a "Chinese" person. Likewise, Chinese correlationism, best embodied in poetics by the spreading, feeling-oriented activity conceptualized by *xing*, is not something the Chinese have in any clear or unique way. Other people have it too (including Spinoza), though in each case the cultural context makes the having different. The decision that the having differs fundamentally, however, could only come from outside, from a discourse whose desire lays itself adjectivally over the process of thought, to organize it.[8]

Any system that purports to describe a conceptual structure involving the horizontal and vertical, no matter how charming or convincing—and such a structure will often be charming and convincing to the animals that have for so long grown up and sheltered themselves in its arbors—is necessarily not true, in that it cannot fulfill the functions of truth and cannot make claims about the falsehood or inadequacy of methods that take the opposed position. Large-scale conceptual distinctions exist in here, inside the parameters of a thought and a program (concepts that refer, at a certain scale of analysis, to different cosmographic or figural imaginaries that we may use to organize a field of play for social analysis) and never out there. *Out there*, like nature, has no concepts; *out there* is in fact only another name for a concept, one I am using in the parameters of another thought and another program.

The year 2014 was designated by the United Nations as the International Year of Small Island Developing States. The year also saw, in March, the death of the French film director Alain Resnais, and, in November, the first landing of a spacecraft on a comet, *Philae* on P67, at 1.3 astronomical units from the sun.

Early in the year Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins published *The Lyric Theory Reader*, a collection of essays filling a long-standing pedagogical and intellectual need in classrooms in the United States. The anthology extends an argument that Jackson and Prins have been making since at least 1999, in an essay called "Lyrical Studies," and that Jackson makes more extensively in *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005), as well as in a special section of *PMLA* on the new lyric studies in 2008 ("Who Reads Poetry?"): the contemporary English-language academic understanding of the lyric is the historical product of two related movements. The first, the theorization of the lyric as one of the major modes of literary production and expression, belonged to the thinkers and poets of the Romantic period; the second, the literary historical rewriting of that Romantic category into a disciplinary framework that functioned as a heuristic and hermeneutic for further research, belonged to developments in universities in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. The new lyric studies takes aim at the second movement, which Jackson and Prins call "lyricization," and *The Lyric Theory Reader* consolidates their critique of the ways that lyricization flattens vast differences in the production, reception, and media circulation of poetry (in a variety of subgenres and modes).

The anthology suggests that lyric theory is produced only—or at least mostly—by the

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Romantic elevation of the lyric to one of the three major aesthetic modes (an elevation the Romantics attributed to their Greek and Latin forebears) and to the literary critical apprehension of that event. With this in mind Jackson and Prins include only work written in the twentieth century, most of it after World War II. This choice affirms the claim that the lyric has no existence outside the social categories of its production and interpretation; since "to be lyric is to be read as lyric," as Jackson puts it (*Dickinson's Misery* 6), the only lyric theory is theory that follows that initial act of lyricization.[9]

One consequence of this approach is that the lyric (and the theory that lyricizes and then occasionally unlyricizes it) exists almost exclusively in Europe and the United States and mainly in the last two centuries. Look at the book's index, where Charles Baudelaire is the subject of some forty references and where other frequently mentioned writers include John Ashbery; Bertolt Brecht; Gwendolyn Brooks; Robert Browning; Paul Celan; Hart Crane; John Donne; Stefan George; John Keats; Stéphane Mallarmé; Alexander Pope; Ezra Pound; Rainer Maria Rilke; William Shakespeare; Edmund Spenser; Wallace Stevens; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; Walt Whitman; and William Carlos Williams. The entire cavalcade of canonical pre-Romantic, Romantic, and modern poetry in English, French, and German makes its force known here; in this way the historical and geographic situation of the lyric as a concept elaborates and reinforces what we already know, for the most part, about the lyric today, though it appears, to be sure, under the sign of the provincial rather than the absolute.[10]

The book gestures outside that tradition in its third section, "Lyric Departures," which includes three subsections: "Avant-garde Anti-lyricism," "Lyric and Sexual Difference," and "Comparative Lyric." I leave for others the question of why the anthology imagines sexual difference as a departure from the lyric (as opposed to something happening inside it). Instead I'd like to make two points about the section "Comparative Lyric": (1) the title implies that the anthology until now has not been comparative, whereas in fact it has been wildly comparative—but only in Greek, Latin, German, French, and English; and (2) the section includes essays by Earl Miner on Chinese and Japanese, Jahan Ramazani on anglophone poetry (much of this poetry by poets from the United States), Aamir Mufti on Urdu, Roland Greene on Haroldo de Campos and Allen Ginsberg, and David Damrosch on classical Egypt. That is how the rest of the world, if you will permit me such a formulation, finds its place in *The Lyric Theory Reader*.[11] What theory of comparison, what theory of departure, is operating here?

We are back in the realm of fundamental differences. Because only a sense that European differences do not amount to an adequately comparative framework permits the linguistic, geographic, and temporal differences of the book's first 450 pages to signify as a single field from which the rest of the world (or immigrants from that copious remainder) departs. It is interesting enough to imagine the mental map of contiguities and resemblances that makes a poet like Langston Hughes (discussed in the sections on the comparative and the sexual) more of a departure from Emily Dickinson or Hart Crane than, say, Horace or Sappho. But it is more interesting still to understand the ways in which the historicization of the lyric as a field, as Jackson and Prins have argued for it, functions as an epistemological and positivist justification for the exclusion of the classical poetry of Africa, East Asia, and South Asia from the theorization of the lyric as such. Because if the lyric was only belatedly invented by twentieth-century literary critics in the United States and Europe, then, of course, the lyric has never existed in any of those places at all. Here then the mental map operates not unconsciously or as an effect of a certain

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habit in the construction of anthologies[12] but as an explicit expression of a careful, innovative theory of the lyric as a historical form.

What theory of historical occurrence, of the interaction between concepts and the world, justifies that elaboration? At some level it is a strict historical nominalism. We cannot learn about the lyric from examples in Sanskrit, Chinese, or Ge'ez because, apparently, the cultures in which those languages are spoken never had the concept of the lyric as such. For similar reasons it would be impossible to study the novel in those places or to think about the history of homosexuality there; a well-formed understanding of the historical development of social categories places out of bounds the use of anachronistic categories in the evaluation of the past. Minimally this is a form of epistemological seriousness.

But this seriousness is never as serious as it wishes to be. Why stop at the boundaries of Europe? Strict historical nominalism would drive the differences all the way down; we cannot talk about the lyric, it would say, because the notion of the lyric as Keats knew it and as Hughes knew it and as we know it is not the same thing. At the limit, as we have known since Ferdinand de Saussure's course on linguistics, no single use of the word (even by the same person) is identical with any of its other uses. And yet an analysis fully immersed in the presumptions of its object could only reproduce exactly the thing it studied. It would not, therefore, be an analysis.

The truth is that no one works this way. What happens instead is that we draw our circles of fundamental difference around the concept, declaring that in this realm the concept is selfsame enough to justify internal differentiation, deciding that outside the boundary, the concept does not historically obtain. So the various uses of the word *lyric* in English, French, German, or Spanish, even though we distinguish the Spanish lyric from the French lyric, and so on, do not require substantive differentiation at the level of the concept lyric. They're all lyric poetry, just different kinds of lyric poetry; they're metonymies of lyric poetry. But what arrests the metonymic drift? What forms of enclosure establish the relation between a word and, say, its cognates (*lyrical*, *lyricism*) or its translations (*Lyrik*, *lyrique*, *lirik*)? What limits would that relation put on any other use of that word, which, in some other context, would not have the same meaning? The point is that any use of any word (casually or in scholarship) takes place in a context that determines the limits of the metonymic and the beginnings of the metaphorical, the limits of the "good" historicism that imposes its concepts from the inside and the beginnings of "bad" idealization, imposing the word's abstractions from a without whose fundamental difference from the objects under consideration enacts a violence terrible and typical.

And so it is in the name of "respect" for Chinese *shi* or Arabic *ghazal* that one omits them from the category of the lyric—they are not different types of lyric poetry but different types of poetry (but do the Chinese have a concept of poetry?), departures from the lyric. If we do not include them, if we do not permit them to interfere with our thought, it is because we honor their difference so much. The boundary of that respect, whose obverse is contempt, reproduces the picture of the world we already have, borrowing the logic of the world from geographic, historical, racial, or social categories that preexist it. These concepts also organize the normative scales at which a scholarly discipline operates and frame the habits of its intellectual work, establishing the comforts of its traditions, its epistemological self-justifications.

The intellectual seriousness of historicizing rigor can be judged by the nearly automatic praise it receives in the profession today. "I think we need to be more historically specific here" is an MLA applause line. But that seriousness depends entirely on the approach one takes to the historical as a

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conceptual field. A social history of Greek life would rightly conclude that the Greeks didn't, for instance, interact with the concept of oxygen, since they never mentioned it. Nonetheless a history of the relation between oxygen and the species (not as the Greeks thought it but as it was) might find interesting evidence in classical Greece, since among other things our understanding of the Greek explanation for fire depends on the fact that we know what fire is and how it really works. So here we might say, well, there are two ways of doing historical work: one reconstructs the categories as they were known; the other applies external rubrics to the analysis. But even this opposition is nonsense: no reconstruction of the categories as they were known can proceed, given the difference between the present and the past, without bringing to bear on the past some knowledge that it never had—minimally, for instance, the knowledge of that past's future. All this is a matter of a decision. What concerns me is when the decisions justify provincialism in the name of rigor.

You might, as a way of getting somewhere, then, acknowledge that though the poetic activity of Chinese-language poets operated, for a couple thousand years, under the rubric of an established poetics that divided the figurative functions of poetry into *fu*, *bi*, and *xing*, nonetheless, the activity of metaphor—used here to describe a certain capacity of language—occasionally appeared in Chinese poetry. And you might similarly conclude—not simply to apply European categories to non-European situations—that though few American poets have heard of the idea of *xing*, nonetheless one can (if one knows what *xing* is) find it operating in American poetry, because *xing* describes something language can do, and language can do things even when we don't know that it's doing them (that's often the case with grammar). At that point you might be willing to admit—on the grounds that it has something to say about the poetic capacities of an expressive medium whose rules are, in the long run, the same for everyone (the species limit is also a form of historicism)—that material on Chinese poetics belongs in your lyric-theory reader and not just in the final section.[13]

Is literature in the world? Can it be in the world? For it to be so scholars would have to stop protecting literature from the world, from, that is, literature's nonnative contexts.[14] I have shown you two instances of that protection, in which a certain historical fundamentalism—produced in the name of cultural recognition and sensitivity in one case, in the name of rigor and respect for historical difference in the other—puts itself to the task of circle drawing, arguing for the impossibility of comparison across certain fields while assuming the necessity of comparison within others. Ask the question one way—did the Chinese have the lyric?—and the self-evidence of the answer (no, they did not have the word *lyric* in their language) allows us to ignore them. Ask it another way—does the history of Chinese poetry have something to teach us about the lyric?—and the willful self-impoverishment of the first way of asking becomes clear. The tendency to ask the first kind of question, to argue from its premises in the name of seriousness, exposes a lack of imagination in the way literary scholars think, when we take our worlds as many—so very many!—instead of one.

Notes

1. The arguments Yu made in the 1981 article are reproduced at greater length in her 1987 book, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition*, as well as in Yu and Huters.

2. One interesting historical equivalent of these arguments appears in Nicholas Malebranche's *Dialogue between a Christian Philosopher and a Chinese Philosopher* (1708); on that subject, see Hayot.

3. Significant counterarguments to these claims drawing extensively on readings in Chinese literature have been made by Zhang (*Allegoresis* and *Mighty Opposites*), Saussy, Ekström, and Gu ("Is Mimetic Theory" and "Mi-

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metic Theory"). The argument I make here has more to do with the conceptual structures that precede (or appear to precede) the field of argumentation than with the specific ways in which one might operate, from within that field, to produce a counterargument, though I often end up traveling the same roads as Saussy did in 1993.

4. Reding provides the requisite, culturally sensitive conclusion: "it is impossible . . . to define the literal and the figurative . . . for there is no such distinction in Chinese. . . . [I]n Chinese the need for spelling out [a word's] literal sense . . . is never felt" (165).

5. Similarly, the mandatory differences between the scholar's understanding of the past and the past itself—the scholar's knowledge of the future of any past moment and of the history of its interpretation—cannot be so fundamental as to keep the scholar from having anything to say; silence is not scholarship. On the potentially "dialectical" historical tension between the agent who produces scholarship and the agent to whom the scholar refers, see Altieri. And on Altieri and more, see Fleissner.

6. Or as Zhuangzi has written, "If you look at them from the point of view of their differences, then there is liver and gall, Chu and Yue. But if you look at them from the point of view of their sameness, then the ten thousand things [everything in the universe] all are one" (34).

7. For a review of theories of metaphor (and an argument for synecdoche), see Turner; see Culler's discussion of Group μ (*Structuralist Poetics* 210–12); see also Saussy 200n52.

8. "OK, so you're saying, it's all differences of degree, not differences of kind." No. Difference of degree relies internally on differentiation in kind, insofar as differentiation in kind distinguishes between differences of degree and nondifferences of degree. "So a difference from one degree to another is a difference in kind?" Yes. "So we're stuck with fundamental differences after all?" Well, Derrida describes the process of differentiation in kind as the "all or nothing" logic of all philosophical concepts and says that it's impossible to form one without it (117). So yes. But the problem here, at least, has to do with the ways in which certain differences are labeled kind and others degree—as though there were a difference in kind between a difference of kind and a difference of degree. My point is, minimally, that the decision to make that argument cannot come from inside the evidence you're looking at.

9. For a critique of this argument, see Culler, *Theory* 74–79.

10. The few names in the index from before 1500 (Dante, Homer, Horace, Vergil, Sappho) reinforce the sense that what we elaborate here is a single tradition. But in an index labeled "Index of Authors and Works," we find, as promised, a list composed of authors and works with one weird exception: a single entry for Chinese literature, which is of course not an author or a work. It has six references, all pointing toward an essay by Earl Miner. What theory of the author or work, or what slip of the mind, permits Chinese literature to transgress the self-acknowledged organization of the paratext in which it appears?

11. I say "the rest of the world," but consider the fact that most of Ramazani's essay focuses on poets living and working in the United States, including Langston Hughes, Ted Hughes, Dionisio Martínez, Wallace Stevens, Sherman Alexie, Amy Clampitt, and Elizabeth Bishop. One of his major examples comes from outside the United States: the Ugandan Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*. The shadow of a racial, as well as geographic, pattern thus falls across this section of the book.

12. In many anthologies the main idea is discussed in the beginning sections, and various other impulses appear in the later ones. See, for instance, *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Brooker et al.), which relegates to its final section, "National and Transnational Modernisms," the vast variety of cultures outside England, France, Germany, and the United States.

13. "But if I include Chinese, I'll have to include Japanese, Sanskrit, and Arabic!" Yes. Or you can call your book *The Western European Lyric Theory Reader, 1924–2011*.

14. In French cuisine a meat is sometimes served *dans son jus*, that is, surrounded by the juices it releases during cooking. Context is the *dans son jus* of the work of art; its function is to separate the native from the nonnative and establish the terms of an extrajected tautology.

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