

## Comparative Criticism beyond Eurocentrism: In Search of the Untranslatables of Literary Theory<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** While the study of world literature is often seen as escaping the boundaries of eurocentrism—albeit with the need for constant revision and self-critique—a truer overcoming would involve another sort of anthologization, namely, of world theory and criticism. World literature should go beyond being a reified collection of translated texts, to become an exploration and comparison of the different ways of thinking about literature and aesthetics in different parts of the world. Barbara Cassin’s *Vocabulaire Européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* provides a possible model in this regard. The untranslatability of critical terms from different traditions is generative of new meanings due to the repeated efforts to translate and to compare non-synonymous terms with each other. This essay examines the untranslatability and comparability of several different terms from Asian aesthetic traditions.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, poetics, literary criticism, literary theory, world literature, untranslatability

**CLC:** I1    **Document Code:** A    **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2022)-01-0100-13

**Doi:** 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202201009

In a piece published in the ACLA Decennial report for 2016, “What the World Thinks about Literature” (61-70), I urged the need for one or more anthologies or chrestomathies of world literary criticism and theory. Or, alternatively, for a lexicon of the untranslatables of world literary criticism, from Sanskrit *rasa* to Japanese *yūgen* to Greek *mimēsis*. Such an anthology would provide an exact parallel to the collections of “primary” world literature, such as those published by Norton and Blackwell, starting, for the historically minded, with the first world literature anthology, Johannes Scherr’s *Bildersaal der Weltliteratur (Picture Gallery of World Literature)* of 1848. A world critical lexicon would respond to the same interests in different systems of cultural thought, meaning, and communication as do other approaches to world literature. It would represent not merely a supplement to the primary material, but also an added level of complexity in our approach to that material by suggesting alternative approaches to studying or even to defining “literature.”

The Comparative Literature PhD program at Penn State is one of few to require that students be exposed to the history of criticism and theory, in a two-semester sequence whose dividing point is Romanticism (usually taken up in the second semester). My qualifications for the assistant professor

position included the ability to teach the first half of the sequence, from Antiquity to Enlightenment. I owed my preparation to my own PhD program at the University of Michigan for having taken an identical course, which I was fortunate to have experienced under the tutelage of Ralph Williams. But with many of the students in my version coming from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America, I needed to take Comparative Criticism as global as possible.

So, after reading an English translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, we adduced Averroës's *Middle Commentary* on that text, available in Charles Butterworth's translation. We explored the mysteries of Lu Ji's "Rhymeprose on Literature" (as the Achilles Fang translation of the "Wen Fu" was titled) and compared notions of the sublime and beautiful in Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant with the theory of emotion as aesthetic response embodied in *rasa* theory from the Indian subcontinent. Also comparable to the sublime is my all-time favorite work of criticism, Zeami's "Nine Ranks." Of course, Zeami, the best-known practitioner of Japanese Noh theater, was not writing criticism per se, nor a philosophical treatise on theater, but something closer to a textbook for actors. On the other hand, Zeami's text is criticism in its most basic sense, a weighing of different performance styles against each other. As he moves through the nine ranks from highest to lowest, Zeami changes kinds of epigraphs for each, from *Zen koan* down to wise but bland dicta from the Confucian tradition. The top rank is introduced as follows: "The Effect of the Wondrous Flower: Silla, midnight: the sun is bright" (Zeami 193). Zeami's comments that follow explore the idea of a performance to which language cannot aspire. Conversely, for the lowest rank, the "Effect of the Coarse and Leaden," we get the following saying of Kunzi: "a tree rat [squirrel] with five abilities" (195). The point of this saying is that none of the five talents of the squirrel (e.g. digging, climbing, etc.) is outstanding when compared to what is found in another animal. One other charming, counter-intuitive aspect of this brief text comes when Zeami recommends that an actor achieve the middle three levels first, then the highest three, and then the lowest three.

*Rasa* from Sanskrit aesthetics proved somewhat of a challenge, given that the vocabulary is involved and the learned translation by Daniel Ingalls of Anandavardhana's work, one of the pillars of the tradition, had not been carried out in the interest of readability. Luckily, there exist knowledgeable and reader-friendly summaries and paraphrases of this body of criticism in English, for example V. K. Chari's *Sanskrit Criticism*. Finally, long after I had finished teaching comparative criticism, thanks to Sheldon Pollock we finally possess an English-language reader for *rasa* theory. *Rasa* is perhaps the most widely known non-Western concept related to aesthetic theory—far more widely known than *yūgen*. Tom Stoppard, for example, has inserted a monologue on *rasa* into his play, *Indian Ink*, and it is an entry in reference works on world theater and performance (e.g., the *Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance*).

Comparison of attempted translations of these terms into a variety of the world's languages is already instructional. The short story "La busca de Averroës" ("Averroës Search") by the Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges is an exemplary meditation on untranslatability. The piece fantasizes on the Cordoban Arabic philosopher Ibn Rushd's (1126-1198 CE) attempt to translate Aristotle's *Poetics* in his *Middle Commentary*. The terms that give him trouble are the Greek *tragōidía* and *kōmōdía*, i.e. "tragedy" and "comedy." Since these refer to different kinds of theatrical performance, they have no exact equivalents in Islamic cultures such as the one Averroës was living in. The tenets of Islam

discouraged mimetic representation, and a theater tradition did not exist in that culture at the time. Averroes translates the Greek terms with two genres of rhetoric, which back-translated from the Arabic would be “eulogy” and “anathema.”

Borges based his *jeu d’esprit* on a well-known translation “error” of the Commentary, where tragedy is rendered with the Arabic for eulogy and comedy with the Arabic for anathema. Indeed, the treatment of *katharsis* in *Middle Commentary* also seems to take that concept far beyond what Aristotle’s understanding of it was. Ibn Rushd’s day before arriving at his inspired renderings includes a conversation in which one friend describes the experience of going to see a theatrical performance in China without knowing what it was. His description becomes a perfect example of the literary device called “alienation effect”:

Las personas de esa terraza tocaban el tambor y el laúd, salvo unas quince o veinte (con máscaras de color carmesí) que rezaban, cantaban y dialogaban. Padecían prisiones, y nadie veía la cárcel; cabalgaban, pero no se percibía el caballo; combatían, pero las espadas eran de caña; morían y después estaban de pie. (Borges 585)

The people on this terrace were playing the tambour and the lute all, that is, save some fifteen or twenty who wore crimson masks and prayed and sang and conversed among themselves. These masked ones suffered imprisonment, but no one could see the jail; they rode upon horses, but the horse was not to be seen; they waged battle, but the swords were of bamboo; they died, and then they stood up again. (my trans.)

The listeners conclude that these were madmen. Borges states in the conclusion to the story that he was interested in telling the story of a task that was impossible for a particular man, despite being easy for others. “Averroes’ Search” and other works made Borges one of the most prominent literary purveyors of the so-called “Whorfian hypothesis,” which posits that language determines thought. In this view, if a word or phrase does not exist in a language, neither can the thought. Dramatic performance is described in the passage above without being thought of. This is the premise of absolute linguistic relativity and absolute untranslatability on which the story is based. But the more current view of untranslatability is not of a blank wall of incomprehension, but of the necessity for constant retranslation and comparison of different versions.

*Yūgen*, associated with Japanese classical forms such as Zeami’s *Noh* theater, is a good example of this view of untranslatability as a catalog of partial translations, as exemplified in the following catalogue of potential English renderings compiled by Henry Wells. *Yūgen* can alternately be rendered in English as “understatement, intimation, elegance, aristocratic grace, composure, equilibrium, serenity, [or] quietism” (Wells 264). This extensive list of possible English translations of the Japanese *yūgen* is an excellent example of what we mean by “untranslatability.” Untranslatability is shorthand for “multiple translation options,” reflecting our inability to provide a definitive and final translation of a term.

Curiously, while many sub-entries for *rasa* have been created in the *Rasa Reader*’s index, there is no entry for “*rasa*, definition of.” In a way this makes sense, since the hundreds of pages of the book, representing many centuries of commentary, all are trying to define the term (thus does the

translator, editor, and commentator Sheldon Pollock argue [xvii]), and many commentators speak directly of *rasa*'s indefinability. For example, on page four, Pollock suggests "taste" as a literal translation of *rasa*. It is, unfortunately, not a helpful one, since current uses of "taste" imply a power of discrimination in the reader, whereas *rasa* implies either the emotional experience embodied in an artwork, or an empathy with that emotional experience that resonates in the reader or spectator. In this tradition, the audience "tastes" or "savors" the emotions embodied in the work. Pollock adduces a number of theorists to contextualize the myriad speculations in Sanskrit: aesthetic philosophers such as Baumgarten, Kant, Schleiermacher, Gadamer, and Latour (4); René Wellek, Beardsley and Wimsatt on the "affective fallacy" (Pollock 44-45); Richard Rorty on the possibility of moral teaching through literature (33); and Max Weber and Matthew Arnold on the relation between religion and art (3-4).

What those new to the Sanskrit tradition understand right from the beginning, however, is that *rasa* is the key term to designate the emotional content of a work, and that our aesthetic tasting of emotion through poetry and performance differs from our ordinary and quotidian affects—much as we might posit Aristotelian catharsis as an experience unique to tragedy, though this too is far from definitive. Unclear and debatable is whether *rasa* is an emotional experience in the poet, in the fictional characters, or in the work's audience. Which of these is the case becomes, as Pollock skillfully explains, a key object of controversy and confusion in the long tradition of aesthetic theorizing and counter-theorizing in Sanskrit that are laid out in the *Rasa Reader*. Emotion is thus the *raison d'être* of art in this tradition, the artwork's job of work—though some theorize a "higher" religious content to *rasa*. Furthermore, the palette of emotions has been carefully and precisely enumerated. Bharata MUNI, whose *Treatise on Drama* founds the tradition but who himself refers to earlier understandings, lists eight stable emotions, such as desire, grief, and anger, to which the ninth, quietude, was later added. These are complemented by thirty-three transient emotions and eight psychosomatic states, such as tears and goosebumps. The exact number of emotions and their relation to each other were also debated through the centuries. Some argued that desire is the one and only emotion, while others opted for quietude. Bhoja (1025-1055 CE) argued against the division of *rasa* into separate emotions, much as Goethe argued against the division of light into anything less than the total apprehension through the active power of seeing. *Rasa* is its own emotion, as it were, which Bhoja names "passion" (Pollock 119). Beyond *rasa* itself, the technical critical vocabulary developed through the centuries to describe *rasa* and poetry in general presents its own examples of untranslatability. Interesting and awkward calques, such as "*rasa*-laden," are produced out of the necessity of rendering specialized vocabulary.

There are two main reasons for the impulse to retranslate, both of them having to do with the nature of language, more than with the act of translation itself: one is that language is not made of words, but of words that occur within specific contexts; the other is that language is not static. Ferdinand de Saussure's division of language into the realms of *langue* and *parole* is a recognition of its dynamism and transience. We are left with the question as to whether these two "sides" or dimensions of language can be said to come together into a whole. Untranslatability reveals the instabilities and uncertainties in our "own" language. In that sense of "untranslatable," we would read Wells' list as a kind of translational stuttering, an attempt to find the words to say "it." A better explanation is contextual or even functionalist, that each English term is appropriate within a particular phrase, sentence, or discourse, or conceivably for a particular art form, which may range

from music and dance to the tea ceremony. That is the more plausible explanation for Averroës' choice of rhetorical genres to translate tragedy and comedy: the choices allow readers to apply Aristotle's insights to their own situations and to the literary forms with which they are most comfortable.

The idea of "untranslatables" finds its pedigree in Barbara Cassin's *Vocabulaire des philosophies européennes*, whose subtitle is *Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*. Among the reference work's entries, one finds a fair number of terms of literary or art criticism, drawn from a variety of languages: *acteur*, *Art*, *beauté*, *esthétique*, *génie*, *goût*, *sublime* (French for "actor," "art," "beauty," "aesthetics," "genius," "taste," "sublime"); *Dichtung*, *Erzählen* (German for "poetry," "narration"); *catharsis*, *mimêsis* (Greek meaning literally "purging" and "mimicry"); description, fancy, work in progress (English). Terms are listed by their spelling in the primary language of their use. Obviously, for a number of terms this apportionment game can be tricky. For example, while it is clear that Greek has given us the words and concepts of catharsis and mimesis, it is less clear whether "art" should belong primarily to French or to English.

As can be seen from this listing, the gimmick of Cassin's undertaking is that the dictionary is multilingual, post-Babelian. Indeed, the introduction defines one of this reference work's express purposes as being the creation of a multilingual cognitive map of European thought, in order to clarify that Europe's many languages are not simply versions of English—though we are left with the question of whether its hundreds of languages are versions of the eight or ten relatively major ones from which terms are chosen. Most classroom teachers of basic language have confronted the following attitude in at least some of their students: everything in the new language is to be referenced as a translation out of the one with which they are most familiar. Entire pedagogies have been constructed in order to circumvent this trap of language-learning-as-translation. On the larger scale of cultural history, this constant reference to English as the standard—indeed, the English term "standard" is an entry in the *Dictionnaire*—and as an unproblematically translatable language acquires political dimensions.

Historically, of course, and from a global perspective, English has not always been the standard. Different cultures and civilizations have put forward different standards. In *Translation as Citation: Zhuangzi Inside Out*, for example, Haun Saussy describes pre-modern Chinese literary culture's approach to translation issues as follows:

A work's translation into Chinese had to integrate it into the existing body of Chinese literature, even if that meant transforming it in many respects. Translating could not be (as are many translations done today) a substitution of the words of the original with equivalent terms from the Chinese dictionary; it had to be rewriting, adaptation, the creation of plausible "backstories" for the text. The reason for this, in turn, lies in the vast prestige and horizon-blocking bulk of Chinese literature. A text had to resemble other works in that corpus to get any sort of audience among educated people. (95)

In other words, in the pre-modern period the untranslatability of literary texts was a given, and every literary translation into Chinese had to become a "tradaptation." Eventually, certain types of foreign texts, such as Buddhist literature in China, and later "Western" literature, were able to build their own corpuses of translations so that a distinct set of comparisons and allusions could emerge.

Emily Apter has applied the notion of untranslatability to world literature as a deflationary and cautionary gesture; her own brief lexicon of untranslatables in *Against World Literature*—whose subtitle is *On the Politics of Untranslatability*—consists of broadly cultural terms such as “Cyclopedia” and “Saudade” (117-190) rather than of ones specific to either philosophy or to world literature. The exception in Apter’s chrestomathy is French “Monde” (“world”) that forms half of the bigram for world literature. But one can also see untranslatability as a major operative force for the creation of new meanings and readings. Jahan Ramazani’s approach to the translatability of poetry “allows for both losses and gains—and for losses that are potential gains, for gains predicated on losses” (589). As I begin now to examine the untranslatability of Chinese critical terms, this lack of technical specificity will play a role as well.

*Dao*, for example (alternatively transliterated as *tao*) occurs with frequency as a literary critical term, but it is deployed in a variety of other cultural spheres as well. The *Daodejing* (*The Way and Its Power*) opens by invoking the untranslatability of its key term as follows: “The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way” (Watson 79). This is of course one of many translations of the first sentence; like most of the published English versions, it loses one of the meanings of *dao*, which also means “to speak.” Thus, Zhang Longxi translates this first line as “The *tao* that can be *tao*-ed [“spoken of”] / Is not the constant *tao*” (27). *Dao* thus occurs three times in the first six words of the opening line Zhang further contemplates the possibility of equivalency between *tao* and *logos* (Greek for word, speech, argument) as two untranslatables from two divergent metaphysics:

Evidently, not only in the Western *logos* but also in the Chinese character *tao* we can find a word that endeavors to name the unnameable and to inscribe the problematic relationship between thinking and language: a single word that signifies, with its remarkable double sense, a hierarchical relation between inner reality and outer expression. (32)

However, the two untranslatables do not directly translate each other, either, because the “Chinese script as a form of nonphonetic writing [...] does differ from the Western alphabetical writing in a significant way that may overturn the metaphysical hierarchy more easily and efficiently than Western phonetic writing does” (32).

What other terms in Chinese might be absolutely fundamental to the aesthetic traditions of that language, and (hence) untranslatable? In searching for such fundamental vocabulary, I am perhaps being essentialist, for which failing however I comfort myself with being in good company. The anthology *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, for example, contained entries on “The Vocabulary of Japanese Aesthetics” (Tsunoda, et al. 172-180, 277-298, 434-440). (The Chinese counterpart of analogous title contains no similarly titled entry.) Furthermore, I do feel, as an insider with a reasonable grasp of “Western” criticism, that an understanding of the untranslatability of the terms “mimêsis” and “catharsis” is fundamental to an understanding of that tradition. They are examples of what Stephen Owen argues, that a tradition of literary thought “is constituted by a set of words, of ‘terms,’ which have their own long histories, complex resonances, and force.” However, “[s]uch words do not constitute a collection of autonomous containers of meaning, but are part of a mutually defining system that evolves in time and has links to conceptual vocabulary in other areas of human endeavor”



(Owen 4). This semiotic web of terminology—one of the two major causes of untranslatability, as noted above—makes the translation or even the borrowing of such terms as loan-words problematic. Owen then proceeds in his collection of English translations of Chinese classical texts to depict that web in which one encounters with frequency words such as *t'i* (form or style), *hsü* (empty), and *wen* itself, from which the modern Chinese word for literature *wenxue* derives, but whose most basic meaning is “pattern” and by extension, “writing” as patterned language.

Owen’s anthology of readings in Chinese literary thought ends with a highly instructive, fifty-two item glossary of Chinese terms (583-595). Historical distance and semantic drift nearly guarantee the untranslatability of the earliest critical terms in Chinese. Apparently, the concept of *hsing* (affect) was quite prominent in the discourse that preceded Confucius, whose remarks on literature have proven an important source of what James Liu in *Chinese Theories of Literature* called the “pragmatic” approach to criticism. Donald Holzman translates one of Confucius’ alleged pronouncements as:

My disciples, why do you not study the *Shih* [*ching*]? The *Shih* will enable you to make metaphorical allusions (*hsing*), to observe [local mores?] (*kuan*), to behave in society (*ch'iiin*), and to express grievances (*yüan*). It helps in serving your father at home and your sovereign abroad. It will add to your knowledge of the names of birds, beasts, plants and trees. (35; Analects 17:9)

The *Shih* is one of the so-called Confucian classics, commonly referred to in English as the *Book of Odes* or the *Book of Songs*. Owen’s entry on the term emphasizes that *hsing* was crucial to the tradition of interpreting the poems in that collection as “affective images,” which Owen feels corresponds well to T. S. Eliot’s idea of “objective correlative” (587). The basic idea is that emotions such as love, fear, or despair are non-representational. Poetry’s job of work is to discover images that can represent affects, such as a deep black pool as a symbol for despair.

Similarly, in her book *Expressing the Heart’s Intent* Marthe Chandler identifies a single term, *zhi*, whose first significant appearance was in the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing*), in the phrase *shi yan zhi*, (poetry expresses heart’s intent). Chandler gives a string of synonyms (heart’s intent, wishes, desires, ambitions, emotions) that partially overlap with *yi*. (Owen does not list *zhi* in his glossary.) Holzman goes on to remark on the passage: “It seems clear that the terms *hsing*, *kuan*, *ch'iiin*, and *yiian* are technical terms. To discover exactly what they meant to Confucius (or to the author of this saying) presents almost insuperable difficulties” (36). Nevertheless, Holzman expresses his preference for “metaphorical allusions” as a translation of *hsing* over Arthur Waley’s “inciting people’s emotions” or James Legge’s “stimulating the mind” (36).

Owen decides for *yi* as the most difficult technical term of Chinese poetics to translate, beginning his sketch of equivalencies with three English possibilities: “concept,” “idea,” and “meaning,” before adding two more, “intention” and “will” (594). Let us examine one passage, from the *Wenfu* (*Rhyme-prose on Literature*) of Lu Ji (261-303 CE), where *yi* occurs. This particular example is found in the text’s preface. Lu Ji writes:

And whenever I myself compose a literary piece, I perceive full well their state of mind (or “the situation,” *ch'ing\**). I constantly fear failure in my conceptions (*yi\**) not being equal to the things

of the world (*wu\**), and in my writing's (*wen\**) not being equal to my conceptions. I suppose it is not the understanding that is difficult, but rather the difficulty lies in being able to do it well. (Owen 80; asterisks indicate words found in the book's glossary)

Let us in passing compare the Achilles Fang's version of the same lines from this often-translated *ars poetica* of Lu Ji:

By writing again and again myself, I obtain more and more insight.

My worry is that my ideas may not equal their subjects and my style may fall short of my ideas.

The difficulty, then, lies not so much in the knowing as in the doing. (270)

So, Owen uses "conception" for *yi*, while Fang opts for the fairly compatible "ideas." Perhaps more attention-getting are the differences in the final sentence, Owen's twenty-two words compared to Fang's fourteen. The four asterisked terms in Owen's rendering are the ones that appear in his glossary, but they are not the only words in the passage worthy of unraveling, as the following three print pages of transliteration and explication in his book make clear. They form, however, a set of literary-critical terms with a long history of mutual conditioning and a great deal of semantic drift. Owen's thesis about the deployment of *yi* here is that it marks for the first time the response to external stimuli through deliberate intention—into which a fear of inadequacy is injected. Logically, Lu Ji describes an inductive process where observed or experienced phenomena cause the poet to form an idea of the world, which he then must express by finding the adequate formulation.

Owen's point about untranslatability is well taken and an important admonition to anyone working in comparative poetics that the seizing on a particular word or term without providing its contexts can be distorting. However, we must also keep in mind the problem of infinite regress in attempting to avoid such distortions. "Western" terms such as *mimêsis* and catharsis have similarly been wrenched out of their supporting networks of related terms, first through their recontextualizations in a variety of languages, and then through historical developments. We have mostly discarded that aspect of *mimêsis* that in Plato's discourse included alongside others an idea of mimicry or aping, as in the operation of a so-called bullroarer or a thunder sheet. *Mimêsis* for most of us is distinct from miming. But trying to erect rules of the game in such a way that we stay within the limits of the meanings found in *The Republic* and the *Poetics* ignores the changes that Plato and Aristotle wrought on terms that they did not invent but appropriated redirected, for example by largely ignoring their religious origins. The literary genre of "tragedy" is also a useful example in this regard. *Tragōidia* originated as a politico-civic celebration in the Athenian polis. The word literally means "goat song," and no one knows how it came to be attached to this performance genre, though it seems to point to its ritual origins. Tragedies were given once a year at the Dionysia, with the god's priest presiding. They were part of an array of civic spectacles, including for example a parade of war orphans. These contexts gradually fell away as the performance genre grew in popularity and found new and diverse audiences. This semantic drift is part of the reason we cannot be sure of what Aristotle meant by catharsis as the targeted affect of tragedy.

Even more broadly, just as we should always be reminding ourselves as individuals that our



mind and senses are the only window we have on the world, we must also consider that ideas and vocabulary originate in particular micro-situations—Plato or Confucius or Jesus speaking with their disciples or opponents, for example—and are developed through expanding networks. The sociologist Randall Collins usefully reminds us that “intellectuals are people who produce decontextualized ideas” (19), a task undertaken in defiance of the reality that

all events take place in a here-and-now as concrete and particular. The perspective of micro-sociology, which analyzes the structures and dynamics of situations, is all too easily interpreted as a focus on the individual actor or agent. But a situation is just the interaction of conscious human bodies, for a few hours, minutes, or even micro-seconds; the actor is both less than the whole situation and larger, as a unit in time which stretches across situations. (20)

The creation of a translanguaged critical vocabulary is one small part of “the unfurling of the scroll of micro-situations” of literature, where “situations are linked to one another; causality—agency, if you like—flows inward as well as outward. What happens here and now depends on what has happened there and then” (Collins 21). The purpose of making critical vocabulary more multilingual, then, is not to recover original meanings, but to use untranslatables as a fulcrum for disrupting the coziness and redundancy of the target web of critical inter-references, thus unleashing new meanings, providing new perspectives, and encouraging more meta-critical engagement with the subject.

Collins devotes much of his book to a microsociology of how ideas contend with each other for cultural attention space, and this dynamic of development would be hard to incorporate into a static lexicon. Furthermore, different dynamics—as opposed to vocabularies—when they develop through culture and history are more (or less) than untranslatables: they are ineffables. In his book *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* Li Zehou posits at several points the fundamentally different starting points for “Western” and for Chinese aesthetics: Western ideas develop through violent contention versus a more harmonious development in China. Dialogue and dialectic do indeed mark the most important development points, from Plato’s dialogues to the Enlightenment critique of tradition, and from the theories of history of Plato and Marx to Modernism’s “make it new,” the prevailing (though seldom entirely accurate) view of the history of ideas in the West is of a series of conflicts. Li attempts to show in his book that the interactions of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and other thought patterns do not so much contradict as provide nuancing and escape hatches for each other. Li Zehou writes,

We can often perceive in the extremely abstract speculations of the Greek or the German tradition a sort of violent and intense motive force. This was the case in Germany, from Kant’s pragmatic rationalism, through Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, to Nietzsche and Heidegger. In China, however, there was no extremely abstract and abstruse speculation, and correspondingly, there was no such intense or impulsive existential spark. These were absorbed into and gave way to the Confucian-Daoist ideal of unity with nature (the humanization of nature and the naturalization of humans). In the face of this ideal, speculations lose their significance and intense force is defused, while eternal nature emerges all the stronger, greater, and more lofty. (99-100)

Li notes at several points the “non-Dionysian” character of Chinese aesthetics. At times, this merely refers to a regard for decorum that Greek comedies, for example, were designed to upset: “affirmation of sensory pleasure [in Confucius and others] is by no means Dionysian licentiousness or saturnalia. On the contrary, this pleasure was always led and regulated, channeled and structured, by society’s rituals, systems, and regulations” (10). Elsewhere, the contrast with the Dionysian, for example the statement that the “rites and music” (i.e., the Confucian) culture was “non-Dionysian” (213) is a shorthand way of referencing Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy, which is roughly equivalent to the Freudian struggle between the unconscious and the ego: “Chinese art and literature never took an interest in such subjects as happiness in the face of ruin, or the denial of life; they did not go in the direction of the Greek tragedy or Nietzsche’s philosophy” (137).

Li’s reading of Confucian thought is that the latter’s central aesthetic concern was not with art, but with life. However, in my opinion things get much less harmonious with the Daoist work known as the *Zhuangzi*—this is the name of the purported author, and hence genuinely untranslatable. This shift is due in part to the latter author’s insertion of Confucius into his treatise as a character who frequently suffers defeat. For example, Confucius fails in his mission to civilize the robber Chih, ending up on the receiving end instead of a long lecture from the bandit. This reversal exemplifies the Daoist critique of “benevolence” as a Confucian ideal. On his return, Confucius admits his failure to Shih’s brother, whom he had admonished as abandoning family loyalty in not reining in his wild relative:

“It couldn’t be that you went to see my brother Chih, could it?”

Confucius looked up to heaven, sighed, and said, “I did.”

“And he was enraged by your views, just as I said he would be?” said Liu-hsia Chi.

“He was,” said Confucius. “You might say that I gave myself the burning moxa treatment when I wasn’t even sick. I went rushing off to pat the tiger’s head and plait its whiskers—and very nearly didn’t manage to escape from its jaws!” (*Zhuangzi* 331)

This bringing down of the magisterial Confucius by inserting him into dialogues and verbal duels resembles Plato’s use of the actual Sophists of his day as interlocutors for Socrates. Socrates tends to win the arguments and at times he makes his opponents appear ridiculous, but at other times the outcome can be left ambiguous or open-ended.

From these and other passages, it appears to me that Li overstates the case for the absence of “violent motion” in Chinese thought. It is also worth noting the vocabulary that Liu Gangji uses to describe the same “harmonic” result that Li describes: “The active spirit wrapped in Confucianism moderated the nihilistic detachment of Taoism, and the free spirit involved in Taoism smashed the ritual trammels of Confucianism. The contrariety and complementarity of the two schools grounded ancient Chinese aesthetics and made it an organic system” (184). This sounds just as violent as the “Western” dialectic.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, perhaps the concept of blandness (*dan*) analyzed by François Jullien as a key aesthetic term supports Li’s emphasis on the non-Dionysian and non-conflictual. I cannot think of an equivalent critical or philosophical term in the Western tradition—Aristotle speaks of the “unnamed middle” without giving it a name. The following passage is from the *Wujing Zhengyi* (*The Correct*

*Meaning of the Five Classics*): “Relations with the Gentleman are like water, those of the small man like new wine. The Gentleman is bland, but that is why he is able to bring things about; the small man is pleasant [to the taste], but that is why he ends up only destroying things” (Jullien 57). This is reproduced quite closely in *Zhuangzi* as: “Dealings with the Gentleman are as bland as water, while dealings with the small man are as pleasing to the taste as new wine. The blandness of the Gentleman solidifies his friendships; but the vulgar man, because of his sweetness, destroys them” (56).

What is different is the context: the Confucian idea is preceded by examples of the Gentleman’s refraining from speaking about matters for which he can offer no help. Actions speak louder than words, we might say, and if there is to be no action there should not be words. Blandness is a sign of authenticity. *Zhuangzi*, on the other hand, removes the statement from its surrounding discourse and thus makes it apodictic.

Elsewhere, Jullien notes of *dan* the same dialectic of inner/outer that we have seen before in the shift in poetics from “taste” as an individual physiological reaction to taste as a judgment intended to convince others of its validity:

This blandness, as experienced in things, corresponds to man’s capacity for inner detachment. That the same Chinese word—*dan*—signifies both, without distinguishing between subject and object, invites reflection. It is also, from this moment on, what gives to this opposition its great inclusiveness: flavor provokes attachment, and insipidity provokes detachment. (43)

In conclusion, let us return to the beginning: what exactly is the point of constructing a multilingual dictionary of philosophies? Or in my case, the multilingual glossary of literary theory and criticism? The question is especially pertinent due to the fact that most of the critical terms considered above derive from the traditional poetics of those cultures. Their reactivation by Western criticism may appear to be a neo-Orientalist gesture that freezes those cultures in their classical images. The goal, however, is quite the opposite, namely the construction of a translanguaged, intercultural critical dictionary, in which the terms and concepts derived from a variety of traditions and languages illuminate the unsaid in the respective terminologies. To give a simple example, Sanskrit *rasa*, which designates the concept of “fictional affect” achieved by a successful work of art, shows us how undertheorized the emotive intelligence of literature has been in the Western tradition (*pace* affect theory), while the long history of mimesis certainly complicates Asian philosophies of world-making.

Thus, a focus on untranslatability in general, and on the construction of an intercultural critical vocabulary in particular, may be considered an activity of meta-critiquing as discussed by Ming Xie:

*Critique, hermeneutics, and theory* come together in what may be called “meta-critiquing,” which is a matter of *process* rather than *position*, of perspectivism more than accuracy of representation. Meta-critiquing can be figured as a performativity of points of view and an elasticity of concepts and categories. Critique is built on second-order recognition of one’s own epistemic fallibility. Hence, critique is meta-critique, or, to make it more of a process and active performing, let us call it “metacritiquing.” Meta-critique may sound too static and essentialist. Metacritiquing as such is far from being suspicious or negative, but is instead a form of the meta-critic’s humility,

since meta-critiquing means putting oneself on the line, in relation to others, in perspective. (53; emphasis in original)

As hinted at here, the term “meta-critique” seems to precede or to follow critique, and to be located in a position of authority over the “lower” instance that lacks the prefix. That makes meta-critique similar to theory, which as Xie states comes into conjunction with meta-critique. But the other ancillary term, “hermeneutics,” reveals that meta-critique is oriented towards a constantly revised understanding of the other, a deliberate introduction of parallax as an interpretive strategy. Parallax, for example the slightly different way an object represents itself when seen through the right eye or left eye only, is a good approximate metaphor for what occurs when critical vocabulary is translanguaged as Cassin does in her *Dictionnaire*, and as I am proposing to do for world poetics.

## Notes

1. Critique, hermeneutics, and theory were the objects of the Luce experiment between Penn State and Nanjing University that provided for student and faculty exchanges. I was and am hindered, of course, by my lack of Chinese. I have had many enlightening conversations with Nanjing colleagues Cong Cong, Cheng Zhangcan, Dan Hansong, He Chengzhou, and Yang Jincai during my time spent at Nanjing University, as well as the visits of some of these scholars to Penn State. Victoria Lupascu, who received her doctorate from Penn State for a dissertation that compares the post-socialist cultures of China, Brazil, and Romania, was helpful as an interlocutor, interpreter, and notetaker for several of these exchanges of information.
2. At the very end of his book (220), Li presents a chart reminiscent of the Wheel of Vergil, or of the Stuart Gilbert schema for James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Five periods of Chinese aesthetic thought are each linked with a dominant philosophy and objective, a subject, a medium, and a repository for beauty. So, for example in the earliest period, Pre-Qin and Han, beauty lay in rites and music, and in the moral Way (the dharma), whereas in the Tang it lay in deep emotion, and in the Ming and Qing, it lay in life. Some untranslatables appear in Li's chart, such as *qi* (roughly, life force or pneuma), *bixing* (metaphor and imagistic association), and *xiang* (roughly, image).

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