

The Meaning of Empathy: Comparative Literary Studies in Our Time

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Abstract:

Through a close reading of Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave" alongside contemporary critical theories, this paper argues for a reconstitution of the aesthetics of empathy in the study of literature. Plato's formation of knowing, transposing, and emphasizing as steps toward enlightenment corresponds neatly with the act of reading literature across-culturally, which communicates empathy for a better understanding of ourselves and the world. This reconstituted aesthetics of empathy is a nod not just to the traditional understanding of literature as a conduit for expressing emotions but also to the theory of postcritique that calls for a refocusing on emotion or affect to mitigate the effect of overwrought skepticism prevalent in many strands of current critical or cultural theories. In so doing, Comparative Literature will better serve its mission of connecting people and cultures through empathetic analogy and sympathetic feelings in our globalized world.

Keywords: knowing, transposing, empathizing, affect, aesthetics of empathy

The coming of age for Comparative Literature in nineteenth-century Europe pertains to a couple of fresh but imprecise phrases from farsighted scholars like Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) and Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett (1855–1927). The former invented "literature comparée," which argues for the grounds of synchronic comparison over historical documentation in literary studies; the latter coined "comparative inquiry" to emphasize the social functions of literature. Both consider literary relations—the cross-cultural references of national literatures—as the key to fully understanding the significance of literature in the postindustrial world. Such an imaginative worlding of connection and commonality coincides with Goethe's

earlier call for “world literature” (1827) and has inspired Comparative Literature to this day, despite its ebbs and flows, which are manifested in its constant struggle for disciplinary clarity and cultural relevance across time and history.

Today as we reflect upon the continuous crisis of Comparative Literature as a discipline since the middle twentieth century, particularly the existential crisis that questioned its *raison d'être* in the 1990s and early 2000s, our first thought is a sigh of relief because Comparative Literature has survived many premature proclamations of its death, and more so that the death of literature in general, for that matter. Energized by the new formation of World Literature informed by Critical Theory, the theory of Postcolonialism in particular, Comparative Literature has ridden itself of ostensible geo-cultural limitations, Eurocentrism, or other locality-centrism, and has started to construct a more inclusive body of texts for students and common readers alike. Original scholars such as David Damrosch, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Pascale Casanova, or Franco Moretti have contributed with new terminologies and critical frameworks to interpret and appreciate this body of texts. The resilience of the discipline is truly remarkable, but perhaps we should not be surprised by this, for the humanistic spirit embedded in Comparative Literature answers the need for the human experience as the world comes together, be it the needs of postindustrial society prompted by the innovation of machine tools, or those of the globalized village brought about by the information explosion.

However, the challenges facing Comparative Literature are far from over. As the next generation of comparatists chases new critical paradigms for the purpose of subversion and alterity, a basic question still haunts the discipline and its scholars: how do we effectively manage the increasingly large number of texts that we call World Literature? This is a theoretical question as much as a practical one, which involves selecting, editing, publishing, and canonizing not only print texts, including those from long-neglected literary traditions but also emerging digital texts that multiply every minute. It is obviously impractical or even disingenuous to suggest that every text and all the texts ever produced are World Literature neither is it viable to accept the proposal that World Literature is the effect of reading by the imaginary reader whose very existence in theory usually falls apart under critical scrutiny. To be fair, there are attempts to respond to the question that are implied in the current *modus operandi* of compiling World Literature, which are evident in the manner of selecting texts according to the political/social/cultural programs informed by different theoretical positions such as postcolonialism, feminism, ecocriticism, or so on. World Literature is a tent big enough to allow competing compilations, but its study, which is also the task of Comparative Literature,

should be able to explain its meaning and significance in the language of literary studies. This is necessary not only for the self-interest of Comparative Literature as a discipline but also for the very reason that Comparative Literature exists in the service of literature. To do this, I propose that Comparative Literature should return to the function of literature as an articulation of human emotions and conceive as its primary charge to explore the aesthetics of empathy as a way to organize and appreciate World Literature.

The importance of emotion to literature is self-evident. In Chinese aesthetic theory, a plenitude of terminology and expressions affirm the value of emotion in literary creation and in reading from ancient times to the present. From “analogizing, observing, socializing, grieving” to “expressing one’s sadness and joy,” from “sentiments in splendid forms” to “speaking one’s emotions and minds,”¹ many concise and vivid critical terms offer perspectives on the origin of literature and on how creative stimuli enhance the experience of reading. Taken together, these aesthetic expressions uphold the universal significance of emotion derived from a combination of personal experience and social activity. Even though the arguments by Chinese aestheticians generally bear traces of Functional Philosophy, that is, the function of things is used to define things themselves—for example, the wings of a bird exist for flying, they nevertheless collectively illuminate the aesthetics of empathy as a vital function of literature. Functional philosophical thinking is, in fact, very common in humanities and social sciences, and it is an effective way for us to understand the experiential world, especially those habituated everyday phenomena and happenings.

Emotions are a core part of this experiential world. They are so common in our life that we are often so immersed in their sentient and concrete details as to care little about their precise linguistic meaning. Instead, we focus on the signifier of individual emotions and create numerous synonyms for a cluster of identical emotions, which rely on the tension between the signifier and the signified to suggest the unique experience of a certain emotion. For example, when it comes to sorrow, we have sadness, worry, distress, depression, annoyance, dejection, regret, misery, despondency, despair, desolation, melancholy, woe, and many other words to invoke a similar emotional experiences. It is precisely because of the separation and the delay between the complicated emotional experience and the linguistic signs of emotions that literature has become a powerful and precious form of verbalizing

1 The Chinese phrases corresponding to my English translations are兴观群怨, 抒其哀乐, 缘情绮靡, 吟咏情性, respectively; they appear in well-known classical Chinese works of aesthetics theory.

human emotions, a form that is embedded in different cultural spaces and in nearly all social formations existing in world civilizations and thoroughly tested against history and time. Compared with body language or ritual performances, the literary language of emotions enriched by suspenseful narratives and colorful lyrical conventions has proven to be a far more vibrant and realistic means of reproducing or representing our emotional life experiences.

Even though the value of emotion to literature may be said to be intrinsic and natural, the argument for it usually depends on a nuanced position towards the relationship between emotion and reality, as seen in the phrase “fusion of emotion and scene” (情景交融) used by many Chinese aestheticians. Generally speaking, emotion is understood as a personal and subjective experience centering on one’s psychological and physiological reactions by the body and the mind. These reactions are activated by stimuli from the external environment succinctly named by the one-word “scene,” thus the expression “seeing the scene produces emotions” (触景生情). “Scene” can be a natural landscape, or it can be a predefined concept about the relationship between humanity and the world, whose range of meaning may be summed up in the word “will” (志). The divergent views on the value of emotion and will in literature give rise to the two long-contending schools of aesthetics of “poetry expresses the will of the mind” (诗言志) and “poetry originates from one’s feelings” (诗缘情).

While different in their positions on the ultimate purpose of literature, both schools agree on the generative power of emotion to literary creation. Examples are abundant in elucidating how “scene” inspires poetic feelings, such as these two lines from Lu Ji 陆机 (261–303): “Sorrowful leaves are in the high autumn, / mellow branches are in the flowery spring” (悲落叶于劲秋, 喜柔条于芳春) (179). However, if the emotion is subjective and the scene is objective, this distinction is no longer feasible after they are blended in a poetic text as in this example. What emerges from reading is not an ontological opposition between scene and emotion but precisely an imagined poetic landscape created by an individualized fusion of the two things, whose meanings are subject to the inherent logic of the language. Ambiguity and multiplicity are generated in the reading process due to the delayed link between the signifier and the signified. This point will become clearer if we play a game of substitution with Lu Ji’s text. For example, if we replace “high autumn” with “golden autumn” and “flowery spring” with “cold spring,” what we read is quite a different natural world, although Lu Ji’s metaphor-based original argument about scene and emotion still stands intact. That is to say, the scene in literature is not a mechanical copy of the actual scene but a representation in

literary language mediated by perspectives and experience. In this connection, the criticism by Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877–1927) of his predecessors is rather poignant: “When the people of the past commented on poetry, they distinguished the language of scenes from that of emotions. They were not aware of the fact that the language of scenes is the language of emotions” (Wang 2019). There were, in fact, similar arguments against the rigid distinction between scene and emotion as critical categories before Wang Guowei, which resulted in some blending among schools of aesthetics, but it is his theory of “literary realm” (境界说) that has truly elevated the place of emotion in literary theory. It is particularly noteworthy that modern scholars often refer to an inherent point in his theory—the possibility of emotion to adjust, mediate, or intervene in the representation of the scene—for any meaningful discussion on emotion and literature. This is precisely the place that want I pay tribute to Wang Guowei through my own reformulated view on the importance of emotions in literary studies.

My interest in literary emotion and the aesthetics of empathy comes partly from a measured reflection on Critical Theory aptly represented by thinkers like Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan, whose poststructuralist mindsets and radical critical stances have exerted a great influence on humanistic studies during the twentieth century. However, Critical Theory itself has been undergoing waves of reexamination and criticism in the twenty-first century. The desire for theoretical breakthroughs of scholars in the West is mirrored in terms such as “cultural turn,” “ethical turn,” “practical turn,” “language turn,” and “postcritique” that have grabbed our attention, if only for a brief period. The theory of postcritique, the newest kid on the block, deserves our attention because it has wholeheartedly reembraced the study of emotion in literature as an indispensable part of experiencing the text in our time.

Postcritique is, first of all, a reaction against the methodology of literary research and cultural criticism influenced by poststructuralist theories. The effect of this methodological pursuit is endless interrogation and skepticism, so much so that Paul Ricoeur would call it “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which he believes to have originated in the way that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud searched for grand or ultimate signifiers (33). This “hermeneutics of suspicion” is extremely helpful to deconstruct hegemonic discourses and repressive political ideologies in all social forms, but it appears inadequate to engage constructive criticism in present societies that aspire to be pluralistic and multicultural because the “intellectual or political payoff of interrogating, demystifying, and defamiliarizing is no longer quite so self-evident” (Felski and Anker 1–2). With the intention of correcting the excesses of “doubt everything,” postcritique advocates a cluster of new critical gestures such

as the following: 1. emphasize the reading experience of emotion or affect from the perspectives of phenomenology and aesthetics; 2. challenge the conventional distinction between deep reading and surface reading; 3. highlight the difference between reading as a method and criticism as a style of writing; 4. and advocate affect as a critical outcome of the aesthetic experience.

More than any other theoretical “turn” in recent times, postcritique draws a sharp contrast with Critical Theory. However, this does not mean postcritique is a total break from Critical Theory. On the contrary, its focus on emotion and affect for literary studies only expands and extends interpretive methodologies already present in many forms of radical critical theories. In fact, acknowledging the importance of emotion to literature itself is not an invention of postcritique, as it has been made clear in the above discussion of traditional Chinese literary theory. On the other hand, the analytical vocabulary for emotion used in postcritique is not a recycling of traditional concepts, which tend to be impressionist or analogical; it is an inventive group of redefined nomenclatures coming directly from the theoretical language of contemporary Western literary theory. One of the most noteworthy examples is the differential uses of the two words “emotion” and “affect.” Conventionally speaking, affect belongs to the category of emotion, but affect, when used in the practice of postcritique, carries nuanced differences from emotion, in which it refers more to those transient feelings drifting away from the known and familiar linguistic signifiers of emotions. It highlights emotional traces and effects but is always at the margins of the structure of feelings. Fredric Jameson has simply defined affect as “an emotional experience that has not yet been named,” which “can be either the world itself or an individual subject” (37). It is precisely between the space of named and unnamed emotions that literary narrative or lyricism demonstrates its unique, evocative power to present a possible and complete topography of all human emotions.

How does emotion in literary representation become an aesthetics of empathy? It has to do with the three stages of knowing, transposing, and empathizing in our encounters with the text. In the paragraphs below, I will conduct a close reading of Plato’s famous “Allegory of the Cave” to illustrate how knowing, transposing, and empathizing occur to complete an aesthetically satisfying reading process.

“The Allegory of the Cave” comes from the book *The Republic*, in which Plato uses a dialogue between his brother Glaucon and his mentor Socrates to present a fable that embodies the central tenets of his philosophy. A brief summary of the fable follows: there is this group of prisoners living in a cave. They are shackled by handcuffs and unable to move freely. They can only sit with their backs to the

entrance of the cave all day long. A fire burns behind them, casting shadows on the wall they face. These shadows are the real world they know. Later, a prisoner gets out of the cave and sees the sunlight, the mountains, and the vegetation outside. He then realizes the ignorance of his imprisoned companions and the illusion of the shadows. At this time, he is faced with the choice of continuing his life outside the cave or returning to the cave to awaken the remaining prisoners (Plato 253–261).

Observant readers will certainly notice how similar Plato's cave is to Lu Xun's "Iron House" metaphor. In fact, this is exactly why I am so interested in Plato, the man of wisdom from the West. If Lu Xun only wanted to present the dilemma of the writer as a prophet facing the Chinese masses yet to be enlightened, then the Socrates created by Plato focuses on broader philosophical propositions, such as form and appearance, the goodness of the human heart, and the evil of the world, the relationship between the mind and enlightenment, political systems and the role of the philosopher-king. Such rich content addressing many fundamental questions in human knowledge has made Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" a continuous topic of interest for other Western philosophers and scholars from antiquity to the present day.²

In Plato's allegorical narrative, Socrates starts with the story of the imagined prisoners in a cave and then expounds on the basic plot or offers new details in the ensuing dialogues. Between narrating the plot and speculatively questioning its meanings, he goes back to the original plot intermittently, embellishing or adding things to make the fable more illustrative of his points. When we rearrange the plot and commentary, we discover there are three sections to the story: the imprisonment in the cave, the pursuit of knowledge from outside the cave, and the return to the cave to save the other prisoners, which illuminate the three themes of knowing, transposing, and empathizing, respectively. Let me discuss the three themes in detail next.

In the story of imprisonment in the cave, one sees the establishment of a cognitive mechanism of knowing. Between the self and its shadow exists the opposition of ontology and epistemology, where Plato plants the seeds of dualistic philosophical thinking. In a closed cave, the prisoner's knowing must rely on an external light source, which is an assumption important enough to be a source for all subsequent formations of Idealism. We notice here that knowing itself is a preassembled concept, which dominates the life experience of the prisoners in the

2 For those interested in Plato's Cave and its relevance to contemporary Western philosophy, please refer to Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*. Tr. Ted Sadler (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002).

cave and both the content and the purpose of knowing is to know oneself. Now it is clear how Plato's allegory intersects with the purpose of literature, for not only is a fable a common genre of literature, but also light, self, and shadow are familiar literary metaphors, and moreover "who am I?" is a question that has forever engaged all forms of literary writing. Plato's construction of the activity of knowing and the self-consciousness of the knower corresponds with the performance of literature in terms of both structural logic and narrative motivation. Knowing is foremost to know oneself, which is the philosophical basis for the aesthetics of empathy.

Transposing is both the subject matter and the theme in the section we call the "pursuit of knowledge from outside the cave." The prisoners live in a limited environment, which restrains their self-knowledge. To overcome the limitation, they must change their perspectives by transposing themselves—being somewhere else physically. Thus, a prisoner—any prisoner—must escape from the cave to be able to know his other self in the world of sunlight and trees. Obviously, "cave" and "outside the cave" have multiple allegorical meanings involving several categories of dualistic constructs such as illusion and reality or appearance and form. My interest here is the concept of transposition between the cave and the outside of it, which makes the production of new knowledge possible. If we extend Plato's concept of transposition from an exchange of physical spaces to that of the self and the other, we will have a better understanding of some important theoretical constructs in contemporary literary theory, such as the signifier and the signified of linguistic signs, self-identity and its reference to the mirror image of the other, gender formation and its social reflections, and so on. In many literary motifs, transposition in either space or time is also a necessary condition for the production of narrative tension, such as nostalgic narrative (city and country), landscape poetry (urbanization and nature), historical legend (present and past), or diasporic narrative (center and margin), which are all imprinted with emotion or affect in their tempospatial shifting structures. Needless to say, reading literature written in a language other than one's own, an idea fundamental to World Literature and Comparative Literature, has all the markings of transposition happening to the reader. This is to say, transposing is the formal basis for the aesthetics of empathy.

Empathy is the logical conclusion as we finish reading Plato's cave. It permeates the ending of the section of the "return to the cave to save the other prisoners," even though Socrates does not say this word specifically throughout the allegory. After the escaped prisoner gets a new life outside the cave, it is not clear whether he takes off or returns to the cave to rescue his comrades, but this is a question

proposed in the story. In the subsequent speculative dialogues, Socrates believes that the lucky prisoner could return to the cave even though the result might be disastrous—his fellow prisoners could reject his version of reality or even persecute him for it (because there is pain associated with the eyes suddenly exposed to the sunlight). Reflecting on such possibilities, however, Socrates offers these words: “He will cherish his happy moments and living conditions, and he will sympathize with others...and let him return from the light to the hole below” (243). Socrates’ (or rather, Plato’s) belief is based on the supreme reason of virtue, which has something to do with the idea of the original goodness of the human heart and the political ideal of the perfect philosopher-king. It is a common practice for all idealistically oriented social and political discourses to use the binary metaphor of light and darkness, but let us leave this aside and consider the words “happy” and “sympathize,” which Socrates uses before he talks about reason. The point of the dialogue is to explain the motivation for the escaped prisoner to return to save the other prisoners. Yes, “reason” is the last state of mind for him before he performs an act of courage, but it is also significant that happiness and sympathy exist to prepare for the arrival of the rational mind. There is no doubt that Plato recognizes the important function of emotions in making the right choices. In short, the rational world advocated by Plato is inseparable from the foundation of the emotional world. It is precisely because of empathy induced by varying emotional experiences that the “Allegory of the Cave” could have a good ending. We can say that the allegory itself—its content and its way of story-telling—embodies the ideal of *The Republic* constructed by reason and empathy. From aestheticizing emotions to fulfilling the promise of goodness, this is the social significance of the aesthetics of empathy.

My extended reading of Plato’s cave is meant to establish the intellectual foundation for the aesthetics of empathy for the study of literature in our time. In so doing, I connect not only with the traditional understanding of literature as a conduit for expressing emotions but also with the theory of postcritique that calls for a refocusing on emotion or affect to mitigate the effect of overwrought skepticism prevalent in many strands of current critical or cultural theories. This refocusing on the aesthetics of empathy carries special relevance to present-day Comparative Literature studies for the simple reason that empathy, by definition, works analogically through sympathetic feelings to connect people and communities. Initiated by the desire for knowing and empowered by the effect of transposing, empathy communicates by comparison, which goes back to the original mission of Comparative Literature as reflected in the conception of “comparative inquiry” by Matthew Arnold and Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett. While comparatists continue to

wrestle with issues of heterogeneity and universality in their different construction of the discipline, a refocus on the aesthetics of empathy will free us from either an obsession with historical influences between individual national literatures or from reliance on loosely constructed abstract concepts such as “refraction” or “planetarity.” Empathy as an aestheticized form of being human may offer the best way for Comparative Literature to remain relevant and meaningful in our globalized world.

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