Perspective and *Tertium Comparationis*: The Case of Asian Literature
Invited plenary speech at the Symposium on “Inter-Asian Comparative Literature: Problems and Perspectives.”
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Mr. Chairman, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It gives me great honour to be invited to speak at this Symposium of the 51st Annual Meeting of the JCLA. I would like to take this occasion to thank my Japanese colleagues, in particular, Professor Haga Toru, Organizer of the 13th ICLA congress, and Professor Takayo Kano, Secretary General of the JCLA, for their kind invitation. I have come to Tokyo with the warm greetings and best regards of my colleagues in Taiwan, and on behalf of our national Association, I wish you every success in your scholarly endeavours.

With the ICLA Tokyo congress in prospect, we are gratified to observe that this Symposium is most relevantly entitled “Inter-Asian Comparative Literature: Problems and Perspectives.” Such a title clearly identifies our shared field of study, but it also raises issues which invite critical inquiry. Rather than being self-evident, our field of study is made available to us as a set of problems defined by the perspective we choose to adopt. Thus I would read the title in a reverse order: One’s perspective helps discover problems which, in turn, give shape to his object of study.

I am not unaware that by taking this position I might be accused for ceding the “field” to “perspective,” for investing the viewer with primacy rather than the view itself. But this is not the occasion to reiterate and to defend my theoretical stance; what I am concerned with here is the concept of perspective. For reasons yet unknown, the word “perspective,” itself not a literary terms (except in narratology), has somehow caught on, and caught us awares. But to my knowledge, no comparatist except Claudio Guillen (1971) has ever reflected on the word and its various implications. I shall briefly examine the concept, its dialectic relationship with another concept, namely, *tertium comparationis*, without which comparative literature would be impossible. My argument consists in the following points. First, “perspective” is such a heavily abused term—and rightly so—in our discipline that it has become semantically void, let alone optically opaque. It is time now to make the concept a little clearer, i.e., to put “perspective,” hopefully, in perspective. Second, the concept of perspective is not transparent, nor is it entirely neutral or value-free. Charged with ideology, it implies discriminations, such as core/periphery
hierarchy and, above all, cultural hegemony. For instance, in visual experience, we often confine perspective to the central system while ignoring other alternatives, such as the isometric system. But at the same time, though a perceptual fallacy in itself, it is a necessary evil for any serious comparative study because it serves as its tertium comparisonis. Now it is precisely on what constitutes an acceptable tertium comparisonis that we comparatists disagree. Finally, I shall try to relate my argument to inter-Asian comparative literature studies in the global context.

Anyone familiar with the history of comparative literature studies would have noticed that, for the last quarter of century or so, comparatists, especially in North America, have been fascinated, indeed, spell-bound by the word “perspective.” Let me give you a few examples picked up randomly. It is no coincidence that two collections of essays published respectively in 1961 and 1988 bear similar titles: Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective and The comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice. Apparently, the interval between the two volumes’ publications witnesses tremendous paradigm-shift in our discipline. But none of the co-editors seem to have reflected on the implications of the word “perspective” which relates the two titles. I am not fusing about (one more time!) Eurocentrism, nor am I alluding to the general movement away from traditional areas of study. And it would be absurd to criticize this author or that editor for lacking a “perspective.” Take the Koelb and Noakes volume for example, the editors make it explicit that comparative literature today is “more a shared perspective that sees literary activity as involved in a complex web of cultural relations” (11). What amazes me is no one to date, except Guillen, has ever given a thought to the word’s history and the validity of its appropriation in critical discourse.

I shall now turn to Professor Ulrich Weisstein whom I admire as a consistent thinker but whose position I never endorse. Prof. Weisstein represents a typical Eurocentric position (1984). He concludes his 1984 survey article of comparative literature with the very word under discussion: “Time will show whether, twenty or fifty years hence, Comparative Literature will have vanished in consequence of its centrifugal flight . . . Perhaps it would not matter, in the long run, if what remains of it were neither the label . . . nor the definitions . . . but the principle and (pace Block) the perspective” (191-92). Professor Weisstein seems to take the word for granted; he never questions it, nor defines it. Pace Haskell M. Block, he reiterates “the need for applying a supranational perspective” (172). We are not sure how the two-dimensional “supranational” can form a perspective without a tertium quid, i.e., the viewer’s stance as apex, whatever and wherever it may be. In order to understand what he means by “supranational,” and to locate this position, we have to look at an earlier text of Herr Weisstein’s. But before so doing, let me make a brief
digression on perspective.

As we all know, the concept of perspective—I am referring to the central system—is a Renaissance product of the artist’s search for spatial unity and is supported by applied systems of construction in Italy. As Rudolf Arnheim observes:

[It] came about as one aspect of the search for objectively correct descriptions of physical nature—a search that sprang during the Renaissance from a new interest in the wonders of the sensory world, and led to the great voyages of exploration as well as to the development of experimental research and the scientific standards of exactitude and truth (1974, 283).

But this attempt at exactitude and truth through an objective method independent the viewer’s idiosyncrasies is itself an illusion. Take the visual pyramid for example. In order to see a picture “correctly,” the viewer has to assume the corresponding position of standing opposite the vanishing point with his eyes at the level of the horizon (287). But such insistence can actually interfere with the perception of a painting. Not to mention the fact that in many a painting the focus is eccentric or even outside the frame. This is especially the case of the modernist painter’s playing with perspective rules. Under these circumstances, the viewer would find it all the more difficult to construct a semblance of unity.

The concept of central perspective involves a number of cognitive paradoxes, such as parallel/convergence, centrality/infinity. It is curious that once the term has been appropriated, the comparatist no longer takes these into account. In his vision of the future of comparative literature, Weisstein hopes “the” perspective will survive the change of name and matter. There cannot be a dominant, totalizing perspective in literary scholarship, let alone the performance of art.

In 1975 Professor Weisstein published an important article on analogy studies as a sequel to his widely used textbook, *Einführung in die Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* (1968, English translation, 1973). He charts all the categories of comparative study in a hierarchical, descending order, according to the proximity or distance between two comparatums.

I. Borrowings (quotations; pastiche, ‘cento’)
II. Translations
III. Adaptations
IV. Imitations
   (a) Serious (including stylization)
   (b) Humorous / critical (including parody, travesty and burlesque)
V. Influences (‘rapports de fait’)
VI. Mutually exclusive parallels (suggesting influence)
VII. Parallels (synchronic and within a given ‘Kulturkreis’), as in ‘Geistesgeschichte’
VIII. Analogies (historical), including the typological approach, as in Stadialism; within or without a given ‘Kulturkreis’
IX. Analogies (ahistorical, but systematic and/or teleological)
   (a) Searching for literary constants (Etienble)
   (b) Searching for anthropological constants (Brown, Staiger)
X. Analogies (ahistorical and non-systematic)
   (a) Within literature (‘rhetorical’ criticism)
   (b) Exceeding the confines of literature (‘wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste,’ with the exceptions noted above)

1975, 597, 608.

The dividing line between the general areas of influence and analogy lies between Categories V and VI. But there are two other invisible lines which should be drawn, respectively, between VII and VIII and between X, (a) and X, (b). These last two lines indicate Professor Weisstein’s shifting stance as viewer, his apexes of two visual pyramids (i.e., perspectives) instead of one. In other words, they underline his two tertia comparationis: Kulturkreis (culture circle) and language as common denominators for legitimized comparative studies. Beyond the European Kulturkreis, comparative literature is suspect; without language as the bottom line, comparative literature is impossible. As to the other tertia comparationis, such as “anthropological constants” and “literary constants,” which some of our inferior Asian colleagues are often found prattling about, are dismissed as peripheral, indeed, close to the bottomless pit. Thus what Weisstein means by the “supranational” perspective is none other, pace Brecht, than the Caucasian Culture Circle.

How could a Eurocentric perspective designer like Professor Weisstein see a landscape below the viewer’s horizon? First, he doesn’t see it. In fact, he didn’t—at least as late as (or as early as) 1973.

Pure analogy studies in comparative genealogy may fulfill a similar function [demonstrating the gap which separates East and West] and are likely to benefit Oriental scholars even more than their Occidental colleagues. For, until very recently, no systematic effort to classify literary phenomenon according to their generic qualities was made in most Far Eastern countries . . . (107)
As primates like monkeys but paragon like angels, we human beings are condemned with the instinct of perceiving with two eyes, i.e., of forming perspective. But the central perspective, a Renaissance ideal and a legacy of the West, is an artificial territorization of space by means of geometry. The consequence is: Now you see it, now you don't. And your insight lies in your blind spot. This understood, Professor Weisstein is not to blame. But when he does see the Other, as in the criss-ridden article cited above, he is alarmed: “[I]n some of the ‘exotic’ countries newly prominent in the ICLA, the justified pride in their national literary heritage has so far prevented the formation of an **unbiased supranational point of view**, with the result that where *francocentrisme* once reigned *sino-, indo, or Africocentrisme* have reared their heads” (1984, 178)

Professor Weisstein is wrong because their cannot be an ‘unbiased supranational point of view.” But he is, ironically, right in the persuasion against other versions of central perspective. In the Eastern Asian *Kulturkreis* (a concept I never subscribe to and, I believe, is open to deconstruction), how not to assume such a perspective as to establish another core/periphery hierarchy and cultural hegemony should be our mutual concern.

**Works Cited**


