

Tongbian 通變 (Tradition and Change)

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SUMMARY

Tongbian concerns the dialectics of tradition and change or of convention and innovation. First made prominent by Liu Xie 劉勰 (c. 465-522) in his *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*), and further developed by Ye Xie 葉燮 (1627-1703) in the Qing Dynasty, the concept is based primarily on the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*). While advocating a return to the sources of the classical canon, Liu nevertheless insists that writers assert their originality by adapting to changing situations. In his *Yuanshi* 原詩 (1627-1703) (*On Poetry*) Ye Xie weaned himself from undue emphasis on tradition and looked at the old and the new with equal eyes. To him the familiar and the fresh alternate just as the Russian formalists consider “top” and “bottom” elements in a literary trend go through a cyclic change.

Among those prominent literary theorists in the West who view the concept dialectically, we may single out Coleridge, Eliot, the Russian Formalists (such as Tynjanov and Jakobson), and Harold Bloom. Coleridge considered the imaginative faculty capable of reconciling opposites, including novelty/freshness with the old/the familiar, so that the creative mind is pulled by both centripetal and centrifugal forces. Eliot advocated the “historical sense,” which implies a simultaneous order of the whole of tradition and new creations. The Russian formalists saw literary change as an incessant alternation between automatized and deautomatized devices. Bloom viewed tradition pragmatically, considering that its usefulness lies mainly in challenging or

blocking the creative mind to live out its "anxiety of influence."

A comparison of their views reveals that Liu Xie's views are similar to Eliot's, Ye Xie's close to Coleridge's and the formalists', and Bloom's at the further end asserting that tradition serves only to challenge and stimulate creativity. Generally, those who hold dialectical views of tradition and change see that familiarity breeds freshness, and freshness reveals familiarity: the two evolve in a moving equilibrium.

KEYWORDS

Bloom, Harold
Ye Xie
Russian formalists
dialectics
Yuanshi
Wenxin diaolong

Liu Xie
Coleridge, S. T.
Yijing 易經
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Eliot, T. S.



I

After T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," more and more students of literature have come to recognize the dialectic relationship between tradition and the individual talent exerting his or her creativity. In China this concept of dialectics is commonly expressed by the term *tongbian*. The concept of *tongbian* was first made prominent by Liu Xie 劉勰 (c. 465-522) in his *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 and extensively discussed by Ye Xie (1627-1703) in his *Yuanshi* 原詩 (On Poetry), it has remained an important topic in the Chinese critical tradition. In Western poetics, no single term conveniently expresses this dialectic. We hear either of tradition/originality, or of convention/innovation, and therefore we may look them up under such entries in Preminger's *Encyclopedia* to see what they are all about. Like the dialectics of the poetic tradition in Western theory, this concept posits the problem of how one may achieve fruitful results in art by exerting one's originality while taking account of tradition and convention. By extension it is also related to the question of how literary history evolves, depending on whether the age lays its emphasis on tradition or on change.

As every writer constantly acquires experience and knowledge of all kinds, literary or non-literary, he faces the question of *tongbian* in forging his products. The question, in other words, is how an individual engaged in the creative act is to correlate the expression of his talent with tradition. In

the process of composition a writer may exert his creativity to the extent that the so-called tradition is all but pushed out of his consciousness. Yet, tradition has inevitably imbued the artist to the marrow of his bones: the ideas he acquires, the language he uses, the form he adopts -- tradition permeates the air he breathes. Even after he manages to change the tradition in some way in his creation, the artist leaves his product to the verdict of time. Obviously, the working out of change alone does not constitute innovation, nor can mere conformity to tradition or convention ever lead to literary excellence. Valuing *tong* over and above *bian*, or giving more weight to tradition than to change, leads to what is known as traditionalism in literature. Conversely, when an age clamors for *bian*, the trend may be set for either literary revolution or decline.

The individual talent modifies, enriches, and invigorates tradition through its creativity. Without what Blake calls the "Poetic Genius" ("All Religions Are One"), tradition will come to a standstill and lie inert like a dead rock. The emphasis of the concept is plainly on ability to act on tradition creatively rather than just be a passive part of tradition itself. Thus Vincent Yu-chung Shih is justified in his translation of Liu Xie's "*Tongbian*" chapter as "Flexible Adaptability to Varying Situations" (Shih 319). In this connection it is also interesting to note that *biantong*, its inverted form used either as noun or verb in daily Chinese, also connotes flexibility or flexible adaptation.

The concept is built on the dual basis of mastery of a significant portion of tradition by the creative mind on the one hand and achievement of innovation within the tradition. Tradition gives the individual a ready stock of materials and suggests directions for his creation. Liu emphasizes acquisition of learning (積學以儲寶, 酌理以富才), which involves aspects both of the ancient and the modern as well as extensive and intensive reading (Shih 515, 570). It should be taken for

granted that even the most learned of writers can absorb only a fraction of what is generally called tradition. Instead of absorbing it as "an absolute body of work," however, the creative writer achieves change of tradition to some extent, as Raymond Williams puts it, in a continual process of "selection and interpretation" (Williams 66-69). This act of selection and interpretation, when practiced with what Liu calls "imaginative judgment" (*quanbie* 銓別) (Shih 329), constitutes *tongbian*. While a total disregard of tradition will simply invalidate any creation at all, flexible adaptability to various and varying situations, rather than rigid adherence to established modes, is the only way to ensure the continuity of tradition.

Some commentators question why Liu Xie uses examples of imitation to illustrate the principle of *tongbian* (Zhou 29:578-80). As implied by Liu's comments, *zhongru longnei* 終入籠內 (finally come within the cage of tradition) and *wujia ruyi* 五家如一 (the five writers seem to have come from the same stereotype), these passages from chapter 29 are more likely examples of how *fu* writers have been laboring with hyperbolic expressions rather than models of the *tongbian* principle (see Zhou 85).

That the emphasis lies on flexible adaptability rather than adherence to tradition can be seen from the meanings of the two characters. Taken apart, the character *tong* means "to comprehend," "to be conversant with [tradition]," and to "go or break through" as in a thoroughfare. Thus, in its association with tradition, *tong* suggests "going through" or "going beyond" instead of passively "adhering" to tradition. The other character, *bian*, simply means "to change." It must be added, however, that *bian* is in itself neutral. It may as likely mean changing for the worse as changing for the better. It is in its combination with *tong* that *bian* dignifies itself into the positive sense of "to innovate." In an attempt to change the tradition, the weak may be stymied or even stifled, but the strong accept the challenge and manage to go further with it.

Identifying *tongbian* with traditionalism is a misunderstanding; identifying *tong* with tradition and *bian* with innovation is also misleading.

For a better grasp of the dialectical nature of the concept, we need to trace it back to its metaphysical origin in the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*), of which Liu Xie, the first important exponent of the concept, was an ardent scholar. In the "Great Appendix" of the *Yijing*, the various meanings of the two characters, used individually or in combination, are linked to the constantly evolving patterns of beauty in the universe. First of all, in an analogy similar to the computerese zero and one, the shutting and opening of a door are said to be analogous to the binary opposites of *kun* 坤 (earth, or female principle) and *qian* 乾 (heaven, or male principle) (闢戶謂之坤，闢戶謂之乾). Since one is passive and the other active, the pair correlates with the norms of *yin* and *yang*. Secondly, instead of attributing *tong* to passivity and *bian* to activity or the other way around, both *tong* and *bian* refer to change. *Bian* means change from one state to the other: shutting to opening, or opening to shutting. *Tong* means the way things change constantly and endlessly in this manner (一闢一闢謂之變，往來不窮謂之通). Thirdly, the *Yijing* affirms that since beautiful patterns result from a constant flux of change, "one who knows the ways of change knows the workings of the supreme being," 知變化之道者，其知神之所爲乎 (*Yijing* 156, 167, 157, 149). Since *bian* (change) is the condition for *tong* (to go through, or to endure), and *tong* the result of *bian*, it is of paramount importance for the creative mind to grasp this principle of flexible adaptability to varying situations. In this sense, the creative mind is mysteriously linked to the Supreme Being of the universe.

In comparison, the concept of tradition in the West seems more pragmatic than idealistic. The word developed from the Latin term, *traditio*, whose etymological meaning is to hand down or over, or deliver. Besides transmission of oral or

written precedents, however, the word, being cognate with treason, also implies emulation or rivaling by its recipients (Bloom, "Dialectics" 166-73). More often than not, the established writers in a tradition face the new writers' challenge, transformation, or even distortion instead of merely passive reception and imitation. Tradition is usually considered as what has been handed down from generation to generation, useful to be acquainted with most of the time, but frequently stifling and blocking in practice. As Harold Bloom maintains, a writer with this view of tradition will have to live with his "anxiety of influence," constantly seeking to rival his predecessors (Bloom, *Anxiety* 93-96). T. S. Eliot might have had this pragmatic view of tradition in mind when he said that "You can hardly make the word agreeable to English ears" (Eliot 37).

II

In his *Wenxin diaolong*, Liu Xie took over the *Yijing*'s observation about the way of nature into his idea of literary change. Nature with its principles and changeable patterns constantly unfolds its grandeur. Literature, art, or culture (*renwen* 人文) also renews itself with its evolving rules. The same outlook is seen in one of the fundamental concepts in Basho's haiku poetics. What Basho calls *fuga no makoto* 風雅の誠 literally means the sincerity of the haiku mind. Rendered as the "true 'poetic spirit'" by Makoto Ueda, it consists in the ability of the haiku poet to transform with the evolution of the four seasons and to act according to the principle of the unchangeable (*fueki* 不易) and the temporal (*ryuko* 流行) (Kuriyama 25-27, 50-51, 62-65; Hisamatsu 242-44; Ueda 36-37). It is useful to bear in mind that the same distinction between the unchangeable and the temporal seems to operate in Liu Xie's *tongbian* theory. Liu Xie's idealized view of tradition is based on such belief in some unchangeable principle in nature. His

tradition, however, is an evolving rather than fixed, order. To my mind, that is what is meant at the beginning of his concluding passage to chapter 29: "The rules of Literature revolve as in a circle and literature renews itself day by day" 文律運周，日新其業，(Zhou 29:571). Tradition then can be a liberating force against time's chaos only when it maintains this dynamism. The way of literary change, therefore, consists in participation in this orderly evolution such as we find in nature.

Liu Xie makes much of a writer's ability "to mediate between substance and form, and to choose appropriately between the graceful on the one hand, and popular or vulgar on the other" 斯斟酌乎質文之間，而槩括乎雅俗之際. This ability results from a mastery of "established principles" (*gushi* 故實) and a sensitive awareness to "new modes and cadences" (*xinsheng* 新聲). A literary artist is thus required to absorb tradition as a necessary preparation for the development of his originality. In extending his originality, moreover, he can create his own laws or follow his own imaginative logic with reference to existing laws. The craft of writing always means a dialectic or syncretic choice between the necessity to follow conventions and the urge to innovate. The principle of *tongbian* involves departing from, as well as following, conventions. Therefore, "with an eye on present circumstances," Liu concludes, a writer has to "create the extraordinary, / And establish laws by reference to ancient practice" 望今制奇，參古定位.

By failing to make it immediately clear whether in his view the Confucian canon is an absolute norm, and whether the genres are truly constant, Liu Xie incurs criticism from such Qing commentators as Ji Yun 紀昀 and Huang Kan 黃侃. They claim that Liu advocated *tongbian* theory only to restore the authority of the Confucian canon (Zhou 571, 578). Whatever Liu's position might have been, we live in an age in which no single canon can maintain its preeminence and the

genres rapidly evolve under influences from all quarters. Thus we run the risk of warping Liu Xie's theory if we fail to grasp the historical limitations imposed on him.

An advocate of the Confucian canon Liu Xie certainly was, but his concept of *tongbian* excludes the notion that rules of the past are rigid and unalterable. Liu's *tongbian* concept becomes controversial only when we mix up Liu's practical criticism with his theory. As we have seen above, Liu prescribed a return to the Confucian classics mainly to remedy the rhetorical excess of the Southern Dynasties Period in which he lived. Moreover, his syncretism frequently entails the positing of two norms within which men of letters may reorient themselves. Liu might have extolled the Classics sky high with a capital C, but they were meant to be studied as literary sources, not really as absolutes. After all, that is what tradition is all about.

In the opening statement of the *tongbian* chapter Liu seems to state either that literary types or the basic principles that go into their making are constant, while the ways of literary change are indefinite.¹ The expression *mingli xiangyin* (名理相因) concerns the concept of genre which in turn is fundamentally related to the concept of tradition. If it is taken to mean that both the name (*ming* 名) and all the constituent principles (*li* 理) of a genre are handed down rigidly from generation to generation, we would not expect the number of genres or the genres themselves to evolve in any significant direction. If we interpret *li* as the most basic content that gives a genre its name, we may see that genres change along with all literary phenomena. Theoretically we may conceive of some genres that will constantly conform to their constituent principles. Historically, however, we observe genres to evolve a lot more rapidly than biological species (Todorov 193). They change in number, in rhetorical, structural, thematological, and various other features.

A genre may be considered as a pattern that has emerged

through an urge toward permanency. It then becomes a constant factor that will seek to stand the ground in the process of literary evolution. But then there is always the other urge to transform a genre as an existing system. Coleridge thought that the poet's imaginative faculty "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities," including "the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects" (Coleridge 2: 12). In other words, the creative mind is pulled by both centripetal and centrifugal forces. Coleridge's centripetal force is the unifying force, or "the principle of unity," while the centrifugal force is "the unceasing succession of the variety" (Coleridge 2: 262). These two forces are similar to the Russian formalists' dichotomy of the deautomatized, dominant element and the automatized elements (Matejka 69, 72).

This double movement, central to the dialectics of tradition and change, is perhaps more aptly described as "a moving + equilibrium," a term Merleau-Ponty has used in the context of language and of culture in general (Gelley 362). The writer has an insistent opposite urge for innovation, for communicating his own vision of reality in a new form. This urge for newness, however, cannot be satisfied without violating to a certain extent the identity of a given literary type. Equilibrium is obtained through the writer's other urge to identify himself with tradition and permanence, and specifically, to maintain the character of a literary type during its evolution. The equilibrium is "moving" because tradition is subject to constant modification (Vodička 11). What Liu Xie says regarding the constant can at best be the basic principles that go into the making of genres rather than the genres themselves. In saying that the method of *tongbian* lies in *sanwu yinge* 參伍因革 (the mixture of tradition and change), Liu Xie himself has said it all.

If we accept a linear view of history, we may consider tradition and change as irreconcilable opposites. On one hand,

we have the relatively constant genres which carry some formal principles or ideological content that more or less conform to their names. On the other, we have the methods of composition, literary expressions and vital force, which vary according to individual styles. These two poles remind us of the dichotomy which Merleau-Ponty sought to overcome -- that between "the past as field of study" and "the present as a field of choice or action" (Gelley 360).

If, on the contrary, we have a cyclic view of history, we will consider that the past is always interlocked with the present, and that what the writer faces is actually the presentness of the past and the pastness of the present. We shall see, moreover, that Liu's dual commitment to tradition and change is analogous to Eliot's commitment to what he calls the "historical sense," which implies a simultaneous order of the whole of tradition and new creations. The practice of the principle of *tongbian*, therefore, contributes to the intertextuality of the works of all writers dead and living.

Liu Xie's *tongbian* theory is most clearly shown in his concept of genres. His expression, *mingli xiangyin*, gives the idea that genre is a dynamic principle as well a prescriptive one, or otherwise there will be only a fixed number of genres handed down from the past, and no new genres can come into being. In other words, the so-called conventions or traditions, no matter whether they concern genres or otherwise, are themselves subject to change. The need of flexible adaptability to changing circumstance, calls for change in the concept and content of a genre, and when this change reaches the point that the name and the content no longer correspond, the name also changes.

Owing to its sheer length, relatively independent evolution, and limited impact from abroad, the history of Chinese literature saw more quarrels between ancients and moderns than Western literatures. Even before Liu Xie's times, such notable figures as Wang Chung 王充, Ge Hung 葛洪, and

Xiao Gang 蕭綱 revolted strongly against slavish imitation of what time had already hallowed as the classics. Liu Xie's *tongbian* theory served as a persuasive argument for the Kungan School (公安派) during the Ming dynasty in their opposition to the traditionalism of the writer-critics called the Former and Later Seven Masters (前後七子). It was not until Ye Xie in the Qing that the principle received a further clarification. Along with Yuan Mei 袁枚 (in *Poetry Talks of Suiyuan* 隨園詩話), Ye in his *Yuanshi* emphasized change not only as a natural but also as a necessary course of events.

III

Ye Xie was perhaps the most notable critic after Liu Xie to have a thoroughly dialectical view of tradition and change. Unlike Liu Xie who lived in an age in which literary trends generally favored novelty, Ye Xie was born in a neo-classical age much given to imitation of the past masters. While Liu advocated a return to the classical canon for a reorientation of the trend of ornate rhetoricism, Ye asserted the importance of writing one's own poetry. Thus, while Liu nursed a nostalgic view of the Confucian classics, Ye shifted from an emphasis on originality toward a balanced view of the past and the present. To Ye literary evolution was a cyclic change. Looking at *zheng* 正 (the norms) and *bian* (the innovations) with equal eyes, Ye said that what thrives will eventually decline, and what is at the nadir can see its zenith again as generations pass from one to another. Such a cyclic view of history refutes the linear view that art necessarily deteriorates or progresses from fixed norms. In short, he insists that we should not value norms at the expense of innovations.

Tradition and change, in Ye's ingenuous analogy, are like the roots and buds of a tree on the one hand; and branches, leaves, and flowers on the other. Those who know only the former do not know the full range of a tree's functions, and

those who only know the latter do not know its fundamentals. The common run of people, however, are not equipped with such insight. Ye says: "Those who dislike the old and familiar (*chenshu* 陳熟) will go for the new and fresh (*shengxin* 生新); and those who dislike the new and fresh will go back for the old and familiar." To his mind, it is erroneous to evaluate literature on the basis of whether it is old or new, or merely on whether it conforms to the norm or deviates from it. Esthetic pleasure consists in the proper mixture of the two. "It is perfect," he continues, "only when the two complement each other, so that freshness is seen in the familiar and familiarity is perceived in the new and fresh."² This makes Ye Xie's position much closer to Coleridge's than to the Russian formalists'. While the Russians such as Victor Shklovsky see art as consisting in the technique of defamiliarization, Coleridge claims as the hallmark of genius the ability to unite "old and new," "to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar" (Shklovsky 11-18, Coleridge 2: 12). We shall see, especially with reference to Tynjanov's attention to "the quality of divergence," that this is only a difference in emphasis; but union or combination, rather than leaning either to the old or new, is essential to the concept of *tongbian*.

Of *cai* 才 (talent), *dan* 膽 (daringness), *shi* 識 (knowledge or insight), and *li* 力 (vitality) that Ye Xie pointed out as the four essential qualities of a good poet, *shi* is most kindred to the concept of *tongbian*, for it involves not only benefiting from knowledge of the past masters, but also *jiangxin* 匠心 (versatility or craftsmanship), the ability of the creative mind to exploit the past, to turn the past to present use. This versatility must be what Liu Xie calls *tongbian* or *xiao huitong* 曉通 (to be versed in the *tongbian* principle). Its acquisition comes from what Lü Benzhong 呂本中 and Yen Yu 嚴羽, two other Sung critics, called *wuru* 悟入 (in-depth

understanding) and *miaowu* 妙語 (exquisite or mystic understanding) respectively. Obviously, this ability is no other than what, in Eliot's idea, a writer "inherits" from tradition with the historical sense, not without great pains.

Ye Xie differed from Yen Yu and the neo-classicists (*gediaopai* 格調派) in refusing to hold the past masters as unshakable arbiters, such as Qin and Han masters for prose, and High T'ang masters for poetry (文必秦漢, 詩必盛唐). What he views as the tradition is not just the classical canon, but the whole existing body of literature or culture. His theory of *tongbian* has moved one significant stride forward from Liu Xie's position in refusing to value the ancients over the moderns. In this regard, Ye was sometimes insistent to the point of obstinacy. For instance, to the fairly common charge against Sung poetry that it had lost its suggestiveness to technical craftsmanship and logic chopping, Ye came to its defence by saying that the same argumentativeness or straightforward statement is seen also in the *Shijing* (*Book of Poetry*) and the works of Li Po and Du Fu.

Like T. S. Eliot, Ye sees tradition as constantly evolving. For him, rules of the past never remain fixed (死法). They are constantly being added to, subtracted from, and reordered as each individual talent contributes to the tradition. They may continue to be vital and organic (活法) only when they are constantly put to the test of time, altered, violated, and thereby enriched by each individual talent. Ye says that all writers come from a tradition (隨風會), and yet their greatness is recognized only when they have modified it (轉風會) in a significant way. Harold Bloom sees tradition to be "gossip" turned into "myth," which "grows older, and becomes dogma." Modernism in literature "is already dogma grown antique: Post-Modernism also has its canons and its canonizers," but when it ceases to maintain its centrality, it too will be washed away in the flood of time. As a late-comer each writer is faced with the task of having to challenge the tradition (Bloom

163-64, 172-73). Such then is an even more dynamic view of the dialectics of tradition. If we compare these critics' views, we may find that Liu Xie's position is very near to Coleridge's and Eliot's, Ye Xie's stance close to the formalists', and Bloom probably stands at the further end, asserting that tradition exists as an opposing, almost hostile, force to creativity.

IV

Although *tongbian* is to be recommended as a principle of good writing, it is difficult to put into practice primarily because what is called tradition is often amorphous and dynamically evolving from diachronic and synchronic interchanges. It is only natural that people even in the same culture can hardly agree on what in fact is the tradition or the classical canon. What one individual perceives to be a structured, ordered, and fixed system may be seen by another as a shifting body of knowledge or devices subject to the challenge of others competing for attention. Strictly speaking, it may be more proper to the sociology of literature to speak of traditions and canons and then discern the affinities among them in similar cultural strata or climates of the same age. Diachronically, we have on-going quarrels between the ancients and the moderns, and synchronically we have constant influences from home and across the borders. No matter whether there are heated bickerings or tacit waverings between acceptance and rejection, they are what keep tradition alive and present it to the attention of creative individuals.

It may be assumed that all successful writers owed their success to the employment of the *tongbian* principle, though of course, when considering such a complicated matter as literary creation, no single principle is a panacea. Liu Xie has pointed out an example of a significant change for the better in Qu Yuan's creation of *Li Sao*, but at the same time he

subjects Qu Yuan to rigorous criticism for his supposed deviations from the Classics. Perhaps nobody can ever answer in full the question about how creative artists use the *tongbian* concept as a guiding principle for their composition and how critics employ it in practical criticism with fruitful results.

As a guiding principle for writers the concept has its twofold function of encouraging better preparedness and bolder creativity. In his monumental work, Liu emphasizes the importance of a writer's preparation by nourishing his "vitality" (*qi* 氣) and immersing himself in literary as well as non-literary traditions. In Matthew Arnold's words, it is the effort "to learn and propagate the best that is thought and known in the world" (Adams 595). On the other hand, *tongbian* encourages the writer to be sensitive to new possibilities, and to grasp the moments that inspire him to create works of surpassing beauty.

In Liu's "Understanding Critic" 知音 chapter, *tongbian* and *qizheng* 奇正 (the novel and the familiar, or the original and the conventional), feature as two of the six critical approaches (六觀). While we may say that in orientation *tongbian* is historical, and *qizheng* is formal, the two are closely related. In using them as criteria of judgment, a critic will seek to determine whether the quality of the text has been enhanced by both tradition and originality by comparing it with similar achievements in the past. Within the text the critic observes how the original elements function against the background of the conventional. We have seen that the Russian formalists considered literary change as an incessant alternation between automatized and deautomatized devices. Their critical practice, therefore, is the consideration of how the dominant elements function against the familiar background. In the final analysis, however, it is the quality of divergence from established modes that counts. In other words, what matters is not the originality of the author, but whether a work perceived to be original is, in fact, an outstanding

work of art. For, after all, just as one can change for the worse as for the better, a work can be original and yet inferior; not so original and yet superior.

To be sure, the Russian formalists place considerable emphasis on the differential quality of a literary fact. They view this quality of divergence (*diferencial noe kacestvo*) from current linguistic usage and from the prevailing artistic norms as important for creative deformation. In other words, this very divergence constitutes its aesthetic function. "A work is correlated," says Tynjanov, "with a particular literary system depending on its deviation, its 'difference' as compared with the literary system with which it is confronted" (Matejka 73, 77; Erlich, 252, 267; Fokkema 166). Presumably, the aesthetic function of new devices is that they enhance perception. This is only one side of the story because, without the old, the new will never appear to be new. The Russian formalists are usually preoccupied with ascertaining whether a given literary phenomenon has novelty or has violated conventions in one way or another. Their concern lies in whether a work of art has changed the direction of literary evolution rather than to what extent it has achieved literary excellence through its innovations (Wellek 288).

If a work of art is examined, however, with a view not only to finding its deviations and its differences from the prevailing conventions, but also to determining how it conforms to them or how it manages to present a tension between the familiar and the strange, one may be able to come to what Liu Xie has called a "rounded view" (*yuanzhao* 圓照) of the work (Zhou 48:888). In spite of Eliot's famous "Tradition" essay, we tend to forget that "the work of any poet exists by reason of its connection with past work, both in continuation and in divergence, and what we call his originality is simply his special relation to tradition" (Trilling 292). Even Longinus tells us that the way to the sublime involves "the imitation and emulation of previous great poets

and writers" as well as individual emotional intensity and imaginative power (Adams 85).

We can think of two extreme attitudes towards tradition: one is to venerate it as absolute and unchanging authority simply because time has given it its suasive power. The other is to consider it as detrimental or even hostile to creativity: tradition in this case is only a stereotype, something always to be shattered and replaced with the new. Classicists or traditionalists in general, East or West, tend toward the former, and Romantics and modernists usually incline to the latter. We can be sure, however, that extremists of both movements, in their adherence or reaction to tradition, frequently refer not to the whole, but only a selected part of tradition. Some may argue that the *tongbian* theory of both Liu Xie and Ye Xie boils down to mere middle-of-the-road eclecticism. Yet, as both Coleridge and the Russian formalists have also observed, no works of art can afford to be too new or too old, for they will then cease to interest their audience.

Notes

¹ The text referred to and my translation are as follows: 夫設文之體有常，變文之數無方，何以明其然耶？凡詩賦書記，名理相因，此有常之體也；文辭氣力，通變則久，此無方之數也。名理有常，體必資於故實；通變無方，數必酌於新聲。

Literary genres are relatively constant, but the ways for literary change are numerous. How do we know this is so? The names and formative principles of such genres as *shih* (poetry), *fu* (rhymed prose), *shu* (epistolary writing), and *ji* (memoir) correspond in their evolution. Thus, genres are relatively constant. On the other hand, the vital force and expressions of creative individuals vary, they must adapt themselves to changing situations in order to endure. Since the names and formative principles are relatively constant, the writers must have recourse to the established modes and principles. Moreover, since there is no definite method to practice the principle

of *tongbian*, the writers must maintain their sensitive awareness to new modes and cadences (Zhou 29: 569, cf. Shih 319).

² The text referred to and my translation are as follows:

夫厭陳熟者，必趨生新；而厭生新者，則又返趨陳熟。以愚論之：陳熟、生新，不可一遍，必二者相濟，於陳中見新，生中得熟，方全其美。若主於一而彼此交譏，則二俱有過……舒寫胸襟，發揮景物，景皆獨得，意自天成，能令人永言三歎，尋味不窮，忘其爲熟，轉益見新，無適而不可也。若五內空如，毫無寄托，以勦襲浮辭爲熟，搜尋險怪爲生，均爲風雅所擯。

Those who dislike the old and familiar will go for the new and fresh, and those who dislike the new and strange will turn to the old and familiar. In my opinion, one must not be biased towards either the old and familiar or the new and fresh. If people should be partial towards one of the two, with one party deriding the other, then both parties would be at fault . . . Writers should express their deep emotions and external objects uniquely and naturally. People will then appreciate and marvel at their works, and find endless flavor and freshness, without being bothered by their familiarity. Their works will therefore remain great regardless of time and place. If, on the other hand, writers are hollow inside, without any true feelings to express, and try to make up familiarity with plagiarism and empty words, or to obtain novelty by far-fetched, eccentric expressions, their works will be ultimately rejected by the world of letters. (Ye 591; cf. Chi, "Ye Xie" 98-99).

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