Article

Bridging the Divide: Literature, *Dao* and the Case for Subjective Access in the Thought of Su Shi

Curie Virág [1,2]

[1] Department of East Asian Studies, University of Toronto, 130 St. George St. 14-087, Toronto, ON M5S 3H1, Canada; E-Mail: curie.virag@utoronto.ca

[2] Institute for Advanced Study, Central European University, Október 6 Utca, 7, Budapest 1051, Hungary; E-Mail: visvirag@ceu.hu

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Abstract: In the 11th century in China, there was an unusual moment in which a number of philosophers, later associated with the *Daoxue*—or Neo-Confucian—school, confronted what they perceived as a long-standing sense of disjunction between inner, subjective reality and the structured patterns of the cosmos. One way they sought to overcome this disjunction was by positing new theories of the cosmos that focused on the underlying, shared reality behind the myriad differentiations of phenomena. A potential tension was born that affected how thinkers understood the relationship between *wen* 文 (writing, literature, culture) and Dao 道 (the cosmic process, the ultimate reality, the normative path). Some thinkers, like Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073), believed that *wen* was simply a vehicle for carrying the Dao, and was thus, implicitly, dispensable. This idea was met with resistance from one of the leading intellectual figures of the time—the philosopher, poet and statesman Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101). While some of Su's contemporaries, in their attempts to demonstrate that the world was real, and that truth was knowable, downplayed the role of individual experience and perception, Su stressed the necessity of subjective, individual experience as giving access, and concrete expression, to Dao. Su's philosophical project came in the form of defending the enterprise of *wen*—writing as a creative, individual endeavor—and asserting that the quest for unity with the Dao could only be realized through direct, personal engagement in *wen* and other forms of meaningful practice. Through his philosophy of *wen*, Su sought to show that the search for truth, meaning and order could not be achieved by transcending subjective experience. Instead, it had to be carried out at the point of encounter between self and the world, in the realm of practice.

1. Introduction

To a certain extent, the ancient quarrel between philosophy and literature, as discussed in Plato, is a "Western" problem: the particular tensions it is premised on are linked to conceptual distinctions that would be important in shaping philosophical inquiry in the West. Of course, much hinges on what we mean by philosophy and literature, and where we think the tension between them lies. The very question of what this "quarrel" was all about defies easy summation: the various Platonic dialogues, representing many different stages in the life and thought of their author, address different aspects of the problem and, moreover, do not necessarily deliver a tidy position [1,2]. Further complicating the matter, when we attempt to identify Chinese counterparts to the terms "philosophy" and "literature", we realize that there is no straightforward mapping, but a splicing of the modern Western terms across a number of different concepts in Chinese—concepts that have vastly different implications for how to approach the tensions at hand.

Acknowledging such difficulties, let us approach the issue with broad strokes and take as our point of departure one node of this ancient dispute, which is that of a distinction between philosophy's concern with truth as such, and poetry's essentially imitative enterprise. In Book X of *The Republic*, where the infamous passage about the quarrel appears, Socrates refers to "those skilled in making" (*tous poietikous*) as nothing but "imitators of phantoms of virtue and of the other subjects of their making" (601a) [3]. Rather than attaining to the truth of something and transmitting it to others, poets offer a man-made counterfeit, and even then, not of the actual thing but of merely its shadows or traces. Their enterprise is thus doubly removed from the realm of truth itself. By contrast, the Chinese literary tradition takes as its foundational model the account of poetry given in the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Poetry* (Daxu 大序, composed first century CE), which states:

> The poem (*shi* 詩) is that to which what is intently on the mind (*zhi* 志) goes. In the mind it is "being intent" (*zhi* 志); coming out in language (*yan* 言), it is a "poem" (*shi* 詩) [4].

This early definition of poetry derives from a presumed etymology of the term *shi* that is based upon a breakdown of the character into its constitutive elements:

詩＝言＋志

According to this account, a poem is the spontaneous expression of what is on a person's mind, and a truthful carrier of the world in which it was written. Early Chinese poetics was thus, as Stephen Owen has put it, "predicated on multiple levels of concealment" that offer the promise of revealing the reality of that of which it speaks. In contrast to a mimetic model of poetry that is premised

upon a "bipolar structure of signification", we have here a "triadic sequence of stages" on a path of successive disclosures ([4], p. 20) [1].

On the basis of these canonical early statements on the nature of poetry, there seem to be grounds for identifying in the Western and Chinese poetic traditions fundamentally different views of the relationship between truth and the literary enterprise. While one regards poetry as something that can never adequately convey the truth about which it attempts to speak, and even obstructs the very pursuit of truth, the other considers it to be a palpable trace of the reality that lies within the speaking subject, or of the reality with which this subject is confronted. The significance of these differences is indisputable, but it is important not to lose sight of the historical specificity of these perspectives, taking them as the basis for positing a dichotomy of East *vs.* West. If we go beyond authoritative texts like the "Great Preface" and consider how certain key thinkers in the Chinese intellectual tradition have reflected, more broadly, on the relationship between truth and literary form, we find a rather different range of possibilities—one in which the potential disjunction between words and truth, outer form and inner substance, was not only within view, but comprised an important theme.

A major voice of dissent against the idea that truth could be told through language was the early Daoist tradition. A central preoccupation in early Daoist writings was a tension between truth (Dao 道) and its linguistic approximations in the form of speech (*yan* 言) and names (*ming* 名). This openly challenged the Confucian faith in the disclosive function of outer forms of expression—not just speech and language, but also bodily conduct, demeanor, facial expression, ritual activity, music and so on— and questioned the very point of the discursive enterprise. Arguably, however, a more radical critique of literature took place in the Northern Song period (960–1127), when a number of thinkers who would eventually be associated with the Neo-Confucian tradition, particularly Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), proposed that the literary enterprise may work at cross purposes with the pursuit of truth. In their endeavor to show that reality was unified, coherent and structured by an intelligible pattern and structure, they concerned themselves with the realm beyond subjective, individuated forms of experience and perception. Locating an ultimate reality beyond the phenomenal realm, they came to see a tension between Dao and literary endeavors. This was not, however, because texts could not give access to the Dao: indeed, the early Neo-Confucians believed in the truth-value of their own schematizations of reality, and also in the embeddedness of truth in certain canonical ancient writings, such as the *Book of Change* [5,6]. The tension had to do, rather, with their assumption of the separability of truth from their phenomenal forms and expressions.

A prominent thinker who resisted this split was the philosopher, poet and statesman Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101). Su insisted on the necessity of subjective, individual experience as giving access, and concrete expression, to Dao itself. Su maintained that one could only engage with the Dao by remaining in touch with the diverse, phenomenal aspects of reality that people perceived and experienced for

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[1] This explanatory model leaves ambiguous the question of what this *zhi* (intention, being intent) consists of: while it represents the thoughts, dispositions, and so on, of the poetic subject, this is a subject that responds to a particular world. Thus, rather than a clear-cut sequence of stages passing from the condition of the world, through the poet, and then translated back to the world through the poem, we have what was probably a more complex picture involving the mediation of the mind of the poet. The functions and characteristics of this mind receive little elaboration in the "Great Preface".

themselves. To this extent, Dao was necessarily perspectival and had to be accessed through personal, individuated channels. This, however, did not mean that it was a relative, subjective truth: for Su, the Dao was real and to connect to it was objectively meaningful. Su's preferred way to connect to this Dao was through *wen*. *Wen* was not just a vehicle for transmitting Dao: it was a mode of engaging with it personally and directly. Through *wen*, the individual could transcend the gap between subjective experience and the objective patterns of reality. *Wen* represented in this way a genuine interface between self and the world.

2. The Limits of Language in Early Daoist and Confucian Thought

The idea that the ultimate reality could not adequately be captured and conveyed through language had ancient origins in China, and was a prominent theme in early Daoist philosophy. One of the clearest examples of this is Chapter 81 of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (fourth century BCE?), where truth and beauty of speech are pitted in opposition to one another:

> Truthful words (x*in yan* 信言) are not beautiful (*bu mei* 不美);
> beautiful words are not truthful.
> The good (*shan zhe* 善者) do not engage in disputation (*bu bian* 不辯);
> Those engaged in disputation are not good [7].

The contrast here between truthful words (*xin yan* 信言) and beauty (*mei* 美) is part of a more general concern with the limits and distortions arising from language. The famous opening lines of the text calls attention to an even more fundamental disjunction between Dao and the attempt to communicate it:

> The dao that can be spoken of 道可道;
> Is not the constant Dao 非常道.
> The name that can be named 名可名;
> Is not the constant Name 非常名 [7].

However one attempts to speak of (*dao* 道) the Dao, the utterance will fall short: the Dao is boundless and dynamic while language is limited and static. Accordingly, any name (*ming* 名) that one deploys to refer to it will be inadequate. The Dao, here, is not only the dynamic and constantly evolving cosmic process; it is also the primordial unity that is prior to the differentiation of things. As the "beginning of Heaven and Earth (*tian di zhi shi* 天地之始)", it is the state of natural fullness that precedes the division of the world into opposing categories through the human deployment of language. The Dao "conceals itself in being nameless" (道隱無名, chap. 7); it is "the nameless uncarved block" (*wu ming zhi pu* 無名之樸, chap. 41) [7].

The paradox, of course, is that the text then goes on to speak at great length about the Dao. However, it does so in ways that contravene the normal workings of language: it does not state what the Dao is but, deploying beautiful poetic language, it evokes it. Through the potent use of paradox, negation and contradiction—and indeed, through the problematizing of language itself—the text brings forth a Dao that lies beyond words and linguistic conceptualizations. Philosophically, the text represents what Philip J. Ivanhoe has termed a *therapeutic* use of language: one that taps into experience, rather than striving to elaborate the nature of truth as such ([8], p. 162). A vital part of this experience is the rousing of the desire to know and unite with the Dao—a desire that arises out of the very tension between language

and Dao, and that opens a space for arriving at Dao through a transcendence of the limits of language. This gives birth to a notion of a sage that is characterized by a kind of "erotic" search for the true nature of reality, of a Dao that is hidden. The sage is one who "keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practices the teaching that uses no words" (*xing wu ming zhi jiao* 行不言之教, chap. 2) [7]. What we have in the *Daodejing*, then, is a text that does not simply negate language as a false stand-in for an ultimately ineffable higher truth, but one that directly confronts and activates the tension between language and truth, giving access to deeper meanings of the Dao itself.

In the other major source text of the early Daoist philosophical tradition, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (third century BCE), there is a more sustained engagement with the problem of language as part of a general critique of logic, conceptual understanding, and human-centered values. The most direct confrontation of such issues can be found in Chapter 2, "The Sorting Which Evens Things Out" (*Qi wu lun* 齊物論). Here, too, what we find is not necessarily a negation and a rejection of language but a series of complications that relativize it. The basic problem with language—and with human constructs and conceptual categories more generally—is that it takes the ultimate oneness and unity of all things and artificially splits them, drawing attention to one or the other aspect and presenting it as the truth. To designate something as "this" (*shi* 是) automatically defines it in opposition to "that" (*bi* 彼); to designate something as "right" (*shi* 是) automatically defines it in opposition to "wrong (*fei* 非)." But by occupying the place in which these opposing categories connect—the "pivot of the Dao" (*dao shu* 道樞)"—one sees beyond these oppositions. This tendency of human language—this "piping of man" 人籟 (*ren lai*)—is to be distinguished from the "piping of Heaven" (*tian lai* 天籟), which is none other than the cosmic process that sets all into motion and "gusts through all the ten thousand differences, allowing each to go its own way" [9]. Thus it is that human constructs necessarily fall short of the fullness of Dao, and the very endeavor to express and communicate it through discursive language must fail: "When Dao becomes explicit (*zhao* 昭), it is no longer the Dao. When words enter into disputation, they no longer attain the meaning" ([9], pp. 19–20).

Much of this critique of language and logic is a direct reference to the philosophical disputations of the "Hundred Schools of Thought" that were active during the fourth and third centuries BCE. Drawing attention to the artificiality and divisiveness of language, the *Zhuangzi* relativizes the truth claims of these thinkers, asserting that the *Dao* is far greater and all-encompassing than the partial perspectives they put forward. Language not only splits the fullness of reality into pieces, affirming one or another of them; the very legitimacy of deploying language is cast into doubt with Zhuangzi's challenge to the efficacy of the dialectic itself as a vehicle for arriving at truth. Cheng Wuzi, one of the Zhuangzi's imaginary characters, puts it this way:

> Suppose you and I get into a debate. If you win and I lose, does that really mean you are right and I am wrong? If I win and you lose, does that really mean I'm right and you're wrong? Or could both of us be right, or both of us wrong? If neither you nor I can know, a third person would be even more benighted… [9].

There is, then, the possibility of distinguishing the meaning from the words. A passage in one of the later "Miscellaneous Chapters" (*Za pian* 雜篇) puts a more optimistic spin on this in referring to language as a "trap" with which to catch the meaning of things:

A fish trap is what you use to catch fish. When you've caught the fish, you can forget the trap. A snare is what you use to catch rabbits. When you've caught the rabbit, you can forget (*wang* 忘) the snare. Words (*yan* 言) are what you use to catch what one has in mind (*yi* 意). When you've caught what one has in mind, you can forget the words. Where can I find someone who has forgotten words, so I can speak to him (*yan*) ([9], p. 114)? [2]

Here, the *Zhuangzi* opens the possibility of communicating through language what one has in mind: having deployed words to convey it, it becomes possible to "forget" the words and separate out the essential message. Moreover, there are no indications in the *Zhuangzi* of an ontological division between language and speech on the one hand, and truth, on the other. The language may not necessarily amount to the truth, and may actually come to distort it, but that it can point to some reality is not fundamentally questioned:

"Speech (*yan* 言) is not just a blowing of air. Speech has something *of which* it speaks, something it refers to." Yes, but what it refers to is peculiarly unfixed. So is there really anything it refers to? Or has nothing ever been referred to? You take it to be different from the chirping of baby birds. But is there really any difference between them? Or is there no difference? Is there any dispute, or is there no dispute? Anything demonstrated, or nothing demonstrated?

By what is the Way hidden, that there should be a genuine or a false? By what is saying darkened, that sometimes 'That's it' and sometimes 'That's not'? Wherever we walk how can the Way be absent? Whatever the standpoint how can saying be unallowable ([9], p. 11)?

The Confucian school, along with some other early schools—such as the Mohists—were more optimistic about the capacity of speech to convey intentions and meanings. The *Analects* of Confucius stresses the way in which the inner person should be manifest externally in one's facial expression and bodily movements.

He said, "Look to how it is. Consider from what it comes. Examine in what a person would be at rest. How can a person remain hidden?—how can someone remain hidden" ([4], p. 19)?

The ideal of the unity of inner and outer meant that one's outer expressions and movements were important traces or clues of the inner person, revealing the total engagement of the person in his moral actions. They were also, more generally, visible signs of who we truly were. However, there is a significant caveat: this picture of unity—this tallying of inner and outer—was not necessarily a vision of what speech, poetry, or demeanor actually were, but of what, ideally, they *should* be. The proposition that a person's speech could adequately convey the true nature of a person reflected the more usual condition in which form and meaning, expression and reality, were split apart. Confucius thus notes on various occasions that speech could be deceiving: if it is often the case that "those who possess virtue (*de* 德) will inevitably have something to say (*you yan* 有言)", it is also true that "those who have something to say do not necessarily possess virtue" [10].

This disjunction between inner and outer was a real possibility not only in the case of words and names, but also of *wen* 文—the patterned, refined conduct that marked a person of culture and learning.

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2   I thank Romain Graziani for this rendering of the term *yi* 意 in this context.

This *wen*, which would eventually evolve into the term for "literature" or "literary values" after the Han Dynasty 漢 (206 BCE–220 CE), referred originally to the proper comportment of the gentleman. As with ritual conduct (*li* 禮), one's *wen* was seen as a counterpart to his virtue and integrity: it did not simply reveal or express one's personal substance, but was a necessary extension of it, giving it palpable form. The following exchange, recorded in the *Analects,* between Ji Zicheng, presumably a minister of the state of Wei, and Zigong, a disciple of Confucius known for his fastidiousness, exemplifies the tension between *wen* and "native substance" (*zhi* 質) that was an important preoccupation for Confucius and his disciples:

> Ji Zicheng said, "Being a gentleman is simply a matter of having the right native substance (*zhi* 質), and nothing else. Why must one engage in cultural refinement (*wen* 文)?"

> Zigong replied, "It is regrettable, Sir, that you should speak of the gentleman in this way—as they say 'a team of horses cannot overtake your tongue'. A gentleman's cultural refinement resembles his native substance, and his native substance resembles his cultural refinement. The skin of a tiger or leopard, shorn of its fur, is no different from the skin of a dog or sheep" ([10], p. 129).

Zigong's reply suggests a particular emphasis on *wen*, on the presence of cultural refinement as inseparable from one's "native substance". Confucius' own position was to insist on a balance between the two:

> The Master said, "When native substance overwhelms cultural refinement, the result is a crude rustic. When cultural refinement overwhelms native substance, the result is a foppish pedant. Only when culture and native substance are perfectly mixed and balanced do you have a gentleman" ([10], p. 59).

However, Confucius seems to have been well aware that this ideal of a balance between *wen* and native substance was elusive, just as it was difficult to achieve a perfect ritual expression that fully and adequately expressed one's feelings and commitments. In the case of ritual conduct, confronted with the real possibility of going too far or not far enough, Confucius opted for an excess in substance—in one's authentic feelings—rather than in ritual: "When it comes to ritual", Confucius observed, "it is better to be spare than extravagant. When it comes to mourning, it is better to be excessively sorrowful than fastidious" ([10], p. 18). Although there are no direct discussions about this, it may well have been that, in the case of *wen* as well—short of an optimal balance between *wen* and substance—Confucius may have chosen to err on the side of substance, thus acknowledging the tenuous claim to substance that an instance of *wen* could make at any given moment.

In the early Chinese philosophical tradition, then, there were varying levels of potential tension between language and refined, patterned expression, on the one hand, and meaning and substance, on the other. Early Daoist thinkers challenged the idea of language tallying with truth and reality, while continuing to affirm the connection between them in intriguing ways by exploring different ways of deploying language. The early Confucian tradition, for its part, sought to erase the potential tension between speech and substance, inner and outer, but this ideal itself was driven by a deep awareness of the split between the two in most cases, and of the difficulty of achieving the desired balance. In the end it was the substance, rather than *wen*, that would come to have ontological priority.

3. *Wen* as Cosmic Pattern

As a term designating refined, cultivated conduct, *wen* eventually acquired the sense, familiar to the modern understanding, of literature, writing and literary values. In his study of the evolution of the concept of *wen* towards the literary conception, Martin Kern identifies no fewer than five distinct non-literary meanings of the term *wenzhang* 文章 in the *Thirteen Canonical Books*, all of which could be traced in Warring States (5th–3rd centuries CE) texts:

(a) the refined personal outward appearance of a scholar;
(b) the refined personal appearance of a ruler or some abstract qualities of good rule;
(c) military/ritual insignia;
(d) normative ritual forms and standards;
(e) textile patterns on ritual vestments ([11], p. 55)

In the Confucian conception, as we have seen, *wen* represented a norm in which the proper outward form corresponded to inner virtue and potency. There was no split between inner and outer, form and substance, *wen* and some true reality, but an ideal in which the *wen* was the palpable, patterned expression of the inner reality.

During the Han Dynasty, *wen* came to be identified more closely with textual learning and writing. This transition was effected by Han Dynasty Confucian scholars, poets, and statesmen such as Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 45–86 BCE), Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE), Lu Jia 陸賈 (ca. 228–140 BCE) and Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE). These scholars asserted the authority of official written texts and put themselves forward as the guardians of this new form of learning and cultural transmission. As Martin Kern explains:

> [A]s the truth and authority of the canon had eventually absorbed and transformed the power of ritual practice into the mastership of texts, *wenzhang*—the appropriate appearance—was found less in sensual emblems and increasingly in correct writings that were based on canonical leaning: *wenxue*, in the Han sense of the word… [These scholars], originally choreographers of the rites and reciters of the canon, have eventually turned into scholars of the text ([11], p. 76).

Through this shift in the locus of cultural authority, *wen* became bound up with the enterprise of reading, writing and studying texts. This assertion of textual expertise as the basis of literati authority went hand in hand with a new emphasis on the connection between the written script and the patterns pervading the natural world. Xu Shen 許慎 (ca. 58–ca. 147 CE), the compiler of the Han Dynasty dictionary, the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字, glossed *wen* as "crossed lines, symbolizing criss-cross patterns" (錯畫也. 象交文) [12]. These natural markings were assumed to be the origins of the written script itself. In the "Xici zhuan" section of the *Book of Changes*, Cang Jie 倉頡, the legendary inventor of writing, is said to have devised the first forms of script by imitating the patterns of things he found in the natural world. From these natural patterns evolved a notion of *wen* in the human sphere—first denoting broader cultural phenomena such as patterns of behavior (ritual conduct, proper speech and dress) and eventually coming to mean "literature" and "writing".

That it was during the imperial Han Dynasty that *wen* became linked with the underlying structure and patterns of the natural world was not a coincidence. *Wen* in the form of cultural institutions and

written texts played an important role in the imperial project of expansion and consolidation, as part of the political endeavor to bring together the vast, diverse imperial realm into a single, unified empire. The literary enterprise of *wen* supported this imperial project at several levels. The task of political consolidation was mirrored in the imperial court's project of collecting, editing and reissuing the numerous ancient texts that had been transmitted to the present. Canons and textual groupings (such as the *Shi san jing*, the *Thirteen Canonical Texts*) were created, discrepancies between different versions of the same basic text were eliminated, and authoritative editions published. These projects devoted to the compilation, unification and promotion of the canonical corpus were a textual mirroring of the unified imperial and cosmological order. *Wen* in the sense of patterned order was thus achieved at the textual, political and cosmological realms.

This unified order based on *wen* was founded on a particular set of assumptions about the locus of meaning, both in the world at large and in the human realm. The basic idea was that the content and structure of a text was itself an embodiment of the content and structure of the world. As we have seen above, the orthodox theory of poetry promoted by the Han imperial court—the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經)—gives an account of poetry as an expression of what is on one's mind. In the context of the larger passage, poetry is further explained as direct, spontaneous manifestation of the inner condition of the person [13]:

> The poem is that to which what is intently on the mind goes. In the mind it is "being intent" (*zhi* 志); coming out in language (*yan* 言), it is a "poem" (*shi* 詩).

> The feelings (*qing* 情) are stirred within and take on form (*xing* 形) in words. If words alone are inadequate, we speak it out in sighs. If sighing is inadequate, we sing it. If singing is inadequate, unconsciously our arms dance them and our feet tap them [14]."

By this account, poetry genuinely and spontaneously articulates a person's thoughts and feelings. It is not a matter of making, but an "organic process of manifestation" ([13], p. 235).

After the collapse of the Han Dynasty in the third century, theorists of literature rejected the poetics of spontaneity articulated by the "Great Preface" and stressed, instead, the craft-like aspect of poetic creation. In his "Poetic Exposition on Literature" (*Wen fu* 文賦), Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303) called attention to the way in which talented writers in the past exerted effort to compose poetry—how they "used their minds" (*yong xin* 用心) and achieved writings of "splendid complexity of craft" (*sheng zao* 盛藻). Here, writing was a matter of making (*zuo* 作) rather than a spontaneous outpouring of thought and feeling ([14], p. 336). This meant that we could no longer take for granted that a literary work was an adequate expression of one's feelings. Indeed, *wen* was not even primarily a matter of expressing one's feelings or intentions: it was instead, among other things, a vehicle for giving form to one's *yi* 意 or conceptions. As invoked by Lu Ji, *yi* is a conscious act of reflection about the world.

By way of a preface to his theory of literature, Lu Ji confessed to a basic anxiety about the act of writing: "I constantly fear failure because my own conceptions are unequal to the things of the world, or because my writing is unequal to my conceptions [14]." Lu directly confronts here the problem of a potential split between what one writes and what one has in mind—in this case *yi* signifies more than the general idea of what one means. This gap between one's *wen* and one's *yi* is to be filled with the cultivation of one's skill: through the mastery of the craft of writing, one achieves not only an adequate expression of one's *yi* but also gives expression to the "principles of nature" (*li* 理) through its boundless

and divine capacity to capture the world in its infinite, transforming aspects. As Lu Ji writes in the closing section:

> The functioning of literature lies in its being
> The means for all principles of nature (*li* 理).
> It spreads thousands of miles and nothing can bar it;
> It passes millions of year, is a ford across.
> Ahead it grants models to ages coming…
> No path lies so far it cannot be included;
> No principle so subtle it cannot be woven in.
> Peer of clouds and rain with its nurturing moisture,
> Divinity's semblance (*xiang* 象) in its transformations (*bian hua* 變化) ([14], p. 342).

Lu Ji here makes an extraordinary claim to the truth value of *wen*, extolling its capacity to encompass any and all principles in the world. However, it is more than a mere image of the real: it possesses godlike functions in itself, in its boundless expressive potential and varying forms.

The sixth-century literary treatise, the *Wenxin Diaolong* 文心雕龍, offers an even more ambitious statement of the possibility of *wen* to join with the true substance and patterns of the world. In this work, Liu Xie 劉勰 (465–522), like the author of the "Great Preface", is concerned with reconciling, through the literary enterprise, the potential gap between the self and world. However, a major difference is that Liu Xie assumes that what is expressed through *wen* is not a conception of things in the world (*yi*), but a characteristic patterning of human beings as located in their emotional constitution, or *qing xing* (情性) [15]. In the "Yuan Dao" 原道 chapter, Liu explains that, just as all things in the universe—the sun, moon and stars, the mountains and rivers, the plants and animals—possess their respective, distinct patterns (*wen* 文), so it is that human beings possess a characteristic pattern. This pattern is specifically located in the mind, and is exhibited through literary compositions—through one's *wen*. The human capacity for *wen* becomes, in Liu Xie's vision, part of the very definition of the human, and is what comes to establish the place of human beings within a structured, intelligible universe in which all things have their distinct and manifest patterns.

After the Tang Dyansty reimposed imperial unity in the 618 CE, it revived the Han imperial cultural project of collecting and reissuing canonical texts, unifying the diverse commentaries on these canonical texts, and presenting its own authoritative readings. To this end, the Tang court commissioned a vast compendium of received texts and their commentaries and subcommentaries, which was notably titled, *The Correct Meaning of the Five Classics*. This early Tang publication project was based on a vision, embraced by thinkers from the Han Dynasty onwards, in which literary form and content were seen as embodying the structure and patterns of the universe. In the late Tang period, however, in the wake of a series of devastating military rebellions that led to loss of imperial authority over much of its former domain, the vision of the world as coherent, orderly and patterned could no longer be taken for granted. This loss of the sense of unity in the world affected the conception and practice of *wen*, and the very meaning and relevance of the transmitted textual tradition came under examination. From the late eighth century onwards, there was a distinct sense among a number of intellectuals that they were living in an age of cultural crisis—an age in which *wen* was no longer anchored in real patterns that could furnish a guide for human civilization. If, in the bygone era of the optimistic and flourishing imperial culture of

the Tang Dynasty, *wen* had signified the locus of cosmic and civilized order, cultural norms, and human values, the destruction of this imperial order inevitably threw into disarray the transmitted literary traditions and cultural institutions, and led thinkers to question the very justification for *wen* [16].

4. The Crisis of *Wen* and Dao, and the Search for Coherence in the 11th Century

In the ninth century, one way in which thinkers, writers and writers responded to this crisis of culture was to relinquish the belief in an all-encompassing, unified, sharable order—located in the cultural tradition or otherwise—and to simply accept that one's vision of the world was subjective, particular, and fragmented. Thus poets like Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751–814) and Li He 李賀 (791–817) wrote poetry that captured this fragmentary, dissonant experience of reality. Yet another response was that of Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), who advocated a new style of writing based on a revival of the ancient style of writing (*guwen*古文) and argued that *wen* was now a matter of conveying the will (*zhi* 志) of the individual, rather than an expression of the qualities of the world as such. This approach to *wen* went hand-in-hand with the view that the Dao itself was not about an objective process or reality to be discovered, but a human endeavor driven by human purposes: as Han wrote in his famous essay, "Inquiry on the Dao" (Yuan Dao 原道), the Dao is an "empty position" (*xu wei* 虛位) whose content is not fixed and remains to be filled by us [17].

In the 11th century, in response to this widespread loss of faith in the coherence and intelligibility of the world—an attitude that was particularly resonant with those thinkers inclined towards Buddhism—there was a renewed attempt among a number of leading thinkers to devise naturalistic accounts of the world that could ultimately demonstrate that the world was real, that it was structured according to orderly patterns, and that human beings could know it. Some of the thinkers engaged in such theoretical pursuits, including Zhou Dunyi and Cheng Yi—who would become identified by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) as founding figures of the *Daoxue* movement—were particularly interested in the search for truth in the sense of an ultimate, unified reality that lay behind the apparent diversity and disunity of the phenomenal world. This underlying reality they called Dao. The Dao referred to both the cosmic order and to the normative order by which human beings should structure their existence.

The cosmological explorations of Cheng Yi, Zhou Dunyi and others, were geared towards extracting some kind of shared, knowable essence from the varied forms of the natural world, and their attempt to do this led them to find the underlying, unifying structure pervading all things. Cheng Yi identified this structure with the concept of *li* 理, and focused specifically on the capacity of *li* to unify the differentiated phenomena into a single, comprehensible whole. As he famously put it, "*Li* is one but its manifestations are many (理一分殊)" [18]. The idea that all things possessed, and partook of, a shared *li* had some important epistemological implications. First, it introduced a common standard of knowledge and thus affirmed that the world was indeed intelligible: "All things under Heaven can be understood by way of *li*. If there is a thing, there is invariably a standard, so each thing must have its *li*" [19]. Second, it implied that one could comprehend the *li* of all things without necessarily investigating each and every thing, since all things *ultimately* shared the same *li*. Cheng Yi illustrated his point by way of an analogy with a path:

> Investigating things to fully understand principle does not mean that one must exhaustively understand all the things in the world. Rather, if you fully understand the principle in one situation, then the rest can be inferred... There are thousands of roads and paths that lead to

the capital, but one can get there by taking just one road. Thus, the reason we are able to understand principle is simply because the myriad things are all of the same principle. When it comes to individual things and affairs, everything, however small, shares this principle ([19], p. 157).

Third, in asserting *li* as the standard, it introduced a hierarchy of knowledge whereby to truly know a thing was to know its *li*. It was the *li* of things, rather than their phenomenal properties, that furnished the proper object of human investigation. Additionally, this *li* was directly accessible to human beings, since their moral nature (*xing* 性) was ultimately the instantiation of *li* in the human realm: according to Cheng Yi, "The moral nature is *li*" (性即理) ([19], p. 204).

When 11th century thinkers like Cheng Yi began to investigate the underlying structure and processes of reality in terms of these transcendent patterns, a potential tension was born between *li* and phenomenal reality. At the same time, the question emerged as to how to understand the relationship between *wen* 文 —writing, literature, and literary values—and Dao. As noted above, *wen* had at its origins the discernible patterns of the natural world, and continued to retain this connection to the character and workings of nature, even after the term had come into its own as a category denoting literature and literary values. From the Han Dynasty onwards, theorists of literature put forward wide-ranging accounts that sought to establish, in various ways, that *wen* embodied the patterns and processes of the natural world and of human reality as well. However, in the 11th century, the perceived disjunction between the objective, structured patterns of the cosmos and the individual's capacity to intuit and give expression to these patterns, gave rise to a distrust of *wen*.

In his *Penetrating the Changes* (*Tong shu* 通書), Zhou Dunyi made a distinction between *wen* and Dao, declaring that *wen* was a "vehicle" for carrying the Dao (文所以載道也) [20]. Although he emphasized the importance of beautiful expression in conveying the Dao and arousing interest in it, *wen* itself was secondary to the Dao that it carried. Literary expression, according to Zhou, was a matter of art (*yi* 藝), while Dao and virtue were the substance (*shi* 實). Ideally, a person of genuine substance would deploy art to give expression to the Dao. Art, being beautiful, would be loved and therefore naturally transmitted. The problem was that this could steer people away from endeavor to learn and to devote themselves to the Dao and to virtue. Zhou thus denounced those "unworthies" who did not apply themselves to Dao and virtue, but instead cultivated their capacity for literary expression which, in the end, was "nothing more than art" [20]. *Wen*, according to Zhou, was a tool for transmitting the Dao, and possessed value only insofar as it fulfilled this function.

In distinguishing between substance and art in *wen*, and in prioritizing the former, Zhou Dunyi was articulating a vision of the world, shared by his contemporary *Daoxue* thinkers, in which some level of truth could be extracted from the phenomenal reality of its expression. Through their patterned models of the cosmos and the natural world, they sought to describe a reality that transcended the limits of the subjective perspective, and to articulate an objective, sharable truth that could be accessed by all. Cheng Yi claimed that this access was provided by the universal possession of the patterned principles (*li* 理) within the self. His contemporary Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011–1077) maintained the possibility of the objective perception of things: by eradicating subjective elements such as emotions and individual preferences that might hinder this perspective, we could "contemplate things from the point of view of things (*yi wu gan wu* 以物觀物)" [21,22].

One possible response was to reject this picture of truth altogether: that is, to deny that the universe was patterned and structured, that it was unified, or that we had access to true understanding of the world as such, let alone its unifying patterns. However, there was another possibility: one could accept that the world was patterned, structured, and unified but still deny that the true patterns lay in a realm that transcended subjective experience. In other words, in investigating the Dao we ought not to strive for a third-person perspective, for Dao could only be accessed through the particularities of one's own subjective experience. In a way quite akin to the phenomenological approach in the 20th century, the pursuit of truth, it was claimed, was inseparable from the perspectives and experiences of the human subject. One thinker who actively sought to defend such a proposition was Su Shi.

5. Su Shi's *Wen* and Multiple Pathways of the Dao

According to Su Shi, the ontological distinction between subjective experience and objective reality could not be maintained. Su engaged with this issue at many levels, but a major focus was on the relationship between *wen* and Dao [23,24]. Su held that the two were inseparable, not only because *wen* was needed as a carrier of the Dao but also because there was no Dao independent of *wen: wen* was the embodiment and practical expression of an individual's encounter with the Dao. This implied a very particular conception of Dao itself: Dao was not an impersonal, transcendent reality that ultimately operated above and beyond the level of phenomena. Instead, it was an apprehension and an achievement that was only meaningful when actualized in concrete, personal experience. It emerged in the self's encounter with reality, in the form of an insight into the true nature of this reality. Because of this, Dao was by definition personal and could only be apprehended in its fullness through one's subjective experience. It was not something that one could capture and transmit to others through words or images.

In a prose essay called "On an Analogy for the Sun", Su compares the attempt to learn about the Dao from accounts given by others with the blind man's attempt to learn about the sun:

> A man born blind did not recognize the sun and inquired of the sighted about it. Someone told him that the sun's shape resembled a tin pan, so he rapped a pan and heard its sound. Later he heard a bell and thought it was the sun. Someone told him the sun's rays were like a candle, so he fingered a candle and felt its shape. Later he handled a flute and thought it was the sun.

> The sun is far removed from a bell and flute too, but the blind man did not know the difference, for having never seen it he sought it from others. Dao is more difficult to see than the sun, and while a man has yet to catch on he is no different from a blind man. When someone who has caught on tells him, however clever his analogies and skilled his guidance, he still can do no better than pans and candles. From pan to bell, from candle to flute; a never ending chain of images. Thus when men of our day speak of Dao some label it according to what they have seen and some, not seeing anything, imagine it. Both are errors of seeking Dao ([23], p. 275).

Su Shi's reference here is to the *Daodejing*'s opening lines, about the inadequacy of language to capture the Dao. But he goes beyond this to develop the idea that Dao is an understanding of how things are, based on direct, personal experience. Those living in the south, for instance, can swim, not because

someone explained to them how to do it, but because, growing up near water, they had ample opportunities to spend time in the water and to hone their skills. Apprehending the Dao was, similarly, about direct engagement and practice, and was achieved when one possessed expertise. It was about the experience of oneness with the world through total mastery of skill—of virtuosity—very much in the sense of the Zhuangzi's sage figure Cook Ding, whose long practice in carving oxen allowed him to so perfect his craft that he could do his work spontaneously and without deliberation.

For Su Shi, *wen* was one of a myriad creative human endeavors that enacted our condition of unity with the forces of the world and our apprehension of truth. Su's account of *wen* was thus simultaneously a statement about the nature of creative expression and about the nature of truth. *Wen* was significant insofar as it captured a moment of genuine encounter with the world, the apprehension of its coherence and unity, and the achievement of a resonance with the coherence and unity within oneself. That this encounter was more than a mental, theoretical apprehension is evident in Su's accounts of how he comes to compose poetry. In his poem, "An Outing to Lone Hill", Su describes how a memorable excursion inspires him to set down his experience in writing:

> This outing has been simple but of replete joy.
> Reaching home, I was dazed, as though just waking from a dream.
> I wrote this poem swift as fire, pursuing the evanescent—
> For a pure scene, once lost, cannot be described again ([25], p. 15).

Commenting on this poem, Michael Fuller writes of this event as an instance of the "immediacy of aesthetic reaction"—an endeavor that is charged with anxiety because Su's "sense of mutability is particularly strong" [25]. The poem is in fact not about the landscape at all, but about Su in the landscape, and how, with the traces of his encounter ever-receding, he came to write the poem. Su's urgency has to do with his own self-conscious awareness of the difficulties of being spontaneous when one is so self-aware: trying to hold onto the fading traces of his momentary, heightened experience of joyful exhilaration in the landscape, he rushes home to compose the poem before the dissolved boundary between himself and the world reasserts itself. While it presumes to capture a state in which he is still infused with the experience of the landscape, without the intervention of a mediating intelligence or self-consciousness, the poem is in fact doubly self-aware: Su presents himself, filled with thoughts and feelings of the scene he wishes to depict, in the act of writing.

The theme of true writing as perfectly spontaneous also emerges in Su's general account of his own process of writing. On one occasion, he compares his writing with the flow of water in a spring:

> My writing (*wen* 文) is like a ten-thousand gallon spring. It does not choose a place—it comes forth anywhere. On plains it rushes and flows, covering thousands of *li* without difficulty. And when it encounters the twists and turns of mountains, it assumes shape in accordance with these things. But it cannot not be known. What can be known is that it always goes where it ought to go, and always stops where it must stop, and that is all. As for the rest, even I am not able to understand it [26].

Wen becomes the occasion for overcoming of the duality between the self and the world of things, and of losing oneself in the flow of one's creative expression. As Su describes it here, his writing is a natural phenomenon that simply "comes forth" and assumes the shape of what it comes into contact

with, and is thus totally open to the world of things. Su's admission that he cannot even understand the process suggests that its mastery enables one to transcend the limited, subjective realm of conceptual understanding and unite with a higher, transcendent realm of reality. *Wen*, in short, allows him to move through the space in-between dualities. However, this is not quite a process of losing oneself in a higher order of existence. Properly realized, one's *wen* does not allow one to relinquish the first-perspective in favor of the third-person one. The image of *wen* as water, and the values associated with it, is not about the formless but about multiplicity—about the assuming of many different shapes. The value of *wen* is thus also precisely this: that it could capture Dao in its multiple guises and instantiations, and could represent multiple vantage points.

Neither is it exactly a process of losing oneself. On the contrary: the very experience of the self lies at the center of Su's literary enterprise. The multiplicity of perspectives and self-consciousness *vis-à-vis* the act of writing are joined to one another in Su Shi's vision. It is thus hardly a coincidence that Su Shi often deployed in his writings a highly visual language that emphasized the multiplicity of views, as well as the perspective of oneself in the context of the whole. Nor that Su was interested in landscape painting which, during his time, was evolving into the most important genre of painting [27]. What may have attracted Su to landscapes, and to the imagery of landscapes, was precisely that they enabled him to analyze and discuss the nature of perception. The shifting visual planes in contemporary landscape practice embodied the multiplicity of human vantage points while capturing something true and genuine about the self's experience of the world. Su thus stressed that one was always looking from a particular perspective and that, through one's roaming eye, a person could one could come to occupy multiple standpoints. The objective was not to achieve a total, all-encompassing view, but to envision diverse possibilities, which ultimately pointed to the very act of the self looking out at the landscape.

While these shifting perspectives could potentially dissipate any sense of self altogether, the recurring theme in Su's writing of the self gazing at the landscape, engaged in the act of seeing, hints at the unique value of the literary enterprise itself: as momentary as it is, it captures something of the very nature of the human predicament, its fragility and its poignancy, but also its potential to grant access to truth and meaning [28,29]. Su invoked this imagery of shifting views in his highly visual account of the Buddhist quest for enlightenment as a process akin to achieving a view of Mount Lu:

> Regarded from an angle, it forms an entire range;
> And from the side, it is but a single peak.
> Depending on whether one looks from far, near, high or low,
> It is not the same.
> If one cannot know the true face of Mount Lu,
> It is because one is standing within it [30].

One could not know the true face of Mount Lu because one was always standing *in* the landscape; there was no objective, all-seeing perspective, but only many particular perspectives from which to view the mountain. No ultimate truth transcended the particularity of one's vantage point. But there was the truth of the picture and of the writing, which captured, once and for all, a moment of genuine encounter with the world.

6. Conclusions

For Su, the fact that one could not envision Mount Lu from an all-seeing perspective did not mean true perception was not possible. Instead, it pointed to the multiple—and indeed, infinite—perspectives from which truth could be envisioned. One could, accordingly, only approach it as on a journey—from a particular point of departure, and through particular pathways. Similarly, just as a landscape admitted multiple possibilities of viewing, reflecting shifting positions and changing conditions of time and environmental conditions, so was one's *wen* was a deeply personal endeavor that was uniquely one's own, and that bore the traces of the circumstances of its composition. Properly executed, however, one's *wen* represented a moment of convergence between oneself and the world. In insisting on this point, Su not only defended the practice of *wen;* he also pointed to the possibility of bridging the potential divide between the search for truth and meaning, on the one hand, and the intensely individual and particular nature of our experience of reality, on the other. The solution was not a transcendence of personal experience, but a focus on the point of encounter between self and the world—an encounter that ultimately gave rise to the distinctively human enterprise of self-realization through literary creation.

Acknowledgments

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References and Notes

1. There is a vast body of literature devoted to this "quarrel", some of which has stressed that the quarrel itself was a fabrication of Plato, though not necessarily a conscious one. See, e.g., Glenn W. Most. "What Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry?" In *Plato and the Poets*. Edited by Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann. Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2011.
2. Raymond Barfield examines how the tension between philosophy and poetry unfolds over the course of the entire Western intellectual tradition, in *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
3. Allan Bloom, trans. *The Republic of Plato*. New York: Basic Books, 1968, p. 283.
4. Translated in Stephen Owen. *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 40–41. The brief discussion of the ontological implications of the definition of poetry given in the "Great Preface" is based on Stephen Owen's analysis and comparative discussion of the subject in this work.
5. On the hermeneutical principles surrounding the Neo-Confucian readings of the *Book of Change*, see On-cho Ng. "Religious Hermeneutics: Text and Truth in Neo-Confucian Readings of the *Yijing*." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34 (2007): 5–24.

6. A very useful collection of essays on the diverse Song Dynasty approaches to the *Book of Change* is Kidder Smith, Jr., Peter K. Bol, Joseph A. Adler, and Don J. Wyatt, eds. *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

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8. As Ivanhoe puts it: the *Daodejing* "is more a form of philosophical therapy than the presentation of a theory. We are to be challenged by its paradoxes and moved by its images and poetic cadence more than by any arguments it presents." Philip J. Ivanhoe, and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001.

9. Translations of the *Zhuangzi* modified from Brook Ziporyn, trans. *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2009, pp. 9–10.

10. Edward Slingerland, trans. *Confucius. Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentarie*s. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003, p. 155.

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12. A useful discussion of the early references to the term *wen* can be found in Tse-Tsung Chow. "Ancient Chinese Views on Literature, the Tao, and Their Relationship." *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 1 (1979): 3–29. The preceding brief account of *wen* given here is based on this article. The *Shuowen Jiezi* passage is quoted and translated on page 12.

13. See Stephen Owen. "Transparencies: Reading the T'ang Lyric." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 39 (1979): 231–51.

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17. Ma Qichang, ed. *Han Changli Wenji Jiaozhu*. Shanghai: Gudian Wenxue Publishers, 1986, vol. 1, pp. 13–19.

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23. The definitive work on Su Shi's engagement with *wen* in the context of eleventh century debates over the meaning and locus of Dao is the chapter on Su Shi (chap. 8) in Peter K. Bol. *"This Culture of Ours": Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992.

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