1

Crossroads, Distant Killing, and Translation

On the Ethics and Politics of Comparison

The way (*tao*) of Heaven, isn't it comparable to pulling a bow?
That which is too high is lowered down; that which is too low is lifted up.
That which is too much is reduced; that which is not enough is compensated.
The way of Heaven is to reduce what is too much and compensate what is not enough.
The way of man is not like this:
It takes from those who have not enough and gives it to those who already have too much.
Who can take the too much and give it to all under heaven?
Only the one who is in possession of the *tao*.

—*Laozi*, chapter 77[1]

To compare or not to compare, unlike to be, or not to be: that is *not* the question. On a most basic level, ontologically speaking, we cannot but compare, and we compare all the time in order to differentiate, recognize, understand, make judgments or decisions, and act upon our decisions. All our actions in cognitive and physical terms depend on making comparisons, and we have no other alternative but to compare, because as human beings we all rush into existence *in medias res*, with our living conditions and social environment,

1. Wang Bi (226–249), *Laozi zhu* [*Laozi with Annotations*], in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Masters Writings*], 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1954), 3:45. All translations from Chinese are mine. The *Laozi* or *Tao te ching* has dozens of English translations; interested readers may look at *Tao te ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), or *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, trans. Richard John Lynn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

including language and culture, already in place, and our life is always caught in between what is given and what is yet possible, external reality and our dreams, desires, and choices. High or low, superfluity or destitution, all these are impossible to conceive without comparison, and it is impossible to achieve the appropriate equilibrium between having too much and having not enough without making the right choice in comparison. It is one of life's little ironies that we have no choice but to choose, and when we choose, we must compare. The contrast between the self-plenitude of identity and the multiple-dependence of difference is an illusion, because the very concept of identity is established through comparison and differentiation, as Sigmund Freud has argued in psychoanalysis and Ferdinand de Saussure in linguistics.

Freud describes the ego as developing according to the "reality principle" by constantly comparing and interacting between the desires and impulses of the id on the one hand, and what is available in the external world on the other. For my purposes here, I cite a short piece by Freud that deals with the problem of identity and difference with direct reference to language in a way that reminds us of Saussure's linguistic understanding. "Our conceptions arise through comparison," says Freud in a review of Karl Abel's *Über den Gegensinn der Urworte*. "Were it always light we should not distinguish between light and dark, and accordingly could not have either the conception of, nor the word for, light," Freud reminds us with Abel. "'It is clear that everything on this planet is relative and has independent existence only in so far as it is distinguished in its relations to and from other things' . . . 'Man has not been able to acquire even his oldest and simplest conceptions otherwise than in contrast with their opposites; he only gradually learnt to separate the two sides of the antithesis and think of the one without conscious comparison with the other.'"[2] In psychoanalytic understanding, nothing exists without comparison with, and in contradistinction to, its opposite. The naive belief in one's own plenitude is mere "narcissism," typical of children and "primitive man," which Freud sees as gradually dismantled by the progress of science: "the self-love of humanity suffered its first blow, the *cosmological* one," when the Copernican heliocentric theory was generally accepted; Darwinian evolution dealt "the second, *biological* blow to human narcissism"; and Freud's own psychoanalysis constitutes the third blow, "the *psychological* one."[3] The human self is fundamentally and dynamically constructed in comparison and

2. Sigmund Freud, "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words," trans. M. N. Searl, in *Collected Papers*, 5 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 4:187

3. Freud, "One of the Difficulties of Psycho-Analysis," trans. Joan Riviere, ibid., 4:351, 352.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

differentiation, and its development a process of *Bildung* that proceeds through a constant cycle of alienation and return, an endless process of learning from what is different and alien.

We find an eminently comparable formulation of identity and difference in Saussure's structural linguistics. "The linguistic mechanism is geared to differences and identities," says Saussure, "the former being only the counterpart of the latter." He considers language as a system of mutually defining terms, in which the value of each sign is determined in comparison with those of other signs, and what is seen as identical is actually equivalent, that is, of equal values in comparison. He illustrates this characteristic of linguistic signs by drawing comparisons with non-linguistic examples. "For instance, we speak of the identity of two '8:25 p.m. Geneva-to-Paris' trains that leave at twenty-four hour intervals. We feel that it is the same train each day, yet everything—the locomotive, coaches, personnel—is probably different. Or if a street is demolished, then rebuilt, we say that it is the same street even though in a material sense, perhaps nothing of the old one remains."[4] The examples bring out the point that what we consider to be the same or the identical may in fact be quite different, and what counts as same or different is determined by an entire network of signs in mutual differentiation. "In language there are only differences," says Saussure. "Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*."[5] The point is that identity is not self-sufficient but is defined by what it is not more than what it is. In other words, identity is established in and through comparisons. Human existence is one of relations, and the necessity of comparison is a given in life, which presents both a good opportunity and a serious challenge.

Crossroads and Parallelism

The difficulty of comparing and making choices is well-illustrated by the story about an ancient Chinese philosopher Yang Zhu, who "wept at a crossroads, for it could lead to the south or to the north."[6] This may sound odd, but it

4. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 108.

5. Ibid., p. 120.

6. Liu An (?–122 BC), *Huainanzi* [*Master Huainan*], in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Masters Writings*], 7:302. A slightly different version of this story can be found in an even earlier text, *Xunzi*, and we can learn about the life and thoughts of Yang Zhu in several other texts, notably *Liezi*.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

takes a philosopher to weep at the juncture of uncertain possibilities, where the philosophical *Angst* is as much about making comparison as it is literally about choosing the right road. Facing a crossroads is of course a conceptual metaphor for facing the dilemma of uncertain possibilities and difficult choices. As George Lakoff and Mark Turner argue, "metaphor resides in thought, not just in words."[7] Conceptual metaphors reveal the deep-seated metaphoricity of the mind that constantly puts things in comparison and maps them over one another. It would be sheer stupidity to take a road that may lead to the south or to the north without considering what may lie ahead, but it is the figurative or metaphorical meaning of a crossroads that enables us to understand Yang Zhu's anxiety—not that he was perplexed by roads going in different directions, but that he feared the consequences of making a wrong move.

In facing roads that diverged in a wood, Robert Frost may have shown, in comparison with the Chinese philosopher, a more robust sense of determination in simply saying that "I— / I took the one less traveled by, /And that has made all the difference."[8] The last line seems to make a factual statement about the consequences of the road taken or the choice made, but what about the road not taken (which is, after all, the title of this famous poem)? Isn't the statement made "with a sigh"? Isn't there the suggestion of a sense of loss or regret, a tinge of sadness perhaps in those words? As another American poet, John Whittier, puts it, "For all sad words of tongue or pen, / The saddest are these: 'it might have been!' "[9] It is in comparison with what "might have been," the lost opportunity of an imagined better condition, that sadness sets in. Happiness or sadness is of course a matter of perception in comparison. "All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," so begins Leo Tolstoy's great novel, *Anna Karenina*, in a neat parallelism.[10] The Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* starts likewise

7. George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 2. The concept of identity is not "autonomous," Lakoff and Turner insist, and they present their argument against the "autonomy claim" of language, i.e., the view that conventional language is semantically autonomous and not metaphoric. Instead, they maintain that "conventional language and our conventional conceptual system are fundamentally and ineradicably metaphoric," and that "there are general mappings across both poetic and everyday conventional language." Quoting Robert Frost's lines about roads taken and not taken, they argue that if the metaphor is not fundamentally conceptual, "there would be no way to explain either why we understand this passage to be about life or why we reason about it as we do" (p. 116).

8. Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken," *Selected Poems* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1992), p. 163.

9. John Greenleaf Whittier, "Maud Muller," in Percy H. Boynton (ed.), *American Poetry* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), p. 254.

10. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Louise Maude and Aylmer Maude (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 1.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

with a comparison, a cyclical notion of history, which presents unity and division as the two choices alternately made in the unfolding of dynastic history: "Speaking of the overall condition of all under heaven, it tends toward unity after prolonged division, and division after prolonged unity."[11]

It could be instructive to see how many memorable beginnings of great novels tell us about the world, real or fictional, by way of comparison. Here is one of the most well-known, the beginning of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.[12]

The parallel structure of this passage is fundamentally comparative, and comparison is, as noted above, not just a structural given in language, but in the mind itself. "In giving shapes to human beings, nature always makes their bodies in symmetry with limbs in pairs. Through the use of divine principles, nothing is left in isolation," says Liu Xie (465?–522), a fifth-century Chinese critic, as he traces parallelism in language and thinking to a natural, even divine origin. "The mind creates literary expressions, and puts a hundred thoughts in the right design. The high and the low are mutually dependent, thus one-to-one parallels are naturally formed."[13] Liu Xie's words seem perfectly suited to what we experience in reading the passage from Dickens. The rhetorical juxtaposition, antithesis, and parallelism are all predicated on the mental work

11. Luo Guanzhong (1330?–1400?), *San guo yanyi* [*The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1985), p. 1. For an available English translation, see *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*, attributed to Luo Guanzhong, trans. Moss Roberts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

12. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: The Modern Library, 1996), p. 3.

13. Liu Xie (465?–522), *Wenxin diaolong zhu* [*The Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons with Annotations*], 2 vols., annotated by Fan Wenlan (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1958), 2:588. For an available English translation, see Liu Hsieh, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons: A Study of Thought and Pattern in Chinese Literature*, trans. Vincent Yu-chung Shih (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

of thinking in comparisons, and in reading Dickens's depiction of an age full of contradictions, we seem to detect a strong rhythmic impulse that reveals a natural tendency toward comparison.

For Roman Jakobson, parallelism embodies Saussure's legacy, his "radical distinction between the 'syntagmatic' and 'associative' planes of language," a "fundamental dichotomy."[14] Jakobson further develops that dichotomy into the two axes of "positional (namely, syntactic) contiguity" represented by metonymy and "semantic similarity" represented by metaphor, the interaction of which can be seen everywhere in language, but is particularly pronounced in literary parallelism. "Rich material for the study of this relationship is to be found in verse patterns which require a compulsory parallelism between adjacent lines," says Jakobson, and he mentions examples "in Biblical poetry or in the West Finnic and, to some extent, the Russian oral traditions."[15] If he knew Chinese, he would probably have added Chinese poetry as the most exemplary, for the second and third couplets in a Chinese *lü shi* or regulated verse, also known as "recent-style poetry," require the parallel structure of an antithesis far more strict than most other prosodies. A famous poem by the great Tang poet Du Fu (712–770) is unusual in having parallelism in every couplet, which may give us some idea of the strict prosodic rules for making a regulated verse in classical Chinese poetry:

> The wind is strong, the sky high, sadly the gibbons are crying,
> The islets are clear, the sands white, in circles the birds are flying.
> Boundless forests shed their leaves swirling and rustling down,
> The endless river flows with waves rolling and running near.
> Ten thousand miles, in sorrowful autumn, often as a wanderer I sigh,
> A hundred years, old and sick, alone up the high terrace I climb.
> In misery and hardships, I hate to see my hair turning all white,
> Out of ill fortune and poor health, I've lately abstained from wine.[16]

In my translation above, I try to keep the word order as close to the original as possible so that the parallelism of each couplet can be seen clearly. Each word in the adjacent lines of a couplet is put in comparison with its

14. Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1956), p. vi.

15. Ibid., p. 77.

16. Du Fu, "Climbing Up the Terrace," in Qiu Zhao'ao (fl. 1685), *Du shi xiangzhu* [*Du Fu's Poems with Detailed Annotations*], 5 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1979), 4:1766–67.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

counterpart—thus "the wind is strong" and "the islets are clear," "the sky high" and "the sands white," "the gibbons are crying" and "the birds are flying," "boundless forests" and "the endless river," "ten thousand miles" and "a hundred years,"—all these are strictly parallel and must contrast to one another in meaning, grammatical category, and particularly tone, as Chinese has four tones and the tonal pattern forms the basis of the musical quality of the language. As Yu-kung Kao and Tsu-lin Mei note, "Jakobson's theory can account for the facts of [Chinese] Recent Style poetry with greater ease than for those of Western poetry—for which the theory was originally intended."[17] In discussing the formation of Chinese phrases and the required antithetical structure of regulated verse, James J. Y. Liu claims that "there is a natural tendency in Chinese towards antithesis." He makes a distinction between antithesis in Chinese poetry and parallelism in other literatures and argues that "antithesis, known as *tuei* in Chinese, differs from 'parallelism,' such as in Hebrew poetry. Antithesis consists of strict antonyms, allowing no repetition of the same words, as parallelism does."[18] It is true that Chinese poetry requires a more strictly antithetical structure than biblical parallelism, but the principle of its structure is comparative, and in that sense, antithesis can be seen as a subspecies of parallelism, not something entirely different in kind. Indeed, whether it is identity through differentiation in a psychological or a linguistic sense, crossroads as a conceptual metaphor or contradictions juxtaposed at the beginning of a novel, the antithesis in a Chinese regulated verse or parallelism in biblical poetry, all these are fundamentally related to comparison, which proves to be the *modus operandi* of thinking and language.

In the postmodern critique of fundamentals, we are told not to essentialize anything and not to hold things in a metaphysical hierarchy, as though any kind of comparison or differentiation, any value judgment, or any order of things would result in a repressive regime that privileges one and, of necessity, excludes all other alternatives. That may explain why some feel uneasy about comparison and question its validity, but if we do not compare and prioritize at all among a number of possibilities, we cannot move, and there would be no action, no narrative, no literature, and no history. Weeping at a crossroads as the philosopher Yang Zhu did may be in itself a temporary choice, but

17. Yu-kung Kao and Tsu-lin Mei, "Meaning, Metaphor, and Allusion in T'ang Poetry," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 38:2 (1978): 287.

18. James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 146. For a classic study of parallelism in biblical poetry, see James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

eventually you need to choose a road and move on. Otherwise, you may shed a lot of tears, but your life remains an empty possibility, not a lived experience. The point is, again, not that we can choose to compare or not to compare, but that we need to make reasonable comparisons and good choices rather than bad ones: good and bad in a profoundly ethical and political sense, as the comparison and the choice we make have consequences affecting our own lives as well as the lives of others. Since comparison is something we always do anyway, all the talk about whether to compare is but idle talk. The question is not whether, but how;—it is a matter of the relevance or reasonableness of the comparison we make, and of its consequences and implications.

Killing a Chinese Mandarin

Kwame Anthony Appiah presents cosmopolitanism as a moral choice, the idea that "no local loyalty can ever justify forgetting that each human being has responsibilities to every other."[19] Here local closeness is compared with, or contrasted to, the distance of the "other," whose fate and condition may seem far from one's immediate concerns. Distance in time and space is a matter of comparison: How far does one's obligation or responsibility extend to a stranger as compared to one's relatives or close friends? How does one treat someone unseen or even unknown in comparison with one's own group or community? In this context, Appiah recalls a scene in Balzac's novel, *Le Père Goriot*, where Eugène Rastignac talks to a friend and poses a question he attributes, erroneously, to Jacques Rousseau. "Have you read Rousseau?" asks Rastignac. "Do you recall the passage where he asks the reader what he'd do if he could make himself rich by killing an old mandarin in China merely by willing it, without budging from Paris?"[20] The killing of a Chinese mandarin far from France by mere volition, without ever getting close and dirtying one's hands, and therefore without the danger of being found out and punished, is presumably something a Frenchman might fancy in view of getting the mandarin's wealth in return. Like Yang Zhu weeping at a crossroads, wondering whether to kill a mandarin in China may serve as another conceptual metaphor with philosophical implications. "Rastignac's question is splendidly philosophical,"

19. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. xvi.

20. Honoré de Balzac, *Le Père Goriot* (Paris: Éditions Garniers Frères, 1961), p. 154; quoted in Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, p. 155.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

Appiah notes. "Who but a philosopher would place magical murder in one pan of the scales and a million gold louis in the other?"[21] Weighing a stranger's life on a balance against "a million gold louis" vividly evokes the point of moral choice and challenges one to consider the ethical and political implications of comparison, and also the core idea of cosmopolitanism as extending one's moral responsibilities to distant outsiders and strangers.

Rastignac's question, however, does not come from Rousseau, but more likely from Adam Smith in a passage in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1760). In discussing the limitations of moral imagination, Smith speculates how a European might react to the news of an imagined earthquake that suddenly wiped out "the great empire of China." Though a decent European might feel sorry for "the misfortune of that unhappy people" and reflect on "the precariousness of human life," eventually he would go back to his daily routine, "with the same ease and tranquility, as if no such accident had happened." The death of millions of Chinese would seem insignificant in comparison with the smallest pain that might happen to his own person. "If he is to lose his little finger to-morrow," writes Smith, "he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own."[22]

Appiah sees both Smith and Balzac posing a question about the moral implications of physical and psychological distance, responsibility, and emotional involvement, all based on the comparison of gain and loss: "If we were to apportion our efforts to the strength of our feelings, we would sacrifice a hundred millions to save our little finger (Smith's inference); and if we would do that (this is Rastignac's corollary), we would surely sacrifice a single faraway life to gain a great fortune."[23] Ethics is all about making the right moral choice, and what constitutes the right choice is based on the comparison of the good and the bad, and sometimes the bad and the less bad. For Appiah, cosmopolitanism implies giving up killing a mandarin in China, even if it also means giving up the opportunity to get rich without much effort or risk. It is a moral choice made not because of a simple sense of sympathy, but because "we are responsive to what Adam Smith called 'reason, principle, conscience,

21. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, p. 156.

22. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 157.

23. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, p. 157.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

the inhabitant of the breast.' "[24] Cosmopolitanism, therefore, is not something natural or intuitive, but it requires a lot of sound thinking and reasonable comparison, a choice consciously made after careful deliberations.

In a learned essay on the theme of killing a Chinese mandarin, Carlo Ginzburg traces the idea of the moral implications of distance to Aristotle and then mainly to the works of Diderot and Chateaubriand, thus establishing a French lineage for Rastignac's question in *Le Père Goriot*. In speaking of pity as an emotional response to something terrible that happens to people, Aristotle used the expression "ten thousand years" as an extremely large figure "to suggest a time, either past or future, so remote that it prevents us from identifying, either in a positive or in a negative way, with the emotions of other human beings."[25] Distance diminishes the intensity of our emotional response, and this is further developed in Diderot's discussion of a man illicitly taking a sum of money away, far from home. "We agreed," says Diderot, "that perhaps distance in space or time weakened all feelings and all sorts of guilty conscience, even of crime. The assassin, removed to the shores of China, can no longer see the corpse which he left bleeding on the banks of the Seine. Remorse springs perhaps less from horror of oneself than from fear of others; less from shame at what one has done than from the blame and punishment it would bring if it were found out." As Ginzburg remarks, Diderot here seems to echo Aristotle's idea, but "it is Aristotle pushed to an extreme."[26] It is interesting that both Adam Smith and Diderot used China to suggest huge distance. In the eighteenth century, because of the Jesuit missionaries' letters and reports, China was very much on the minds of European thinkers, though for the average person, it was still a faraway place, probably on the margins of some imaginary *mappa mundi*, and thus suitable as a symbol of the greatest distance possible.

Ginzburg points out that the assassin who left Paris for China in Diderot's work reemerged in François-René de Chateaubriand's popular work, *The Genius of Christianity*, where the author writes, "I put to myself this question: 'If thou couldst by a mere wish kill a fellow-creature in China, and inherit his fortune in Europe, with the supernatural conviction that the fact would never be known, wouldst thou consent to form such a wish?' "[27] The question obviously responds to Diderot's hypothetical situation and is almost identical

24. Ibid., p. 174.

25. Carlo Ginzburg, "Killing a Chinese Mandarin: The Moral Implications of Distance," *Critical Inquiry* 21: 1 (Autumn 1994): 48.

26. Denis Diderot, "Conversation of a Father with his Children," in *This Is Not a Story and Other Stories*, trans. P. N. Furbank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 143.

27. Viscount de Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity; or the Spirit and Beauty of the Christian Religion*, trans. Charles I. White (Baltimore: John Murphy and Co., 1856), p. 188.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

to Rastignac's in Balzac's novel. Chateaubriand, as Ginzburg notes, "created a new story: the victim is a Chinese; the murderer, a European; a reason for the murder—financial gain."[28] Chateaubriand, however, used that hypothetical murder of a Chinese to prove the ubiquitous presence of conscience, particularly from a Christian point of view. However he tried to rationalize the distant killing of a Chinese, eventually, says Chateaubriand, "in spite of all my useless subterfuges, I hear a voice in the recesses of my soul, protesting so loudly against the mere idea of such a supposition, that I cannot for one moment doubt the reality of conscience."[29] In Balzac's novel, Rastignac's friend likewise eventually rejects the temptation and chooses to extend his moral responsibility to a stranger despite the enormous distance. In fact, *tuer le mandarin* was a rather popular theme in the nineteenth century with a philosophical point, and we find variations on this theme in works as different as the Portuguese writer Eça de Queiróz's *The Mandarin*, in which the wealth suddenly acquired by the magic killing creates a huge problem, and Arnold Bennett's *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns*, in which Vera, a fashionable lady, was contemplating killing a mandarin by mere imagining in order to buy herself a brooch for her gown.[30] All these stories make an ethical point about comparison as a moral choice.

In *The Hypothetical Mandarin*, Eric Hayot considers "killing a Chinese mandarin" to be "a generic philosopheme for the question of how best to be, or to become, a modern, sympathetic human being."[31] In the "civilizing" process of European life and sentiments during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, China was both on the margin as a sign of the distant "Other" *and* an "empire of cruelties," a barbaric foil to contrast with civilized Europe, "a horizon of horizons."[32] In an article on the same subject, Iddo Landau discusses killing a mandarin as a thought experiment, a philosophical hypothesis that reveals the deep-seated self-deception of all human beings, that people are often worse than they think they are, that most people "are ready to, or have significant difficulty in refusing to, murder a human being, if it is clear that we would never be caught," thus highlighting "the importance, or centrality, of society's supervision over us."[33] From a European or American point of view,

28. Ginzburg, "Killing a Chinese Mandarin," p. 54.

29. Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*, p. 188.

30. See Eça de Queiróz, *The Mandarin and Other Stories*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (Sawtry, UK: Dedalus, 2009), and Enoch Arnold Bennett, *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns* (London: Penguin, 1946).

31. Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 8.

32. Ibid., p. 10.

33. Iddo Landau, "To Kill a Mandarin," *Philosophy and Literature* 29 (April 2005): 94.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

a Chinese mandarin signifies an unknown person from a distant place, but the philosophical import of this thought experiment need not be limited to just European or American. In fact, the fantasy of killing a person at great distance without the risk of dire consequences is not at all an alien idea in Chinese imagination. In a satirical essay on "Chinese Fantasies," the influential modern writer Lu Xun observes: "There is another small fantasy. That is, with a gentle hum a man can send out a ray of white light from his nostrils and kill his hated enemy or opponent, no matter how far away it is. The white light will return and no one will know who's done the killing. How nice and carefree it is to be able to kill someone and have no troubles for it!"[34] The similarity between this Chinese fantasy of magic killing and the European idea of distant killing is rather striking. In his study of classical Chinese fiction, Lu Xun notes that such fantasies, stories of "riding on clouds and flying daggers," were quite old and already had become popular in the literature of the Song dynasty from the twelfth to the mid-thirteenth centuries.[35] Such fantasies of distant killing seem to anticipate the Western fantasy of killing a Chinese mandarin, but the significant difference is that the Chinese fantasy does not have a Frenchman or Englishman as the target. This lack of particularity reveals something specific about modern and European coloniality that we cannot relate to those classical stories of Chinese fantasies.

Hayot refers to a version of killing a Chinese mandarin in Gertrude Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography*, in which she remarks that "many people had thought it was funny when, in her opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 'they asked Saint Therese what would she do if by touching a button she could kill three thousand Chinamen and the chorus said Saint Therese not interested.' "[36] Saint Therese here shows her saintly quality and moral conscience, but thanks to the progress of science and technology, particularly in the manufacturing of increasingly more sophisticated and powerful modern weaponry, the distant killing of thousands of people by pushing a button in a bomber or a missile base is no longer an abstract philosophical hypothesis or literary fantasy, but a real choice available for the politicians and military commanders to make (and have made) in the world today. On the one hand, the development of

34. Lu Xun, "Zhongguo de qixiang" [Chinese Fantasies], *Lu Xun quanji* [*Lu Xun's Complete Works*], 16 vols. [Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1981], 5:239.

35. See Lu Xun, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi lue* [*A Concise History of Chinese Fiction*], *Lu Xun quanji* [*Lu Xun's Complete Works*], 9:100.

36. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (New York: 1971), pp. 89–90; quoted in Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin*, p. 205.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

science has made it possible to kill from a distance, but on the other, because the fantasy of distant killing has become a real and lethal possibility and, more importantly, a possibility no longer exclusively European and American, killing a Chinese mandarin has lost its guarantee of safety in its original imaginary form. In comparison with the time of Diderot and Balzac, then, science and moral sensibility in our time have almost eliminated the distance—physical and psychological—between China and the West, and has given the metaphor of killing a Chinese mandarin a definite feel of datedness, an unsavory flavor of Western racism and imperialism, which the original metaphor purports to question and challenge in the works of Adam Smith, Diderot, Chateaubriand, Balzac, and others.

When Adam Smith imagined an earthquake that destroyed "the great empire of China," he probably had in mind the real, devastating earthquake that had destroyed the city of Lisbon in 1755, which inspired Voltaire to write his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* and *Candide*, in which he satirized Leibniz's optimistic idea of "the best of all possible worlds." That famous earthquake had a profound influence on the Enlightenment philosophers and helped change European thinking and society in many ways. If the Lisbon earthquake was indeed the background for Smith's imaginary earthquake in China, for at the time China seemed so far away from Europe that such natural disasters could only be imagined by the Europeans, then we may compare Smith's imaginary earthquake with the real and hugely destructive Sichuan earthquake that shook China in May 2008, or the horrible earthquake, tsunami, and dangerous radioactive leaks at the Fukushima nuclear power plant in Japan in March 2011. Both of these earthquakes in Asia were immediately reported the world over through satellite TV and extensive international news coverage that made them a compelling reality felt far beyond China or Japan, at least in people's consciousness, such that it became rather difficult for an average European or American with any degree of decency to brush it aside as if nothing had happened. Intercontinental travel, Internet, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, television, and world news reports—all these common features of the digital age—have made the world seem much smaller. What was distant one hundred years ago now seems close to home in the so-called global village.

If distance diminishes the intensity of emotional responses, then, compared with the time of Adam Smith or Balzac, have modern science and technology diminished the distance between different parts of the world, say, between China and Europe? That killing a Chinese mandarin has gone out of currency in the usage of our time may suggest a positive answer. And yet, whether one is to extend one's moral responsibilities to distant strangers as compared to

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

one's relatives and close neighbors is still a choice to be made, still a matter of comparison each time we face a real issue. We find ourselves still facing a crossroads that calls for careful comparisons and reasonable decisions.

A Critique of Untranslatability

Translation is all about comparison, about finding comparable or equivalent expressions in one language for those in another, and in recent theoretical reflections, translation is often taken to be a model for comparative literature. "Global translation is another name for comparative literature," as Emily Apter puts it.[37] So far, I have argued for the necessity of comparison, so translation as inherently comparative is also, I would argue, always necessary and possible. Much of recent Western theorizing, however, has focused on the notion of untranslatability, the idea that translation is impossible. Apter's "Twenty Theses on Translation" begins with "nothing is translatable," though paradoxically or dialectically, it ends at just the opposite position: "everything is translatable."[38] Untranslatability in Apter's argument, however, does not really mean incomparability and therefore does not mean the impossibility of translation. Untranslatability is a misnomer.

There is always this dream of untranslatability, what John Sallis calls "the dream of nontranslation": "What would it mean not to translate?" asks Sallis. "What would it mean to begin thinking beyond all translation?"[39] If thinking is speaking to oneself, as Plato and Kant have argued, it is already thinking in language and therefore, Sallis asserts, "it will never have outstripped such translation. . . . In other words, for thinking to begin beyond such translation would mean its collapse into a muteness that could mean nothing at all; incapable of signification, it would have ceased—if thinking is speaking to oneself—even to be thinking. It would have risked a captivation that falls short even of silence, if indeed silence is possible only for one who can speak."[40] But mystics and philosophical mysticism have always dreamed of that silence, and despite his effort to refute it, Sallis has to admit that "attestations to

37. Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. xi.

38. Ibid., pp. xi, xii.

39. John Sallis, *On Translation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 1.

40. Ibid., p.2.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

untranslatability abound."[41] They abound particularly in recent theorizing in translation studies, in which the idea of untranslatability denies languages their basic comparability.

In her introduction to a volume of essays on translation, Sandra Bermann reminds us that the semantic "overlap" of words in different languages, on which translation is based, can only be partial, that words seemingly synonymous are in fact untranslatable, "as is attested by Benjamin's famous example of '*Brot*' versus 'pain' or Saussure's equally well-known discussion of '*mouton*' versus the English 'mutton' *and* 'sheep.' "[42] That no two languages or linguistic expressions totally overlap is a basic fact that calls for comparison and translation in the first place, but when Benjamin claims that "the word *Brot* means something different to a German than the word *pain* to a Frenchman, that these words are not interchangeable for them, that, in fact, they strive to exclude each other," he is making a clear distinction, "distinguishing the intended object from the mode of intention." As though to forestall misunderstanding, Benjamin immediately goes on to add: "As to the intended object, however, the two words mean the very same thing."[43] For Benjamin, the mode of intention or the way in which the intended object manifests itself is always couched in a particular language and makes sense only in that language. *Brot* makes sense in German and differs from *pain* in French, but using the concepts in German phenomenology, he also argues that different languages with their different modes of intention can intend "the very same thing," or relate to the same referential intentionality. Benjamin does not, in other words, endorse the idea of untranslatability. On the contrary, he emphatically states that "the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them."[44] Benjamin argues that beyond their different idioms and modes of intention, all languages want to express a deep intention realized in a "pure language."[45] It is this pure language that one tries to translate, and it is in this pure language that translation finds its ultimate legitimacy.

Benjamin's idea of the task of the translator, as Antoine Berman comments, "would consist of a search, beyond the buzz of empirical languages, for

41. Ibid., p. 112.

42. Sandra Bermann, "Introduction," in Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (eds.), *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 5.

43. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Glasgow: Fontana, 1973), p. 74.

44. Ibid., p. 70.

45. Ibid., p. 74.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

the 'pure language' which each language carries within itself as its messianic echo. Such an aim, which has nothing to do with the ethical aim, is rigorously metaphysical in the sense that it platonically searches a 'truth' beyond natural languages."[46] For Benjamin, translatability is rooted in the very nature of languages and their comparable intentionality, it is confirmation of the possibility of translation on a conceptual level, even though on a technical level, some words or expressions may prove to be untranslatable. "The very aim of translation—to open up in writing a certain relation with the Other, to fertilize what is one's Own through the mediation of what is Foreign," says Berman, "is diametrically opposed to the ethnocentric structure of every culture, that species of narcissism by which every society wants to be a pure and unadulterated Whole."[47] The idea of untranslatability is wrong because it is based, wittingly or unwittingly, on that narcissistic desire of cultural and linguistic purity, the ethnocentric illusion that one's own language and culture are unique, superior to, and incomparable with, any other. Or, in a different way, it is wrong because it keeps the Other as absolutely Other, as totally different from one's self, with no possibility of comparison, understanding, and communication. Translation as comparison of the Other with what is one's Own is thus deeply ethical as the act of communication and the establishment of a human relationship.

In a discussion of the ethics of translation, however, Robert Eaglestone deliberately goes against the widely accepted view "that translation is central to the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas," and puts forward his own counterargument that challenges such a consensus. "Levinas's work," says Eaglestone, "offers an understanding of ethics that suggests the impossibility of translation."[48] According to Eaglestone, "Levinas's thought is about translation—but that movement is heading out from the community to the other, precisely where translation is impossible. Levinas argues for an unending (and so infinite) ethical responsibility incumbent on each of us. The counterintuitive conclusion is that we are each responsible for those we do not, cannot, and could not understand."[49] But with such total alienation and lack of understanding, how can one establish an ethical relationship with the Other in an

46. Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, trans. S. Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 7.

47. Ibid., p. 4.

48. Robert Eaglestone, "Levinas, Translation, and Ethics," in Bermann and Wood (eds.), *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, p. 127.

49. Ibid., p. 137.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

intense engagement, what Levinas calls "the face-to-face with the Other"?[50] What Levinas calls "face" denotes the presence and alterity of the Other, but he speaks of human relationships, not of automatons. "Face to face with the other man that a man can indeed approach as presence," the thinking subject is exposed, says Levinas, "to the defenseless nakedness of the face, the lot or misery of the human," ". . . to the loneliness of the face and hence to the categorical imperative of assuming responsibility for that misery." For Levinas, it is the "Word of God" that commits us to such a moral responsibility, hence "a responsibility impossible to gainsay."[51] With such an absolute moral command, ethics is injected into hermeneutics, and the dialogic relationship with the Other in understanding is recast as the real and practical questions of human relationships and responsibilities: questions of comparison and moral choice. Denying understanding is thus to deny recognition of the "face" of the Other, its suffering and misery, its basic humanity; it is to put the Other at the fantastic end of exoticism as pure difference, or at the endlessly remote distance where untranslatability turns into total indifference. The ethical implication of translation as communication is the comparison of the Other with one's self, the extension of moral responsibilities to the Other in comparison with one's own relatives and one's own community.

When Emily Apter draws on Alain Badiou to "rethink translation studies from the standpoint of the presumption that 'nothing is translatable,'" she acknowledges that her notion of "the translation zone is established on the basis of the philological relation."[52] To limit comparison to philological relations with common etymons in languages and shared sociohistorical conditions, however, is a very limited view, almost of the old-fashioned *littérature comparée* with its positivistic emphasis on *rapports de fait*. What Badiou does is to discard all those philological and cultural relations in the comfort zone and to compare a classical Arabic poet Labîd ben Rabi'a with the French poet Mallarmé across huge chasms and gulfs in culture and language. Badiou does not have much faith in the old-fashioned comparative literature, nor does he consider much translation of great poets adequate, but he is not at all inimical to comparison. On the contrary, he believes "in the universality of great poems, even when they are represented in the almost invariably disastrous approximation that translation

50. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other [and Additional Essays]*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 79.

51. Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 158.

52. Apter, *The Translation Zone*, p. 85.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

represents." "Comparison," says Badiou, "can serve as a sort of experimental verification of this universality."[53] Translation may be miserably inadequate as "disastrous approximation," but it is surely not impossible. Here we may recall Benjamin's remark that "the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them." For Badiou, it is comparison that makes understanding possible despite disastrous translations. In his comparative work, as Apter well describes it, "for all the obstacles posed by translation, 'great poems' surmount the difficulty of being worlds apart and manage to achieve universal significance. This poetic singularity against all odds challenges the laws of linguistic territorialization that quarantine language groups in communities 'of their own kind' (as in Romance or East Asian languages) or enforce a condition in which monolingualisms coexist without relation."[54] That is exactly what comparative literature for our time should be—comparison not just within but beyond and across philologically linked language groups, across Romance and East Asian languages. "Badiou's literary universalism, built on affinities of the Idea ("une proximité dans la pensée") rather than on philological connections or shared sociohistorical trajectories," says Apter, "defines a kind of *comparatisme quand même* that complements the militant credo of his political philosophy."[55] For Badiou, the very act of comparison bears witness and serves as "experimental verification" of the universality of radically different literary works brought into comparison. That, in my view, holds out an exciting and promising prospect for comparative literature more effectively than the translatability of everything into everything else by, into, or through digital codes in an age of advanced computer technologies.

Concluding Remarks: The Inevitability of Comparison

The Self and the Other are invariably correlated as identity and difference, or more precisely, as identity through comparison and differentiation. This can find another formulation in Spinoza's famous motto *omni determinatio est negatio*—"determination is negation."[56] To determine or ascertain one's Self

53. Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 46.

54. Apter, *The Translation Zone*, pp. 85–86.

55. Ibid., p. 86.

56. Benedict de Spinoza, *Correspondence, The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), 2:370.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany

is necessarily to relate to the Other in an act of comparison and differentiation; thus Spinoza puts forth the following as an *ethical* proposition: "Every individual thing, or everything which is finite and has a conditioned existence, cannot exist or be conditioned to act, unless it be conditioned for existence and action by a cause other than itself."[57] Freud and Saussure made the same argument in psychoanalysis and linguistics, which all confirm that comparison or differentiation is ontologically and epistemologically necessary, inevitable, and always already functioning. That is also the core of my argument in this chapter.

Parallelism and antithesis are obviously predicated on comparison, while the conceptual metaphors of a crossroads and distant killing help bring out the necessity as well as the challenge of comparison as a risky business with moral and political implications. Cosmopolitanism as a moral choice is seen as deeply comparative in the sense that it measures the distance of the Other against one's loyalty to one's relatives and local community, and argues for extension of one's responsibilities to distant strangers and outsiders. Finally, translation is inherently comparative as it involves the Self and the Other, what is one's Own and what is Foreign, the close and the distant, the local and the global. It is essential not only because it engages different languages and their comparability, but because understanding and communication are, in a broad sense, necessary for forming any human relationships. Translation, in that sense, is then a fundamental form of communication like dialogue, and thus a form as essential to Mikhail Bakhtin as it is to Levinas. Bakhtin puts it very well: "To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end."[58] We may say in the same vein that comparison, by its very essence, cannot and will not come to an end. Bakhtin's insistence on dialogue thus becomes as much a moral imperative as Benjamin's insistence on translatability or Badiou's insistence on *comparatisme quand même*. Comparison, we realize, is what we must always do to exist and to act, and therefore what and how we compare—and what follow as consequences of our comparison—truly deserve our critical attention.

57. Spinoza, *The Ethics,* Ibid., 2:67.

58. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 252. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist first made the connection between Bakhtin and Levinas. They emphasize Bakhtin's skeptic attitude toward systematizing and put him in a tradition of thinkers "from Heraclitus to Emmanuel Lenivas, who have preferred the powers that inhere in the centrifugal forces." See Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 8.

© 2015 State University of New York Press, Albany