On Reading *Laokoon*

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In the course of study into ancient Chinese aesthetics, our attention is often monopolised by only the most celebrated theoretical works. It goes without saying, of course, that works such as the “Record of Music” ("Yue ji" 樂記), the *Ranking of Poets* (*Shipin* 詩品), *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍), and the various *causeries* on poetry and prose, painting and dramatic prosody must remain the focus of our research, as too must the innumerable letters, prefaces and so on that proclaim themselves to be discussions of literature and art. At the same time, however, anyone who is honest about the matter is forced to admit that extensive research into this type of material has certainly not produced a harvest commensurate in its proportions with the effort expended. Much of the research has resulted in cliché and empty rhetoric, and has simply afforded the researchers involved the opportunity to strike well-mannered poses.

Discussing the nature of literary anthologies, Ye Xie 葉燮 (1627–1703) once complained: “They may well be entitled ‘An Anthology of Writing,’ but they are in fact little more than ‘Selections of People’” (On the Anthologist” ("Xuanjia shuo" 選家說), *Jiqi ji* 己畦集, *juan* 3). What are often “entitled” histories of the criticism of literature and art are “in fact” no more than *Summaries of the Pronouncements of Famous Historical Personages in the Field of Literature and Art*. Each and every one of the personages cited may well be famous, but what they have to say often lacks any substance.

Frequently, however, in poetry and lyric verse, in occasional writings, novels and drama, even in popular ballads and proverbs or critical exegesis, we find expressed, unconsciously and often in only a line or two, profound and inspiring insights that benefit our understanding tremendously. When amplified, these insights contribute greatly to our theories of literature and art. Some will perhaps argue that such bits and pieces amount to nothing and are thus unworthy of our picking out and glorifying. They will go on to claim that as such insights are at best both isolated and spontaneous they cannot pass muster as systematic and self-conscious theory. Yet it is precisely because such fragmentary and trifling things are so easily overlooked and forgotten that they require even more that we garner them up and give them our care and
attention. Spontaneous and isolated insights constitute the source of all self-conscious and thoroughgoing theory. What is more, many of those *causeries* on poetry and prose that we read so assiduously cannot be said to embody any form of theoretical system.

We need only reflect for a moment upon the processes of intellectual history. Although a great many closely argued and comprehensive philosophical and ideological systems have not survived the vicissitudes of time and have already lost their integrity, various specific insights once contained within these systems have remained to be taken up by later generations without losing any of their initial effectiveness. One can make an analogy with a large and imposing building that has already been destroyed and can no longer either accommodate people or inspire awe. The timber, stones, bricks and tiles used in such a building remain useful, however. Inevitably, those things of value that do remain after the collapse of complete theoretical systems are but partial ideas. Such partial ideas are, by their very nature, fragmentary, regardless of whether they have previously formed part of larger systems or have remained merely embryonic. A viewpoint that pays attention only to major theories or that holds such isolated sentences or phrases in contempt, intoxicated with quantity and thus ignoring a gram of worth for a ton of verbiage, is superficial and vulgar—if it is not in fact an excuse for laziness and sloppiness.

Let me give an example of this truth. Recently,1 a number of our literary theorists have developed an interest in Diderot’s *Paradoxe sur le Comédien* (The Paradox of Acting), and have written numerous articles discussing this work. The essence of the “paradox” they discuss is this: only when an actor is himself calm and sober may he give lifelike expression to the ardent passions of the character he plays. He must first learn not to be “stirred” himself before he can vividly “manifest” the joy or anger, sorrow or happiness of the character *(c’est le manque absolu de sensibilité qui prépare les acteurs sublimes)* [In complete absence of feeling is the possibility of a sublime actor)]; for instance, when an actor wishes to play fury well *(jouer bien la fureur)*, he must certainly not himself be furious *(être furieux).*2 In actual fact in eighteenth century Europe this insight was certainly not Diderot’s alone,3 while Don Quixote had hit the

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1 This article was originally written in 1962.


3 Cf. my *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters* (管錐編), pp. 1190–93. Nietzsche has argued that if an actor is affected by the emotions that he is playing, then he is “finished” *(er wäre verloren)*, *Kunst und Künstler*, Item 7, *Werke*, Alfred Kroner, Vol. XI, p. 2; a contemporary sociologist, Erving Goffman, has claimed that everyday life within society