

# Useless Parables: Chuang-tzu's Lost Ground, Kafka's Broken Wall

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## ABSTRACT

Here I explore what I see as Kafka's and Chuang-tzu's common "neighborhood" of parabolic or metaparabolic thinking/discourse. I interpret Kafka's "Great Wall of China" and "Parable of Parables" and four stories (fables, parables) from the *Chuang-tzu*—the "untrodden ground," "disappearing ground," "useless oak tree" and "sacred turtle"—in the light of this meta-parabolic dimension. This self-reflexive and indefinitely recursive discourse or textual strategy that "points beyond itself" by effectively cutting away its own ground or literal sense, thereby self-destructing, is closely tied, in both Kafka and Chuang-tzu, to the praxis of an "unlimited" thinking/saying, which again is the praxis of the "use of uselessness." That is, the uselessness of the most abstract or (logically) "limitless" thinking is both ironically contrasted and paradoxically identified with the most radically immanent sense of real-life suffering and the need to survive. Thus, in "becoming parable" as Kafka calls it, or in moving (flowing) over onto the "untrodden ground" in Chuang-tzu's terms, we simultaneously become irrelevant to the "problem" of human existence and already "solve" it—by no longer, in a sense, seeing the difference between what is parable and what is not.

## KEY WORDS

Metaparabolic discourse  
divinatory discourse  
spillover saying  
"becoming parable"

(un)ground  
broken wall  
praxis of uselessness



Kafka had read a certain amount about China, travelers' tales, Buber's work, and scholars have identified Chinese sources for stories where China is not even mentioned. He told Felice Bauer, in a famous phrase, that he *was* Chinese;<sup>1</sup> and of course the whole question of the imaginary appropriation of real places is a fascinating one: we could think of Brecht's China too; Julia Kristeva's; Roland Barthes's Japan . . . Kafka's . . . China . . . his textual China . . . appears in several stories and fragments, most noticeably of course in "The Great Wall of China" . . . probably written in 1917, first published in 1931 . . .

Kafka's China is a place of infinite, elaborate, patient, uncertain interpretation—but then so is everywhere else in Kafka, so we need not linger over this characteristic in itself. It is the domain of an ancient bureaucracy, and it has vast internal spaces—so vast, we read, that even fairy tales cannot evoke it, and heaven itself is scarcely wide enough to span it. An analogue, perhaps a parodic exaggeration of the Austro-Hungarian empire. It is endless China, *das unendliche China* . . .

—Wood 330-331

No doubt Kafka's "China" may largely be, as Wood claims, a kind of "imaginary appropriation," a textual "place" embodying the arcane, absurdly ingrown and overgrown "bureaucracy" which permeates this writer's work: the labyrinthine hierarchies of power, baroque

castles and passageways with their "vast internal spaces," infinitely regressive series which, while clearly also grounded in certain psychological and sociopolitical realities of Kafka's life as a Prague Jew with an extremely authoritarian father, seem to "point beyond," parabolically, toward metaphysical referents whose ontological status remains uncertain.<sup>2</sup> But immediately we sense a certain ambiguity in the nature of this appropriation: on the one hand this "textual China" seems to have something distinctly "Chinese," or at least Non-Western, about it, and as such might be, even if we see it as an "analogue, perhaps a parodic exaggeration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire," the result of a certain kind of (intentional or unintentional) distortion or even prejudice.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand it represents for Kafka a universal (dis)order, that of the human condition itself at the most (parabolically extended) "abstract" levels of meaning—the logical-epistemological maze of human puzzlement about the ultimate (absence of) meaning or ground, the linguistic maze of textuality and of reading itself, that "place of infinite, elaborate, patient, uncertain interpretation." We might wonder: could this view of "China" be distorted if China represents something so huge, so virtually unlimited? (It's "internal spaces"—like those of Kafka's texts, not least "The Great Wall of China"—are "so vast . . . that even . . . heaven itself is scarcely wide enough to span it.") Compared, for instance, with the (clearly tropical, brutally authoritarian, "hieroglyphic") culture of the "Penal Colony," the "China" of "Great Wall" seems a far more complex, abstract, universal, self-reflexively textual kind of place.<sup>4</sup>

Here then I will not try to go any further in unraveling the problem of what "China" may have meant for Kafka in relation to his view of Europe. The more interesting problem for me is: how seriously do we take what can be read as "Confucian" and "Taoist" elements in "Great Wall"? But this question is closely tied to the issue of a universal or local meaning for "China," since those "vast inner spaces" of labyrinthine (and perhaps Austro-Hungarian) bureaucracies, those endlessly ingrown structures of power, can clearly be read in terms of classical Confucianism—a parodic exaggeration and/or (intentionally or unintentionally) "distorted" view of Confucianism. I am therefore

fascinated by what I tend to see as the (countervailing as it were) "Taoist" aspects of "Great Wall," though I'm not sure how or why (or even if) Kafka is (intentionally or unintentionally) mixing the two "philosophies" here; I'm certainly not assuming any sort of (at least direct) "influence" on Kafka of ancient Chinese thought—there is no evidence of this that I know of. I propose, then, simply to read specific passages from "Great Wall" and "Parable of Parables" and from (the ancient Taoist philosopher) Chuang-tzu which seem to throw light on one another in interesting ways. I want to explore, beyond the obvious differences between Chuang-tzu and Kafka—for Kafka's "China" is after all "(post) modern" as well as "Western" in certain respects—what I sense may be a crucial similarity, a common tendency of thought or expression. I see in both writers a logically and metaphysically playful thinking which strives to reach "beyond itself"—hyperbolically, parabolically, perhaps self-reflexively or recursively—by expressing itself in concrete images of its own "unlimitedness" and, closely tied to this, of its "uselessness" in relation to (our limited) "ordinary life." But the "useless" also has a certain "use"; this parabolic (hyperbolic) project or vision is both paradoxical and interminable; the meta-parabolic image becomes one of "incompletion."

### Historical, Political, Metaphysical Levels of the "Wall"

As Wood suggests, whatever "else" China may have meant for Kafka it clearly meant something *unendliche*, "unending"—a term which has implications of both "infinity" and "incompletion." "Great Wall" is a "report":<sup>5</sup> its central image is a wall which was never finished; its ostensible purpose is to understand the meaning of this incomplete "thing," the construction of which the "Emperor" (or "high command") has, according to the standard "history," decreed—and/or to understand the meaning of the Emperor's "principle of piecemeal construction." "Naturally in this way many great gaps were left . . . Now on first thoughts one might conceive that it would have been more advantageous in every way to build the wall continuously . . . After all, the wall was intended . . . to be a protection against the peo-

ples of the north. But how can a wall protect if it is not a continuous structure?" Since the unfinished (broken, ruptured) wall is "useless," cannot serve the purpose for which it was supposedly intended, our investigator takes it—and/or the "imperial command" which ordered it to be built—as something absurd, incomprehensible in human terms.<sup>6</sup> Thus the "speaker" of this report, the "reporter" or "investigator"—reminiscent of the canine speaker in "Investigations of a Dog" who reflects on the meaning of canine existence, or the ape speaker in "Report to an Academy" who gives an objective report on his own "becoming-human," or indeed K reflecting on the meaning(s) of "the Law," or virtually any of Kafka's "characters"—is trying to analyze or explain that which is (like human, ape or canine existence itself) fundamentally unanalyzable, inexplicable, incomprehensible. That is, he is engaged in a hermeneutic project which is by definition interminable, impossible to finish, forever (and "always already") incomplete.

In all fairness to the "reporter" in "Great Wall," the conclusion that the wall is something absurd is not reached immediately. The discontinuous system of construction, resulting in a discontinuous wall, logically has two explanations, a more "pragmatic" (and presumably historically accurate) and a more mythic-metaphysical—"parabolic" one.<sup>7</sup> The practical explanation is that the task was simply too vast in scope, the wall too hard to finish, so that the emperor or "high command" had no choice but to leave it unfinished, a "piecemeal construction;" the mythical explanation is that the emperor/high command is "too wise" not to have foreseen all the (practical) difficulties, that this discontinuous wall was therefore "decreed," the system of piecemeal construction indeed a "principle" rather than something reached by default. But while he speaks of the "exhaustion" of construction supervisors and the need to allow masses of workers to return home periodically, the speaker never really wants to assume that the high command did not "plan" it this way: every apparent "contingency" is given a ground in (logical) necessity. One way to read this, and "Great Wall," would then be as a ("Confucian") rationalization of the people's suffering: countless workers were forced into slave labor to build something that was never finished (and was therefore useless), so

there had to be an official "myth" to justify this absurd reality, make sense of it. The actual history of the Great Wall suggests that a justifying, morale-raising myth from "on high" would have been needed: "The *Shih chi* says . . . ([The emperor] dispatched [his general] Meng T'ien to lead a force of a hundred thousand men north to attack the barbarians. He seized control of all the lands south of the Yellow River and established defenses along the river, constructing forty-four walled district cities overlooking the river and manning them with convict laborers . . . . Thus he utilized the natural mountain barriers . . . . The whole line of defenses stretched over ten thousand *li* . . ." (Waldron 70).<sup>8</sup>

But surely these "defenses along a river" are not the Great Wall as we know it? Waldron's point here is also that the Great Wall as we now know it has evolved through many ("piecemeal") versions, that the standard "history" of it is largely mythical (and political): "We can say with certainty . . . that this Ch'in frontier was discontinuous, built of earth and stones, and had vanished by the later Han . . . Chinese writers of the time were, in any case, singularly unconcerned with its specifics; for them its importance was moral. The wall project became, with the burning of the books and burying alive of the Confucian scholars, one of the primary examples of the despotism of the first Ch'in emperor. Condemnation of the Ch'in's approach to rule was a preoccupation of its successor, the Han . . ." (70-71). Thus Kafka may be playing on what is already an ambiguous "history" in the speculative, mythic-historical "reconstruction" of his reporter here. This is one of the more obvious ways in which "Great Wall" can be read as a satire or parody of "official Confucian" history (of the wall); then this "official history" itself becomes the "piecemeal construction" (reality/fantasy, history/myth), becomes itself the "broken wall." We get a variation on this parodic exaggeration of (the discontinuity of) official history, and on meta-narrative "brokenness," if we read "Great Wall"'s own "piecemeal construction" in terms of those infinite, labyrinthine, self-reflexive (Confucian) commentaries, passed down through historical "tradition," on ancient texts.

"Great Wall"'s speaker seems then to keep jumping to the

mythic-political-metaphysical explanation of the wall's piecemeal construction in terms of an "intentional decree"—as if perhaps the "pragmatic" (actual) explanation could never have been distinguished in the first place from this one, as if it was always already "pointing toward" it.<sup>9</sup> But this explanation of the discontinuous wall as the result of an imperial decree itself breaks down, logically speaking—the labyrinth of logical pathways is after all Kafka's "game"—into two possibilities: either the emperor (and/or the "high command") did decree the building of this (absurd) wall at a certain discrete point in time/history, or in fact it/he (high command/emperor) never *decreed* it, as "the high command has existed from all eternity, and the decision to build the wall likewise," while the "Honest, unwitting Emperor . . . imagined he decreed it!" (Glatzer 242)<sup>10</sup> One of the reporter's more interesting speculative explanations of the first hypothesis—this (absurd) "order" (in both senses of the term) was actually given at a certain time (rather than having existed "from the origin") by the Emperor (God, high command)—is this: absolute power maintains itself as/in absolute power, maintains its utterly "transcendent" status with respect to the "empire," by giving just such (humanly) incomprehensible commands. Here we will less likely think of Foucault or Nietzsche than of Kierkegaard, who follows Tertullian: we believe in God precisely because He or it (such a belief) is absurd; He/it transcends human rationality or sense; such belief is the (non-rational, non-ethical) leap of faith; God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac was incomprehensible, "absurd," and demanded on the latter's part a "teleological suspension of the ethical."

There are indeed various hints that the emperor (high command) could also be the Judaeo-Christian God, with his (arbitrary, thus absolutely powerful) decrees: "Let there be light," or "Let's destroy the human race with a flood," or "Let's confuse their tongues so they can't finish their tower and reach up to Heaven." (One of the many speculations about the wall—although, as the reporter notes, the wall's fragmented state cannot easily justify it, rendering this possibility at least partly absurd though not perhaps "impossible"—is that it was to be the foundation for a new and improved Tower of Babel.)

And then one reading of the second logical possibility—that this command has never been given by the Emperor, that indeed there is no Emperor—becomes: God does not exist, God is dead. This is clearly one way to read the “dying Emperor’s” message to “you” in the parable (within “Great Wall”) of the “Imperial Messenger,” that message whose very “announcement”<sup>11</sup> is interminable, that “truth” which can never reach (from author to) its intended reader: “I (the Emperor, God) am dying/dead,” “There is no God/Emperor/absolute meaning” (yet “you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself.”) If the intimate connection between (the self-identity or persistence of) absolute power and the absurdity (incomprehensibility in/to the human world) of its “commands” is Kierkegaardian, the “infinite delay” of this news of the death of God strongly echoes the end of Nietzsche’s “madman” parable in *Gay Science*.<sup>12</sup>

But while the Judaeo-Christian God is no doubt one of the (more obvious) meanings of Kafka’s “emperor” here, we are given pause by that second option in this logical maze, this (broken) garden of forking paths: the command was never given by the emperor, it has existed from all eternity, he only imagines he gave it. On a Judaeo-Christian view of things, we might identify this “command” (to build an absurd wall, create an absurd world—absurd for whom? for God Himself or only for His creatures?)—with God, who after all has “existed from all eternity.” But then in a sense God has disappeared behind His command (and/or His creation), has somehow “gotten lost” (as the crowd sarcastically suggests to Nietzsche’s madman) or “disappeared.” (Deism? Cabalism? Atheism?) The Judaeo-Christian reading is further problematized by Kafka’s emphasis on the “people,” on “we Chinese” (for whom the speaker clearly speaks, of whom he is part) in “Great Wall”: “Far rather do I believe that the high comand has existed from all eternity . . . Unwitting peoples of the north, who imagined they were the cause of it! Honest, unwitting Emperor, who imagined he decreed it! We builders of the wall know that it was not so and hold our tongues.” Are these human builders—the same citizens of the world or human empire, perhaps, who tried to build a tower that reached Heaven and were stopped by the Biblical God, who appar-

ently had no intention of "sharing power"—themselves the (eternally pre-existing) creators, the origin of the order to build or that order itself, since they alone "know" about it? On this reading the human creators "become God"—the wall the foundation for a new Tower of Babel reaching to Heaven—and also (like Him) disappear behind their own production (or self-construction).<sup>13</sup>

A "Taoist" reading of "Great Wall" could easily account for this virtual disappearance of the "transcendent" and foregrounding of "we the builders." Such a reading, subsuming the ethical-political within the metaphysical, might take the "broken wall" at face value as an indefinable, indeterminate, useless "thing," and take this again as representing the cosmos. That is, the Taoist worldview<sup>14</sup> sees the universe as a *wu hun ch'eng*, "thing confusedly formed" (one of Lao-tzu's "names" for Tao), a huge "something," formless in both space and time, having no clear spatial boundary (its "boundary" like a broken wall) and ever-changing. Thus the *Tao te ching* opens: "The tao that can be said is not the constant Tao." One reading of this goes: "Constant Tao is ineffable, beyond rational thought/language;" another reading: "The only Tao we could talk about is always changing" (or even "We couldn't imagine an unchanging Tao"). Over against Greek and Hebraic ontological dualism—transcendent (Judaeo-Christian God or Parmenidean-Platonic One Being) above immanent (physical world of change)—Taoism is then a kind of monism which breaks down the transcendent/immanent distinction, making the dividing line or "wall" here a "broken" one. This "pervasively immanent" world is a kind of extended "incompletion" or "inexhaustibility," a vast "piecemeal construction," to speak metaphorically (and parabolically), an on-going pattern of change with (like a broken wall) no final totalized meaning, all-inclusive form, transcendent *archai* or first principle (God, Emperor, Empire).

Lao-tzu says that "*Tao fa tzu-ran*," literally "Tao follows the self-so" or "follows nature," "follows spontaneity." The pervasively immanent cosmos is a self-generating and self-ordering cosmos, a "self-constructing structure" having no need for outside (transcendent) ordering principles, forms, *archai*, emperors. Lao-tzu also (more fa-

mously) says that the sage-king *wei wu wei*, *tse wu pu chih*, “does nothing yet the empire orders itself” (or “people order themselves,” or “things order themselves”). If we see the broken wall as self-ordering people/empire/cosmos (the distinction tends to break down here), then when “we builders” claim that the decision to build the wall has always existed and that there is no emperor (or no precise “decree” at a given moment in time/history), we could take it to mean: “the empire/cosmos simply self-orders.” Even “we build it” becomes “it self-orders”: we are the wall, we are its self-ordering, and/or it is ours. Or: we are its (and its *story*’s, its *history*’s) “system” or “principle of piecemeal construction,” that is, of on-going (through time/history) construction, as it is ours. If this is a politically “radical” view it is because politics (and ethics) has been absorbed into a radically opened metaphysics and non-dualistic logic.<sup>15</sup>

But again, on the most mythic-metaphysical (and thus also political) level we can hardly ignore the possibility of a more rational-humanistic, “Confucian” reading of “Great Wall”—Kafka, I am suggesting, can be read as mixing Taoist and Confucian aspects, inviting both kinds of readings—especially given the author’s emphasis on “we Chinese” in relation to the “emperor” and a pre-existing “high command.” What might be called the proto-Confucian worldview of the ancient *Book of History* seems to presuppose a kind of ethical-political dualism (hierarchical order) within the fundamentally monistic (“Taoist”) ontology sketched above. Thus we have Heaven (and the ruler) “above” yet also vitally depending on, in necessary “harmony” and “communication” with, Earth/empire/people. According to an ancient myth the chaotic forces of earth (symbolized as flood waters) threaten to “engulf Heaven”:

The Ti said . . . See! The floods assail the heavens! . . . destructive in their overflow are the waters of the inundation. In their vast extent they embrace the hills and overtop the great heights, threatening the heavens with their floods, so that the lower people groan and murmur! . . . water . . . must be duly regulated . . . the earth . . . reduced to order

[so] the (influences of) heaven [may] produce their complete effect . . . (*History*, Lin 709, 715)

The early (mythic) Sage-Emperor Yao was famous for having built (dug) a system of canals so that the flood rising "from earth to heaven" could subside, and earth and heaven (empire and emperor) could again be "regulated" and "harmonious;" that is, heaven-and-earth could again keep (as in the *I Ching*) a balanced pattern of yang/yin "polarity." Even if this sort of balanced polarity—which depends on "heaven above, earth below"—is not seen as "monism," the "dualism" it assumes is clearly less radical than that presupposed by the flood myth of the Old Testament, according to which an infinite, omnipotent God destroys a finite (and evil) mankind. The Chinese myth is describing the chaotic forces of nature,<sup>16</sup> the floods *fa tzu-ran*, "follow of themselves" and not from any "high command," the imperial (or human) command is concerned with controlling/releasing this chaos; in the Biblical myth it is rather the (anthropomorphized) God who releases, in an apparently arbitrary "decree" at a certain moment in time/history, the destructive (natural) forces of the flood.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, this "Confucian" flood-myth also makes an interesting contrast with Chuang-tzu's Taoist myth (fable, parable) of Hun-tun, where the attempt to "order" or "regulate" the aboriginal, all-pervasive "Chaos" (disorder, flux or perhaps just "nature"), by cutting "channels" in it, destroys it:

The emperor of the South Sea was called Shu [Brief], the emperor of the North Sea was called Hu [Sudden], and the emperor of the central region was called Hun-tun [Chaos]. Shu and Hu from time to time came together for a meeting in the territory of Hun-tun, and Hun-tun treated them very generously. Shu and Hu discussed how they would repay his kindness. "All men," they said, "have seven openings so they can see, hear, eat and breathe. But Hun-tun alone doesn't have any. Let's try boring him some!"

Every day they bored another hole, and on the seventh day Hun-tun died.<sup>18</sup> (*Chuang-tzu* 7, Watson 95)

Kafka may well have had some form of classical Confucian thought in mind when, near the end of "Great Wall," he has his reporter say: "The common people . . . are the empire's final support." In the *Book of History's* "Songs of the Five Sons," we hear: "It was the lesson of our great ancestor: . . . /The people should be cherished,/And not looked down upon./The people are the root of a country;/The root firm, the country is tranquil./ When I look at all under heaven . . . /Any one may surpass me." (Lin 721). And Lin Yu Tang notes here the echo in (the much later) Huai Nan-tzu: "People are to the state as the foundations are to the city wall." Thus in the "Announcement of T'ang" (*Book of History*), where T'ang bids "for the support of the princes and the people," is "first found the famous theory of the 'mandate of Heaven' [*T'ien Ming*], which is that the ruler rules the people for the people's good in a mandate from Heaven. The right to revolt, in contradiction to the doctrine of loyalty to the monarch, early puzzled the Confucianists, and this theory was the answer. Mencius fully developed it." (Lin, note, 722) Here T'ang says:

"It is given to me, the One man, to secure the harmony and tranquility of your states and clans; and now I know not whether I may not offend against (the Powers) above and below. I am fearful and trembling, as if I were in danger of falling into a deep abyss. Throughout all the regions that enter on a new life under me, do not, (ye princes), follow lawless ways . . . that so we may receive the favour of Heaven. The good in you I will not dare to keep concealed; and for the evil in me I will not dare to forgive myself. I will examine these things in harmony with the mind of God. When guilt is found anywhere in you who occupy the myriad regions, let it rest on me, the One man. When guilt is found in me, the One man, it shall not attach to you who occupy the myriad regions. (*Book of History*, Lin 723)

One is struck here by the almost Christ-like role apparently played by the early Chinese Emperor.<sup>19</sup> While those who “occupy the myriad regions” *beneath* him may be primarily the princes rather than the masses of people, clearly a “sacred bond” between leader and people is desired: “the ruler rules the people for the people’s good in a *T’ien ming*,” a heavenly “decree” or “command.” That is, if we (princes and emperor) all follow “lawful ways,” are virtuous in our rule of the people, we can receive the Mandate of Heaven—which has itself existed from long before us, perhaps indeed “from all eternity.” Thus on an ethical-political level Kafka, in foregrounding the power of both the “high command” and the wall-building (empire-grounding) “people,” might be taking a kind of Confucian perspective; the seeming ambivalence here could even be seen as that middle position (or “contradiction”) between “the right to revolt” and “the doctrine of loyalty to the monarch” which the Confucian *T’ien ming* represented or embodied. But in virtually identifying these two terms (“high command which has always already *decreed* the wall” and “we builders of the wall”), in undermining the power/existence of a “higher order” insofar as (ethical-ontological) dualism or hierarchy is itself being undermined or erased, he may well also be subverting any such perspective.<sup>20</sup>

### Logical-Epistemological Levels of the “Wall”

The still more radical (level or degree of) subversion here comes through the undermining of the people’s *own* power—not from above but from below or within, through their own self-doubt, uncertainty or ignorance, the “incompletion” of their own knowledge. Toward the end of “Great Wall” our reporter says: “But it is precisely this question of the empire . . .”—the question whether there now exists or ever has existed an Emperor, God, “Empire” (as coherent concept, totalized meaning)—“which in my opinion the common people should be asked to answer, since after all they are the empire’s final support.” Here, ironically enough, that which becomes “one of the greatest unifying influences among our people; indeed . . . the very ground on which we

live," is (not the Emperor, high command, Mandate of Heaven itself but) the people's very "uncertainty" regarding the (present) existence or non-existence of an Emperor—not so much their skepticism or "agnosticism" as their simple ignorance with regard to this question. Or more precisely still (stressing the limitations of this ignorance), it is "a certain feebleness of faith and imaginative power on the part of the people, that prevents them from raising the empire out of its stagnation in Peking and clasping it in all its palpable living reality to their own breasts, which yet desire nothing better than but once to feel that touch and then to die."<sup>21</sup>

In the context of Huai Nan tzu—"People are to the state as the foundations are to the city wall"—and the proto-Confucian *T'ien Ming*, the notion that the people should take their own skepticism or ignorance regarding the existence of an Emperor (Empire, perhaps wall) as their "solid ground" is absurd; the irony, parody, satire are somehow functions of an encompassing absurdity. For there is a self-consuming or self-defeating logic at work here: the people build a wall to represent (by "enclosing" and "defining" it) the "Empire," yet the very "ground" and "foundation" of the people (and thus of the wall itself) is their own doubt as to whether there is any Emperor or Empire, any original purpose, cause, or sense in building the wall, any "meaning" for it to enclose or define. This self-defeating logic is itself captured by the image of the fragmented wall, and this is the "whole sense" (in a single image which extends metaparabolically beyond sense) of the parable of the broken wall: the people (and/or high command and/or "decision to build the wall," from which the people are virtually indistinguishable) have built a wall whose foundation is its meaninglessness, the incompleteness of its meaning, unavailability of its purpose to its builders. It is itself a "useless" parable, a useless because incomplete definition of themselves. It is a self-consuming, self-defeating discourse or text; it self-destructs.<sup>22</sup>

But perhaps it is precisely because we are rational-humanistic "Confucians," because we are trying to understand "Great Wall" in a logical (and ethically, politically "reasonable") way, that we get caught up in this self-defeating logical conundrum, end up with this frustrat-

ingly “useless parable” of a broken wall. In a “Taoist” reading of the text, which takes “incomplete wall” in the widest logical and cosmological senses as a kind of inexhaustible open-endedness, the fact that the people’s only “solid ground” is their very “lack of ground” (of certainty, of knowledge) is not at all something negative and hopeless; it is completely “natural,” just what we would expect. Chuang-tzu’s logic is innately paradoxical, it freely accepts, absorbs, identifies opposites: “What is It is also Other; what is Other is also It.” (Graham 53) This open-ended (non-dualistic) logic grounds (or is grounded in) an epistemology of incompleteness (brokenness); the radical limitation of human logic/rationality suggests dependence on what lies “beyond” it, but this “transcendent” trans-rational—“what is unknown” (as object) and “not-knowing” (as process or knack)—is still immanent, still pervasive within the (non-)encompassing incompleteness of the (cosmos, empire, story, text as) broken wall.

Thus when Kafka’s reporter, seeking for an explanation of the “principle of piecemeal construction,” says that “The limits that my capacity for thought imposes upon me are narrow enough, but the province to be traversed here is infinite” (241), we *could* take it “negatively” as suggesting the hopelessness of the quest, the hopelessness or uselessness of trying to comprehend the absurd, useless (history or parable of the absurd, useless) wall. But we need not be limited to this reading; we could also say that here the reporter sees and Taoistically accepts these (his own) limits: after all, there *is* a positive side here, he *is* speculating on it, offering possible explanations. Perhaps this mode of “speculation” or “speculative investigation,” or indeed of serious “philosophical inquiry,” is one meaning of Chuang-tzu’s “letting what we know depend on what we don’t know,” to give ourselves greater “scope to range”:

My life flows between confines, but knowledge has no confines . . . Hence, as the ground which the foot treads is small, and yet, small as it is, it depends on the untrodden ground to have scope to range, so the knowledge a man needs is little, yet little as it is he depends on what he does

not know to know what is meant by 'Heaven' (T'ien).  
(*Chuang-tzu* 24, Graham 62)

Kafka's (speaker's) "province" is "infinite" because, again, it is both "vast" and "piecemeal," in part because the (province of the) "text" moves between the most minute, embedded layers of "narrative" discourse and the widest meta-narrative levels. This sort of movement is in fact common to both Kafka and Chuang-tzu, although the latter's "framing" discourse, at least in Inner Chapters like the *Chi Wu Lun*, is philosophical-discursive—with many smaller narratives embedded within it—while Kafka, we might say, tends to give priority to the "narrative" dimension. But even in "straight narratives" like *The Trial* what "frames" the tale is really the on-going, questioning, speculative voice of the speaker or "investigative reporter;" in mixed, "eccentric" texts like "Great Wall" this discursive dimension or voice more clearly is the "framing" one—giving us, perhaps, like Chuang-tzu's own rambling discursive voice that frames and guides his many "parables," the greatest possible "scope to range." But here arises the crucial issue of the "difference" between philosophical and narrative discourse. That is, might not philosophy itself be a (grand) "narrative"? Kafka and Chuang-tzu are both playing on the "hinge" or "axis" here—perhaps it's one sense of the latter's *Tao shu*, "axis of Tao." Still, it is at what *seem* the most abstract, meta-narrative (and metaparabolic) levels of discourse—which self-reflexively, recursively describe the writer's own writing/thinking process—that the two thinkers/writers can most easily be compared.

Of course in "Great Wall" that embedded level of "we builders of the wall"—who feel that not-knowing if there is an Emperor/Empire provides a "solid ground" and sense of "solidarity," that is, "grounds" them/their "Empire"—recursively embodies, reflects, echoes, recapitulates the meta-narrative "situation" of the speaker/reporter, speculating on what he can't "know." And the "Taoist" interpretation then can fit both. On this reading, again, we say the builders (like their spokesman, "Great Wall"'s speaker) see and Taoistically accept the limits of their knowledge, that is, their "ignorance," since, after all, the

province of "untrodden ground" is too vast. More than this, perhaps this "solid ground of their ignorance" on which they "depend" is a source of deeper "understanding." But here we might want to distinguish a Taoist reading of "We see our own not-knowing as our ground," or "We depend on not knowing to know what the empire (emperor, high command, decree of Heaven) is," not only from a Confucian-hierarchical reading—which after all seeks a moral justification of the suffering of the builders, brought about by an arbitrary decree from "on high"—but also from a (Western) "negative theological" reading. Perhaps we end up with the latter if we take the builders here to mean: "We do not know X (mysterious high command, original "reason" for/meaning of the wall) directly but only by knowing it is not Y (Emperor's as against Heaven's decree, some "lower term"); our solid ground of "knowing" X depends on our not-knowing (it), or on "what we don't know."

However I think a Taoist reading—as against the more traditional Neo-Platonic, gnostic, Hassidic, Cabalistic, perhaps Kierkegaardian readings<sup>23</sup>—becomes possible if we do not look at Chuang-tzu's logic-epistemology-metaphysics purely "objectively," do not take it quite "seriously." I think Chuang-tzu especially "fits" Kafka's logical-epistemological-metaphysical game-playing because of three closely inter-related (virtually indistinguishable) factors: first there is the self-conscious "textuality" just mentioned, the constant interplay between textual "layers;" then there is the ironic, self-parodying tone of both writers, the unremitting, radical playfulness of logic and language; finally there is the concrete imaging of abstractions ("ground," "walking") which both must and cannot be "taken literally" (since by taking them literally we move beyond them and destroy their literal sense.) In other words, these are both extremely "literary" philosophers; they are both steeped (or embedded) in a powerful tradition (or traditions) of "folk story" as moral fable or philosophical parable. Here we come back to the Confucian-political issue: if Western negative theology remains the province of the "priests," the folk tradition is something simultaneously more "pragmatic" and less "serious," simultaneously more and less "useful."

One of Chuang-tzu's striking images in the "untrod ground" passage is the "flow of life" itself: "My life flows between confines, but knowledge has no confines." Perhaps we might extrapolate (given enough "scope to range") that this unlimited knowledge also "flows—between *no* confines." This "flow" as a dynamic process or praxis, a knack of "(not) knowing" invites a move back to the meta-narrative level, on which "Great Wall" is a parable of (on-going, never-completed) speculative investigation but also (therefore) a "parable of reading" (Wood). If spatial "incompletion" is an incomplete boundary or "broken wall" (absence of clear boundary), temporal incompletion is the deferral or delay of "knowing" or "understanding" (never-reaching, absence of the "end"); the epistemological process or praxis of (not-) knowing is also the interpretive process of reading and (not) understanding. And if in "Great Wall" such abstract processes are represented in terms of concrete images like "ground" and "walking," then the (un)encompassing, metaparabolic image for this is the "broken wall" of the story itself. This "wall" can represent, on various discursive levels, the incomplete and inexhaustibly self-ordering empire/cosmos/text itself, the (discursive, meta-narrative) "philosophy" or "worldview" of this same cosmos, and the (narrative) "story" of this cosmos, the story in which this worldview, in however distorted, broken or mixed a form, is presented or "embodied." Yet this incompletion is also the incompletion of our own (all-too-human) understanding—it is just this sort of incompletion or "infinite delay" which is after all at stake in the parable-within-the-parable of the "Imperial Messenger" who can never quite get his message (his still "unknown" message, which might be that he no longer exists, that he is "dead") to "you" (the reader).

But Kafka gives us here another, perhaps less noticed "parable of the reader" within the larger parable of the broken wall. This overtly epistemological, meta-narrative discourse is a kind of variation on the "Imperial Message," giving us the "infinite delay of understanding" (reader-to-text relationship) rather than the "infinite delay of announcing/expressing" (author-to-text relationship). This second parable of the reader is presented by the reporter/narrator, in one of many

parodies of his own "story," as a "secret maxim . . . which moreover was elaborated in a parable that was later often quoted":

Try with all your might to comprehend the decrees of the high command, but only up to a certain point; then avoid further meditation. A very wise maxim . . . elaborated in a parable . . . Consider rather the river in spring. It rises until it grows mightier and nourishes more richly the soil on the long stretch of its banks, still maintaining its own course until it reaches the sea . . . Thus far may you urge your meditations on the decrees of the high command. But after that the river overflows its banks, loses outline and shape, slows down the speed of its current, tries to ignore its destiny by forming little seas in the interior of the land, damages the fields, and yet cannot maintain itself for long in its new expanse, but must run back between its banks again, must even dry up wretchedly in the hot season that presently follows. Thus far may you not urge your meditations on the decrees of the high command.<sup>24</sup> (240)

Thus we are given two ways of "meditating on," or "trying to comprehend," that which is (virtually) incomprehensible, the (eternally pre-existing) decree to build a useless, broken wall (broken, absurd world). The whole "moral lesson" here may suggest a parody of Confucianism, with its emphasis on harmonious order and regularity, on not transgressing boundaries (which will be hard if those very boundaries are fragmentary). We also remember the ancient myth of Sage-King Yao, whose greatest claim to fame was "regulating" with canals the chaotic waters of earth, which were threatening to "flood Heaven," and Chuang-tzu's myth of Hun-tun, Chaos, who was destroyed by those who wanted to cut "openings" ("channels") in him and so "harmonize" him. Kafka seems to be saying here that we *may* try to understand the incomprehensible by thinking/knowing in an orderly/finite way, but *may not* try to understand it by *going past* this moral-rational

limit to begin thinking/knowing in a chaotic/overflowing/"unlimited" way. Whereas we are being warned of the "danger" if we follow the second way, the way of chaos-thinking, warned that we will "dry up" and never reach our "goal" (understanding), apparently the first way, by which the river of finite knowing reaches the sea and empties out into it harmoniously, is allowed. Yet the implicit (and ironic) point is that even by following this first way we still cannot "know the unknowable" (which is impossible in any case)—we can only meditate on it "up to a certain point; then avoid further meditation."

That is, the maxim implies that we still do not "know" even when our finite knowing flows into the (wider, deeper ground of the) sea, but this kind of "not knowing" is normal, acceptable. This "sea" might be contrasted with Chuang-tzu's infinite ground of (un-)knowing, on which our limited knowing must "depend" in order to "know Heaven":<sup>25</sup> the Confucian view has us beginning with the finite and moving toward the infinite, which we (thus) still cannot "know," whereas Chuang-tzu asks us to "begin with the infinite" and so know (by not knowing) "Heaven." Is the Confucian "sea" (perhaps an already-regulated "flood") just draining away from us any potential "knowing"? This interpretation fits the imagery of the (Confucian) warning: a more forceful river-flow (generated by trying harder to comprehend) causes the river to back up and "overflow its banks" further inland. Then while the admonition to "stop trying to know" (to "not urge our meditations past this point") may mean, from the ostensible Confucian standpoint, that we can never reach to the "infinite" through a chaotic or overflowing thinking—this kind of thinking will only cause us to self-destruct, "dry up"<sup>26</sup>—another (Taoist/Confucian) reading seems somehow (also) implied here: the overflowing-of-banks does actually bring the understanding we seek, the "chaotic" understanding-by-not-understanding, the wider "scope to range," and we are advised not to overflow because we are not supposed to gain this understanding. (It would be dangerous and/or self-destructive for us in some "Confucian" sense, perhaps as absolute knowledge/power).

In this last reading, which is reinforced if we take the whole passage as a parody of Confucian rationalism/moralism, perhaps we are

reading a more "secret" (Taoist) meaning in(to) this "secret maxim": the only way we could ever "know" the unknowable is through this praxis of overflowing-knowing, since the cosmos (Empire), that which we would know (and can know only by becoming one with it), is not a dualistic or hierarchical order at all but a "thing confusedly formed," an indefinitely-extended, incomplete, overflowing thing, a chaos (Hun-tun);<sup>27</sup> that is, our knowing depends on the (trans-rational) limitlessness of "what we do not know." Thus we are brought back to the key distinction between an "orderly" outflow/overflow—river naturally and harmoniously flowing into sea—and a "chaotic" one involving a certain extreme transgression of boundaries, an overflowing of one's banks (on the "way" to the wider sea). One reason why this "Confucian" absorption-into-sea could not give us the understanding we seek might be just Chuang-tzu's point: we must "begin" with "what we do not know," the sea or overflow, and not with the river of finite knowing that flows into it:<sup>28</sup>

My life flows between confines, but knowledge has no confines. . . . If we use the confined to follow after the unconfined, there is danger that the flow will cease . . . Hence, as the ground which the foot treads is small, and yet, small as it is, it depends on the untrodden ground to have scope to range, so the knowledge a man needs is little, yet little as it is he depends on what he does not know to know what is meant by 'Heaven.' (*Chuang-tzu* 24, Graham 62)

Rather than "begin with the confined" (rational logic/knowledge/understanding) we must jump—in a kind of "leap of faith" perhaps—right into that "untrodden ground" of the "unconfined." This could also be a figure of "overflowing" or "flooding" (of the limited into the unlimited): a horizontal surface is implied by the images of "untrodden ground" and "scope to range"—the picture of a wider, (un)encompassing ground here rather than a deep *abgrund* or abyss—and the river of my life/limited knowledge "flows between confines" upon this surface. But where in Kafka's "Confucian" maxim the

"danger" is just this sort of overflow of limited into unlimited, which causes us (the limited river of our life after it overflows itself) to "dry up wretchedly in the hot season," here we seem to have the reverse situation: "If we use the confined to follow after the unconfined, there is danger that the flow will cease." For Chuang-tzu, to begin with our limited (life's) knowledge, "using" it "to follow after the unconfined," is what is dangerous. This ceasing of the flow is actually closer to what we get in Kafka's "first way to meditate": the orderly, harmonious outflow of (finite) river into (infinite) sea—that figure for trying "with all your might to comprehend" the unknowable/trans-rational by starting with the knowable/rational—now seen as a "draining away" or "exhaustion" (of our life force/current/potential knowing). In Kafka's maxim the life-threatening "danger" appears only at the "end" of the normal flow, when the possibility of (self-destructive) overflow arises; the Taoist sees the danger of exhaustion of our potential energy at the very beginning of this ordinary (finite to trans-finite) flow, and so advises us to overleap it and "begin" in the (trans-finite) overflow.

But at the beginning of his "secret maxim" which tells us just "how far" we may meditate, distinguishes limited not-knowing (still within bounds) from unlimited not-knowing (where the latter, seen Taoistically, spills over into a kind of "positive" knowing),<sup>29</sup> Kafka's reporter says that in fact we must "Avoid further meditation" (past the point of overflow) "not because it might be harmful; it is not at all certain that it would be harmful. What is harmful or not harmful has nothing to do with the question. Consider rather the river in spring . . ." (240) I find it hard to avoid an ironic reading here, given the context: the seeming absurdity of a fragmentary wall which will be useless in keeping out violent barbarians from the north who are bent on destroying the Empire; the absolute power of a "high command" which can make incomprehensible (and seemingly self-destructive) decrees and does, after all, want to limit our thinking, prevent us from understanding "why;" the clear and present danger of a (recursively self-destructive) "overflowing thinking" that "loses outline and shape . . . damages the fields . . . must even dry up wretchedly in the hot season . . ." (240) In fact, we more likely think, the (Confucian)

authorities *would* punish us if we transgressed in this fashion—tried to build our own tower to reach up to Heaven and become ourselves like gods or emperors—would perhaps drive us “into some dark corner with cudgel blows tomorrow” (242); but this implicit threat of harm is softened by the “pretext” of a neat, harmlessly abstract moral “maxim.”

Indeed, Kafka often plays the “abstraction” of his parabolic discourse—parodied here in this (traditional, all-too-conventional) “secret maxim”—against the suffering, danger, “harm” of real life: in “Great Wall” the (encompassing) parable of the “Useless Wall” is intimately tied up with, interplayed with in various ways, its own real-world uselessness and absurdity. And yet, as always in Kafka, we sense there *could* after all be something valid, something “useful” in a genuinely “spiritual” (as against rigid and conventional, “Confucian”) parabolic discourse, perhaps indeed in a (“Taoist”) discourse which overflows limits, or begins from (the perspective of) that which has “already overflowed.” This choice or ambivalence between—this paradox of—taking parabolic discourse seriously and the impossibility of taking it seriously is precisely the *topos* of Kafka’s “Parable of Parables,” a metaparabolic (or “over-flowing”) meditation on the “beyondness” of parabolic discourse:

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: “Go over” (*Gehe hinüber*), he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place . . . he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something that he cannot designate more precisely either, and therefore cannot help us here . . . All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables (*den Gleichnissen folgen*)

you yourselves would become parables (*Gleichnisse geworden*) and with that rid of all your daily cares (*der taglichen Mühe frei*). (Glatzer 457, Wood 336-337)

This metaparabolic "parable of reading" or "parable of interpretation" (Wood) has at least two interpretations: we could take "becoming-parable" seriously, as a positive or desirable state, and we could take it as indeed something "useless," impossible, absurd, like a broken wall which would "protect" the empire from attack. On the latter reading there are actually two choices: we can seriously believe "becoming-parable" (or "becoming broken wall," the very project or plight of "we builders of the wall") is something impossible/absurd or not take it seriously but ironically, parodically, even sarcastically. ("We builders of the wall" take their own not-knowing of the wall's meaning as their "only solid ground.") And finally we suspect this act or *praxis* of becoming-parable is something indefinable, indefinitely self-reflexive in a way that suggests an infinite regress or recursion of (meta-) discursive levels (or meta-languages)—thus also raising the problem of language/action (*langue/parole*, assertive/performative utterance) difference—so that it (the issue/*praxis* of becoming-parable, and/or of how we read/interpret this becoming-parable, since now we have already "become" this parable just as we have become the "empire of the broken wall") remains finally incomplete, unending, indefinitely delayed like the "announcing" of the emperor's message to "you, the reader."

Here the "many" say that parables are "useless" to us (for our everyday life) because they point to "some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something that he cannot designate more precisely . . . ;" that is, they "really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible (*dass das Unfassbare unfassbar ist*, intangible is intangible), and we know that already." Technically we could distinguish between a (parabolic) discourse which is incomprehensible to us as it points to "something unknown to us, something that cannot be designated" (tells us what we don't know) and one which is incomprehensible because it "tells us what we already know,"

namely a tautology ( $A=A$ , "the incomprehensible is incomprehensible"). It is again the (meta-parabolic) move to the meta-discursive level: on the first level we are told something we can't understand (e.g. "this Door to the Law, outside of which you have waited hopelessly/uselessly for your whole life, was intended for you alone and now will close"—though this is already a kind of self-reflexive parabolic discourse), on the second level we are told that this "meaning" which was always beyond our reach does indeed lie always beyond our reach. Kafka may be combining these first- and second-order levels of meaning ironically to reinforce the distance, the "beyondness" of this meaning: tautologies in general are "useless knowledge" in the sense that they are redundant or superfluous knowledge;<sup>30</sup> this particular one ("what we don't know is what we don't know") just takes on an added "opacity," as it were, is still further distanced from us in its uselessness (hopelessness).

Of course, at this stage we might also wonder, if we reflect on the skeptic's critique of parabolic discourse: what use would such discourse be even if we could "understand" it? Or indeed: how would we even know if we did understand it?<sup>31</sup> (Is not this latter dilemma a built-in dilemma of parabolic discourse?<sup>32</sup> Does the skeptic also mean or imply these kinds of problems, without stating them directly?) And the sage's rejoinder here is in fact a response to, or "imaging" of, just such puzzlement: "if you only followed the parables (*den Gleichnissen folgen*) you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares." Perhaps we would no longer "know" that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible because now, having "become the incomprehensible" (or having become the tautological truth of its self-identity as something incomprehensible), we can "comprehend" it, or because we no longer realize that we don't comprehend it, or (perhaps the most obvious meaning) because we no longer know the *difference* between what is comprehensible and what is not, indeed between what is *parable* and what is not, and thus need no longer *care*—about this difference, about ourselves (does "becoming parable" also entail "becoming incomprehensible to ourselves"?), about our "daily cares." We can get lost interminably in such logical-epistemological

mazes, as Kafka likely intends—they are again the labyrinthine mazes of the “Law,” the ingrown bureaucratic corridors of “Power”—but I would rather come back to the concrete image of *folgen*, “following” in both its figurative and literal senses: “if you follow the parables you yourselves can become them.”<sup>33</sup> In the metaphorical (moral) sense this means of course, “If you live in accordance with the (precepts of the) parables.” But we might also take the *folgen* literally, as “following after” across the ground of a limitless expanse. Then we have the situation of Kafka’s reporter on the “wall”: “The limits that my capacity for thought imposes upon me are narrow enough, but the province to be traversed here is infinite.” (241)

### Chuang-tzu’s “Ground” and the “Use of Uselessness”

This *folgen*, “follow after” brings us back, by a kind of circuitous route, to Chuang-tzu’s notion that it is “dangerous” to use our finite life/knowledge to follow after (understand or “try to become”) unlimited (non-)knowledge or (in-)comprehension, that we had better just leap into/depend on it from the outset so as not to drain away our life-energy trying to “reach” it. Does Kafka also mean that we can never reach to or comprehend Parable (the incomprehensible) by beginning from the domain/discourse of the comprehensible—in which case we will perhaps be infinitely delayed, “drained” like the Confucian messenger or the flowing river that can never “understand” the sea? Does he mean we can only “enter Parable” by “leaping into” it from the outset? It seems both writers may be playing in the same “neighborhood” of thought/discourse, one where an extremely “skeptical” logic-epistemology-metaphysics is closely tied to (and played against) the “unlimited discourse” which expresses (or embodies) it; where a pragmatic awareness of immediate life and its pressing needs (mainly that of survival) is played against the abstract/contemplative “praxis of the unlimited” (which allows us to “survive”) in various (often ironic) ways, and also (paradoxically) identified with it.

For we must be careful not to Neo-Platonize (gnosticize, hermeticize, negative theologize) Chuang-tzu, if this means making his

"untrodden ground" something finally "solid" and "certain" in the sense of a transcendent or absolute. One of the points which I feel he shares with Kafka is precisely this (abrupt, discontinuous, ironic) awareness of life's radical immanence, transience, materiality, potential danger. That is, failing to "depend on the unlimited" is harmful to our life, and the way we can best "preserve" it and "live out our days" is by "depending on what we do not know in order to know 'Heaven,'" but this does not diminish the "untrodden ground"'s (and/or "Heaven"'s) own quality of radical contingency, indeterminacy. This same ground (or un-ground, *abgrund*, abyss) is also the ground of all "existence":<sup>34</sup>

The myriad things have somewhere from which they grow but no one sees the root, somewhere from which they come forth but no one sees the gate. Men all honor what wit knows, but none knows how to know by depending on what his wits do not know; may that not be called the supreme uncertainty (*da yi*) . . . ? There is nowhere you can escape from it . . .<sup>35</sup> (*Chuang-tzu* 25, Graham 102)

This passage seems perhaps more "skeptical"—thus closer to Kafka's "wall"—than the "untrodden ground" passage. In the latter the wider ground, giving us "scope to range," did seem to offer a certain possibility of "knowing by depending on what our wits do not know;" but now this "positive" possibility is caught between *two* levels of negation, on both of which the *da yi*, "great doubt" can operate: "what his wits (*chih*, knowledge, intellect) do not know," and "not knowing how to know by depending on what his wits do not know." The radical contingency, immanence and imminent "danger" of this un-ground, abyss of knowing, "root" and "gate" of all things is clearer in Chuang-tzu's parable of the "disappearing ground," itself closely related to the parable of the "untrodden ground":

Said Hui Shih to Chuang-tzu, "These sayings of yours are useless (*yen wu yung*, words no use, talk no use)."

"It is only with people who know about the useless that there is any point in talking about uses (*yen yung*). In all the immensity of heaven and earth, a man uses no more than is room for his feet. If recognizing this we were to dig away the ground round his feet all the way down to the Underworld (*Huang Chuan*, Yellow Springs), would it still be useful to the man?

"It would be useless."

"Then it is plain that the useless does serve a use."

(*Chuang-tzu* 26, Graham 100)<sup>36</sup>

But we are struck immediately with a certain ambiguity. The *tse tsu erh tian*, "to dig away the ground round his feet," can mean "dig away the ground just beyond the ground immediately under his feet," but also "dig away the ground between (immediately under) his feet." (*Tian* is "sink into" but also can be "overwhelm" and "cushion or prop up.") Graham's "round" tends to suggest the "beyond" interpretation, and Ware's translation (338) leaves no doubt: "If, however, the part to the side of his feet sank to the subterranean Yellow Springs, would there still be any for man to use?"<sup>37</sup> This is a crucial issue since the "beyond" reading more clearly echoes the "untrodden ground" that gives us "scope to range." But here the "untrodden ground" has effectively "disappeared." We picture a man stranded on a small spot of land like an island sticking up in the midst of nothingness: he not only has "no scope to range" intellectually, according to the metaphorical or parabolic sense of the passage; if we "take it literally" he would quickly fall to his death upon taking a single step.

Chuang-tzu's main "point" here, his tying of the praxis of surviving imminent danger in a life/death situation to the praxis of the most profound thinking/understanding, remains intact if we read the Chinese another way: it could also mean we dig away all the ground *beneath* the ground we normally walk on (in our everyday lives), so that this pragmatic ground now is radically unsupported (unstable, inconstant, imminently falling away beneath us); or even that we dig away all the ground—"the ground between our feet"—the immediate,

pragmatic ground as well as the “deeper” ground.<sup>38</sup> This last interpretation—in which the newly-discovered “uselessness” of the ground immediately beneath us becomes not just its “unsupportedness” but its non-existence—has the limitation that it no longer distinguishes the “trodden” from the “untrodden” ground. As for the other two readings, we might say the “vertical” picture stresses more the radical contingency of our situation, the imminent danger of falling to our death, though this is still present in the (perhaps most standard) “horizontal” reading. The horizontal picture might seem to fit more easily to our discussion of “flooding” and “over-flowing” above, in the context of Kafka’s “secret maxim.” But in fact flooding/overflowing begins with a vertical movement upward—as when the earth’s chaotic waters “threatened to flood heaven”—followed by a horizontal spreading-out.

On either reading the “(un-)ground” image carries, then, two senses, metaphorical and literal: the physical (un-)ground right around/beneath us and the (un-)ground of our thinking/knowing/understanding at the deepest or widest level. As in Chan Buddhism we are shown the praxis of meditation—“regulated” or “overflowing” meditation?—the “immanence of transcendence” and “use of uselessness”: the (un-)ground image ties the contingency of all things—thinking, knowing, being (Chuang-tzu’s “ground” is also the “root of all things”)—to the radical contingency of our own existence as we face the immediate danger of death. Without the ground surrounding/supporting us we not only would be unable to “go” anywhere but would be in imminent danger of falling, yet the ground surrounding/supporting us is in fact a no-ground. Thus in both the literal and metaphorical senses we are forced to see the “usefulness” of what we had thought was “useless,” that further out (deeper down), more abstract or *hsuan*-obscure, “unknowable” un-ground (*abgrund*)<sup>39</sup> upon which our immediate, “pragmatic” ground (limited, rational thinking/knowing) had radically *depended* all along, without (until *now*) our realizing it. What we had thought useless is now seen to be the most fundamentally useful thing, for without it as foundation of the more immediate basis of our life/thought this immediate basis is rendered useless. But this fundamental basis is a no-basis: our new awareness of depending on it

means an awareness that what we depend on is, in a way, no-thing; what is most "useful" is just this awareness. (And so, again, we think of Laotzu's contemplation as praxis, the praxis of a meditation which is, contrary to Kafka's "maxim," allowed to be "urged beyond the point of overflow" into the unknowable.)

Chuang-tzu's parable is then suggesting, perhaps—within the "depths" of its own complex passageways, labyrinthine subtleties—that the "danger" comes in "not knowing the usefulness of the useless," in not depending on the wider/deeper ground, not knowing how to depend on it or perhaps (also) not knowing that we do already depend on it. This reading fits, at least, the "untrodden ground" passage:

My life flows between confines, but knowledge has no confines. . . . If we use the confined to follow after the unconfined, there is danger that the flow will cease . . . Hence, as the ground which the foot treads is small, and yet, small as it is, it depends on the untrodden ground to have scope to range, so the knowledge a man needs is little, yet little as it is he depends on what he does not know to know what is meant by 'Heaven.'" (*Chuang-tzu* 24, Graham 62)

This danger of using our limited life/knowledge (immediate ground) to "follow after the unconfined," rather than understanding our radical dependence on the unconfined from the outset and allowing ourselves to "depend on" it, or simply "leap into" it, might then be compared with the "imminent danger of falling" in the (still more paradoxical) disappearing ground parable. To not (know how to) begin with the wider/deeper (un-)ground is to continue on one's normal life-course, trying to "understand" the unlimited from the limited perspective of the here-and-now, which leads to the drying up or exhaustion of the "flow." This is the danger; to overcome it we must make, as it were, the "leap of faith" or leap into "spiritual flight," jump into the perspective of the unlimited and look at things from that perspective—which means now seeing the "usefulness" of that "useless" (from our limited perspective) untrodden ground.

If you know the ultimate One (*chih da i*), the ultimate *Yin*<sup>40</sup>, the ultimate eye, the ultimate adjuster (*chun*: 'equal,' 'level'), the ultimate in scope (*fang*: 'place'), the ultimately truthful, the ultimately fixed (*ding*<sup>41</sup>), you have attained the utmost. The ultimate One makes things interchangeable, the ultimate *Yin* unravels them<sup>42</sup>, the ultimate eye looks out at them, the ultimate adjuster sets a route (*yuan*: cause, reason, follow, margin) by them, the ultimate in scope identifies with them, the ultimately truthful verifies them, the ultimately fixed supports them (*chih*: holds, grasps, *shou*-hand radical beside *ssu*-temple).<sup>43</sup> (*Chuang-tzu* 24, Graham 63)

But in the "disappearing ground" parable it is Chuang-tzu's "words" (*yen*, speech, talk), after all, that are "useless" to Hui-shih; the "unlimited ground" stands in very close proximity to—if indeed it cannot quite be identified with<sup>44</sup>—Chuang-tzu's unlimited (logical-metaphysical) discourse which expresses or embodies the "ultimate One" by "interchanging," "unraveling," "identifying (with)" all things. We must begin with this knowing that is not-knowing and saying that is not-saying (not-asserting), this "discourse" that contains/interchanges all things (assertions, predications). Our knowledge depends on/is surrounded by what we do not know, our rational discourse (which asserts "X is Y" or "X is not Y") depends on/is encompassed by the "big saying" of the *Chi Wu Lun*, "Discourse that Evens Things Out": "What is It is also Other, what is Other is also It. There they say 'That's it, that's not' from one point of view, here we say 'That's it, that's not' from another point of view. Are there really It and Other? Or really no It and Other?"<sup>45</sup> (*Chuang-tzu* 2, Graham 53) This wider ground of saying is (literally) a "disappearing" ground, for "what we say is never fixed," leading to the possibility that we cannot finally distinguish "what words say" from the "blowing of breath" or "peeps of baby birds."<sup>46</sup> This vast sea of non-discriminating language or discourse may then also be described in terms of *chih yen*, "spillover saying," named after "a kind of vessel (*chih*) designed to top and right itself when filled too near the brim . . . a fluid language which keeps

its equilibrium through changing meanings and viewpoints" (Graham 107, note):

"Spillover' saying is new every day, smooth it out (*he yi*) on the whetstone [potter's wheel] of Heaven (*t'ien ni*, horizon)." Use it to go by and let the stream find its own channels (*man yen*, overflowing lake, spreading flood), this is the way to last out your years. If you refrain from saying, everything is even (*ping*) . . . saying is uneven with the even (*chi*). Hence the aphorism, "In saying he says nothing" . . . [Therefore] be shaken into motion by the limitless, and so find things their lodging-places in the limitless. (*Chuang-tzu* 2, 27; Graham 60, 107)

This saying/discourse which "overflows" to "find its own channels"—as against that regulated Confucian flow-into-sea of the river of meditation (on the incomprehensible, *das Unfassbare*)—is also then a kind of "not saying" (of any discrete thing/assertion in contradistinction from all other possible things/assertions) and as such a "leveling" or "evening out" of all things/assertions. "By not saying everything is even": here we sense the proximity between the wider (untrodden, disappearing) horizontal ground of (not-)saying and that of (not-)knowing. Consider the same "evening" or "leveling" metaphor used by Chuang-tzu in connection with "doubting":

Why be bothered by doubts (*huo*)? If you use the undoubted (*pu huo*) to unravel (*chie*) the doubted . . . this is to have too much respect for the undoubted.<sup>47</sup> Use the unlevel to level (*pu ping ping*) and your levelling will not level, use the untested to test (*pu cheng cheng*) and your testing will not test. The sight (*ming*) of the eye is only something which it employs, it is the daemonic (*shen*, spiritual) in us which tests. (Graham 63)

On Graham's reading, to use the "undoubted" to solve/make

clear what is “doubtful” is like using the “untested” (unquestioned) to test/question, or the “unlevel” to “make it all level;” this seems to tie the notion of “certainty” to the “uneven” (as in hierarchical “Confucian” orders?) and “doubting” or “questioning” to that of “evening out.” It may also reinforce the image of “spillover saying” or “big saying”—simultaneously a not-saying—as an “evening out” of all things (by “letting the stream find its own channels”). We must “begin” then, Chuang-tzu seems to be saying, with (dependence on) this wider (not-)knowing/(not-)saying which “keeps things even.” The crucial problem is that of the relation between the sage’s praxis of “becoming-unlimited” (in thinking/knowing) and his praxis of (using) “spillover saying” (unlimited discourse).<sup>48</sup> We might say the sage becomes unlimited precisely by using or “performing” such discourse, or “thinking in terms of it”—and here we beg the question of assertive (affirmative, propositional, representational) versus performative utterance, of *langue* versus *parole*, —or indeed by *becoming* it.

But we could no more say what it would mean to “become unlimited discourse” than we could say what Kafka might mean by “becoming-parable” (becoming parabolic discourse). In Kafka this praxis may be a way to no longer see the *différence* between what is parable and what is not parable; if we emphasize the “becoming” here we could see “becoming-parable” as the moment of moving beyond “ordinary life” and into “parable,” the interim moment of “betweenness” in which we are “neither here nor there” and thus “can’t see the difference.” But this takes us back once again to the *folgen*, “following.” Kafka says it is by “following” the parables that we can “become” them, where “following” means (metaphorically) “believing in,” “thinking in terms of,” but literally “succeeding” or “continuing after” (*das Folge* is “succession,” “continuation”), “moving after the other” or—we are encouraged to take it this way by Kafka’s use of the “*gehe hinüber*,” “going over”—“moving beyond (oneself/itself) to the other,” perhaps “overflowing.” And here it is the same paradox we find in Chuang-tzu: the praxis of “overflowing” (rational sense) cannot itself be a “limited” or “rational” praxis, an orderly flow into the sea, it must be an “already-over-flowing” (or “already-overflowed”)

praxis. We cannot "follow" parabolic discourse finally in the (rational) sense of "understanding" it, that is, (by) "using the confined to follow after the unconfined," since the unconfined is precisely what is "incomprehensible" to us; we must somehow "begin" with the overflow, with what has already overflowed rational sense/knowing, begin by becoming-overflow. We can only truly "follow" the parables by becoming them.

"Parable" in Greek is not "throwing-beyond" ("hyperbole") but "throwing-alongside;" the German *Gleichnis*, "likening," "comparing," is tied to *gleich*, "same," "equal," "even"—suggesting that the "(meta-)parabolic" thrust might ultimately be toward an "evening out" of things/discourses.<sup>49</sup> In the proto-Confucian model of heaven above earth, earth's chaotic waters threaten to "overflow heaven" (rational order) and so must be "regulated." A vertical Taoist model might picture the chaos of unlimited thinking/knowing/saying/being on the bottom, as a "ground" ("earth") or "un-ground" into which rational discourse spills down or overflows. But this really becomes already a horizontal model of the (rational) flow that overflows its banks onto the wider plain (untrodden ground). And this model of horizontal over-flow pictures, not a "transgressive" overflow (as in earth's waters flooding up to heaven) but a natural "evening out" of things: the river has simply risen to the level of the plain and then overflowed onto it. Spillover saying (unlimited saying, parabolic discourse) "seeks its own channels," suggesting an unlimited freedom and spontaneity, but it is also (in terms of rational assertion) a not-saying in or by which "everything is even." But this encompassing "evenness" is in a sense what was already there, what we had already been depending on (as untrodden ground) without knowing it. Perhaps then the praxis of beginning with the "over-flow" of unlimited discourse in both Kafka and Chuang-tzu is really the praxis of beginning with the wider (overflowed) ground of thinking/saying that was always already there.

This picture of an "encompassing" parabolic discourse is just what we would have if we took "positively," in Kafka's "Parable of Parables," the rejoinder to the sage's suggestion that we "become parable":

Concerning this a man once said: "Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares."

Another said, "I bet that is also a parable." The first said, "You have won." The second said: "But unfortunately only in parable." The first said: "No, in reality: in parable you have lost." (Glatzer 457)

Thus when the other speaker says that the "praxis of becoming-parable" is itself a parable he means it is "only" this and so mocks it for this limitation—this praxis is "not real," "not practical," but when the sage finally says that he has "won in reality but lost in parable," we jump again to the other ("wider") perspective, get a glimpse of that *encompassing* (already-overflowed) parabolic discourse from whose perspective "pragmatic reality" is itself something too limited. Yet as Wood points out, this "Parable" can be read both ways—we can finally take sides with the "pragmatist" and his "everyday life" or with the "sage" and his "parables," in fact, the author's "point" even may seem to move back and forth as we read it, giving the sage the "last word." This brings us back to the crucial issue: the connection between "becoming-unlimited," in both Kafka and Chuang-tzu, and "ordinary life" with its problems (in the first place that of "living out your years" in Chuang-tzu's phrase). If we think the "world of parable" is irrelevant to our "real life," we will be more inclined to take ironically and parodically Kafka's "praxis" of becoming-parable. But this position of course means we are defining "real life" in a certain ("confined") way and giving priority to it over "mere thought" or "discourse," rather than, say, shifting our perspective to see things from the "other side." And yet, what is the (practical) point or benefit of shifting our perspective in this way? Isn't this "praxis of the unlimited" really a purely theoretical, therefore "useless" praxis?

Chuang-tzu and Kafka may be saying that, viewed from the "other side," this "mere thought" is no longer "mere thought." Chuang-tzu's disappearing ground parable actually performs a kind of *Gestalt*-switch on our normal conception of "danger": we had thought

it would be the most dangerous, most terrifying thing imaginable to experience an earthquake, to suddenly have no ground under or immediately around us. And yet, Chuang-tzu is suggesting that we only think the condition of "the abyss" is terrifying because we are looking at it from the solid-ground perspective; in fact the wider/deeper ground of the "abyss" (*abgrund*) is our "natural home," the "most secure" place because the widest, most encompassing place, upon which we have been "depending" without knowing it. What is really dangerous, Chuang-tzu says, is trying to approach (know) the abyss from the narrow-ground perspective: because this "dries up our flow" (we are unable to overflow), but also (the same thing?) because it is only from this narrow perspective that the abyss appears terrifying. Still, we might wonder, isn't the "comfort" of this wider (un-)ground really a purely metaphysical or intellectual comfort, the sort of thing one seeking God (or perhaps the death of God), but not an "ordinary man," would be interested in? For ordinary people, isn't the real danger to have no ground under our feet? Doesn't the comfort of the no-ground, like the danger of the river flowing into sea, only exist "in parable," in the terms of parabolic discourse?

One of the ways Chuang-tzu brings home the reality of the threat to life is through his frequent tales of old things/trees/people which are considered "ugly," "deformed" or otherwise "useless" and thus are allowed to "live out their days." Thus, for example, the "useless" tree that no one wants to cut down (in order to make something with its wood) can live out a long life, unlike all the "useful" trees. Now, if we try to tie the "usefulness of useless discourse" in the disappearing ground parable back to this idea, it seems that it is the very *impracticality* of this spillover saying/big saying which then would allow it to "persist," not be "infringed upon" or limited in any way: Chuang-tzu is in a sense seeing things already from the "big" perspective here, that of big saying itself. But of course the point is also this: the sage who "dwells" in (the perspective of) this sort of "wide" (and ostensibly impractical) discourse, that is, who "thinks in terms of it" and so "unlimits" himself, will be calm, will see all things as "equal" or "even," won't care about life and death, including his own life/death.

Since he won't care about his "own" death or, indeed, anything else—for the Taoist, to be "unaware" even of one's own death would be the most radical ("to the root"), because most comprehensive (encompassing), form of pragmatism—from the perspective of others he will be (precisely because of this "indifference") considered useless (like the gnarled old tree), and thus can "live out his days."<sup>50</sup> Thus "unlimited" thinking/discourse is radically "pragmatic" paradoxically because of its very "uslessness," its extreme "impracticality" as viewed from the perspective of the narrow pragmatist.

### Inaudibility of the "Sacred"

Still, it would be easy to argue that Kafka is finally too much the (post)modern ironist and parodist to be meaningfully compared to Chuang-tzu; that Kafka, who is not trying to teach or expound any sort of "praxis" but would likely subvert and parody any such "dogmatism," is finally more ambivalent on this issue of the "usefulness of the useless" than the Taoist philosopher; that Chuang-tzu, whose discourse is after all primarily "philosophical" and "discursive," is finally more serious, more earnest about his (philosophical) "praxis." Or that Kafka, coming not out of a Chinese Taoist but a Judaeo-Christian background, has finally a more "tragic" vision.<sup>51</sup> This may be so, but I would like to suggest something of Chuang-tzu's own ambivalence—and ironic, playful attitude—toward the "sacred," perhaps toward the "land of parable" construed (via "Confuciansim") as a kind of formal entity or place; and something of the darkly cynical, self-consuming or self-defeating quality (metaparabolic "brokenness") of his own "parables of praxis."

In one story Carpenter Shih notes the "uselessness" of the old "chestnut-leaved-oak by the altar of the god of the soil (*she shu*)—'good-for-nothing wood . . . wretched timber, useless for anything; that's why it's been able to grow so old.'"

When Carpenter Shih came home, the sacred oak appeared in a dream and said to him: "With what do you pro-

pose to compare me?<sup>52</sup> . . . These are [all] trees which by their own abilities make life miserable for themselves; and so they die in mid-path without lasting out the years assigned to them by Heaven, trees which have let themselves be made victims of worldly vulgarity. Such are the consequences with all things. I would add that this quest of mine to become of no possible use to anyone has been going on a long time; only now, on the verge of death, have I achieved it, and to me it is supremely useful . . .” When Carpenter Shih woke up he told his dream.

“If it prefers to be useless,” said the apprentice, “why is it serving as the sacred tree?” “Hush! Don’t say it. It’s simply using that as a pretext (*chih chi*, Watson: ‘It’s only resting there’<sup>53</sup>), thinks of itself as pestered by people who don’t appreciate it (Watson: ‘If we carp and criticize, it will merely conclude that we don’t understand it’). Aren’t the ones which don’t become sacred trees in some danger of being clipped? (Watson: ‘Even if it weren’t at the shrine, do you suppose it would be cut down?’) It protects itself in a different way from ordinary people. If you try to judge (*yi*) it by conventional standards, you’ll be way off!” (*Chuang-tzu* 4, Graham 72-73, Watson 61; last two sentences are Watson’s)

The “crowd gazing at” the tree might remind us of the crowds watching first Kafka’s “hunger artist” and then (the more “meaningful” to them, or more “useful”) panther. But more strikingly Kafkaesque is the absurd “project” of the old tree: “this quest . . . to become of no possible use to anyone has been going on a long time; only now, on the verge of death, have I achieved it (Watson: ‘now that I’m about to die, I’ve finally got it’), and to me it is supremely useful.” Of course, we may think this is a more “positive” or “hopeful” project than that of Kafka’s man from the country who waits his entire life in vain before the gateway to the Law, or the project, again, of the hunger artist as he “rationalizes” it at the end of his story. (Still the

artist, like the tree, has freely chosen his own path.) The tree's praxis (practice) of becoming-useless helped him survive, after all, until he was old—he didn't really need "perfect" or "total" uselessness to avoid the woodcutters' axes all those years. But (perhaps for this very reason) there is still something "useless" (and absurd) about finally "perfecting" the art of becoming-useless (finally being "perfectly useless") only when one is about to die, since after death one will no longer need to "know" this; yet death is the final perfection, the very embodiment of "uselessness" (and of the uselessness-embodying "art of fasting"), and it is perhaps the "metaparabolic uselessness" here (in/of this "parable of a useless life") that most reminds us of Kafka.

Finally then we have the tree's "being sacred" as a "mere pretext," a role that it plays, a temporary "resting place" in front of the shrine which it pretends, as it were, to be protecting. The passage is somewhat ambiguous. Graham takes it to mean that guarding the temple also serves the "use of uselessness"—woodcutters can't cut down the "sacred tree," it's "sacredness" makes it useless for their purposes. But Watson has the perhaps still more subtle and labyrinthine interpretation—filled with "vast inner spaces" like the empire of the broken wall, that wall whose "purpose" was to "protect" the/its empire: "Even if it weren't at the shrine, do you suppose it would be cut down? It protects itself in a different way from ordinary people." That is, the tree did not need this temporary "job" (function) of "being sacred" in order to avoid getting cut down; it already had a sufficient degree (or appearance?) of "uselessness" to protect itself without this "pretext." But then why did it choose to *do* this job? "It protects itself in a different way . . ." Watson's reading gives the parable a paradoxical and indeed "metaparabolic" quality which, as in Kafka's "Parable of Parables," propels it somehow beyond itself. We sense the tree is already within the realm of a "true sacred" lying beyond (overflowing) all sense and rationality—as against some traditional "Confucian" (rigidly formal, dogmatic, conventional) "sacred," reached perhaps by a finite river "following after" the unconfined. That is, we sense the tree has already "become parable." It is precisely when we read the "parabolic" or "sacred" in the "Parable of Parables" as not a "Confucian"

but a "Taoist" sacred in just this sense that we can more likely take this Parable "seriously." But on this reading—in this picture of limitlessness beyond/within the limit—the boundary between ordinary life/parable, confined/unconfined breaks down: thus, "not seeing the difference," we can go on.

The other Chuang-tzu story I want to mention is the story of the turtle, which in fact comes just before the "disappearing ground" parable in Chapter 26—so that when Hui-shih tells Chuang-tzu, "Your sayings are useless," he could actually be referring back most immediately to this turtle-story. In this most labyrinthine, inwardly coiled of parables, Lord Yuan dreams of a strange-looking man who tells him that, while delivering a message from the "Clear Yangtze [River] to the court of the Lord of the Yellow River," he got caught by a fisherman:

When Lord Yuan woke up, he ordered his men to divine the meaning, and they replied, "This is a sacred turtle" . . . The next day Yu Chu [the fisherman] appeared at court and the ruler [Lord Yuan] said, "What kind of fish have you caught recently?"

Yu Chu replied, "I caught a white turtle in my net . . ." "Present your turtle!" ordered the ruler. When the turtle was brought, the ruler could not decide whether to kill it or let it live and, being in doubt (*hsin yi*), he consulted his diviners, who replied, "Kill the turtle and divine with it—it will bring good luck" (*Sha guei yi bu chi*). Accordingly the turtle was stripped of its shell, and of seventy-two holes drilled in it for prognostication, not one failed to yield a true answer.

Confucius said, "The sacred turtle could appear to Lord Yuan in a dream but it couldn't escape from Yu Chu's net. It knew enough to give correct answers to seventy-two queries but it couldn't escape . . . having its belly ripped open. So it is that knowledge has its limitations (*kun*, distress, confinement), and the sacred (*shen*, god) has that

which it can do nothing about (*suo pu ji*, that which cannot reach, cannot attain). (Ware: 'wisdom has its troubles and gods are not omnipotent.') Even the most perfect wisdom can be outwitted by ten thousand schemers . . . Discard little wisdom (*chyu hsiao chih*) and great wisdom will become clear (*erh da chih ming*). Discard goodness and goodness will come of itself (*chyu shan erh chih shan yi*). (Watson 135-136, Ware 338)

Here I want to suggest a metaparabolic reading of this parable by which we might compare it to Kafka's "Parable of Parables." Turtle-shell divination, like ancient Greek and other (ancient) forms of augury, is seen (experienced, "read") as a reception of the divine voice (or divine writing, divine text); yet in this as in many early forms of augury, the animal whose inner body (bones, intestines, underside of tortoise shell) receives the spiritual "message" must naturally die first, that is, be killed in a sacrifice (to the same spirits who "speak" or "write" in the act of divination.)<sup>54</sup> To carry, then, his message, the messenger must first die so that we can read the message in his (dead or still living?) inner body. The further irony in this particular story is that Yuan's decision to kill the turtle and use it for the traditional form of divination "to bring good luck" is itself based on an independent (non-turtle-based?) divination; at the beginning the turtle-dream's "meaning" ("This is a sacred turtle") was also given to Yuan through (independent) divination. Thus this is a story of divination-within-divination, a kind of hierarchy or Chinese box structure infinite regress of divinations—and/or, perhaps, of (meta-)parabolic texts or discourses. But we sense that, unlike the "ruler's diviners" with their conventional, Confucian, highly arbitrary means of "divining," this sacred white turtle has the true oracular (divinatory) gift: precisely because it therefore can, perhaps as mere "pretext," divine "truthfully" (in the eyes of its professional "readers," it must die. So it is that "knowledge has its limitations"), and "the sacred has that which it can do nothing about (or 'which cannot reach')": perhaps the (true) "sacred" has become, for this sacred turtle, a (self-destructive) burden

"which it can do nothing about;" it cannot escape its fate (or function) of "being sacred," unlike, we suppose, yet somehow still suggestive of, the "sacred tree" who played at the "sacred" as a "mere pretext" whose (superfluous) "uselessness" he actually could have done without. There is an ironic, skeptical view here played paradoxically against the fully transcendent ("sacred") view, and we sense that the turtle (like the tree) lies just between them, at their point of intersection—that his true "sacredness" lies precisely here.

Couldn't we perhaps then say this turtle has "become parable"? As the "messenger" that reaches toward the divine—or "reads" it, or lets it be "read" for the human world, mediating between two worlds—the turtle both reaches and does not reach its "goal," it must die (like the hunger artist and perhaps the man before the gate of the Law) in order to "reach" it. But for Chuang-tzu it is just this move beyond the point of caring about life/death—of seeing the *difference*—which is the ultimate pragmatism, a spiritual (sacred) pragmatism. However, seeing it from the narrow pragmatist's perspective, it is of course a joke, an absurdity that the turtle must first die in order to (become) "divine": from this perspective (Kafka's "voice of the many") the "sacred" then is merely self-destructive and therefore absurd, or incomprehensible. Another ("Confucian") view of the sacred might see it as something formal and dogmatic, something the cynic (cynical pragmatist) would see as an easy game to play, a temporary "job" or "role" that can help him preserve his life. But Chuang-tzu's sacred tree (on Watson's reading) could have preserved his life simply through the perfection of his "praxis of uselessness," and the reason he chose to (temporarily) play the role of "sacred tree" was something else again, something we "cannot judge by normal standards"—perhaps something more truly (incomprehensibly) "sacred" that we could compare to the praxis of the white turtle who enters into the uselessness of death in order to become truly "useful." That is, the white turtle has also, no longer caring about life/death difference, perfected his "praxis of uselessness." The sacred (and from his own perspective perhaps useless) "object" that he becomes remains something paradoxical, something that we can always see from two sides: a real-

world pragmatic (and thus also ironic, parodic) side and another side which can never quite be defined, but remains simply "other."

We might then say Chuang-tzu is ambivalent about "divination discourse" here. On the one hand he is clearly rejecting—ironically, cynically rejecting—the idea that formal "divination," a sacred (Confucian) ritual, could give us "truth" or the dimension of the "sacred;" the absurdly arbitrary power of the king's diviner to "read" the cracks on the burned turtle shell reminds us of that of the emperor himself, and of his (divine, eternally pre-existing) "decree." In fact, it is a dangerous power: this is the central "pragmatic" message of the parable of the turtle. But on the other hand, there is still a certain "use" for this sort of discourse, too "close" to us perhaps for us to see it—the use of uselessness, the use of the "parable" itself. For Chuang-tzu's sages who "fly on air" cannot compare with those who fly on nothingness, into the infinite;<sup>55</sup> behind his "piping of earth" we hear the inaudible "piping of heaven":

T'zu-chi said, "The Great Clod" (*ta kuei*, Lao-tzu's Tao as "Formless Thing," pervasively immanent cosmos) belches out breath and its name is wind. So long as it doesn't come forth, nothing happens. But when it does, then ten thousand hollows begin crying wildly. Can't you hear them, long drawn out? . . . And when the fierce wind has passed on, then all the hollows are empty again . . . T'zu-yu said, "By the piping of earth, then, you mean simply [the sound of] these hollows . . . But may I ask about the piping of Heaven?" T'zu-chi said, "Blowing on the ten thousand things in a different way, so that each can be itself—all take what they want for themselves, but who does the sounding?" (Watson 31-32)

Watson (32) comments: "Heaven is not something distinct from earth and man, but a name applied to the natural and spontaneous functioning of the two." And Graham (49): "Chuang-tzu's parable of the wind compares the conflicting utterances of philosophers to . . .

the noises made by the wind in hollows of different shapes. It is natural for differently constituted persons to think differently; don't try to decide between their opinions, listen to Heaven who breathes through them." Wu's interpretation suggests Heidegger's notion of (human) *dasein* as the being that "asks the question of Being":

Holes are something negative, a lack; the wind is something invisible, the power of a no-thing. And our questions are also a lack, asking to be filled, and to be filled with something like the wind. That *something* must be as powerful as the wind, as no-thing, as invisible, blowing the wind to blow forth sounds out of a lack, a hole . . . Yet this "something" is . . . more lacking than the "lack" of holes . . . It is an inexpressible No-thing, to which we can allude only by questions . . . Heavenly piping . . . that is yet to begin to let there-exist something that is yet to begin to exist . . . (187).

In the next passage Chuang-tzu describes the "hollow" of our non-identical self, that inner chaos or pervasively immanent "Something" with no transcendent *archai* to give it "form" and "definition": "Joy, anger, grief, delight, worry, regret, fickleness, inflexibility, modesty, willfulness, candor, insolence—music from empty holes, mushrooms springing up in dampness . . . (Graham: 'music coming out of emptiness, vapour condensing into mushrooms.')

Without them we would not exist; without us they would have nothing to take hold of . . . It would seem as though they have some True Master, and yet I find no trace of him." (Watson 32-33, Graham 50)

Kafka also gives us "music out of emptiness," and more specifically in a "divinatory" context, in the canine investigator's description of the "musical dogs" he has seen as a youth: "They did not speak, they did not sing, they remained generally silent . . . but from the empty air they conjured music. Everything was music, the lifting and setting down of their feet, certain turns of the head, their running and their standing still . . . But it is too much to say that I even saw

them . . . my mind could attend to nothing but this blast of music which seemed to come from all sides, from the heights, from the depths, from everywhere, surrounding the listener, overwhelming him, and over his swooning body still blowing fanfares so near that they seemed far away and almost inaudible." (Glatzer 281-282)

For Kafka is also quite ambivalent about the possibility (or possible meaning) of a sacred or "divinatory" discourse. Perhaps we could say he is playing here between a truly "magical"—spiritual, transcendent, incomprehensible—reading of these dogs and a reading which takes them as mere tricksters, magicians, (trained) artists *performing* their divine/divinatory "rituals." Yet we sense there is still a *trace* of the genuinely sacred in the (incomprehensible) subtlety of these dogs: they are contrasted by the canine speaker with the overtly, conventionally spiritual "soaring dogs," who seem to serve no "purpose" or "use to society." But this uselessness of playing the *role* of sage (artist, diviner), of enacting these formal rituals, is not the "highest" uselessness (which the musical dogs seem more nearly to embody): it is a mere flaunted, "puffed up" spirituality, other-worldliness, irrelevance to the "real world" or "practical life." Like Chuang-tzu's lower-level sages, after all, the soaring dogs still "depend on air" (as their "solid ground"), they do not "fly on nothingness into the infinite."<sup>56</sup>

We get what seems a more genuinely useless sort of "music" or "divinatory discourse," and thus may come nearer the neighborhood of Chuang-tzu's "piping of heaven," in Kafka's own "piping" passages in "Josephine" and "The Burrow." The character of "Josephine the singer" is obviously a parody (like the "dogs" and "hunger artist") of actual singers and other stage performers, and also (up to a point) of Kafka's own "performance art" of writing. Yet if Kafka really wanted to parody "artists" (including himself), wouldn't he make Josephine a great singer—as the hunger artist is a great fester, Chuang-tzu's turtle a great diviner—or at least a pretty good one? Instead Josephine can't really sing at all, her "singing" is nothing but "piping," which in fact is *nothing but* her (or *anyone's*) "ordinary breathing." The audience likes to "listen" precisely *because* she cannot really sing—actual

singing, the usual "art" of singing, would have been "useless," perhaps a mere "pretext"—and this "piping" reminds them (most usefully) of the commonality of their (human, or rodent) existence, as perhaps the broken wall reminds its builders of that "current of blood no longer confined within the narrow circulation of the body . . ." (Glatzer 238). Here I think of Chuang-tzu's piping of earth—explicitly a "blowing of breath"—in the "hollows" of earth/body, and behind it the invisible/inaudible/virtually non-existent piping of Heaven: the common point is a sense of radical immanence, as of a Tao, cosmos, Being or "body" (breathing) so "close" to us that we cannot see or hear it. This is again Lao-tzu's "Tao that cannot be spoken of," which in its extreme ordinariness (*ch'ang*-"constant" Tao is also *ch'ang*-"common" Tao) is utterly "useless."<sup>57</sup>

In "The Burrow" Kafka's piping is more explicitly tied to the radical immanence of the body (one's own body or, in this case, that of "the other") and its (all-too-ordinary)-act of breathing, indeed to the "piping of earth":

The nature of the noise, the piping or whistling, gives me much food for thought . . . but then it draws in the air for a new push. This indrawing of its breath . . . this noise I hear then as a faint whistling. . . Sometimes I fancy that the noise has stopped, for it makes long pauses; sometimes such a faint whistling escapes one, one's own blood is pounding all too loudly in one's ears; then two pauses come one after another, and for a while one thinks that the whistling has stopped forever. I listen no longer, I jump up, all life is transfigured; it is as if the fountains from which flow the silence of the burrow were unsealed. (Glatzer 354, 350)

As always we have self-deflating irony—it could almost be a parody of Chuang-tzu's "piping of Heaven" passage, but only given a sufficiently "serious" reading of Chuang-tzu—which still leaves, we think (or hope), a "trace" of something "sacred," truly "other," radi-

cally "incomprehensible." (The irony, in a sense, points both ways.) "One thinks that the whistling has stopped forever": here the burrow/writer/diviner wants it to stop for the most narrowly pragmatic of reasons, as it is (or *signifies*) a direct threat to his life. But in quite another, more discursive, self-reflexive, overtly autobiographical context—yet still, in the hyperbolic thrust of its irony, offering a glimpse or trace of something "beyond" despair and hopelessness—Kafka feels he has "stopped the world's music" by his own writing: "All that he does seems to him, it is true . . . incapable of becoming history, breaking short the chain of the generations, cutting off for the first time at its most profound source the music of the world, which before him could at least be divined." ("He," Aphorisms, Glatzer ix) A divinatory art (divining act) of writing which in fact "cuts off the world's music at its most profound source," so that "it can no longer be divined"? Again we have the self-consuming logic of parabolic writing which "divines its own uselessness," of the metaparabolic text which, like the sacred turtle, self-destructs.

There is then in both Kafka and Chuang-tzu a paradoxical interplay between an ironic and a serious "praxis," an immanent and transcendent "uselessness." But this very situation suggests we are situated (always) already within an unlimited, metaparabolic discourse, which reaches beyond itself without ever (like the "imperial messenger" in "Great Wall") quite reaching a finite "truth" or "meaning"—or a finite "reader" ("diviner") whose interpretation could have created that truth/meaning. The sacred turtle, like the broken wall, is itself its own (finally incomprehensible, inexpressible) "story," its own "sacred writing" or "text," its own "parable." Like them it can only express its "meaning" by showing the impossibility of expressing it. Thus the "logic" of these parables—the parable of the turtle, the ground, the wall, of "parables"—is self-defeating; metaparabolic discourse is a self-destructive discourse; in moving beyond itself it inevitably erases itself. And/or never quite "reaches" (*pu chi*) itself.

*Chuang-tzu* 33: "Pointing cannot reach, reaching never ends." (*Chih pu chih, chih pu chueh.*)<sup>58</sup> *Lieh-tzu* 4: ". . .

having pointings-out you don't reach it, having things you don't exhaust it" (*Yu chih pu chih, yu wu pu chin.*)<sup>59</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Postcard from Kafka to Felice Bauer, May 1916. Quoted in Weiyang Meng, *Kafka und China* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 1986), pp. 30-31. (Wood's note.)

<sup>2</sup> At least in more "traditional" readings. Benjamin, Deleuze and Guattari would deny that the bureaucratic orders of Kafka's texts point to anything beyond themselves—either inwardly toward Freudian-psychoanalytic or outwardly toward metaphysical-(negative) theological meanings. But denying a metaphysical (not to mention psychological) dimension in Kafka seems like denying one in Shakespeare, Beckett or indeed Plato. Plato only *thinks* he's doing metaphysics? (Back to psychology!) Perhaps it's a tenable view, which might somehow fit both Derridean and Deleuzian readings of Platonic "difference" in terms of the repression of writing and of simulacra, "false images." But surely even such "repression" strikes one as being somehow more "metaphysical" (not to mention psychological) than "political." In any event Deleuze's reading of Kafka in terms of regressive (mathematical) series and orders of signification is sufficiently sophisticated that it might be made either to include or—as I strongly suspect—be included within such traditional metaphysical-theological—"parabolic" readings as the one I pursue here.

<sup>3</sup> The West has long tended to view the Orient as "non-rational" in the Western sense. (Could there be more than one sense of the term? Perhaps "differently rational" would be better.) But this non-rationality is part of the Orient's "exotic mystery": Westerners decry the chaos but crave the non-dualistic thinking—the "higher states of consciousness." This same (perhaps unanswerable) question about possible distortion and prejudice in the appropriation of "China" arises with Kafka's more China-obsessed disciple Borges: we think of "The Garden of Forking Paths" (and its variant, "The Library of Babel"), "The Wall and the Books" (clearly Kafka-influenced) and that curi-

ously alogical, comically absurd "Chinese Encyclopedia" which Foucault puts at the beginning of *The Order of Things*. (Foucault discusses here Medieval and Renaissance thought/discourse in terms of "resemblances," that is, in terms of the whole analogic and "parabolic" tradition that lies behind Kafka).

<sup>4</sup> "China" as parodic exaggeration of certain aspects of the West (its vast inner bureaucratic spaces) need not be seen as a "localized" China even more absurd than (thus able to exaggerate) the West of *The Trial* and *The Castle*. It can be seen as an exotic (self-distancing) image or manifestation of the universal, intertextual indeterminacy and absurdity—Hutcheon claims "parody" is basically intertextual, unlike "satire"—of an unfinished world/text. Also, if Kafka's absurdity is to a degree (darkly) comical and even "positive," then so is the "China" that parodies it. Perhaps even, in his "reading about China," Kafka came to see the *difference* of Chinese from Western philosophical thought and came to place higher value on Chinese "chaotic" (non-dualistic) thinking?

<sup>5</sup> A quite mixed or indeterminate form (genre) of writing, though non-fictional, "discursive" qualities seem to predominate here over "narrative" ones, as also in "Report," "Investigations" (also a "report") and "Josephine."

<sup>6</sup> And here we note the recursive levels of "uselessness"—a report on something useless which becomes itself the useless object/text, the "parable of parables": it can reach no clear "conclusion" (on the metaparabolic level), no more than can the "imperial messenger" (in the parable-within-the-parable) reach "you," the reader.

<sup>7</sup> Borges in "The Wall and the Books" jumps even faster into the parabolic explanations. But he faces the same situation as Kafka: finally the historical "facts" about this "Great Wall" are unclear, history is hard to distinguish from myth, and the practical "reality" points us already toward the level of parable.

<sup>8</sup> Waldron continues here: "A folk tradition developed as well . . . The Chinese peasantry seem not to have forgotten the forced dispatch of hundreds of thousand of their number to the north to war with the Hsiung-nu, settle in their territory, and build barriers along its margins.

Out of their memory, folk songs and folk tales developed, and in 48 B.C., Chia Chuan-chih stated that 'Songs of the Long Wall have never ceased up to now.' We even possess four lines that probably originated in such a song. They warn parents: 'If a son is born, mind you don't raise him! / If a girl is born, feed her dried meat. / Don't you just see below the Long Wall / Dead men's skeletons prop each other up.'" (71)

<sup>9</sup> Though, as we shall see, there might be "Taoist" as well as "Confucian" explanations, both of the reporter's "move" toward the metaphysical and of the nature of this "pointing."

<sup>10</sup> Kafka clearly wants to distinguish "high command" from "Emperor": the former has "existed from eternity" and might signify God in some more abstracted sense; the latter suggests a more anthropocentric (God-) figure, existing and deciding things in time; we think again of Kafka's power hierarchies, and of ontological hierarchies in gnosticism (which influenced Jewish mysticism) and Neo-Platonism, all of which are no doubt being ironized and parodied here. We get the further, perhaps more subtle distinction between the "high command" itself and the "decision to build the wall," both of which have "existed from eternity." Kafka is perhaps as usual playing with/interplaying the logical-metaphysical possibilities (of interpretation) here; in one reading we could distinguish between the "high command" as "potential" origin/source of the "decision" (e.g. to create the wall/world) and the "actual" decision. But what sense does this make, if both have "existed from eternity"? Or, how could the (active, actual) decision (divine *fiat*, "moment" of creating the universe) itself have "existed from eternity"? Creation as eternally on-going act is a serious theological position which Kafka may have entertained, but he may more likely just be playing around.

<sup>11</sup> As Heidegger reminds us, Hermes is the herald ("announcer") and messenger of the gods; from his name comes *hermeneuein*, "to interpret."

<sup>12</sup> Politzer (84-86) points out the connection between Kafka's parabolizing—especially in his two "essential" Parables, "Before the Law" and "The Imperial Messenger"—and that of Dostoevsky ("The Grand Inquisitor") and Nietzsche. The latter's "madman" (whom

Politzer calls a “tragically paradoxical . . . mad Diogenes”) says: “I come too early . . . my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering—it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves.” (Kaufmann 96)

<sup>13</sup> Postmodern reading: behind our own “textuality” (as in “death of the author”). But such “postmodern” interpretive discourse is closely related to the most ancient forms of parabolic and “divination” discourse.

<sup>14</sup> Which arguably comes from one side or one “reading” of the earlier *I Ching*, while Confucianism comes from the other.

<sup>15</sup> Both of which are more fully developed in the *Chuang-tzu*, particularly in the *Chi wu lun*.

<sup>16</sup> Also human, “unconscious” nature, if we can interpret it within the same framework used for other world myths—a framework which admittedly seems more easily to “fit” the Taoist myths of Chuang-tzu.

<sup>17</sup> Kafka in “Great Wall” has both the Tower of Babel and Biblical flood on (or in the back of) his mind; that he also has some Chinese philosophical notions of “flood” in mind is strongly suggested by the “two ways of meditating on the divine decree” passage, discussed below.

<sup>18</sup> This passage, strategically located at the end of *Chuang-tzu* 7—last of the “Inner Chapters,” those most clearly written by Chuang-tzu himself—is very rich. One point is the emphasis on “time” (in the names). Is chaos then to be interpreted first in a temporal sense? And if so, what do we make of “ordering” this chaos-time by drilling holes in it? Another point is the picturing of Hun-tun as a kind of primitive, uncivilized, indeed non-human or not-yet-human creature, one who has not yet “developed” the faculties of “sense,” suggesting that this “chaos” is just primeval “nature” (*ta tzu-ran*, great self-so) itself. Is Hun-tun then meant to subvert that other, proto-Confucian legend of Sage-King Yao whose “channels” overcame (by regulating) the flood-waters? The “monstrous” is—as Allinson especially has pointed out—

a key theme in the Chuang-tzu, with its many stories of deformed creatures who, because of their very "uselessness" (abnormality), can "live out their days."

<sup>19</sup> Thus if Kafka is a "guilt-ridden" man, a man of Kierkegaardian "fear and trembling," these need not be only Hebraic, Western or even Freudian characteristics.

<sup>20</sup> In an earlier passage we get a more direct satirizing or parodying of traditional Chinese (Confucian) society, which echoes also the "existence from eternity" of (not God perhaps or an Emperor but) a precept, rule, (Heavenly) "decree," the only thing that prevents this passage from directly contradicting the final passage about the "solid ground of ignorance" is the fact that the former is referring, apparently, to the "lower schools" but not to the masses of "common people": "The farther one descends among the lower schools the more, naturally enough, does one find teachers' and pupils' doubts of their own knowledge vanishing and superficial culture mounting sky-high around a few precepts that have been drilled into peoples' minds for centuries, precepts which, though they have lost nothing of their eternal truth, remain eternally invisible in this fog of confusion." (Precepts of a "Confucian" high command/heavenly decree which are both eternally true and "invisible," or non-existent.)

<sup>21</sup> The mock-romantic "grand gesture" here, the plunge into operatic bathos, as in "See Naples and die!"

<sup>22</sup> Logical abstractions and paradoxes are expressed in images ("ground," "foundation," "wall") which we are forced yet unable to "take literally": these most "concrete" images point (metaparabolically) beyond themselves, and thus undermine their literal sense. Baum says "parable . . . suggests analogical rather than analytical discourse . . . the parable assumes the form of extended metaphor, but it is an open-ended comparison in which the chain of signifiers automatically cancels its literal sense . . . to imply patterns of association which may be bonded to the actual signifier only by the slightest tether of semantic . . . paradigm." (155) Thus "taking the parable literally" (or "becoming-parable") can be negative-ironic, indeed self-destructive. (See note 33.)

<sup>23</sup> Bloom in his Introduction to *Kafka: Modern Critical Views* mentions all of these things, though as usual he seems especially fascinated by gnosticism—and takes it as lying in the background of Jewish mysticism, Hassidism, cabalism. Here he also notes that Kafka's "gateway of the Law" echoes an image in ancient gnostic texts.

<sup>24</sup> These two ways—the way we "can think" and the way we "must not think"—might also be a parody of Parmenides' "two ways": the Way of Truth (that there is only "what is," that "what is not can be neither thought nor said") and the Way of Seeming (which allows also the "not"). This connection is in a sense implicit in the following discussion. Parmenides disagrees with Heraclitus (Lao-tzu's counterpart), for whom "all flows," and predicts Plato (Confucius' counterpart) with his emphasis on a rational ethics. But for Kafka, unlike (we assume) Parmenides, the "way we cannot think" is just the taking-too-far or chaotic "overflowing" of the "way we can think."

<sup>25</sup> In the *Chuang-tzu's* "Autumn Floods" chapter the sea represents infinity and the finite river, approaching it, is encouraged (or forced) by the sea to reflect on the relativity of space, time and meaning.

<sup>26</sup> Again, this doesn't quite make sense, since by following the normal, harmonious path into the sea we also "won't know," but ostensibly (as a "pretext"?) it could still be intended to help us avoid self-destruction in trying (fruitlessly) to know. Then by draining into the sea harmoniously do we not self-destruct? (Confucian harmony: each individual plays his/her *jen*-proper role to fit into the larger whole.)

<sup>27</sup> See note 18.

<sup>28</sup> Though this could also be urged as a reason to explain why even the "second way of meditation," which also begins with the flowing river, cannot "work."

<sup>29</sup> "Limitless ignorance": we think of the builders with their solid ground, Chaos with no holes cut in it.

<sup>30</sup> Though they are also the foundation of all logic—Aristotle's principle of identity ( $A=A$ ), pure "logical form" for the early Wittgen-

stein—as Kafka is clearly aware in his “formal-tautological” novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*. (Like metaphoric discourse, tautological discourse is redundant, self-canceling.)

<sup>31</sup> This would be one way to interpret Nietzsche’s attitude toward the “impossible news” of the “death of God” (see note 12) and toward his readers’ lack of “ears to hear” it, or him. (*Zarathustra, Ecce Homo*.)

<sup>32</sup> We could compare this to Socrates’ “dilemma of inquiry” in the *Meno*: “There’s no use in inquiring about that which we do not know—transcendent forms like ‘the good’—since we won’t know when we have actually hit upon the ‘right answer,’ having nothing to compare it with.” Plato’s formalist thinking is after all a kind of parabolic thinking, and Kafka is clearly in this tradition; see Leadbeater on Platonic elements in “Investigations.”

<sup>33</sup> Baum emphasizes the negative-ironic interpretation of “taking parables literally.” Just as the son takes the father’s “judgment” of “death by drowning” literally in “The Judgment,” so “It is enough for Gregor to take literally, if only for a moment, a figure of speech . . . if his father has actually called him an *Ungeziefer*—what more appropriate defensive strategy for the son than to take actual shape in this metaphoric guise, to ‘become parable, and thus rid himself of his daily cares . . .’” As for “Before the Law” within *The Trial*: “. . . the shortest route to the law is through the endless proliferation of parables. Thus the message of salvation may be offered the suppliant only when he ceases to take literally the text, something the man from the country cannot do, of course, since the significance of his existence depends on ‘being-in-parable.’ . . . Paradoxically, [K.] fails to take the text literally enough because he is its counterpart.” . . . Baum also notes that “*das Gleichnis*, literally ‘likeness’ or ‘simile,’ indicates more clearly the semiotic duplicity inherent in the narrative.” (158, 157, 155). Is Baum then (like Derrida) questioning the possibility of “transcendence” beyond the literal/textual level? Might not Kafka and Chuang-tzu be playing between these two positions, offering us a kind of “trace” off/to the beyond?

<sup>34</sup> And we sense that Nietzsche and Heidegger may also be playing in this neighborhood.

<sup>35</sup> See Heidegger (*Early Greek Thinking*) on Heraclitus' "How can one hide before that which never sets?"

<sup>36</sup> Graham puts this in his "Passages related to the Inner chapters," those most clearly Chuang-tzu's own.

<sup>37</sup> Giles translates: ". . . yet man uses of it only as much as is covered by the sole of his foot. By and by, he turns up his toes and goes beneath it to the Yellow Spring." (263) (Radical contingency—Giles translates the chapter title, *wai wu*, "external things" as "Contingencies"—or just life's brevity and slightly comical absurdity?)

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps Chuang-tzu wants to "include" all three meanings, or at least the first two?

<sup>39</sup> Heidegger (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 3) of course distinguishes *Ur-grund* ("primal ground"), *Ab-grund* ("abyss") and *Un-grund* ("non-ground"). The fundamental question of metaphysics ("Why do beings exist, rather than nothing?") "aims at the ground of what is insofar as it is . . . what is put in question is thus related to the ground. However, since the question is a question, it remains to be seen whether the ground arrived at is really a ground . . ." (That is, to see *which* kind of "ground" it is.) See Wu's interpretation of Chuang-tzu's "piping of Heaven" in terms of "earth-lack," "heaven-lack" and "questioning." (Discussed in my "Sacred" section below).

<sup>40</sup> *Yin* is of course the "feminine" principle, "receptivity." (Kristeva's "semiotic *khora* of language"? Irigaray's "volume without contours"? ) Feminists take note. The great *Yin chieh*—"unravels" things; *chieh* is untie, loosen and (thus) solve, analyze, understand.

<sup>41</sup> The character for *ding* has *mien*-"roof" over a graph derived from *tsou*-walking, which is the radical for *tsu*-foot, base, sufficient, full.

<sup>42</sup> See note 40.

<sup>43</sup> The passage continues: "If to embrace them all we have Heaven (*chin yu t'ien hsun*, 'inexhaustible having heaven follow') and to stay on course have its light, if . . . we have the axis (*shu*) on which things turn, and to start from have that which is other than ourselves, then our unraveling will resemble [not unraveling], our knowing will resemble [not knowing]. The questions which we put to that which we

know only by being ignorant cannot have confines yet cannot be without confines. If when we wrench everything apart . . . can it be denied that there is a grand total of all? Why not after all put our questions to it?"

<sup>44</sup> An abysmal (unlimited) question for ancients and postmodernists alike; Chuang-tzu famously says, "The One and its name make two;" "If you refrain from saying, everything is even . . . saying is uneven with the even . . ." I also think of Heidegger (*Early Greek Thinking*) on Parmenides' duality of thinking/being.

<sup>45</sup> The passage continues: "Where neither It nor Other finds its opposite is called the axis of the Way (*Tao shu*). When once the axis is found at the center of the circle there is no limit to (*wu ch'ung*, 'no emptying of,' 'no exhaustion of') responding with either . . . no limit to what is *it* . . . [or] to what is not. Therefore I say: 'The best means is Illumination [*ming*].' Rather than use the meaning to show that 'The meaning is not the meaning,' use what is *not* the meaning." This last phrase refers to the "sophist" Kung-sun Lung's "Meaning (*chih*, pointing-out) is not meaning," at the opening of his (proto-"postmodernist") *Chih Wu Lun*. (See Stevenson on Graham's interpretation in "Meaning is Not Meaning.")

<sup>46</sup> *Chuang-tzu 2*: "Words are not just wind (*fu yen fei chuei yeh*, Graham: 'Saying is not blowing breath'). Words have something to say (*yen che yu yen*, 'saying says something'). But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds (*ko yin*), but is there any difference, or isn't there?" (Watson 34, Graham 52)

<sup>47</sup> Graham's reading; here he combines a passage from the end of chapter 24—where *chie*-unraveled echos the function of the "great *Yin*" (great Feminine)—with one from the end of chapter 32. (Graham 63)

<sup>48</sup> See note 44.

<sup>49</sup> See note 33. Baum's notion of parable as "extended metaphor" and "open-ended comparison in which the chain of signifiers automatically cancels its literal sense . . ." (155) can also suggest a wider

"leveling of the field"—since literal sense may be canceled by analogical (or parabolic) sense and *vice versa*. (Perhaps if, as Chuang-tzu says, "The One and its name make Two," then "difference" without its "name" makes "one"?)

<sup>50</sup> He won't be called upon for that most life-endangering activity, (Confucian) government service: the recurring Taoist theme of the praxis of the apolitical "hermit."

<sup>51</sup> Here's Kafka on "the Way": "It was very early in the morning, the streets were clean and deserted, I was on my way to the station. As I compared the tower clock with my watch I realized it was much later than I had thought and that I had to hurry; the shock of this discovery made me feel uncertain of the way, I wasn't very well acquainted with the town as yet; fortunately, there was a policeman at hand, I ran to him and breathlessly asked him the way. He smiled and said: "You asking me the way?" "Yes," I said, "since I can't find it myself." "Give it up! Give it up!" said he, and turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter." ("Give it Up!": Glatzer 456) It remains always undecidable in Kafka which goes deeper, the hopelessness or the irony; this undecidability is perhaps the "absurd." Chuang-tzu's "Way has never had boundaries, Saying has never had norms" (Graham 57), and yet the Way's limitlessness is "useless" (for "going anywhere"), and it might be impossible to distinguish this Saying from the "peeps of baby birds." On the "seriousness" of Kafka's parabolic discourse, also see note 33.

<sup>52</sup> Again, the point of Kafka's "Parable of Parables" (*Gleichnis* means "compare") may be that once we have "become Parable" we can no longer be compared to anything, thus (or because) we no longer can see (or no longer *are*) a "difference" between/among things (including the difference of self/others).

<sup>53</sup> In fact this *chi* can be "send," "entrust" "consign" but also "dwell temporarily" (in another's house): thus "a pretext" as merely "temporary position" ("assumed position"). This is quite interesting in the context of *chih yen*, spillover saying, which Graham describes as "a fluid language which keeps its equilibrium through changing meanings and viewpoints." But this *chih yen* is contrasted by Chuang-

tzu (27) with both *yu yen*, "saying from a *yu*-lodging place" and *chung yen*, "weighted saying." The former—*yu* is literally "to live temporarily," "to consign" but also can mean "fable," "allegory," perhaps "parable"—is "traditionally taken to be the expression of ideas through imaginary conversations but becomes, in Chuang-tzu's style of disputation, the standpoint of the other party in debate . . . it is possible to convince a man by temporarily assuming his standpoint and arguing from it." The latter is "the aphorism with the weight of the speaker's experience behind it." The question then becomes, how might we "interpret" Kafka's (and Chuang-tzu's) (meta)parabolic discourse in terms of these three types of saying/discourse, given that it has clear connections to all three, and to *chi*-"pretext," which itself seems closely tied to "saying from a lodging place" (though we would want to distinguish it from "spillover saying")?

<sup>54</sup> In Shang Dynasty turtle-shell divination, small indentations were drilled in the carapace (inner surface of shell) and heat was applied; the augury was based on the shape of the cracks which resulted: a particular crack was "read" as meaning either "yes" or "no" by the diviner in response to a specific question he had just posed. (The *I Ching* came from this: each hexagram is seen as response to a specific question we have asked, and/or to our specific "situation" at that moment.) Kalkhas, near the opening of the *Iliad*, is "wisest of all who scanned the flight of birds;" Tiresias in *Oedipus Rex* is asked by Oedipus to "look to the voices of prophetic birds or the answers written in flames . . ." The "reading" of the intestines (*eingeweide*) of birds and other animals is an image played upon by Nietzsche in *Zarathustra*, as he is fascinated by its suggestions of (cosmic) "inversion."

<sup>55</sup> *Chuang-tzu* 1: "Lieh Tzu could ride the wind and go soaring around with cool and breezy skill, but after fifteen days he went back to earth. . . . He escaped the trouble of walking, but he still had to depend on something to get around. If he had only mounted on the truth of Heaven and Earth, ridden the changes of the six breaths (*liu chi chih bian*), and thus wandered through the boundless (*yu wu ch'ung*) (Graham: 'As for the man who rides a true course between heaven and

earth, with the changes of the Six Energies for his chariot, to travel into the infinite'), then what would he have had to depend on?" (Watson 26, Graham 44)

<sup>56</sup> See previous note.

<sup>57</sup> This is one interpretation of the line, and it echoes Heraclitus: "The Logos is common to all but each thinks he has a private understanding of it." That is, "common" Tao/Logos is already "within" us, thus too close to see: by an objectifying, rational "knowing" or "saying" of it ("the way that can be spoken of") we separate it from ourselves, fragment it, subjectify it, don't get the ("unlimited") constant/common Tao/Logos.

<sup>58</sup> From the second series of paradoxes or "sophisms" at the end of the Chuang-tzu and usually attributed to Kung-sun Lung, who with his friend Hui-Shih (Chuang-tzu's interlocutor in the "disappearing ground" passage) often debated with Chuang-tzu. (Sophists or debaters of the *Ming Chia*, School of Names, in love with logical paradoxes which remained still within a kind of logical-discursive "limit," versus the Taoist's 'unlimited' thinking/saying.) Chan translates: "The pointing of a finger does not reach (a thing), the reaching never ends." And Graham: "What we point out we fail to arrive at, what we arrive at we do not detach."

<sup>59</sup> This paradox, again ascribed to Kung-sun Lung, is for Graham a "Taoist" version of the previous one. Graham comments in *Disputers of the Tao*: "A friend of Kung-sun Lung then gives brief explanations. . . . 'without pointings-out, you reach them all: what exhausts things there constantly is . . .'" Graham, influenced by Hansen's mass noun hypothesis, is thinking in terms of an immanent, indeterminate whole-of-parts, which may or may not finally come to the same thing as a ("mystical"?) Taoist perspective. Or perhaps "what exhausts things yet constantly is" is just the pervasive, open-ended signifying structure of human language, the (meta-metonymic, meta-parabolic) chains of signifiers which, pointing always "beyond" themselves, destroy their own "literal sense"? (See Stevenson, "Meaning is Not Meaning" and "South Has (No) Limits.")

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