

Destruction/Deconstruction in the Text of Lao Tzu

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In choosing *Tao-te-ching* for this project of de-structive hermeneutics, I am aware that I may force myself, and the reader as well, into a series of cruxes. A crux confronting us, first of all, is: Is there a text of Lao Tzu? Presently this entails another question: Was Lao Tzu the author of *Tao-te-ching*, or, to put the question more bluntly, did Lao Tzu exist?¹ Indeed, the text of Lao Tzu is extremely problematic in the history of ancient Chinese literature. Our project, then, requires an understanding that these questions are historical givens well dispensed with by various commentators and exegetes² — in order to proceed with our disclosure of the text. However, other questions arise as soon as we set out on our hermeneutic tour. There is no denying the text of Lao Tzu has disappeared beneath its interpretations and commentaries over the centuries. After so many feats and finds, we feel, there is no “immaculate perception” and no simple return to *the* text of Lao Tzu itself, to its original edition. Wang Pi’s commentary has apparently become another text apart from Lao Tzu’s, and to adopt Chuang Tzu’s text as a cross reference does not really help in unravelling the text of Lao Tzu.³

Where shall we begin? No doubt, we must begin with the text, seeking to “bore from within” its *force* (in the Derridean sense of the word). Verily at this point we find the subversion of discourse in the text of Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu’s text, which is among other things a discourse on government,⁴ has turned itself into another discourse. Specifically, a discourse on the Nature of Language. Examples can be spotted quite easily. Here are two of the most often quoted:

信言不美	，	美言不信；
善者不辯	，	辯者不善；
知者不博	，	博者不知。

Truthful words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not
truthful. Good words are not persuasive; persuasive words are

not good. He who knows has no wide learning; he who has wide learning does not know. (LXXXI)

知者不言，言者不知。

One who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know.
(LVI)

Paradoxically, Lao Tzu's text exhibits the subversive process in which rhetorical reversals (either via repetition or substitution) deprive an aphoristic statement of its preudial authority. A most important key to the understanding of this paradox is found in Chapter XXI: "As a thing Tao is shadowy, indistinct . . . yet within it is an image" (道之爲物，惟恍惟惚，惚兮恍兮，其中有象). Placing *hsiang* 象 in between Tao and its thinghood, Lao Tzu emphasizes presencing as contingent while he states that Tao precedes every thing including discourse.⁵ That is why on the one hand he points to the ineffableness of Tao and, on the other hand, he has no other alternative than appeal to language, offering makeshift names of Tao. The sagacity of Lao Tzu's unarbitrary stance is to make his text a free play in keeping with Derrida's theory of endless regress and supplement.⁶ As Lao Tzu states in Chapter XLVIII: "In the pursuit of learning one knows more every day; in the pursuit of *Tao* one does less every day." One possible interpretation which may be appended to this statement is: once Tao is uttered (*énoncé*), it soon gets lost in the lexical maze – or, in the prison-house of language, to appropriate Fredric Jameson's term. This explains why he says emphatically in Chapter XLI, "Tao conceals itself in being nameless."

Lao Tzu's hesitancy to name, to demonstrate anti-nomianism is made clear, point-blank, in Chapter I, which has nearly been worn thin by exegetes:

道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名。
無名天地之始，有名萬物之母。

The Tao that can be enunciated
Is not the constant Tao;
The name that can be named
Is not the natural name.
The Name-less was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad things.

In fine, the Ontology of Tao is beyond discourse. What is verbalized in the text concerning Tao is merely the enunciable in terms of human

schematization — namely, what is sayable — and is far from Tao. In this connection, Han-fei Tzu's commentary (though his remarks on other occasions are often misleading and mistaken) is worth quoting here:

凡理者，方、圓、短、長、麤、靡、堅、脆之分也。故理定而後物可得道也。故定理有存亡，有死生，有盛衰。夫物之一存、一亡、乍死、乍生，初盛而後衰者，不可謂常。夫唯與天地之剖判也俱生，至天地之消散也不死不衰者，謂常。而常者，無攸易，無定理。無定理非在於常，是以不可道也。…強之曰道。然而可論。⁷

Now that naming (the act of naming) is but a kind of presencing, a contingent representation (in a Foucauldian sense), Lao Tzu goes on to concede that he does not know the name of Tao, and in designating it as such he may as well give it the makeshift name of “the Great”:

強爲之名曰大。
大曰逝，逝曰遠，遠曰反。

Being great, it is further described as receding,
Receding, it is described as far away,
Being far away, it is described as Eternally Returning. (XXV)

Explicit here is of course Derrida's (to be more accurate, Nietzschean) notion of *jeu*. Lao Tzu's heightened awareness of the danger or liabilities of language certainly enables him to avoid usurpation of Ontology by methodology and turn his contingent representation into a free play.

As Han-fei Tzu correctly pointed out, Lao Tzu's effort not to let *method* override Truth is so unique that he seeks by no means to schematize. He does not even allow himself the naïvete in believing (as Chuang Tzu does) that his presencing could reach the Ontology of Tao, the “transcendental signified”-Tao. Therefore, Lao Tzu's experience allegorizes the fundamental principle that Method or System is always alienating and that Meaning and Being are effected through the de-struction of Method. And, to be sure, this de-struction comes from within the text.

To reiterate our speculation: The text of Lao Tzu displays the effort to make *a-letheia* possible and yet in the meantime problematizes the intransigence of language to Tao. Two most striking cases in point which attest to this aporia are found in the following excerpts:

Tao cannot be seen — it is unarresting;

It cannot be heard, being inaudible;
 It cannot be held, being intangible.
 These three cannot be fathomed
 And so they are confused and joined in one.
 Its upper part is not dazzling;
 Its lower part is not obscure.

Tao, being unbroken, cannot be named.
 It returns to nothingness.
 The form of the formless,
 The image of the imageless,
 It is called indefinable and beyond description. (XIV)

Tao is for ever nameless.
 Though the uncarved block is small
 No one in the world dare claim its allegiance.
 . . . Only when it is cut are there names.
 As soon as there are names
 One ought to know that it is time to stop. (XXXII)

The unnamability of Tao is granted aprioristically, but a contingent naming is offered nonetheless. In addition to the joy of free play mentioned above, another *aporia* raises its intrinsic head here. Lao Tzu seems to realize that whether or not one employs discourse self-consumingly to reveal the anteriority of Being depends on this: one needs to decide if one is to go Cartesian and assert the primacy of the cognitive I or admit with Merleau-Ponty that,

To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learned beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.⁸

In the words of Merleau-Ponty, the world is *there* before any possible analysis is imposed upon it. Thus reflection is carried away by itself. When this touches upon the realm of language, more intricacies appear. As Heidegger states in "The Nature of Language":

If we are to think through the nature of language, language must first promise itself to us, or must already have done so. Language must, in its own way, avow to us itself — its nature. Language persists as this avowal. . . . The essential nature of language makes itself known to us as what is spoken, the language of its nature.⁹

The paradox is that language as seen by Heidegger or Derrida is self-subversive. Here is what Heidegger says in “What is Metaphysics?”:

If science is right, then only one thing is sure: Science wishes to know nothing of the nothing. Ultimately this is the scientifically vigorous conception of the nothing. We know it, the nothing, in that we wish to know nothing about it.

Science wants to know nothing of the nothing. But even so it is certain that when science tries to express its proper essence it calls upon the nothing for help. *It has recourse to what it rejects.*¹⁰

The cogency of Heidegger’s statements can be attested from the Chinese perspective — for instance, by Wang Pi’s elucidation on *hsiang* 明象 :

夫象者，出意者也。言者，明象者也。盡意莫若象，盡象莫若言。言生於象，故可尋言以觀象；象生於意，故可尋象以觀意。意以象盡，象以言著。故言者所以明象，得象而忘言；象者，所以存意，得意而忘象。猶蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄；筌者所以在魚，得魚而忘筌也。…存言者，非得象者也；存象者，非得意者也。象生於意而存象焉，則所存者乃非其象也；言坐於象而存焉，則所存者乃非其言也。然則，忘象者，乃得意者也；忘言者，乃得象者也。得意在忘象，得象在忘言。故立象以盡意，而象可忘也；重畫以盡情，而畫可忘也。¹¹

From this, it can be understood why Lao Tzu mentions that “Foreknowledge is the flowery embellishment of Tao and the beginning of folly” (XXXVIII), and meanwhile pleads, somewhat nostalgically, for a return to the “innocence” of a new born babe (LV). The former points to the “double bind” of foreknowledge and the categorical structure of language as well. A new born babe, free from this yoke, “does not know of the union of male and female, yet its male member will stir.”

It is precisely under this double bind that Lao Tzu formulates his idea of

“the form of the formless, the image of the imageless,” and so forth. Since Nothing is the case that is in question, it gains its thingness in the course and becomes Something. (In this case, the phenomenal description of Tao has a certain affinity with the Heideggerian adumbration of Nothing.) Hence, an interplay of Absence and Presence is at work, for instance, in “有無相生” (II) and notably in Chapter XI:

Thirty spokes

Share one hub.

Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the cart. Knead clay in order to make a vessel. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the vessel. Cut out doors and windows in order to make a room. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the room.

Thus what we gain is Something, yet it is by virtue of Nothing that this can be put to use.

A metaphoric extension of this chapter is presented in Chapter XLII:

Tao begets one; one begets two; two begets three; and three begets the myriad things.

The myriad things carry on their backs the *yin* and embrace in their arms the *yang* and are the blending of the generative forces of the two.

And Wang Pi expounded it as follows:

萬物萬形，其歸一也。何由改之？由於無也。由無乃一，可謂無。已謂之一，豈得無言乎？…從無之有，數盡乎斯…故萬物之生…雖有萬形，沖氣一焉。

Wang Pi's note quoted above emphasizes the harmony achieved by the combining of the principles of *yin* and *yang*. And, of course, the underlying argument is no other than the interplay of absence and presence, which also finds expression in Chapter XVI.

All things considered, we find in Lao Tzu the same tension of two incompatible narrators as Paul de Man found in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.¹³ Often the aphoristic – or rather, the metalinguistic – statements on the Nature of Language is contradicted by the rhetorical praxis, that is,

the author's own contingent describing of Tao. The paradigmatic narrator in Lao Tzu is successful in forming meta-commentaries which the contingent (I use this word with reservation) narrator fails to implement or observe closely in his metaphoric extension. Granting that Tao is unnamable and that enough is enough, the latter narrator in Lao Tzu himself, however, tends to forget the *a posteriori* truth: That which is does not seem to be present. Lao Tzu characterizes the Nameless as "the beginning of heaven and earth" (I) and Tao as empty:

道冲而用之或不盈，渊兮似萬物之宗。

…吾不知誰之子，象帝之先。

Tao is void, yet use will not drain it.

Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad things.

... I know not whose son it is.

It images the forefather of the Creator. (IV)

Clearly, Lao Tzu's Tao bears much affinity with the Heideggerian Being whose origin man is destined to lose track of owing to the Nature of Language. Therefore, it may follow that Lao Tzu's characterization of Tao is what it should be and preferably remains so. And yet in Chapter XXV no sooner does he reiterate this abstract derivation than he looks for "concretization" in the last clauses:

There is a thing confusedly formed,
Born before heaven and earth.
Silent and void
It stands alone and does not change,
Goes round and does not weary.
It is capable of being the mother of the world.

*Man models himself on earth,
Earth on heaven,
Heaven on Tao,
And Tao on what is natural.* (Emphasis added)

Ironically but certainly, the endless reversals of repetition or substitution cancels the force of the narrative, as in Chapter LII:

The world had a beginning
And this beginning could be the mother of the world.

When you know the mother
 Go on to know the child.
 After you have known the child
 Go back to holding fast to the mother,
 And to the end of your days you will not meet with danger.
 Block the openings,
 Shut the doors,
 And all your life you will not run dry.
 Unblock the openings,
 Add to your troubles,
 And to the end of your days you will be beyond salvation.

The most amusing part of it is that Lao Tzu is seeking at this point to define the term Discernment (as the ability to see the small) and his zigzag razzle-dazzle discursive formation certainly stops short of his attempt to elucidate.

But, it should be pointed out that provided the reader can recognize this as inherent in the free play, it turns into an asset with which the otherness (Lacanian / Derridean) of discourse is invoked.¹⁴ The laconic drive of the aphoristic narrator is in question insofar as his being implies a being other than itself. It is on this same ground that Lao Tzu formulates such statements as "Straightforward words seem paradoxical" (LXXVIII); "How much difference is there between yea and nay? How great is the distance between good and evil?" (XX); "It is on disaster that good fortune perches; it is beneath good fortune that disaster crouches" (LVIII).

In concluding, we gather from the text of Lao Tzu that "letting be" is possible only if language qua language is undermined. What we have is "One Text" (in the name of the Subtle Sameness) that recollects itself through plurality. Even when words go awry in the form of a-symmetry or sheer a-morphousness, it is still *the* text. In no event do we find that Lao Tzu's text deconstructs itself out of existence as Paul de Man sees happening with Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, which, incidentally, is a miscalculation — I think. With all the makeshift names and discursive representation, the text of Lao Tzu is certainly no hollow vessel, for we know in the last analysis that,

The Tao of heaven
 Excels in overcoming though it does not contend,
 In responding though it does not speak,
 In attracting though it does not summon,
 In laying plans though it appears slack. (LXXIII)

Notes:

1. See Ch'ien Mu 錢穆, *Chuang-Lao-t'ung-pien* 莊老通辨 (Taipei: San-min-shu-chü 三民書局, 1973), pp. 11-20, 21-102, 287-314. According to Ch'ien, Lao Tzu was purely a legendary figure and *Tao-te-ching* 道德經 appeared much later than part of Chuang Tzu's works. Hence, Ch'ien argues that some author (not Lao Tzu himself) fabricated the text and apparently drew some of his sources from Chuang Tzu.
2. Ch'ien, *op. cit.*, and Wang Shu-min 王叔岷, *Chuang-hsüeh-kuan-k'uei* 莊學管窺 (Taipei: I-wen 文藝印書館, 1978), p. 6. Wang argues in the opposite direction from Ch'ien, stating that although Chuang Tzu was not a contemporary of Lao Tzu, the former adored and adopted his predecessor's treatise.
3. For Wang Pi's commentaries on Lao Tzu, I use the edition revised and annotated by Lou Yü-lieh, *Lao-tzu, Chou-i Wang-Pi-chiao-shih* 老子周易王弼注校釋 (Taipei: Hua-cheng 華正書局, 1981). Hê Chien-tsung 何鑑宗 criticizes Chuang Tzu severely for his distortion of Lao Tzu. See Hê's *Lao-tzu-hsin-i* 老子新釋 (Taipei: T'ai-sheng 泰盛, 1977), Preface, pp. 1-8 and Appendix, pp. 1-46.
4. For Lao Tzu's discourse on government, see Ch'ien, pp. 61-77, 103-32 and Yü Ying-shih, *Li-shih-yü-szu-hsiang* 歷史與思想 (Taipei: Linking 聯經, 1976), pp. 1-86.
For the English translation of *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, I use D. C. Lau's (Penguin Books, 1963) — on some occasions without changing, on other occasions I have my own radical modification of his translation. Henceforth, chapter numbers will be given when the text of Lao Tzu is cited.
5. Ch'ien, pp. 51-52, 87; Wang Shu-min, *Chuang-hsüeh-kuan-k'uei*, p. 6.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976), pp. 141-64, and "Differance," in *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 129-60.
7. Quoted by Wang Hsieh in Ch'en Chu-kuei 陳柱桂 and Wang Hsieh 王協, *Lao-hsueh-chiu-p'ien* [老學九篇, *Nine Lectures on Lao Tzu*] (Taipei: Lung-ch'ian 龍泉, 1980), p. 5.
8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. ix.
9. Martin Heidegger, "The Nature of Language," in *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 76.
10. Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 98. Emphasis is added.
11. *Chou-i-lüeh-li* 周易略例, in Lou, p. 609.
12. See Lou, p. 117.
13. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 103-18.
14. Cf. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. x-xii.

