

## The Taoist Imagination: Chuang Tzu's Aesthetic Intimations

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Scholars have given Chuang Tzu 莊子(399-295 B.C.), the greatest proponent of mystico-aesthetic Taoism, various names: A philosophical Taoist, a moralist, an ironist, or a visionary.<sup>1</sup> All these roles indicate the complexity of the thought of this ancient Chinese Taoist. From a combined formalist and archetypal perspective, Toshihiko Izutsu, Professor of Humanities at McGill University, views Chuang Tzu as "essentially a seer who tends to lose himself in the limitlessly vast metaphysical domain of nothingness" and enjoys himself completely in "a transcendental realm of being beyond good and evil."<sup>2</sup> For Hsü Fu-kuan 徐復觀, an intellectual historian and literary critic, it is important to discover Chuang Tzu from the aesthetics of Tao 道. Consequently, he proposes *i-shu ching-shen* 藝術精神 (aesthetic spirit) as a key to the understanding of Chuang Tzu's metaphysical framework:

To Lao Tzu 老子 and Chuang Tzu, Tao is the creative energy of the universe and man is originated in Tao. The philosophers first designated Tao as *Te* 德, manifestation or power, and then as *hsing* 性, nature or innate ideas. From their metaphysical framework and theory, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu have nothing to do with art. But from the point of view of kung-fu 功夫, creative process, both of them are great artists. In this sense, Chuang Tzu is a metaphysician in terms of philosophical ideas, but he is also an aesthete in terms of this concept of Tao as an aesthetic experience.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, Professor Hsü treats Chuang Tzu as one of the champions in the main stream of the creative consciousness in Chinese literature, philosophy, and fine arts, and much scholarly elaboration on Chuang Tzu

has been left incomplete. In the essay which follows, I intend to support his views by taking a close look at the nature of creative imagination in Chuang Tzu. From the comparative perspective, I will also attempt to elucidate Chuang Tzu's aesthetics by drawing some parallels between the Taoist and the English Romantics. Lastly, I will evaluate in what way Chuang Tzu has a modern relevancy for literary aestheticism.

## I

In order to demonstrate Chuang Tzu's creative imagination, it is necessary to turn to the concept of Tao and its manifestation in the Taoist philosophy. Prior to Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu in his *Tao Te Ching* 道德經 had already expounded Tao as a formless, nameless, all-embracing first principle. To describe Nonbeing as the creative potential, Lao Tzu uses the epithets of *i* 夷 (elusive), *hsi* 希 (rarefied), and *wei* 微 (infinitesimal). The inscrutable mystery of Tao, the shapeless shape, formless form, lies in the metaphysical "emptiness":

Such [is] the scope of All-pervading Power  
That it alone can act through the Way.  
For the Way is a thing impalpable, incommensurable.  
Incommensurable, impalpable.  
Yet latent in it are forms;  
Impalpable, incommensurable  
Yet within it are entities.  
Shadowy it is and dim  
Yet within there is a force  
A force that though rarefied  
Is none the less efficacious. (Tao Te Ching, XXI)

孔德之容。惟道是從。  
道之爲物。惟恍惟惚。  
恍兮惚兮。其中有象。  
恍兮惚兮。其中有物。  
窈兮冥兮。其中有精。  
其精甚真。其中有信。

There is an eternal withdrawal to the "mysterious emptiness" where the creative energy of the universe emanates from the Great Master of all things. Lao Tzu calls this continuing process the ever-renewing Valley Spirit:

It is named the Mysterious Female  
And the Doorway of the Mysterious Female  
Is the base from which Heaven and Earth sprang.

(*Tao Te Ching*, VI)

是謂玄牝。  
玄牝之門。  
是謂天地之根。

Here the mother image is, of course, related to that of the Great Mother found in various myths around the world to represent maternal conception and birth as creativity.<sup>4</sup> It is through the creative Tao that formation and transformation take place, a cosmic process later perceived by Goethe thus:

Realm of Image unconfined  
Formation, Transformation  
Eternal play of the Eternal Mind  
With semblance of all things in creation  
Forever and forever sweeping around.<sup>5</sup>

Chuang Tzu followed Lao Tzu's definition of Tao closely. To Chuang Tzu, Tao is inaudible, invisible, inexpressible, indescribable and inexhaustible. Tao has its laws and evidences. Devoid both of action and form, it "may be transmitted but cannot be received. Before heaven and earth were, Tao was. It has existed without change from all time . . . To Tao, the zenith is not high, nor the nadir low, no point in time is long ago, nor by lapse of ages has it grown old."<sup>6</sup> Tao is the life and order of the ten thousand things, and is a Grand Unity of Nonbeing and Being while it is both Nonbeing and Being at the same time. Arnolds Grava has summarized this paradoxical nature of Tao as the potential and the actual in the following words:

The Tao which cannot be named, which is beyond any concepts or conceptual perception, is precisely the primeval condition of this bipolar dynamic tendency before and beyond any differentiation between subject

and object. . . It is this entirely mysterious, incomprehensible potentiality which, in its timeless condition, is characterized or symbolized by rest, permanence, stillness or void. . . On the other hand, Tao as conceptualized, as form of expression of its inmost bipolar dynamic tendency in the very process of creativity, is characterized or symbolized by restlessness, flux, activity, or change, due to the now actualized bipolar tendency of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽.<sup>7</sup>

Like Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, Chuang Tzu wished to construct a system of philosophy whereby man could "appreciate the beauty of heaven and earth, discern the patterns of all things, and justify the ways of the ancients."<sup>8</sup> The "system" was not fully developed in a coherent and unified way because *Chuang Tzu*, a Taoist magnum opus, is a composite work written by Chuang Tzu himself and his subsequent followers. However, never before had anyone speculated so extensively about the interrelation between Tao and the Mind, between the cosmic principle and creative intuition, as Chuang Tzu conscientiously pronounced the aesthetics of imagination to the ancient world.

Chuang Tzu divides human mental faculty into two categories: the ordinary mind and the superior mind with imaginative perception. *Ch'ang-hsin* 常心, a fixed and limited mind, is a condition of one who is concerned with the material, that which is outward and one-dimensional, and whose philosophy is merely rationalization of the perception he receives from the five senses. As such he is, like the cicada and wren in the first chapter of *Chuang Tzu*, unable to have any communion with the world of eternity. Like Blake's "mortal eye's perverted and single vision,"<sup>9</sup> the ordinary mind is hampered by false rhetoric and distorted vision.

Chuang Tzu's Perfect Man, a paradigm of Taoist ideals, is a personified creative imagination. For the Perfect Man, Tao is the central power and the necessity of the Mind because he recognizes that Tao manifests itself as *shen* 神 or *ching-shen* 精神 (spirit) or in our modern terminology, creative imagination in the human mind. Just as Edgar Allan Poe expounded that imagination is "a lesser degree of the creative power in God,"<sup>10</sup> the creative imagination in Chuang Tzu is the mental agent of Tao, and the high perception of the Mind. It moves back and forth from the self to the external world, from multiplicity to Tao.

As opposed to the limited vision of *ch'ang-hsin*, the mind of the Perfect

Man is described as *t'ien-fu* 天府 (heavenly domain), *ling-fu* 靈府 (spirit's abode) or *ling-t'ai* 靈台 (spirit's plateau) because the Perfect Man transcends the ego-consciousness and comes into contact with Tao and his own inmost being.<sup>11</sup> When the imagination is passive and inactive, his Mind is pure, still, and receptive. It resembles water, a mirror, or the valley as described by Lao Tzu. Quite simply, Chuang Tzu's image of the mirror is somewhat like Zen:

For the Perfect Man employs his mind as a mirror. It grasps nothing; it refuses nothing. It receives, but does not keep. And thus he can triumph over matter, without injury to himself. (VII, Giles, 97-98; Watson, 97)

Perfect equilibrium and inaction is likened to water, a reflection of the universe in the pure mind:

When water is still, it is like a mirror, reflecting the beard and eyebrows. It gives the accuracy of the water level, and the philosopher makes it his model. If water thus derives lucidity from stillness, how much more the faculties of mind? The mind of the Sage, being in repose becomes the mirror of the universe, the speculum of all creation. (XIII, Giles, 157-158; Watson, 142)

To exhibit the vital freedom and great mobility of the imagination, Chuang Tzu uses an elaborate metaphor of airborne journey. Here, in the imaginative capacity, Chuang Tzu introduces sublime consciousness involving an encounter of the mind with something larger and more overwhelming. When the Imagination moves toward the spatial and temporal outer limits, it takes an expanding and ascending spiritual journey. The imaginary voyage is certainly a universal symbol of how the limited field of ego-consciousness is taken into "an enlarged sphere of awareness, whose pivot point is no longer the ego, but a new center which appears as the fount of all life and power."<sup>12</sup> The Taoists would agree that traveling out of a locale indicates that the mind is awakened from lethargy and limited vision, but they treat it as a paradox. Lao Tzu regards self-confinement indoors as being conducive to spiritual cultivation, whereas Lieh Tzu 列子 recommends "internal sightseeing" as the highest form of travel.<sup>13</sup> Their view of travel within is expressed by Lao Tzu:

Without leaving his door  
He knows everything under Heaven  
Without looking out of his window  
He knows the way of Heaven . . .  
Therefore the Sage arrives without going  
Sees all without looking  
Does nothing yet achieves everything. (*Tao Te Ching*, XLVII)

不出戶。  
知天下。  
不窺牖，見天道。  
……  
是以聖人。  
不行而知。  
不見而名。  
不爲而成。

Real travel to Chuang Tzu is an inner experience of spiritual expansion. He regards *hsiao-yao-yu* 逍遙遊 (easy and free wandering), a key concept of the imaginative voyage of the Mind, as the highest form of travel. The enormous P'eng 鵬 bird in the first chapter of *Chuang Tzu* is an emblem of the upsurging imagination:

In the northern darkness there is a fish and his name is K'un. The K'un is so huge I don't know how many thousand li he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is P'eng. The back of the P'eng measures I don't know how many thousand li across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky. When the sea begins to move, this bird sets off for the southern darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven.

The *Universal Harmony* records various wonders, and it says: When the P'eng journeys to the southern darkness, the waters are rolled for three thousand li. He beats the whirlwind and rises ninety thousand li, setting off the sixth month gale. (I, Watson, 29; Giels, 1)

Kuo Hsiang 郭象 (d. 312 A.D.), the annotator of *Chuang Tzu*, sees in the above passage the identity of the large and the small in their own individual space,<sup>14</sup> but most critics regard *hsiao-yao-yu* as a symbol of spiritual liberation. Izutsu argues that the Bird is an "apt symbol for the Perfect Man who, transcending the pettiness and triviality of human existence, freely wanders in the void of infinity and nothingness."<sup>15</sup> That the flight of the P'eng bird opens the whole book is not accidental. The

metamorphosis of fish into bird and the coverage of the vast space suggest the power of the creative imagination. In addition, Chuang Tzu uses Lieh Tzu in the same chapter as an archetypal cosmic voyager to illustrate that a man, by having communion with Tao, can make an imaginative excursion to the supramundane spheres. He can ride the wind and soar casually in the cool breeze. Yet Lieh Tzu's free wandering must depend upon the vital breeze, which is a metaphorical equivalent of the Imagination.

The Perfect Man's feeding upon the air and dew and riding on the clouds with the mythological dragons is a metaphor of the imaginative faculty's ability to contact the pure elements of the universe and grasp the primordial creative force. Charioting on Tao, he moves about the "six limits of space" and dashes beyond the bound of mortality or materialism. He also connects the past, present and the future in an infinite scale by roaming from the "beginning to end of all creation."<sup>16</sup> In the marvelous journey, the Perfect Man can come to grips with the cosmic order:

He mounted the subtle ether of Heaven and Earth  
And enthroned the changes of the six breaths.

(I, Watson, 32; Giles, 5)

## II

The dynamic imagination in Chuang Tzu resembles the manifesto of the Romantic poets. What Hoxie Neal Fairchild notes in the direction of the Romantic mind is an appropriate generalization:

Wordsworth usually enlarges his personality by absorbing nature into himself, while Shelley prefers to achieve the same end by projecting his mind outward into Nature in order to share, with enhancement rather than the loss of selfhood, the benign energy of west wind and skylark and cloud.<sup>17</sup>

Wordsworth and Coleridge, for instance, perceive the interrelation of the mind with both the sublime and beautiful forms of nature, but the uniqueness of self remains paramount. In their poetry, self-projection

endows the phenomenal world with a visionary quality, but the ego becomes "the basic certainty in which all else is rooted."<sup>18</sup>

In Keats we find that the self-annihilating process starts with the expansion of the self to the natural object, but continues to be engaged in self-effacement. He removes all the boundaries and restrictions, and identifies the self with the object. Keats's letter to Richard Woodhouse on October 27, 1818 is a representative statement about the sympathetic imagination at work:

As to the poetical character, it is not itself — it has no self — it is everything and nothing — It has no character — it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated — It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet.<sup>19</sup>

The poetical character, by imaginative projection, is "continually infor[ming] and filling some other Body." He offers the "Negative Capability" as a mental quality of being "in uncertainty, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."<sup>20</sup> By this means Keats can project himself into a nightingale, a sparrow, the sun, and the moon, and knows by experience "the alertness of a stoat or the anxiety of a deer."<sup>21</sup>

Keats' sympathetic imagination fully conforms to Chuang Tzu's Perfect Man who has no self, and remains "blankly passive as regards what goes on around him."<sup>22</sup> The dialogue between Chuang Tzu and Hui Shih 惠施 on the bridge over the River Hao in Chapter XVII of *Chuang Tzu* demonstrates the identification of Taoist imagination with the flux of the external world. While strolling on the bridge, Chuang Tzu admires the minnow fish swimming freely in the water. The fish arouse the Taoist's sympathetic imagination while he projects his own self-consciousness to them. The philosopher sees the fish ignite his own imagination so that they become interfused with his own state of mind. The witty argument with Hui Shih shows how Chuang Tzu loses himself into the fish beneath him in the water, and how Hui Shih is limited by the distinction between "I" and "Thou":

"See how the minnows are darting about! That is the pleasure of fishes," observed Chuang Tzu.

"Your not being a fish yourself," said Hui Tzu, "how can you possibly know in what consists the pleasure of fishes?"

"And your not being I," retorted Chuang Tzu, "how can you know that I do not know?"

"If I, not being you, cannot know what you know," urged Hui Tzu, "it follows that you, not being a fish cannot know in what consists the pleasure of fishes." "Let us go back," said Chuang Tzu, "to your original question. You asked me how I know in what consists the pleasure of fishes. Your very question shows that you knew I knew. I knew it from my feelings on this bridge." (XVII, Giles, 218-219; Watson, 188-189)

Like the Romantics, Chuang Tzu's concept of oneness of existence starts with the loss of self-identity. Assuming Tao as the center of Reality, the Perfect Man proceeds from the self, Coleridge says, "in order to lose and find all self in God."<sup>23</sup> By abandoning his own ego, the Perfect Man is able to render everyday living or technological skill into things of aesthetic interest and aesthetic value. The "knack" passages in *Chuang Tzu* present the Taoist progress of aesthetic synthesis through "self-forgetfulness."

In the well-known episode of P'ao Ting 庖丁 Prince Hui's 文惠君 cook, the senses first inform P'ao Ting of the presence of the bullock as a natural object, and then provide him with the information about its physical characteristics. But through the enactment of the imaginative perception, the cook discerns why things are the way they are and grasps the relationship between the carving and the carved bullock. The great "knack" begins in the integration of a more inward-looking into the subject with the outward-looking of the object. The eidetic manifestations of the bullock's size, shape, color, and structure, and the cook's carving become visionary:

What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began to carve, I fixed my gaze on the animal in front of me. After three years I no longer saw it as a whole bull, but a thing already divided into parts. Nowadays I no longer see it with the eyes. I merely comprehend it with the inward vision. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. (III, Watson, 50-51; Giles, 34)

When the imaginative perception arises from the act of carving, the cook blends the outer and inner, the sensory acuteness and the depths of subjectivity. The process starts with the dissolution of the barrier between

mind and the hand, between the eye and the bullock. The right comprehension of Tao is the necessary ground for the cook's practical excellence. The cook does not appeal to intellectuality which supports ordering, analysing, remembering, and judging the why, when, and where of his experience. Instead, the Way, or the creative principle which dominates the overall act of carving, feeds the imagination with some source of energy. The imagination penetrates the invisible forces and patterns:

Every blow of his hand, every heave of his shoulders, every tread of his foot, every thrust of his knee, every *whshh* of rent flesh, every *chhk* of the chopper, was in perfect harmony. (III, Giles, 33; Watson, 50)

One may argue that not all the craftsmen necessarily cast a visionary splendor over outward things, and that many people attain skill without comprehending an inner principle as P'ao Ting does. This is exactly the manner by which Chuang Tzu criticizes ordinary craftsmanship concerning the fixed principle of the possible and impossible, fit and unfit in the skill.<sup>24</sup> Several skillful hands such as the cicada-catcher, swimmer and boatman display Chuang Tzu's aesthetic vision of the "knack" in Tao. Identifying themselves with the object, these persons concentrate first upon self-abandonment and then dissolve the subjective in and through other-than-self. The cicada-catcher, for example, who balances five balls on top of one another on the stick, is actually balancing his own inner being and the external force. He can easily catch the cicadas because he focuses his attention upon nothing but the cicadas' wings. Analogically, the boatman and swimmer, discerning the natural law, flow and move with the changes of the rapids. To them, the barrier between the self and the external object does not exist in the act of rowing and swimming. These "knack" passages demonstrate a typical oriental aesthetic which Coormaraswamy identifies as the "immediate assimilation" (*tadākāratā*): "Neither knower nor known existing apart from the act of knowledge."<sup>25</sup> The absorbed attention to creative work results in a visionary splendor of the non-self: "Draw bamboos for ten years, become a bamboo, then forget all about bamboos when you are drawing."<sup>26</sup>

The "knack" passage of P'ao Ting also presents Chuang Tzu's concept that imagination sublimates practical skills into aesthetic value, resulting from

what Joseph Needham calls "minute concentration on the Tao running through natural objects of all kinds."<sup>27</sup> The aesthetic quality of practical excellence lies in the appreciation of the technique in performance. P'ao Ting's imagination brings the act of carving before his mind's eye so completely organized and so perfectly formed that his slaughtering the animal aesthetically resembles the performance of ancient ritual music and dance. Thus, his skill commands the admiration of the spectator, Prince Hui, while the cook enjoys the operation of his own "knack."

The self-annihilating process in Chuang Tzu has a deeper metaphysical significance. Whereas Keats' poetical character can assume an Iago or Imogen, Chuang Tzu's Perfect Man can be both other-than-self and other-than-object. When the subject and object coalesce in Tao, everything is endowed for the Perfect Man with an "atemporal and aspatial" state of *wu-hua* 物化 (transmutation of things). The classic anecdote of the butterfly best exemplifies the ultimate Taoist vision of "chaotic unity":

Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was a Chuang Chou. Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be some distinction. This is called Transmutation of Things. (II, Watson, 49; Giles, 32)

Among the critics who take the dream of Chuang Tzu as a footnote to the Taoist view of transcendental reality, Hsu Fu-kuan maintains that the dream of the butterfly is a moment of aesthetic judgment reflecting the coalescence of the self and object into Zen enlightenment.<sup>28</sup> Izutsu perceives the metaphysical chaos as expressing a dream-like mode of existence in which all things are liberated from their watertight compartments and fused into an amorphous whole. In the mythopoeic level, Chuang Tzu's metaphorical chaos is, Izutsu argues, a "stratum of the spontaneous evolvement of imagery" resulting from an actual spiritual experience in shamanistic trance.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, Chuang Tzu insists on the capacity of the mind to understand the cosmic unity of being, and treats the world as a continuum

in which self and non-self are fused into one living totality. It is appropriate to point out that the "surrealistic" or "visionary" imagination elevates self-annihilation to the level of cosmic unity. The distinction between the butterfly and the dreamer, between the everyday reality and the dreamland, is no longer valid in the sublime of imagination. Viewing the reality from a greater and higher level, *t'ien-chün* 天鈞 (heavenly equalization), there is an imaginative affirmation in the identity of spirit and matter, dream and reality. From this oneness of existence, we are introduced to another important aspect of Chuang Tzu's aesthetics, *coincidentia oppositorum*.

### III

Chuang Tzu's aesthetic vision is reflected in his emphasis on the Taoist paradox of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the reconciliation of opposites, the notion that truth lies at both ends, and that higher reality, the Absolute Tao, reconciles all contradictions and opposites. In Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, the consistent use of paradox is a way to illuminate the meaning of the All-embracing Tao. At a certain level, the Taoist paradox might seem to be a metaphysical play-on-words, as parodied in the following lines:

Said an erudite Sinologue, "How shall I try to  
explain to you Tao?  
It is yes; it is no;  
It is stop; it is go;  
But it is neither; do you understand now?"<sup>30</sup>

Lao Tzu is concerned with the application of Tao as a negative quality to the ethical and sociopolitical principle. The images of the uncarved block, the female source, water, or the infant are paradoxes themselves which present the way and the power of Tao, a mirror for human behavior. By this reversal of value, Lao Tzu expresses a profound statement concerning the paradoxical Tao:

The Way that is bright seems dull  
The Way that leads forward seems to lead backward  
The Way that is even seems rough;

The highest virtue is like the valley  
The sheerest whiteness seems sullied;  
Ample virtue seems indolent  
Plain virtue seems soiled. (*Tao Te Ching*, XLI)

Through the language of paradox, Lao Tzu poses the fundamental questions for those who seek for Tao: How could one perceive in the ten thousand things the cosmic pattern of eternal return, and how could one fulfill the universal law by *wu-wei* 無爲 (inaction), or action without interfering with nature?

Chuang Tzu's contribution to Taoist paradox lies in his extending Lao Tzu's metaphysical and behavioral implications of Tao to aesthetic vision. He developed the paradox to the theory of polar truth, thus allowing the imagination to include fair and foul, high and low, light and darkness as aesthetic equivalents. The famous Taoist manifesto of *coincidentia oppositorum* is recorded in the well-read Chapter II of *Chuang Tzu* entitled "Identifying All Things as Equal" (*Ch'i-wu lun* 齊物論).<sup>31</sup>

There is nothing which is not objective; there is nothing which is not subjective. But it is impossible to start from the objective. Only from subjective knowledge is it possible to proceed to objective knowledge. Hence it has been said, "The objective emanates from the subjective; the subjective is consequent upon the objective. This is the Alternation Theory." Nevertheless, when one is born, the other dies. When one is possible, the other is impossible. When one is affirmative, the other is negative. Which being the case, the true Sage rejects all distinctions of this and that, he takes his refuge in Heaven [Perfect Ideal], and places himself in subjective relations with all things. (II, Giles, 17-18; Watson, 39-40)

This passage illustrates Chuang Tzu's epistemology of polar imagination. Assuming the objective as a creation of the subjective cognition, Chuang Tzu sees no real tension in the polar principles. In this chapter, he proves the futility of human disputes over the right and wrong, because such an idea as the right habitat, right taste, or the correct standard of beauty which is appropriate to one party may not be applicable to the other:

If a man sleeps in a damp place, he gets lumbago and dies. But how about an eel? And living up in a tree is precarious and trying to the nerves;—but how about the monkey? Of the man, the eel, and the monkey, whose habitat is the right one, absolutely? Human beings feed on flesh, deer on grass, centipedes on snakes' brains, owls and crows on mice. Of these four, whose is the right taste, absolutely? (II, Giles, 27; Watson, 45-46)

Chuang Tzu points out the necessity of contradiction and opposition in the phenomenal world because, he argues, only through the existence of divisions can one see the infinite Absolute which harmonizes all the discords. He approaches truth from the perspective of *liang-hsing* 兩行 (double or polar truth) and *yin-shih* 因是 (following what it is) as Tao, the light of nature. Like the Platonic Ideal Form, Tao, the Center or Axis, blends positive and negative alike into one and affirms the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*:

When subjective and objective are both without their correlatives, that is the very axis of Tao. . . . To take a finger in illustration of a finger not being a finger is not so good as to take something which is not a finger. To take a horse in illustration of a horse not being a horse is not so good as to take something which is not a horse. So with the universe and all that in it is. These things are but fingers and horses in this sense. The possible is possible. The impossible is impossible. Tao operates and given results follow. (II, Giles, 18-19; Watson, 40)

One must relate Chuang Tzu's reconciliation theory to the dialectic of the School of Names, or Dialecticians. Represented by Hui Shih and Kung-sun Lung 公孫龍, the school is noted for "strange theories and indulgence in curious propositions."<sup>32</sup> The paradoxes of Hui Shih and Kung-sun Lung must have left a profound mark on Chuang Tzu's Alternation Theory. As will become apparent, Hui Shih's ten paradoxes of size, time, space, and movement and Kung-sun Lung's method of "proving the impossible as possible, and affirming what others denied" provided the theoretical foundation of *coincidentia oppositorum*.<sup>33</sup> Chuang Tzu could expatiate on the dialecticians' curious paradox that the universe is one, and yet he criticizes the "deceiving glamour" of their sophistry over the human mind. He is interested in how the imaginative perception reconciles

all opposites and contradictions into an aesthetic vision.

But how is *coincidentia oppositorum* related to the aesthetic vision espoused by Chuang Tzu? To answer this question, we might start with the universal law of polarity in the two Romantic poets—William Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Based on theology and his own poetic vision, Blake develops his contrary vision of the spiritual and material world. Reminiscent of the Aristotelian concept that the highest harmony springs from opposites and that all things are in a state of strife, Blake himself sees that the contradictions—innocence and experience, good and evil—are a *yin* and *yang* totality, and precondition the movement and progression of the world. In his imaginative vision the dialectic of contraries yields to a marriage of Heaven and Hell, the reconciliation of all contradictions and opposites.

The imagination, a divine power speaking from within the poet, is the highest fourfold vision. It opens up a visionary mandala of utter perfection. At the same time, it manifests itself in a grain of sand, which simultaneously contains both the finite and the infinite:

To see the World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.<sup>34</sup>

In Coleridge, organicism provides the necessary metaphysics for a Romantic theory of the Imagination. Coleridge grasps the world as the manifestation of the Supreme Reality and sees organic unity “evolving from the invisible central power.”<sup>35</sup> Like Chuang Tzu’s identity of opposites in Tao, Coleridge asserts that the unity of opposites is a universal principle:

Every power in nature and spirit must evolve an opposite as the sole means or condition of its manifestation, and all opposition is a tendency to reunion. This is the universal law of polarity—of essential dualism . . . the identity of thesis and antithesis is the substance of all being.<sup>36</sup>

Behind his famous definition of imagination in Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria* lies the Romantic belief that imagination is a productive, esemplastic power. Imagination not only is the living power and the prime

agent of human perception, but also “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate” a new organic being. It enables one to transcend the “fixed and dead” conceptual world and perceive the reconciliation of contraries as a living principle of life and poetry.

As a unifying power, Imagination interpenetrates the opposites and presents “multeity in unity,” transforming the phenomenal world into an aesthetic image. While the imagination reconciles the One and the Many, it spreads “the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had dimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew drops.”<sup>37</sup> As a modifying power, it casts on the ordinary scene some “sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape” clearly define.<sup>38</sup> This is the reason why the cornfield in “Fear in Solitude” and the foliage in “This Lime-tree Bower” are transformed into a fresh spectacle as the poetic mind perceives how the sunshine adds wonder—the One in the Many—to the landscape.

Just as Coleridge states in *Biographia Literaria* that the Imagination enables the poet to “make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature,”<sup>39</sup> Chuang Tzu grasps the intricacy of imaginative perception. Let us view his concept of interchange between *shen-ch'i* 神奇 (wonder, animation) and *fu-hsiu* 腐朽 (corruption):

We look on some as beautiful because they are rare or unearthly; we look on others as ugly because they are foul and rotten. But the foul and rotten may turn into the rare and unearthly, and the rare and unearthly may turn into the foul and rotten. (XXII, Watson, 236; Giles, 278)

To Chuang Tzu, the imagination flexibly adapts itself to the polar extremes; it adheres to a thing of beauty and, of ugliness. The imagination makes the commonest or even the foulest sight something miraculous. The exposition of the omnipresent Tao in Chapter Twenty-two reveals that the imagination is a part of the one Great Mind which includes incongruities and opposites:

Tung-kuo Tzu asked Chuang Tzu: “Where is the so-called Tao?” Chuang Tzu said, “There is nowhere where it is not.” Tung-kuo Tzu said:

"Specify an instance of it." Chuang Tzu said, "It is in that ant." "How can it be still lower?" "It is on the panic grass." "How can it be still lower?" "It is in the earthenware tile." "How can it be even lower?" "It is in excrement." (XXII, Giles, 285-286; Watson, 240-241)

To the ordinary mind, the supreme Tao and the obnoxious excrement are in outright contradiction, but Chuang Tzu points out a noumenal world beyond empirical reality which can only be comprehended through *coincidentia oppositorum*. The paradox is not only in itself a form of reconciliation on the Taoist bipolar interchange—the universe as embracing the essential duality of *yin* and *yang*—but also an explanation of the Great Unity in which the aesthetic vision makes possible a super-reality.

Through the dynamic interchange between the two polar extremes, Chuang Tzu evolves the paradox of the great and small. He derives his concept of the infinitesimally great and infinitesimally small from the Greater One and the Lesser One of Hui Shih, but he juxtaposes imaginatively the extreme of grandeur with the extreme of smallness. By the transformative power of the imagination, Chuang Tzu sees the large in the small. He understands that both the *ne plus ultra* of the great and the *ne plus ultra* of the small are the same image of Tao:

There is nothing under the canopy of heaven greater than the tip of an autumn spikelet. A vast mountain is a small thing. Neither is there an age greater than that of a child cut off in infancy. P'eng Tsu [a Chinese Methuselah] himself died young. The universe and I came into being together, and I, and everything therein, are ONE. (II, Giles, 23; Watson, 43)

And so the whole universe can be reduced into the size of a mustard seed and the tiny hair magnified as big as a mountain: "The universe is but as a tare-seed, and the tip of a hair is a mountain." (XVII, Giles, 206; Watson, 179).

Chuang Tzu's attachment to the polar principle is also strikingly illustrated by the external-internal nexus. As a counterpoint to the *hsiao-yao-yu*, in which the imagination reaches the empyrean height, the inward journey presents a mystical apprehension of creativity within one's innermost being. Like Blake, he sees the immensities of inner space from outside,

and builds the paradox of motion in stillness, and sound in silence, upon the interplay of the internal and external. While engaged in a creative converse with Tao, the Mind is first quickened to the wholeness and divine radiance, and then turns his internal outward:

He can see where all is dark. He can hear where all is still. In the stillness, he alone can detect harmony. He can sink to the lowest depths of materials, to the highest heights of spirituality he can soar.

(XII, Giles, 139; Watson, 128)

The interplay of internal and external implies a characteristic Taoist paradox: perception goes on though the setting is dark; sound is audible though it is quiet; in motionless stillness, harmony is discerned. The high and low are sharply contrasted and yet compatible. Chuang Tzu is obviously stressing spiritual dynamism which defies the ordinary sense impressions. Yet, at the same time, he exhibits the aesthetic vision—another hearing and another seeing—which connects the discerning mind and the external manifold:

While I am sitting like a corpse, my dragon-power is manifest around; while in profound silence, my thunder-voice resounds, and the powers of heaven respond to every phrase of my will. (XI, Giles, 122-123; Watson, 116)

Chuang Tzu's imagination joins the infinitude of inner space with the external world, which also helps enhance inner light. Like Keats, Chuang Tzu is able to project perceptual sublimity upon light and shade with equal intensity. Furthermore, whereas such Romantic poets as Wordsworth and Shelley respond actively to the larger scenes and more extended prospects of nature, Chuang Tzu welcomes bleak landscape as an impetus for a dynamic internalization. He casts an ironic vision on outward desolation and immediately makes an aesthetic transformation for the illumination of the inner world. To exemplify this dynamic conversion of barrenness into inner brightness Chuang Tzu uses a notable image of the bare room:

Look at that window. Through it an empty room becomes bright with scenery; but the landscape stops outside. . . You use your ears and eyes to

communicate within, but shut out all wisdom from the mind. (IV, Giles, 44; Watson, 58)

The image of the window has a twofold meaning. In the literal sense, it opens to outside scenery and brightens the room. On the metaphorical level, it represents the intermediary between outer and inner reality. Through sight and hearing, the mind contacts the phenomenal world. Chuang Tzu, however, wants to isolate the Mind from human wisdom—the paucity and fragmentariness of learning and daily experience. Instead of looking he sees with *hsüan-lan* 玄覽 (illuminated vision) and becomes identified with *Tao-t'i* 道體 (substance of Tao) so as to reach the beatific realm of *integritas*, *consonantia*, and *claritas*. For this reason, the bare room symbolizes for Chuang Tzu external barrenness while still providing an excellent aesthetic interest for the Mind to convert sterility to splendor and beauty in Tao.

Yet the imaginative penetration of silence and sound, inner and outer, must be preceded by spiritual cultivation. In addition to the spontaneity of creative imagination as advocated by the Romantics, Chuang Tzu offers a unique “discipline of the mind” for the sublime of imagination. Like Lao Tzu, who emphasizes a daily process of “emptying oneself” for the ultimate union with Tao,<sup>40</sup> Chuang Tzu’s *hsin-chai* 心齋 (fasting of the mind) is a prerequisite for the making of the Perfect Man and a necessary step toward a radiant unity of the Self with the Absolute Reality. Both the episode of Shih-nan I-liao 市南宜僚 (XX) and of Nan po tzu k’uei 南伯子葵 (VI) endorse such a claim. In the first story, Shih-nan I-liao exhorts a despondent ruler of Lu to strip away every impediment of the body and cleanse his mind of all desires, before he takes a trip to the ideal place ruled by the power of Tao. Likewise, Nan po tzu k’uei is told by Nü Chü 女偶 to put away the world, things, and his own physical life in a staged period of time, until he sees the aesthetic vision in the “light of dawn” and “multiety in unity.”

Chuang Tzu’s “fasting of the mind” reminds one of the spiritual progress of a mystic: *via purgativa*, *via illuminativa*, and *via unitiva*. When he succeeds in this spiritual progress, he has left behind him the world of claims and counterclaims, and passed into a world beyond joy and sorrow, love and hate, life and death. He has become, in Schiller’s words, a “pure daemon,” and embodies “the statutes of pure spirit.”<sup>41</sup> Although he would

appear like a withered tree or dead ashes, inside him he rises into the cosmic consciousness. The world beyond and within is creativity, light, and unity.

#### IV

Chuang Tzu's Taoist imagination — self-annihilation and expansion, *coincidentia oppositorum*, and perceptual sublimation — attests to his great impact on Chinese thought and art. Historically, Chuang Tzu inspired the "abstruse learning" and mystical escapism during the Six Dynasties (222-589 A.D.). The kernel of his teaching such as "naturalness," "emptiness," and "spiritual clarity" became essential to romantic Taoists who resorted to eccentricity, alchemy, and seclusion, as they advocated a return to nature and a full life of freedom and illumination.

In the sphere of Chinese landscape painting and poetry, "spiritual resonance" is a Taoist stock in trade. Especially the wind metaphor as conceived by Chuang Tzu is the unifying power of the imagination which traverses the microcosm and macrocosm. While depicting nature, the visual manifestation of Tao, the artist is first moved by a vitalizing *shen-szu* 神思 (spiritual thought) and then is united himself with a cosmic, spiritual force.<sup>42</sup> The artist reconciles inward and outward, distance and nearness, while incorporating Tao and his own creative genius to the work. The observation of Wang Wei, the famous T'ang poet-painter, is revealing: The artist's imaginative entry into the natural landscape and his own brush and scroll enabled the wind to rise from the green forest and the river to foam on its bed.<sup>43</sup> For this reason, "spiritual forms" of the mountain and the sweeping force of the waterfalls are prominent in many of the outstanding Chinese landscape paintings as well as in Wang Wei's own "Wangchuan Scroll," a long, horizontal scroll about the local scene of his retirement in Lantien, Shensi.

The language in *Chuang Tzu* can be called "poetry" because it suggests rhapsodic spontaneity of thought and imagery. Chuang Tzu's Taoist vision and paradox appeal to our creative intuition, helping us discover the dynamic interrelation between the one and the many in all things. The profound spiritual realm of his writings further guides us to a world of wonders and mysteries, so that we go beyond the visible appearance of things and

apprehend the Taoist principle of life, poetry, and beauty in things great and small. Everytime we attain to these moments of perceptual sublimity and spiritual freedom, we become divine, sagacious, and artistic beings. As modern artists and readers, we are indeed indebted to Chuang Tzu for grasping Nature and man in his assessment of the Chinese tradition of creativity.

## Notes

1. For a complete translation of Chuang Tzu, see *Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralizer, and Social Reformer*, trans. Herbert A. Giles (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1926); *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

Chuang Tzu's philosophy has been best formulated by Fung Yu-lan 馮友蘭 in his monumental two-volume *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. by Derk Bodde (Peiping: Henri Vetch, 1937), Vol. I, pp. 221-245; Arthur Waley treats Chuang Tzu as a philosopher who appeals to the imagination in *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (New York: Doubleday, 1939), pp. 3-79. Similarly, K.J. Spaulding describes Chuang Tzu as a mystic in his *Three Chinese Thinkers* (Nanking: National Central Library, 1947), pp. 96-166; Thomas Merton, a famous Christian monk, writes of Chuang Tzu as a subtle, sophisticated, and mystical Taoist in his *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965); C. H. Wu 吳經熊 also discusses the mysticism of Chuang Tzu in "The Wisdom of Chuang Tzu: A New Appraisal" in *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality* (New York: St. John University Press, 1965), pp. 61-94; Clae Waltham calls Chuang Tzu a psychologist, philosopher, mystic and hippie in his introduction to *Chuang Tzu: Genius of Absurd* (New York: Ace Books, 1971), a re-arranged version of James Legge's *The Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), XXXIX-XL.

The most insightful discussion of Chuang Tzu is contained in Toshihiko Izutsu's *A Comparative Study of the Key Concepts in Sufism and Taoism* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1967), especially Vol. 2. In addition, two articles of Izutsu are noteworthy: "The Archetypal Image of Chaos in Chuang Tzu: The Problem of the Mythopoeic Level of Discourse" in *Anagogic Qualities of Literature*, ed. by Joseph P. Strelka (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn. State University Press, 1971), pp. 269-287, and "The Absolute and the Perfect Man in Taoism" in *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XXXVI (1967), pp. 379-441.

- From a sociological point of view, Vitaly A. Rubin stresses the anarchism and anti-cultural attitude in Chuang Tzu. See his *Individual and State in Ancient China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 89-118.
2. Izutsu, "The Archetypal Image" in *Anagogic Qualities of Literature*, p. 269.
  3. Hsü Fu-kuan, *Chung-Kuo i-shu ching-shen* 中國藝術精神 (Aesthetic Spirit in China) (Taichung, Taiwan: Tunghai University Press, 1966), p. 50.
  4. Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. from German by Ralph Manheim (Princeton 1970); Samuel F.G. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963).
  5. The idea of "Gestaltung, Umgestaltung" appears in the Dark Gallery Scene in J.W. Goethe's *Faust* (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institute, 1925), p. 279. For the discussion of creativity in Goethe, see Harold Jantz, *The Mothers in Faust: The Myth of Time and Creativity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1969).
  6. Herbert Giles, *Chuang Tzu*, ch. VI, p. 76; Burton Watson, *Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 81. (References to these two books hereafter follow the quotations in the text).
  7. Arnolds Grava, "Tao: An Age-old Concept in Its Modern Perspective," *Philosophy East and West*, XIII:3 (Oct. 1963), p. 239.
  8. *Chuang Tzu*, XXXIII, Giles, p. 439; Watson, p. 364.
  9. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, Plate 53, lines 10, 11 in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 200.
  10. Edgar Allan Poe, in a review in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, II, 328 as quoted by Margaret Alterton, "Origin of Poe's Critical Theory," *University of Iowa Humanities Studies*, Vol. II, no. 3 (n.d.), p. 104.
  11. Such terms as spirit's domain are mentioned in chapter V, XIX, XXIII, Giles, pp. 64, 242, 302; Watson has translated these terms into "spirit storehouse" and "spirit tower." See Watson, pp. 74, 206, 255.
  12. Edith Schnapper, *Inward Odyssey* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965), p. 127.
  13. *Lieh Tzu*, trans. A.C. Graham (London: John Murray, 1960), pp. 81-82.
  14. Fung Yu-lan, *Chuang Tzu: A New Selected Translation With an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1933), p. 29.
  15. Izutsu, *Key Concepts*, p. 159.
  16. In addition to chapter I, the reference for spiritual excursion in *Chuang Tzu* can be found in chs. XIX, XX, XXI, Giles, pp. 231, 246, 264; Watson, pp. 198, 209-210, 223.
  17. Hoxie Neal Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), Vol. III, p. 374.
  18. Albert Gérard, *English Romantic Poetry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), p. 39. For the same idea of egotism in the Romantic poetry, see Patricia M. Ball, *The Central Self: A Study in Romantic and Victorian Imagination* (London: Athlone Press, 1968), pp. 5-21; Edward E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), p. 4.

19. *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Harvard University Press, 1958), Vol. I, pp. 386-387.
20. *ibid.*, I, 193.
21. *ibid.*, II, 80.
22. *Chuang Tzu*, XII, Giles, p. 138; Watson, p. 128.
23. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 Vols. (Oxford University Press, 1907), I, p. 186.
24. *Chuang Tzu*, XII, Giles, p. 144; Watson, p. 132.
25. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 12.
26. D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), p. 31.
27. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge University Press, 1956), II, p. 121.
28. Hsu Fu-kuan, pp. 97-98.
29. Izutsu, "The Absolute and the Perfect Man in Taoism," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XXXVI (1967), p. 412; "The Archetypal Image of Chaos in Chuangtzu," *Anagogic Qualities of Literature*, pp. 271-272.
30. Quoted in David Newsome, *Two Classes of Men* (London: John Murray, 1974), p. 57.
31. For a perceptive commentary and new translation of this chapter, see A. C. Graham, "Chuang Tzu's Essay on Seeing Things as Equal," in *History of Religions* IX, no. 2/3 (Nov/Feb 1969/70), 137-156.
32. *The Works of Hsüntze*, trans. Holmes H. Dubs (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1928), p. 79.
33. For a detailed discussion of the similarities and contrasts in Chuang Tzu and the Dialecticians, see Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, I, 197-220; *Chuang Tzu*, XVII, Giles, pp. 214-217; Watson, pp. 185-187.
34. "Auguries of Innocence," in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Erdman, p. 481.
35. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. W.G.T. Shedd (New York: Harper, 1871), I, 359.
36. Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke (Princeton University Press, 1969), I, 94.
37. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Shawcross, I, 59
38. *Ibid*, II, 5
39. *Ibid*, II, 258.
40. In Chapter XLVIII Lao Tzu states, "in the pursuit of the way one does less everyday. One does less and less until one does nothing at all." Also, Chapter LVII stress "inaction, stillness, and freedom from desire." See *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin, 1963), 109, 118.
41. Friedrich von Schiller, "On the Sublime," in *Native and Sentimental Poetry and*

- On the Sublime: Two Essays*, trans. Julius A. Elias (New York: Unger, 1966), p. 210.
42. Osvald Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting* (Peiping: Vetch, 1936), pp. 19, 23.
  43. Lewis Calvin and Dorothy Bush Welmsley, *Wang Wei: The Painter-Poet* (Tokyo and Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1968), pp. 106-110; *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, ed. Wm Theodore de Bary et al (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), I, 255.