

The Poetic Element in the *Lao Tzu*

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When the man of highest capacities hears Tao
He does his best to put it into practice.
When the man of middling capacity hears Tao
He is of two minds about it.
When the man of low capacity hears Tao
He laughs loudly at it.
If he did not laugh, it would not be worth the name of Tao.

XLI (trans. Arthur Waley)

上士聞道，勤而行之。
中士聞道，若存若亡。
下士聞道，大而笑之，不笑不足以爲道。

Introduction

The *Tao Te Ching* 道德經 (*The Way and Its Nature*), China's greatest wisdom text, traditionally ascribed to the shadowy figure of Lao Tzu 老子 and therefore referred to as the *Lao tzu*, is a work of poetry. Written for the most part in metrical language with rhyme, it is divisible into poem-like chapters whose order, though subject to debate and rearrangement, suggests an interrelationship of parts such as one finds in a long poetic sequence. The language of the text is poetic, everywhere concise and elusive. Conventional poetic figures (simile, metaphor, symbol, analogy) appear from time to time. Parts of the text represent traditional sayings. The individual "chapters" are argued as gnomic or aphoristic poems would be.

But the *Lao tzu* is also poetic in a larger sense. As Homer embodies the poetry of *epos*, as the *Bhagavad Gita* embodies a poetry of religious vision, so the *Lao tzu* embodies what we might call the poetry of wisdom. This wisdom, or philosophic truth, is embodied in its poetic language, rhetoric and structure.

Western thought, with its penchant for reductive or essentializing categories, loves the abstract. The highest moment in a Western text is

summary. Its ground and method are both idealist. Chinese thought, with its object of practical advice, tends to be more concrete. We move from one to another aperçu without the Western mania for system. Lao Tzu, no less than Confucius, is a realist: pragmatic, sensible, anti-idealistic.

The philosophic truth of the *Lao tzu*, then, lies not in the abstract principles deducible from it (as in the summary treatments of Western or Westernizing historians of Chinese thought—Frederick W. Mote, Fung Yu-lan 馮友蘭) but in the poetic texture and dynamic of its argument. Likewise, its true poetry lies not so much in diction, meter, rhyme and suchlike as in its broader conception of things: its practical doctrine, its attitude to experience, its view of thought itself. Since the text—an eclectic assemblage of traditional wisdom, not an argument or essay in the Western sense—moves organically from one thing to another, to grasp its meaning we must read it *as it unfolds*.

This raises a problem. For just as the language of the text is uncertain—virtually every line has been debated, emended, cut or moved—so the order of the chapters is open to question. Some texts have part II (the so-called *Te Ching* 德經) before part I (the so-called *Tao Ching* 道經). In fact it has been argued that only the opening chapters of those sections justify this designation of the two parts. Much of the controversy herē, as elsewhere, I would suggest, arises from a misapprehension of the nature of the text. For just as the vexed problem of Lao Tzu's historicity disappears if we regard the text as traditional, so the problem of its order disappears if we regard it as an anthology of related sayings. There *is* a cumulative effect, but the effect does not depend upon any precise route of accumulation. There *is* a body of thought, but we arrive at it not so much through progressive argument as poetic consensus. The analogy of the New Testament Gospels is pertinent: our perception of the Christian message does not depend substantially on the order in which we read them.

What I propose to do, then, is two-fold: (1) expound the philosophy of the *Lao tzu*, as it appears sequentially in the text that we have, and (2) demonstrate the poetic element. Part I of the text—the *Tao Ching* (or *Classic of the Way*)—is more doctrinal, and I will use that section to demonstrate Lao Tzu's thought. Part II of the text—the *Te Ching* (or *Classic of the Nature of Things*)—is more practical, pithy, and poetic—in the customary sense. I will use it primarily to demonstrate the poetic element. But these divisions, both of labor and text, are artificial and should not be misunderstood. For

just as the two parts of the text depend upon one another, so philosophy and poetry in the text are interdependent. The first half of my paper, then, will deal with what we might call the poetry of philosophy, the second with the philosophy (or significant form) of poetry.

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The text opens with the poetry of epistemological paradox:

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.*
道可道非常道，名可名非常名。

Much of the poetry of the *Lao tzu* is a kind of anti-poetry: of namelessness; of secrecy and paradox:

Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets;
But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe
its manifestations.

故常無欲，以觀其妙。
常有欲，以觀其微。

The doctrine is also in a sense anti-philosophical, for, as Wing-tsit Chan says of Chinese philosophy, "Most schools insist on the correspondence of names and actualities and accept names as necessary and good: Taoism, on the contrary, rejects names in favor of the nameless.** The poetry of namelessness is by no means exclusively Eastern (one thinks of Jehovah's ineffability), nor is the *Tao's* secrecy (one thinks of the Christian life that is lost before it is found). In fact the poetry of secrecy is a mark of the high religious tradition (one thinks of Buddhist exclusivity as well as Western

* Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from D. C. Lau's translation.

** Citation of commentaries refer to the notes to whichever chapter of the text is under discussion. A list of editions cited will be found at the end of the paper.

Hermeticism).

Identity and diversity, the mystery of the One and the Many, is the burden of Chapter I's closing lines:

These two are the same
But diverge in name as they issue forth.
Being the same they are called mysteries,
Mystery upon mystery—
The gateway of the manifold secrets.

此兩者同出而異名。
同謂之玄，玄之又玄，衆妙之門。

As Chapter I closes with paradox, so Chapter II opens:

The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, yet this
is only the ugly; the whole world recognizes the good as the good,
yet this is only the bad.

天下皆知美之爲美，斯惡已。
皆知善之爲善，斯不善已。

(The form of the paradox might itself be seen as paradigmatic of Lao Tzu's whole method: the step-wise, reduplicative exfoliation of meaning.) Unlike Western categories—such as Plato's *to kalon*—Lao Tzu's categories are not consistent, are in fact contradictory; and yet it is precisely with what Chang Chung-yuan calls "the self-identity of contradictions and the wonderful achievement to which it leads" that Chapter II is concerned. It is only one abstractive step to Chuang Tzu's 莊子 "Construction is destruction, destruction is construction. This is also that, that is also this." Though at odds with most Western philosophy, the passage is thematically consonant with much Western poetry in its concern with the interpenetration of reality and appearance. This quality, which we might denominate the poetry of reciprocity, extends to other entities:

Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;
The difficult and the easy complement each other.

故有無相生，難易相成。

Lao Tzu next introduces two concepts of great importance to Taoist thought: actionless action and wordless wisdom, both recommended as a consequence of the foregoing observations. "Therefore," he says,

the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no
action and practices the teaching that uses no words.

是以聖人處無爲之事，行不言之教。

Implicit in the chapter, awaiting later development, is yet another theme: the unity of the subjectivity of man and the objectivity of things. By this process of adumbration philosophic points are often prepared and reinforced. (Later we will speak more specifically to the question of the resolution of the subject-object problem.)

The personal ridding of desire and the taking of no action, enunciated respectively in Chapters I and II, are then applied in Chapter III to the realm of government, where the sage is said to keep the people "free from desire" and to do that himself "which consists in taking no action." As a consequence, says Lao Tzu, "order will prevail." Waley sees the chapter as "bait for the Realists [Legalists]"; Chang, reading it metaphysically, sees it as illustrating "the non-differentiated knowledge" or "the knowledge of no knowledge," which he compares with Hegel's "immediate knowledge." (Hegel had first lectured on the *Tao Te Ching* in 1826.) This influence of Lao Tzu on Western thought extends to the poeticization of philosophical thinking, especially in the work of Martin Heidegger.

Chapter IV introduces the famous metaphor of emptiness, to which we shall return in our discussion of poetic rhetoric. Chapter V opens with a much-glossed passage:

Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as
straw dogs; the sage is ruthless, and treats the people as straw dogs.

天地不仁，以萬物爲芻狗。
聖人不仁，以百姓爲芻狗。

As Chan's translation ("Heaven and Earth are not humane") makes more evident, the passage may be read as a contradiction of the Confucian principle of *jen* 仁 (humanity or benevolence). "Actually," says Chan in his comment, "the Taoist idea here is not negative but positive, for it means that Heaven

and Earth are impartial, have no favorites, and are not humane in a deliberate or artificial way." The strategy of this paradoxical passage reflects what we might call the poetry of the unexpected, the deliberate reversal of the reader's expectations. The quietism of the chapter's closing lines ("Much speech leads inevitably to silence. / Better to hold fast to the void" 多言數窮，不如守中) has also been seen as at odds with Confucianism. Chang reconciles the two by adducing a passage from the Confucianist *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸: "When delight, anger, sorrow or joy have not yet emerged, this is called *chung* 中 ["center"; by extension: speechlessness, emptiness] *Chung* is the great foundation of the entire universe." Characteristic here is the reconcilability of Taoist with Confucian and Buddhist thought.

A late Han commentator links this final image of Chapter V with the opening line of VI ("The spirit of the valley never dies" 谷神不死): "When intelligence and thought diminish to nothingness, the spirit of the valley unceasingly remains." Chang elaborates: "When idle thoughts no longer obscure the mind, the reality of the emptiness of the mind exists continuously." We shall return to discuss the symbol of the valley.

The principle of passivity, "the mysterious female" of Chapter VI, is extended in VII to Heaven and Earth, which are here described as "enduring." Combining the concepts, Lao Tzu then recommends for man an enduring passivity:

the sage puts his person last and it comes first,
Treats it as extraneous to himself and it is preserved.
Is it not because he is without thought of self that he
is able to accomplish his private ends?

是以聖人後其身而身先，
外其身而身存。
非以其無私耶，
故能成其私。

For Chuang Tzu, "The perfect man has no self."

The famous first line of VII, "Highest good is like water 上善若水 may also be rendered (as it has been by Wang Pi 王弼, most ancient of the commentators), "The best man is like water." Chang underlines the relationship between VIII and VII and draws a contrast between their joint image of man and that of the Confucian *jen*: "The man of *Tao* is free from self, free

from reputation, and free from claiming credit . . . Although Confucianism also teaches humility, it is humility which is merely a modification of one's ambition or ego. Primarily, ambition and a strong ego persist at the center of one's being." He goes on to compare the Taoist attitude here with the Buddhist concept of "every-day mindedness."

A metaphorical connective with Chapter IX is apparent in its opening lines:

Rather than fill it to the brim by keeping it upright
Better to have stopped in time . . .

持而盈之，不如其已。

The chapter as a whole recommends retirement, but, as Chan points out, "only after one's work is done: The Taoist way of life is not that of a hermit, although hermits have taken its name." He goes on to draw another parallel with Confucianism: "Mencius said that it was the way of Confucius 'to withdraw quietly from office when it was proper to do so.'"

Chapters X and XI are concerned with complementary concepts, Embracing the One ("When carrying on your head your perplexed bodily soul can you embrace in your arms the One / And not let go?" 載營魄，抱一，能無離乎？) and the Unity of Multiplicity. Both are inherently poetic ideas (Wallace Stevens, a Taoistic poet, once identified the idea of God as the most poetic). In XI the utility of non-being is exemplified in a series of images—the wheel hub, the cart, the vessel, doors and windows—all which represent useful emptiness. In XII, Lao Tzu contrasts outer and inner worlds—to the advantage of the latter ("the sage is / For the belly / Not for the eye" 聖人爲腹不爲目). Waley calls the section "a reply to the Hedonists." Chapter XIII, though more practical in orientation, is nonetheless linked philosophically:

The reason I have great trouble is that I have a body.
When I no longer have a body, what trouble have I?
Hence he who values his body more than dominion over the
empire can be entrusted with the empire.

吾所以有大患者，爲吾有身。
及吾無身，吾有何患。
故貴以身爲天下，則可寄於天下。

To establish the link Waley quotes the *Lü Shih Ch'un Ch'iu* 呂氏春秋: "He alone may be entrusted with empire who does not let empire interfere with his own life culture." Inwardness, or accomodation with the void, is a precondition for outwardness, or dealing with the world.

The final lines of XIV, though they appear to deal only with prehistoric origins, are linked by Waley with the foregoing theme of subject and object. Where Lau reads "The ability to know the beginning of antiquity / Is called the thread running through the way" (能知古始，是謂道紀), Waley reads "For to know what there was in the beginning . . .," which he glosses: "Macrocosmically, in the Universe. Microcosmically, in oneself." Thus a concern with origins, often asserted as absent from Chinese thought, makes its presence felt.

Almost casually, in a simile (the sage is "thick like the uncarved block" 敦兮其若樸), XV introduces the concept *p'u* 樸 (in Chang's phrase, "original non-differentiation"). The poetic form of the sage's portrait shapes and surrounds the concept. Likewise poetic form figures importantly in XVI, where a passage of poetic concatenation provides both a philosophical summary and, in its linkage of lines, something analogous to the linkage of chapters or ideas that informs the whole text:

. . . should one act from knowledge of the constant [*jung* 容]
 One's action will lead to impartiality [*kung* 公],
 Impartiality to kingliness [*wang* 王],
 Kingliness to heaven [*t'ien* 天],
 Heaven to the way,
 The way to perpetuity

知常容。容乃公。
 公乃王。王乃天。
 天乃道。道乃久。

Progressively the four key terms describe, in Chang's words, "the stages of contemplation, or quietness, after the achievement of enlightenment. In the realm of the absolute void," he continues, "there is interfusion and interpenetration of self and others." It is the naturalness and inevitability of this resolution of the subject-object problem that Western philosophers find so attractive. The notion of naturalness then links XVI and XVII, where attention is turned to the ruler (though what applies to the ruler applies as well to the individual).

Chapters XVIII and XIX are related rhetorically as negative and positive forms of the same idea. XVIII, a caustic deflation of supposed virtues, is cast in the form of the *vituperatio*:

When the great way falls into disuse
There are benevolence and rectitude;
When cleverness emerges
There is great hypocrisy;
When the six relations are at variance
There are filial children;
When the state is benighted
There are loyal ministers.

大道廢，焉有仁義。
智慧出，焉有大偽。
六親不和，有孝慈。
國家昏亂，有忠臣。

XIX, the corrective, counters with poetic exhortation:

Exterminate benevolence, discard the wise,
And the people will benefit a hundredfold;
Exterminate benevolence, discard rectitude,
And the people will again be filial.

絕聖棄智，民利百倍。
絕仁棄義，民復孝慈。

Again the uncarved block is called into being, this time through metaphor, with no concern for further definition:

Exhibit the unadorned and embrace the uncarved block,
Have little thought of self and as few desires as possible

見素抱樸，少思寡欲。

If XIX closes with prescriptions for the self, XX takes that self and allows it to flourish in the voice of the sage speaking for the first time *in propria persona*. His poignancy here suggests the voice of a T'ang poet:

I alone am inactive and reveal no signs,
Like a baby that has not yet learned to smile.
Listless as though with no home to go back to.

The philosophical point is fully embodied, half in the tone or persona, half in what he says: "Vulgar people are clear. / I alone am drowsy" (俗人昭昭，我獨昏昏)。"I alone am different from others" (我獨異於人)，he concludes, "And value being fed by the mother 而貴求食於母，" a phrase that catches up the earlier simile quoted above.

In complement to the *yin* 陰 (the mother) of XX, XXI offers the *yang* 陽: "fathers of the multitude 衆甫，" the abstract external origin that we know because we know its concrete internal counterpart:

How do I know that the fathers of the multitude are like that?
By means of this.

吾奚以知衆甫之然哉？以此。

Thus the *Tao* manifests itself in this poetry of bipolar origins. The parallel of the Brahman-Atman exchange suggests itself, and, as Chang points out, the Buddhist sense of no origin is also relevant: "although one tries to see the beginning of all things, there is actually no beginning. The beginning of no-beginning is the subtlety of all things."

Chapters XXII to XXIV function as a group. XXII introduces the principle of humility through a sequence of metaphors, which culminate in its iteration: "the sage embraces the One and is a model for the empire" (是以聖人抱一爲天下式)。He does so, as the remainder of the chapter makes clear, for self-preservation. XXIII extends the principle of humility to the principle of conformity to the way. XXIV, which an ancient commentator combines with the preceding chapter, further exemplifies the principles of XXII and XXIII.

Chapter XXV, by way of periodic repetition, offers a major definition of what *Te-ching*, in Chang's quotation, refers to as "the totality of *Tao* itself," the "thing" (*wu* 物) referred to in the opening line. Lao Tzu's method here is the reprise of earlier passages, a poetic (repetitive) strategy which also serves as a means to reiterate principles:

There is a thing confusedly formed,
Born before heaven and earth.
Silent and void
It stands alone and does not weary.
It is capable of being the mother of the world.
I know not its name
So I style it "the way."

有物混成，先天地生。
寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，
周行而不殆，可以爲天下母。
吾不知其名，字之曰道。

The lines that follow offer another poetic chain, which is capped by and introduces the important notion of return. "Hence the way," the argument continues, "is great; heaven is great; earth is great; and the king is also great" (故道大，天大，地大，王亦大). Then, reversing the order of his key terms, Lao Tzu, with an echo of the passage quoted from XVI, concludes, this time making more explicit the principle of naturalness enunciated earlier:

Man models himself on earth,
Earth on heaven,
Heaven on the way,
And the way on that which is naturally so.

人法地，地法天。天法道。道法自然。

Chapters XXVI and XXVII offer, in alternating passages, a mixture of practical advice and metaphysical conclusions. In contrast to the relative formlessness of these chapters the rhetoric of the next four places them among the most tightly argued in the text. Chapter XXVIII, to which we shall return to examine rhetorical structure and the poetic use of symbol, opens as follows:

Know the male
But keep to the role of the female
And be a ravine to the empire.

知其雄，守其雌，爲天下谿。

The second line picks up and repeats language from X ("Are you capable of

keeping to the role of the female?" 能爲雌乎?), the third, an image from VI ("The spirit of the valley never dies"), uniting them here more explicitly than before. Philosophical commentators have noted in the chapter the source of the Neo-Confucianist notion of the Non-ultimate, which, added to the Great Ultimate of the *Book of Changes*, lead to a metaphysical bifurcation of reality. Chan resolves the problem as follows: "the Non-ultimate is the state of reality before the appearance of forms, whereas the Great Ultimate is the state after the appearance of forms"; "the two," he asserts, "form a unity."

Chapters XXIX to XXXI are highly practical in their emphasis and interesting in their modes of argumentation. We shall also return to look at them in more detail; but we can summarize the burden of their argument here by quoting briefly:

Whoever takes the empire and wishes to do anything to it I see
will have no respite.

(XXXIX)

將欲取天下而爲之，吾見其不得已。

One who assists the ruler of men by means of the way does not
intimidate the empire by a show of arms.

(XXX)

是以道佐人主者，不以兵強天下。

Arms are instruments of ill omen, not the instruments of the gentle-
man. When one is compelled to use them, it is best to do so without
relish.

(XXXI)

兵者不祥之器，非君子之器。不得已而用之，以恬澹爲上。

The quietistic philosopher's concern with the practice of warfare has seemed to some contradictory. Two answers to the objection are available: (1) If war is inevitable, one should conduct it according to Taoist principles, remaining detached and quiescent; (2) Lao Tzu is not so quietistic as is sometimes imagined.

The last six chapters of the *Tao Ching* are among its most elegant and demanding. Philosophically acute and poetically serene, they require of the reader both an outward attentiveness (to the text) and an inner attentiveness (to himself). "The way is for ever nameless" (道無常名), XXXII begins, thereby defining *Tao* as something beyond reasonable apprehension. In the

next verse Lao Tzu reintroduces the elusive image of the uncarved block, about which he says, "Only when it is cut are there names." By joining the abstract concept of namelessness, which we can render concrete only by an irrational leap, with the concrete image of the uncarved block, to which we can ascribe meaning only by a rational act of abstraction, Lao Tzu places in tension two opposed tendencies of the mind. These he then reconciles by an appeal to the principle of moderation:

As soon as there are names
One ought to know that it is time to stop.
Knowing when to stop one can be free from danger.

名亦既有，
夫亦將知止。
知止所以不殆。

The subsequent leap to a final generalization ("The way is to the world as the River and the Sea are to rivulets and streams" 譬道之在天下，猶川谷之於江海) seems to reflect the state of safety Lao Tzu has spoken of. Naturalness, earlier posited as principle, now becomes implicit in the analogy itself.

Though more conventional in form, XXXII pursues this poetry of relentless truth, demanding that the reader attend intellectually to the general form of what is said but, at the same time, and with a self-questioning sincerity, apply the principles to himself:

He who knows others is clever;
He who knows himself has discernment.

知人者智，自知者明。

The chapter is brought to an end with two truths disguised within banalities:

He who does not lose his station will endure;
He who lives out his days has had a long life.

不失其所者久，死而不亡者壽。

In sayings such as these the very discrepancy between banality of observation and depth of insight forces the reader to comment; his effort to elucidate in turn often draws further comment. Hence the tradition of commentary.

So Chang quotes Chuang Tzu: "One must learn to see where all is dark, and to hear where all is still . . . Thus one can penetrate to the furthest depths and grasp spirituality." And then is moved to comment himself on Chuang Tzu: "To grasp the spirituality of one's self is to be aware of one's self. To be aware of one's self is to retain one's source and to be longlasting."

Chapter XXXIV presents the paradox of greatness in smallness. "It is because it never attempts itself to be great that it succeeds in becoming great" (以其終不自爲大，故能成其大). "The way," Lao Tzu argues, "claims no authority," speaking himself with the voice of authority.

After the definitions of XXXIV, XXXV recommends what in psychological parlance would be called an internalization of the *Tao*. The lines, where "the great image" stands for the *Tao*, embody the familiar triad of self, way and world.

Have in your hold the great image
And the empire will come to you.

執大象者天下往。

Discipline is the key (on the practical plane) to the gaining of authority, (on the metaphysical plane) to the resolution of subject and object. The concluding lines of the chapter subtly contradict the earlier advocacy of action, stressing instead the naturalness of the *Tao*, its ineffability (these two themselves in *apparent* contradiction); its inexhaustibility:

The way in its passage through the mouth is without flavor.
It cannot be seen,
It cannot be heard,
Yet it cannot be exhausted by use.

道之出言，淡兮其無味。
視之不足見，聽之不足聞，用之不可既。

Chapter XXXVI at first appears more modest in its intentions, re-treating from images of ultimate paradox to more commonsensical maxims:

If you would have a thing shrink,
You must first stretch it;

If you would have a thing weakened,
You must first strengthen it . . .

欲將翕之，必固張之。

欲將弱之，必固強之。

However, as we examine and reexamine the couplets, they seem less referential, less concerned with the world of the senses, than at first appeared. Moreover, they seem to partake of a rhythm—difficult to specify, but present—of parturition (Lin Yutang 林語堂 entitles the chapter “The Rhythm of Life”). Its final line represents yet another of Lao Tzu’s deliberate “non sequiturs”:

The fish must not be allowed to leave the deep;

The instruments of power in a state must not be revealed to anyone.

魚不可脫於淵。

邦之利器不可以示人。

Whatever its relationship to the line that precedes it, the final line invites, and has received, two distinct kinds of interpretation. Thus Waley reads it as practical advice to princes, Chang as a statement of metaphysical principle, and translates: “The best arms in the nation are those that remain invisible.”

Without enumerating every article of faith therein, the concluding chapter (XXXVII) nonetheless epitomizes the meaning of the *Tao Ching*. Poetic form greatly aids in this effect. Like the first chapter, the last opens with the phrase, “The way”; as the first closes with the idea of mysteries about to be revealed, so the last closes with the idea of an imminent peace, naturally achieved. Each chapter, then, is informed by an envelope of *yang* and *yin*. The last chapter elaborates this form into the pattern A B B₁ A₁, where A = lords and princes; B, the myriad creatures; B₁, the narrative “I”; and A₁, the empire. Within this envelope appear other elements: the two important principles, spontaneous transformation and the uncarved block (also designated as nameless), and, between them, desire:

The way never acts yet nothing is left undone.

Should lords and princes be able to hold fast to it,

The myriad creatures will be transformed of their own accord.

In stressing the discrepancy between appearance and reality Lao Tzu emphasizes the difficulty of the *Tao*; in choosing paradoxes drawn from traditional wisdom to define it he supports the thesis that the philosophical element in the text most often finds its crucial expression through poetic figuration. After five more lines of comparable gnomic figures Lao Tzu leaps to another mode: "The great square has no corners" (大方無隅). Suddenly we find ourselves in a realm of mystic apprehension:

The great note is rarefied in sound [or has no sound].

The great image has no shape.

大音希聲。

大象無形。

The sequence concludes with the reassertion of the *Tao*'s ineffability ("The way conceals itself in being nameless" 道隱無名), this higher poetry of namelessness reiterating the thought with which the *Tao Ching* had begun. But so far Lao Tzu has said nothing new, nothing, that is, that we have not heard before. In the final line of the chapter he strikes a new note: "It is the way alone that excels in bestowing and in accomplishing" (夫惟道，善貸且善成). The notion of accomplishment (or bringing to fulfillment) is the key to the *Te Ching*. As Chan notes, "*Tao* is not for contemplation but for diligent practice. The goal of *Tao* is not simply peace of mind or purity of heart but the full realization of all things." The fulfilment, then, of the *Tao* lies in the accomplishment of *Te*, which in turn represents the appropriate manifestation of the way.

Is there not here an analogy between this relationship and another of which we have been speaking: that of the philosophical and poetic elements in the text? Should we substitute "philosophy" for "*Tao*" and "poetry" for "*Te*," we might paraphrase Wang Pi's statement, quoted above, as follows: How is poetry to be achieved? It is to be achieved through the exposition of philosophical truth. How is poetry to be completely realized? It is through the abnegation of the traditionally poetic. As this abnegation is completed, thereby driving out the extraneously decorative, non-doctrinal element, a poetry of total reality will be achieved. Or, in Wallace Stevens' phrase, the poet will "realize poetry."

This process of realization in the *Te Ching* begins with the application of metaphysical principles to conduct. Hence its beautifully practical

embodiment of philosophy, as in XLIV:

Your name or your person,
Which is dearer?
Your person or your goods,
Which is worth more?
Gain or loss,
Which is a greater bane?
That is why excessive meanness
Is sure to lead to great expense;
Too much store
Is sure to end in immense loss.
Know contentment
And you will meet with no danger.
You can then endure.

名與身孰親？
身與貨孰多？
得與亡孰病？
是故甚愛必大費。
多藏必厚亡。
知足不辱，知止不殆，可以長久。

Though fully rhetorical, this chapter nonetheless represents poetry wholly in the service of truth.

Dichtung und Wahrheit: one and the same, or separable? Opposed, or correlative? Let us examine a crucial text, Chapter XXXVIII, the first of the *Te Ching*:

A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue. A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue and that is why he is without virtue. The former never acts yet leaves nothing undone. The latter acts but there are things left undone. A man of the highest benevolence acts, but from no ulterior motive. A man most conversant in the rites acts but when no one responds rolls up his sleeves and resorts to persuasion by force. Hence when the way was lost there was virtue; when virtue was lost there was benevolence; when benevolence was lost there was rectitude; when rectitude was lost there were the rites. The rites are the wearing thin of loyalty and good faith. And the beginning of disorder;

Foreknowledge is the flowery embellishment of the way
And the beginning of folly.
Hence the man of large mind abides in the thick not in the thin,
in the fruit not in the flower.
Therefore he discards the one and takes the other.

上德不德，是以有德。
下德不失德，是以無德。
上德無爲而無不爲。
下德爲之而有以爲。
上仁爲之而無以爲。
上義爲之而有以爲。
上禮爲之而莫之應，
則攘臂而仍之。
故失道而後德，
失德而後仁，
失仁而後義，
失義而後禮。
夫禮者忠信之薄，而亂之首也。
前識者道之華，而愚之始也。
是以大夫處其厚，不處其薄，
處其實，不處其華。
故去彼取此。

Philosophically, the passage represents a poetry of worldly wisdom, which by its nature is paradoxical: true virtue subverts apparent virtue; the highest action lies in non-action; rectitude and rites provide no guarantee of good behavior; the greatest principles of worldly order produce disorder. Life is in the living; its proper conduct dictates the renunciation of mere propriety.

Poetically, the passage represents a philosophical proof based on forms of logical argumentation. It divides into four parts: (1) an introductory chain of paradoxes, all thematically related; (2) a series of consequent truths, linked in a chain argument; (3) a series of moral precepts presented in the guise of definitions ("The rites are the wearing thin of loyalty," etc.); and (4a and b) the two concluding sentences. We might schematize the chapter as follows:

- A history of the degeneration of the *Tao* (1 and 2)
- B general historical principles induced therefrom (3)
- C a general moral principle induced from B (4a)

D a method deduced from B and C (4b)

In another relationship of Truth to Poetry the major philosophical concepts of the *Tao Ching* appear to have generated corresponding poetic principles. Thus virtueless virtue gives rise to an anti-poetic poetry. Actionless action finds its counterpart in what we might call negative poetry (we have already mentioned and shall later consider examples of negative images and metaphors). The poetry of compressed, seminal statement corresponds to the notion of the uncarved block; the poetry of ineffability, to the concept of namelessness.

Likewise, in a larger sense, the experiential nature of Taoist thought finds its counterpart in the poetry of a chapter such as LXIV, whose method might be designated as the gathering of wisdom (and, behind it, experience) under a single rubric (in this case the principle of non-action). I quote the Waley translation:

“What stays still is easy to hold;
Before there has been an omen it is easy to lay plans.
What is tender is easily torn,
What is minute is easy to scatter.
Deal with things in their state of not-yet-being,
Put them in order before they have got into confusion.
For “the tree big as a man’s embrace began as a tiny sprout,
The tower nine storeys high began with a heap of earth,
The journey of a thousand leagues began with what was under the feet.”
He who acts, harms; he who grabs, lets slip.
Whereas the people of the world, at their tasks,
Constantly spoil things when within an ace of completing them.
“Heed the end no less than the beginning,”
And your work will not be spoiled.
Therefore the Sage wants only things that are unwanted,
Sets no store by products difficult to get,
And so teaches things untaught,
Turning all men back to the things they have left behind,
That the ten thousand creatures may be restored to their Self-so.
This he does; but dare not act.

其安易持，其未兆易謀，
其脆易破，其微易散，
爲之於未有，治之於未亂。

合抱之木，生於毫末。
九層之臺，起於累土。
千里之行，始於足下。
爲者敗之，執者失之。
是以聖人無爲故無敗，
無執故無失。
民之從事，常於幾成而敗之。
慎終如始，則無敗事矣。
是以聖人欲不欲，不貴難得之貨。
學不學，以復衆人之所過。
以輔萬物之自然而不敢爲也。

Here, then (to paraphrase Wang Pi), is Lao Tzu's virtuous embrace of all things, poetic in the capaciousness of its vision, philosophical in the way in which the sage "also shows the world the degree to which ordinary life can be moulded to the pattern of the *Tao*" (Waley). But poetry and thought are here finally inseparable.

Poetry and argument, argumentative poetry, poetic argumentation. Chapter LXXVII affords one of the most complex examples of these interrelationships. Its central philosophical statement, one to which its argument leads, and upon which it turns, reads: "Who is there that can take what he himself has in excess and offer this to the empire? Only he who has the way" (執能以有餘奉天下？惟有道者)。Who is Godlike? He who is like God. The underlying structure, like the structure of the chapter at large, is chiasmic (though not tautological). "Is not the way of heaven like the stretching of a bow" 天之道其猶張弓乎？ the chapter opens in simile, then moves with parallel rhetoric to elaborate that figure into conceit (emphasis added):

The high it presses down
The low it lifts up;
The excessive it takes from,
The deficient it gives to.

高者抑之，
下者舉之，
有餘者損之，
不足者補之。

Then, by means of chiasmic elaboration, the *applicatio*:

It is the way of heaven to take from *what has in excess* in order to make good *what is deficient*. The way of man is otherwise [anti-theoretical turn]. It takes from *those who are in want* in order to offer this to *those who already have more than enough*.

天之道，損有餘而補不足。
人之道，則不然。損不足以奉有餘。

The sage way of heaven having found its embodiment in the heavenly sage, the chapter concludes with a syllogistic combination of terms:

Therefore the sage benefits them yet exacts no gratitude,
Accomplishes his task yet lays claim to no merit.

是以聖人爲而不恃，功成而不處。

Lest the chapter be read as a program for positive action, Lao Tzu appends a monitory coda: "Is this not because he does not wish to be considered a better man than other?" (其欲不見賢邪?) In the sage, then, we have neither God nor mortal but the exemplification of what Chan calls "the doctrine of the equality of all things." The suavity of argumentation here puts the Jesuit to shame.

The Western mind is prone to mistake Lao Tzu's grace for languor, his elegance for desuetude. In fact syllogistic structure, with changes rung thereon, frequently characterizes his argumentation. Chapters XXIX to XXXI provide convenient examples. (I have excerpted their essential arguments [see above, p. 402]). In the first of these, Lao Tzu offers three examples of the rashness of action; induces a series of general statements illustrating the world's division into categories; and concludes with a deduction of principle ("Therefore the sage avoids excess, extravagance, and arrogance" 是以聖人去甚，去奢，去泰)。

Chapter XXX departs from strict syllogism in its doubling of major premises and laxity of conclusion. It begins by stating its principle in negative terms; it replaces the syllogistic minor premise with a reason ("This is something which is liable to rebound"); and adds *exempla*. It then asserts its principle in positive form ("One who is good aims only at bringing his campaign to a conclusion and dare not thereby intimidate"); elaborates in a series of exhortations ("Bring it to a conclusion but do not boast; . . .

bring it to a conclusion but do not intimidate”); and then concludes by analogy and recourse to antecedent principle:

A creature in its prime doing harm to the old
Is known as going against the way.
That which goes against the way will come to an early end.

物壯則老，是謂不道。
不道早已。

The analogy poetically multiplies as we ponder it: the creature in its prime doing harm to the old is like the mortal ruler intimidating an immortal empire. His unnatural conclusion of life is the obverse of the ruler's inability to bring his own campaign to conclusion; this in turn brings the ruler to an early end. The glosses of philosophical and religious commentators indicate that extratextual analogies also readily suggest themselves to the Chinese mind. More immediately, the argument has its analogues in the arguments of adjacent chapters; more broadly, in those general recommendations for the conduct of the prince that form so much of the substance of the text at large. Moreover, there is something in the partite organization of argument that encourages this kind of analogical (or poetic) extension of meaning.

Lau's text of XXXI may, as he says, represent not Lao Tzu's words but Wang Pi's commentary. Lau recommends certain transpositions but retains a poetic core, poignant in itself and interesting in its use of/departure from syllogistic form. Again I quote the central passage:

Arms are instruments of ill omen, not the instruments of the gentleman. When one is compelled to use them, it is best to do so without relish.

The form of the argument is of interest. The first sentence (A) defines the nature of the gentleman, the nature of arms, and their incompatibility; the second (A₁), their compatibility, with conditions. The text continues:

There is no glory in victory, and to glorify it despite this is to exult in the killing of men. One who exults in the killing of men will never have his way in the empire.

勝而不美。而美之者樂殺人。
夫樂殺人者，不可以得志於天下矣。

The first sentence (B) defines the nature of glory and vainglory; the second (B₁), the consequences of vainglory. After intervening material, the chapter ends with a passage that serves as a practical pendant to A and B:

When great numbers of people are killed, one should weep over them with sorrow. When victorious in war, one should observe the rites of mourning.

殺人衆多，則以悲哀泣之。
戰勝者則以喪亂處之。

Curiously, either sequence, ABC or BAC, may be read as syllogism, and perhaps it is this very ambiguity that lends to the sentiment expressed its poignancy. But enough for the stricter forms of logical argument.

As in most early traditions, especially in their poetry, parallelism is a more common form than syllogism. Chapter XXVIII, one of the most sophisticated in argumentation, combines parallel structure with logic, weaving in and out of its argument some of the most powerful and poetic symbols of the text. I have quoted the opening lines, but we must have them before us again:

Know the male
But keep to the role of the female
And be a ravine to the empire.
If you are a ravine to the empire,
Then the constant virtue will not desert you
And you will again return to being a babe.

知其雄，守其雌，爲天下谿。
爲天下谿，常德不離，復歸於嬰兒。

Rhetorically as dense—if not as personal, allusive or obscure—as any Western poetry, these lines affect the reader at all levels of his consciousness: the male-female-babe sequence draws upon what I have earlier called the rhythm of parturition, the intervening image of the ravine functioning here, subliminally, both as vaginal and uterine metaphor. At this level, Chang's translation—a work of Heideggerian abstraction—provides material for comparison and contrast:

To be aware of the positive, yet to abide in the negative is to be
the abyss of the universe.

To be the abyss of the universe is to not deviate from real attain-
ment and to remain like an innocent child.

Superficially less poetic (in verbal texture, in imagery, in human associations), it nonetheless speaks to the deep polarities in human nature and experience, serving to crystallize the same archetypes, perhaps more surely for the room which its vagueness allows the reader's own imagination.

That the opening two lines (in Lau's version) quote the traditional wisdom of Lao Tan, that the next two refer us backward to an earlier point in the text, that the final two draw an image of infancy into the central concept of the Return creates another pattern of great depth—but also one of great delicacy and erudition. At a more literary level of rhetoric, the six lines form a mirror construction. *Anadiplosis* links 3 and 4, serving to emphasize their central doctrine; 2 and 5, 1 and 6 complement one another in remarkable ways. The passage partakes of the dynamism of poetry, reinforced by this particular chain of images; but it also partakes of the stasis of the Taoist view, its backward movement to infancy reinforcing this contradictory, paradoxical tendency. At the level of rational argument, we note the simple but compelling structures: the timeless verbs (in lines 1–3), the conditional structure of causality (in lines 4–6), and the relationship of those two structures to one another.

The relationship of the first six lines to the subsequent “sixains” also requires some comment:

Know the white
But keep to the role of the black
And be a model to the empire.
If you are a model to the empire,
Then the constant virtue will not be wanting
And you will return to the infinite.

知其白，守其黑，爲天下式。
爲天下式，常德不忒，復歸於無極。

Each line, in fact each image, glosses its double in the first six lines: *white, male; black, female; model, ravine; not wanting, not desert you; the infinite, a babe*. I am, of course, speaking here of only one translation; comparison

of half a dozen, however, suggests that the absence of specific effects in any one translation is compensated for by the presence of others. The fundamental rhetorical structure at least remains constant; likewise the presence of images at once deep, traditional and sophisticated. Though the shading of meaning changes from one translation to the next, the doctrine is consistent.

The third sixain reads:

Know honor

But keep to the role of the disgraced

And be a valley to the empire.

If you are a valley to the empire,

Then the constant virtue will be sufficient

And you will return to being the uncarved block.

知其榮，守其辱，爲天下谷。

爲天下谷，常德乃足，復歸於樸。

So rich are the associations (*the babe, the infinite, the uncarved block*), both individually and in combination, that quotation speaks more eloquently than paraphrase. Suffice it to say that the interrelationship of those three images would require lengthy explication.

After using three repetitive sixains—parallel but antithetical, independent of one another but cumulative in their meaning, Lao Tzu shifts tactics:

When the uncarved block shatters it becomes vessels.

The sage makes use of these and becomes the lord over the officials.

Hence the greatest cutting

Does not sever.

樸散則爲器。

聖人用之則爲官長。

故大制不割。

Images of magic parturition, fantastic dominion, and deamlike paradox underlie, contradict and augment the rational meaning of these conclusions. Moreover, the coda as a whole stands in a double relation to all that goes before: it brings a sequence of evocative images to argumentative conclusion and yet, in its non-sequentiality, seals them off as an independent unit still active on another plane of consciousness.

Conclusion

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

信者不美，美者不信。
善者不辯，辯者不善。

The poetic means employed in the *Lao tzu* are manifold, ranging from simple simile (“Governing a large state is like boiling a small fish” 治大國若烹小鮮) [LX] to commentated parable (the description of utopia in LXXX). Its quintessential poetry, however, is, as I earlier suggested, a kind of anti-poetry; it lies not in conventional figures but in their subversion.

The way is empty, yet use will not drain it.
Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad creatures.
Blunt the sharpness;
Untangle the knots;
Soften the glare;
Let your wheels move only along old ruts.
Darkly visible, it only seems as if it were there.
I know not whose son it is.
It images the forefather of God.

(IV)

道冲而用之或不盈。
淵兮似萬物之宗。
挫其銳，解其紛，
和其光，同其塵，
湛兮似或存。
吾不知誰之子，象帝之先。

This is the poetry of emptiness, of absence, of the void—the void of ultimate reality. Its imagery is negative, its metaphors abstract. But for all that it is no less poetic, no less fecund, no less sensuous:

Is not the space between heaven and earth like a bellows?
It is empty without being exhausted:
The more it works, the more comes out.

(V)

天地之間，其猶橐籥乎？
虛而不屈，動而愈出。

Each positive has a negative, each negative a positive. Though it seems reductive this in fact is a poetry of inclusiveness, a way of opening the world so that the world itself becomes poetry.

The way begets one; one begets two; two begets three;
three begets the myriad creation.

(XLII)

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。

It is a poetry of ultimate origins and ultimate manifestations, but also a poetry of continuous creation and natural transformations. Lao Tzu's method is organic: chapter follows chapter in an exfoliation of meaning. Word alternates with word, thought with thought, sentiment with sentiment, as day with night. Thought gives way to poetry, poetry to thought. "Thus," says the master, "a thing is sometimes added to by being diminished and diminished by being added to 故物或損之而益，或益之而損。” (XI.II)

Lao Tzu's poetry is a poetry of thought in the absence of thought:

The further one goes
The less one knows.
Therefore the sage knows without having to stir.

(XLVII)

其出彌遠，其知彌少。
是以聖人不行而知。

It is practical and metaphysical, its practicality metaphysical, its metaphysics practical. It teaches how to live and is therefore doctrinal ("doctrine" is one meaning of *Tao*).

Since it derives, in part, from the poet's experience, it is therefore, in part, personal, as in the famous passage from Chapter LXVII:

I have three treasures
Which I hold and cherish.

The first is known as compassion,
The second is known as frugality,
The third is known as not daring to take the lead
in the empire . . .

我有三寶，寶而持之。
一曰慈，二曰儉，三曰不敢為天下先。

But what it has to say is really general:

Being compassionate one could afford to be courageous,
Being frugal one could afford to extend one's territory,
Not daring to take the lead in the empire one could
afford to be lord over the vessels.

夫慈故能勇。
儉故能廣。
不敢為天下先，故能成器長。

Though sometimes enigmatic, it is more often explicit:

Now to forsake compassion for courage, to forsake frugality for
expansion, to forsake the rear for the lead, is sure to end in
death.

今舍慈且勇。舍儉且廣，
舍後且先，死矣。

And though it speaks through metaphor it does so in order to speak the
truth:

Through compassion, one will triumph in attack and be impregnable
in defence. What heaven succours it protects with the gift of
compassion.

夫慈以戰則勝，以守則固。
天將救之，以慈衛之。

Though the *Lao tzu* may seem to be religious, it is really practical. And
herein lies its highest value. For this is not transcendent vision but the poetry
of worldly wisdom.

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