

The Question of the Wind in Zhuangzi

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Introduction

Zhuangzi 1 opens with the closely-mixed themes of cosmogony (generation), transformation and relativity:

In the northern darkness there is a fish and his name is K'un [鯀]. 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 [鵬]. 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 [Watson 23].¹

Here Watson notes: "K'un means fish roe. So Chuang Tzu begins with a paradox - the tiniest fish imaginable is also the largest fish imaginable" (23).

Of course, this relativistic (oppositional) paradox of large/small is closely tied to the disjunctive paradox of self-generation/transformation: the egg of one's own minuteness is also the egg of one's self-generation and/or self-transformation; being its own egg (Wu 1990, 47 actually gives Kun's 鯀 name as "K'un the roe") implies Kun's power to transform into (a larger version of) itself and/or into something *other* than itself (a bird).²

Zhuangzi goes on here to raise a certain problem in the "dynamics of flight": if "wind is not piled up deep enough, it won't have the strength to bear up great wings. Therefore when the Peng 鵬 rises ninety thousand *li*, he must have the wind under him like that. Only then can he mount on the back of the wind, shoulder the blue sky [...]" (Watson, 30). And now Zhuangzi gives us, first the relativistic difference between flying for extremely short distances (the cicada and dove) and extremely long ones (the Peng), and then the qualitative or "quantum-leap" difference (on a second order of relativity) between physical flight that rides on physical wind and metaphysical flight which needs no wind:

Lieh Tzu [列子] could ride the wind [...] but after fifteen days he came back to earth. [...] He escaped the trouble of walking [while riding the wind], but he still had to depend on something to get around. If he had only mounted on the truth of Heaven and Earth, ridden the changes of the six breaths [*liu qi* 六氣], and thus wandered through the boundless [*wu qiong* 無窮], then what would he have had to depend on? Therefore I say, the Perfect Man has no self [*wu ji* 無己], the Holy Man no merit; the Sage no fame (Watson, 26).

Here the first-level ("bounded") floating/flying still requires a "ground" on which we must "depend"; the second-level (unbounded) flying requires no such ground to support it, "back it up." The "piping of heaven and earth" passage near the opening of *Zhuangzi* 2 seems to offer a kind of variation on this problem of ground/groundless and the notion of a "groundless ground." Here the "piping of men" (music played on pipes) and "piping of earth" (the sound of wind blowing through earth's caves) are contrasted with the "piping of heaven," which somehow grounds (or un-grounds) both. This "piping of heaven" has various interpretations, but I am especially interested in that of Wu Kuang-ming (1990). Wu stresses that this cryptic parable, with its image of the wind blowing

¹ All subsequent quotations from Zhuangzi are from Watson's translation unless otherwise noted.

² The cosmogonic meaning is also immediately made explicit: once the huge Peng bird is in the air it "sets off for the southern darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven [*tian chi* 天池]" (230). Wu takes the Northern Darkness as the realm of chaotic, transformative *yin*-forces 陰, the Southern Darkness as that of clarity and order, *yang* 陽: "The Northern Darkness is the primordial Deep, the primeval Hun Tun [渾沌 Chaos] or non-separation. The Southern Darkness is the mystery of Separation-and-Clarity" (72, 86). But by making the dynamic of a relativistic generation/transformation overtly allegorical Zhuangzi also reinforces our sense of its "rhetorical" relativity or ambivalence: it is a text which can be read as "serious" metaphysics and/or as "playful" creation-myth.

through earth's hollows and then suddenly subsiding, is used by Zhuangzi not so much to "answer" as to "express" a *question*, the question as to whether one can really "lose oneself" in meditation.³ Thus Wu sees the earth's (or self's) "holes" themselves as "questions" into/through which the wind (of man/earth/heaven) blows, filling and then emptying them again. That is, rather than "answering" these (unanswerable) questions, the wind simply "fills them out" or "extends" them, expands their "space of questionability" - at least this is how I shall interpret Wu's extremely subtle reading here.

In my "expansion" of Wu's reading, I will emphasize the (textual, rhetorical) reflexivity of a parable about unanswerable questions that is used to "answer" (or rather express, further inflate) an unanswerable question. Referring to Nietzsche on the "question of why we want to know why" and to Kierkegaard and Deleuze on speculative and ironic questioning, I will explore the "question-filling wind" reading of the piping parable in terms of two question-modes, that of un-grounded or "open" speculative questioning and that of self-repeating or "closed" rhetorical questioning. The open-endedness of speculative questions can be, I will suggest, also seen in terms of an ungroundedness which may be indistinguishable from an indefinite (or infinite) regress of grounds, thus arguably making speculative questions indistinguishable from rhetorical questions with their proclivity for indefinite self-repetition (answer repeats the question). I will also suggest the congruence of these questioning-modes with Zhuangzi's "big saying" (*da yan* 大言) or indefinitely "unbounded discourse," a taste of which we get in the Liezi passage above. But this big saying is clearly a *praxis* for Zhuangzi; it has "value for life" (for survival) as Nietzsche would say, and I will attempt to see whether questioning-modes can shed light on the sense in which the most abstract, metaphysical discourse can also be the most pragmatic. By way of conclusion, I will read the "ethical" parable of Hun Dun 渾沌 (**Chaos**), in which Wu is also interested, in terms of questioning-modes, setting this interpretation in relation to both Zhuangzi's parable of the sacred turtle who was sacrificed so that the king's diviners could use him for (an in one sense "rhetorical") ritual augury and his piping parable, in which earth's holes may remind us of the holes carved in Hun Dun's face.

The Piping of Man/Earth/Heaven

Toward the beginning of *Zhuangzi* 2, the *Qiwulun* 齊物論 or "Discussion on Making Things Equal" (Watson), the author and/or dramatic speaker enters into a sort of lament on the multiplicity and changeableness, groundlessness, ultimate "emptiness" of the self⁴:

Joy, anger, grief, delight, worry, regret, fickleness, inflexibility, modesty, willfulness, candor, insolence - music from empty holes, mushrooms springing up in dampness, day and night replacing each other before us, and no one knows where they sprout from [...] Without them we would not exist; without us they would have nothing to take hold of [...] It would seem as though they have some True Master, and yet I find no trace of him. (Watson, 32-33)

In *Butterfly*, Wu "introduces" his translation and extended commentary (in the form of Meditations) on the first three chapters of *Zhuangzi* via his four preliminary Meditations, the second of which is entitled "Conversation With A Roadside Skull." If his "music from empty holes" passage suggests the self's extreme changeability and un-groundedness, Zhuangzi's "skull" passage playfully and ironically contrasts the uncertainty of the living self (our secret knowledge of our own emptiness, finitude, death) with the immobility of a human skull which/who feels death is more peaceful and comfortable than life. Wu will tend to see it as an interplay of life-in-death and death-in-life, again reminiscent of "music from empty holes" - not least because skulls have several holes in them, and (at least on the face of things) should make fine natural "wind instruments." In fact there are two

³ For when Yan 顏 asks Ziqi 子綦 if he can really lose his body/mind in this way, Ziqi says: "You do well to ask the question, Yen. Now I have lost myself. Do you understand that?" (It is a "negative-rhetorical" question: how *could* Yan understand?) And then he proceeds to relate the parable of piping.

⁴ The question of how "seriously" we might take such a speaker will be implicit in the later discussion.

skull “passages” (thinking of the musical sense) in *Zhuangzi* 18, the shorter one being near the end of the chapter: “Lieh Tzu was on a trip and was eating by the roadside when he saw a hundred-year-old skull. Pulling away the weeds and pointing his finger, he said, ‘Only you and I know that you have never died and you have never lived. Are you really unhappy? Am I really enjoying myself?’” (116-17).⁵

This “skull” appears in another form in the opening dialogue of *Zhuangzi* 2, which will be followed by the “piping” and “music from empty holes” passages. Here “Tzu-ch’i of South Wall sat leaning on an armrest, staring up at the sky and breathing - vacant and far away, as though he’d lost a companion [‘the counterpart of himself,’ Graham 48],” and Yancheng Ziyou 顏成子游 asked him, “Can you really make the body like a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes?”⁶ Ziqi 子綦 replied, “You do well to ask the question, Yan. Now I have lost myself. Do you understand that? You hear the piping of men, but you haven’t heard the piping of earth. Of if you’ve heard [that], you haven’t heard the piping of Heaven!”⁷ On being asked what this means by Yan, Ziqi offers this story (metaphor, analogy, parable) by way of elucidation:

“The Great Clod belches out breath and its name is wind.⁸ So long as it doesn’t come forth, nothing happens. But when it does, then ten thousand hollows begin crying wildly. Can’t you hear them, long drawn out? In the mountain forests [...] there are huge trees [...] with hollows and openings like noses, like mouths, like ears, like jugs, like cups, like mortars, like rifts, like ruts. They roar like waves, whistle like arrows, screech, gasp, cry, wail, moan, and howl, those in the lead calling out *yee!*, those behind calling out *yuu!* [...] In a gentle breeze they answer faintly, but in a full gale the chorus is gigantic. And when the fierce wind has passed on, then all the hollows are empty again. Have you never seen the tossing and trembling that goes on?”⁹

⁵ The earlier passage goes: “When Chuang Tzu went to Ch’u, he saw an old skull, all dry and parched. He poked it with his carriage whip and then asked, ‘Sir, were you greedy for life and forgetful of reason, and so came to this? [...] Or did springs and autumns pile up until they brought you to this?’ When he had finished speaking, he dragged the skull over and, using it for a pillow, lay down to sleep. In the middle of the night, the skull came to him in a dream and said, ‘You chatter like a rhetorician and all your words betray the entanglements of a living man. The dead know nothing of these! [...] Among the dead there are no rulers above, no subjects below, and no chores for the four seasons. With nothing to do, our springs and autumns are as endless as heaven and earth. A king facing south on his throne could have no more happiness than this!’ Chuang Tzu couldn’t believe this and said, ‘If I got the Arbiter of Fate [*si ming* 司命 “prince of fate”] to give you a body again [...], you would want that, wouldn’t you?’ The skull frowned severely, wrinkling up its brow. ‘Why would I throw away more happiness than that of a king on the throne and take on the troubles of a human being again?’ it said.” (114-15, Wu, 15)

⁶ Graham comments (49): “The trance of Tzu-ch’i reappears in [*Zhuangzi* 24], where he speaks of a progressive objectivization of successive selves from which he detaches himself. Here he has finally broken out of the dichotomy, losing both ‘the counterpart of self’ and ‘his own self’; thus Graham feels that the later, more complete passage “must be the discarded introduction of the story in chapter 2” (105). Wu comments on the openings words: “Since the center of the city is occupied by upper class people, the South Wall is a plebeian district, if not a ghetto. [The name] “Ch’i” [基] [means] ‘the base.’ Therefore the name may imply Mr. Basis among the commons” (1990, 154). Here he also notes that the *yin* 隱 of *yin ji* 隱几, “depend on the armrest” is normally translated “lean on” but might mean “hide”; this is a crucial issue because the later lines, “What does the Way rely (*yin*) upon, that we have true and false? What do words rely upon, that we have right and wrong?” (Watson 34) may also be translated “By what is the Way hidden” (Graham 52) and “How-could Tao be hid” (Wu 139). Indeed Watson comments (34) that his “rely upon” follows Zhang Binglin’s 章炳麟 reading: “The older interpretation of *yin* here [...] is, ‘What is the Way hidden by,’ etc.” Either way, the 5th character at the opening of the *Qiwulun* is *yin*, here appearing subtly in the “mundane” context of an armrest; while it is not so clear what it would mean to “hide” one’s own “basis,” the image of a burned-out skull might come to mind.

⁷ Wu comments here: “And having lost oneself, one immediately asks, ‘Do you hear . . . piping?’ Such is our way of participating in things. [...] Such participation is called things-(inter)change (*wu hua* [物化] line 305) - fish changing into bird, Mr. South Wall Basis letting himself become like dry wood and dead ashes. Chuang Chou dreaming himself a butterfly. Things-interchanging is also myself-changing” (1990, 186).

⁸ Graham (49) comments on the *da kuai* 大塊: “That hugest of clumps of soil [...] seems to conjure up an image of the universe so far in the distance that it is no bigger than a clod you could hold in your hand.” Such relativity of perspective fits the *Qiwulun*’s central theme of “evening out all things.” Wu (155) says the 大塊 “is either the earth (Yü Yüeh) or between heaven and earth (Lin Hsi-I, Ch’u Po-hsiu, Chu Kuei-yao);” here one might think of Hesiod’s *Xaos* as the pre-existing earth-sky “gap.”

⁹ This is one of Zhuangzi’s best-known poetic and “onomatopoetic” passages. Wu (156) notes the various rhymes and parallelisms - in/of sounds, meanings, and the forms of characters. “Rapid parallelisms convey busy commotions.” In the

Tzu-yu said, "By the piping of earth, then, you mean simply [the sound of] these hollows, and by the piping of man [the sound of] flutes and whistles. But may I ask about the piping of Heaven?"
Zi Qi said, "Blowing on the ten thousand things in a different way, so that each can be itself - all take what they want for themselves, but who does the sounding?"¹⁰

Graham interprets this "piping" allegory (parable): "Chuang-tzu's parable of the wind compares the conflicting utterances of philosophers to the different notes blown by the same breath in the long and short tubes of the pan-pipes, and the noises made by the wind in hollows of different shapes. It is natural for differently constituted persons to think differently; don't try to decide between their opinions, listen to Heaven who breathes through them" (49). And Watson: "Heaven is not something distinct from earth and man, but a name applied to the natural and spontaneous functioning of the two" (32). In a slightly later passage of the *Qiwulun*, this extended meditation on the relativity and equilibrium of all things/meanings, Zhuangzi plays a slight variation on the piping passage and the idea that "the conflicting utterances of philosophers" are all "blown by the same breath": "Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference or isn't there?" (Watson 34).

The problem for "philosophical debate" is that it is not clear how we could even distinguish "this" (*shi* 是 "it is," predication, affirmation of a position) from "that" (*fei* 非 "it is not," negation of a predicate or position), since words, propositions, assertions and negations - "X," "This is (not) X," "This is (not) an X" - have no fixed meaning.¹¹ But to speak of assertion-and-negation is to state the problem only at the "highest" or most "formal" level of language; Zhuangzi's question here is also whether we finally can distinguish this level of meanings from "lower" levels (e.g. the level of the meanings of individual words in various languages) and indeed whether we can even distinguish, finally, human "utterances" (vocal "sounds" or "noises") from the "peeps of baby birds."¹² But it is important to note that Zhuangzi is, as usual, "leaving the question open": "[...] is there any difference or isn't there?" Thus we are left in an ambivalent state with regard to the possibility of

parallel lines beginning "So long as it doesn't come forth" and "And when the fierce wind has passed on" we get the movement from "before things calm down into emptiness" to "silence"; all of this parallels "the situation of Mr. Tzu-ch'i."

¹⁰ The last phrase, *nu zhe qi shei ye* 怒者其誰邪 rendered by Watson "but who does the sounding," is translated by Wu: "He-who rages-up, who is he?" This *nu*- "rages" repeats from the earlier line, "once it starts up, then myriads of hollows rage-up howling" (Wu, 135) or (Watson) "ten thousand hollows begin crying wildly." Wu (155-56) wants to correlate *nu*-raging with the sudden upward flight of the giant Peng-bird and (correlatively) with the earth-sky "between" (seeing this as an upward-thrusted "between") of *Zhuangzi* 1; as the Kun-bird has transformed into the Peng, he also correlates this flight with spiritual transformation, and the earth-sky "between" with the "Northern Darkness" which "bred this change." Thus the raging-silence-raging of earth's "hollows" is echoed by the (in effect) "Caw! Caw!" of a giant, upward-rushing (raging) bird of transformation (enlightenment): "Silence is followed by noises" (156).

¹¹ Chad Hansen in "A *Tao* of *Tao*" takes *Dao* 道 as a "discourse" that guides human actions; he sees Zhuangzi as having many discourse-*daos* rather than the Confucian authoritative ("one and correct") discourse-*Dao*: "Zhuangzi does not claim that all *shi*-ing [asserting] is wrong because the absolute is without any distinctions. He claims instead that all *shi*-ing is right - from some perspective or other. He does not claim that all language is *fei*-perverse but that all is admissible - in some conventional practice or another. 'There is no limit to what you can *shi* and . . . what you can *fei*. So I say nothing is better than clarity' [*Zhuangzi* 2]. *Ming*/clarity is apparently to be understood here as the awareness that there is a possible *dao* which would generate any desired pattern of *shi*-ing and *fei*-ing. Whatever pattern of response we adopt becomes a way. The conventionality and artificiality of *daos* and language are underlined again" (46). This view of *dao*(s) is of course also not that of the primitive Daoism of Shen Dao 慎到, which refuses to adopt any system of discrimination and thus sees "all things as one." Rather, the "mature Daoist" view attributed by Hansen to Zhuangzi seems in effect to "mime" or "play off of" Confucianism: ". . . Zhuangzi goes on to pragmatic endorsement of 'residing in the usual' - using names and *shāng* in the conventional, shared, therefore useful and understandable ways." Such a reading would seem to fit the various aspects of Zhuangzi's playfulness including my own reading in terms of "rhetorical" repetition/mimesis. Yet Hansen (48) also acknowledges Zhuangzi's claim - a seemingly "serious" if not also "mystical" one - that "[Conformist *shāng*] comes to an end; and when it is at an end, that of which we do not know what is so of it we call [the] *dao*."

¹² Thus my discussion of the problem in *Philosophy East and West* (2006) in terms of (trans-human, perhaps trans-terrestrial) background noise and Serresian non-linear dynamics. Here I suggest that we might see Zhuangzi's *Dao* of the *Qiwulun* as a sort of "pre-linguistic" background, from which (perhaps like static on the radio) all kinds and levels of meaning(s) emerge and back into which they pass. This locates *Dao* in an interim position (arguably like that of birdsong, wolf howls, traffic noises and the sounds of waterfalls) between full "linguisticity" and "non-linguisticity."

(consistent, stable) “meaning”; we are left suspended between two views, one that takes meaning as possible (“words have something to say”) and one that sees it as (strictly speaking) impossible (“what they say is not fixed”).

Now let us come back to Watson’s and Graham’s readings of the “piping of heaven and earth” passage. Graham says Heaven “breathes through” the various human (philosophers’) voices, thus embodying their ultimate oneness; Watson says that Heaven is “a name applied to the natural and spontaneous functioning of earth and man.” But before considering this question of the all-pervasiveness yet “invisibility” (or “inaudibility”) of Heaven, perhaps we need to be clearer on the piping of man/piping of earth relationship. Of course we may think, especially after pondering the paradoxes of the Hun Dun/Chaos parable, that man is himself fundamentally indistinguishable from earth, from his own indefinitely inward or downward-extended earthiness (as well as from heaven/sky). Wu’s whole reading of the *Zhuangzi*, tending as it does toward the mythopoetic-intuitive and away from the (excessively) rational-analytic, often reminds us that Zhuangzi thinks in terms of all-pervasive “thing-ness” (Hun Dun again), of a “multiplicity of things.” To pick just two of many examples: “[The] Ch’i Wu Lun seems to be concerned with *wu* [物] “things,” the many-ness of something other than the self. The chapter is advertised as *qi* 齊, a “sorting out” (Graham) and an “equalizing” (Watson) of the other-than-self” (Wu, 180); “Thus we can say logic (*lun*) trivially unifies (*ch’i*) all things, including systems and arguments (*wu*). Yet things (thoughts, arguments, and metaphysical systems) differ one from another” (Wu, 179).¹³

The point is that man’s thinking-breathing (and we remember that the *Qiwulun* begins with Ziqi “leaning on an armrest, staring up at the sky and breathing”) is itself a thinking-breathing “of things” and also the thinking-breathing “of a body-thing,” which one tries to lose and which will in any case be lost. And as such it may be (many-thingness implies contingency, not logical necessity) indistinguishable from the thinking-breathing of “earth” (the *da kuai*, great clod or chaotic multiplicity of all things) as well as, inaudibly “breathing through” both the single-thing man and the many-things/whole-thing earth, the thinking-breathing of heaven or sky. Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense* (1990) suggests that human-animal thinking is really derived from human-animal speech, a function of the mouth (one of earth’s “caves” or “hollows”) on the surface but also, more fundamentally, a function of breathing outward (through nose and mouth) from those “pipes” we call the lungs, from the deep inner-body. Deleuze, also noting the strange redundancy of a mouth which served/serves for both breathing-and-eating (and then later speaking-and-eating, thinking-and-eating), further suggests that a primordial, nonsensical “inner noise” of the body later emerges (in terms of biophysical evolution), after passing through several stages, as sensible (rational, communicative) “speech” passing out through throat, larynx and mouth.¹⁴ And it is very interesting to note that all *modes* of human utterances are emitted from our lungs-throat-mouth as, fundamentally, “wind” - including those forms of utterance known as “questions” as well as those known as “answers” (“assertions”).

Thus I am struck above all by the originality of Wu’s reading of the “holes-wind” relationship in Zhuangzi’s piping passage as “question-answer” relationship - and not least for its sensitivity to the sophistication, playfulness, “rhetoricity” of this ancient Daoist text. Here is part of Wu’s commentary:

And having lost oneself, one immediately *asks*, “Do you hear ... piping?” Such is our way of participating in things. To listen (*’ing*) is to attend and gather. To hear (*wen*) is to empty-mindedly let in. To listen is to collect; to hear is to accept. [...] The subject *wu*-self loses itself (*wu*), and then it can hear emptily the heavenly piping, the wind blowing. To hear is to listen with the breaths of things; one becomes an empty room to accommodate things, for the ways of things gather themselves in emptiness.¹⁵ All this describes mind-fasting. [...] [W]e all live in order to listen, not with ears (only) but

¹³ In certain ways, this “multiplicity-of-things” might sound Deleuzian.

¹⁴ See *The Logic of Sense* e.g. 186-195, 239-249.

¹⁵ But perhaps this “empty room” still has a “door” insofar as Chinese *wen* 聞 “hear” is “ear-in-door” while *wen* 問 “ask” is mouth-in-door; or perhaps we wouldn’t need the room since the “door” merely describes the hole, the between-space or

with our spine of souls. [...] [We are] able more and more to “hear” things and “overhear” the silence of things, that is, their actuality [...] But what sort of “piping” is it that we hear and overhear when we lose our *wo*-self and blend with things? We know holes make sounds. Why? Wind arises and blows, that’s why. The wind arises; why? Who made it so? The answer to the latter two questions is “somewhat like the relation between holes and the wind.” Holes are something negative, a lack; the wind is something invisible, the power of a no-thing. And our questions are also a lack, asking to be filled, and to be filled with something like the wind. That *something* must be as powerful as the wind, as no-thing, as invisible, blowing the wind to blow forth sounds out of a lack, a hole. Yet this “something” is not identical with the wind or holes; it is less than that no-thing, the wind, and more lacking than the “lack” of holes. It is that mysterious Darkness to the North. It is an inexpressible No-thing, to which we can allude only by questions, as in the beginning of the chapter, or by admissions of ignorance (“How would I understand it?”), attempts at saying something [...], or saying things “with abandon” (“I will try for you to say some abandoned words; you with the same abandon listen”).¹⁶ All these are modes of saying without saying [...]. Now, if holes and cavities make the earthly piping, and our questions and trials make the human piping, what is unique about the heavenly piping of which both these pipings are an expression? To begin with, we realize that heavenly piping is not a piping as other pipings are, but a piping-enabling power [...] That is why silence is also part of heavenly piping; “Are you alone not seeing them wavering, quivering? [...] On the one hand, [piping] is as it is [...]. On the other hand, it is produced by, and produces, a nothing - it produces sound, as invisible as a nothing, and it is produced by a nothing, a hollow or cavity blown through by a breath of air that is invisible [...] Furthermore, piping can man echo and resonance [...]. All of these are symbolic of heavenly piping, that mysterious dark power of enablement that is itself a non-being.”¹⁷ (186-187)

Wu then is comparing the “dynamics” of hole-wind with that of question-answer, except for the fact that we never actually get an “answer” here (any answer is, like the holes themselves, “lacking”) or even actually a “wind”: “And our questions are also a lack, asking to be filled, and to be filled with something like the wind. That *something* must be as powerful as the wind, as no-thing, as invisible [...]” Wu proceeds through a movement of progressive negation, progressive “minimizing”: rather than *answering* there is a mere *filling* of questions, or rather there is an *asking to be filled*, on the part of that which lacks (the holes, caves, hollows of the earth), by that which also lacks a “self” or “actuality” (the wind); “heavenly piping” as “piping-enabling power” is then the purely “negative force” of a windiness which, lacking self or substance or actuality, enables all winds to blow.¹⁸

tong 通 “communicating”-space that is now opening “both ways.” (Given the largely implicit parallels with Heidegger which I won’t try to pursue, one also wonders here about the later Heidegger’s *legen* - “speech” or “saying” - as the “laying-that-gathers”).

¹⁶ This last line is from near the end of the *Qiwulun*. Watson translates (42): “I’m going to try speaking some reckless words and I want you to listen to them recklessly. How will that be? The sage leans on the sun and moon, tucks the universe under his arm, merges himself with things, leaves the confusion and muddle as it is, and looks on slaves as exalted. Ordinary men strain and struggle; the sage is stupid and blockish. He takes part in ten thousand ages and achieves simplicity in oneness. For him, all the ten thousand things are what they are, and thus they enfold each other.” Wu renders the last part: “- although / Multitudes of men, slave, slave, / the holy man, a stupid sluggard, participates in / myriads of ages and forms one lump - / He lets myriads of things become so, / as they are, exhausting- ly, / and with this growth lets them mutually enfold” (150). “Abandoned/reckless words” are *wang yan* 妄言; 妄 is *wang* 亡 “enter concealed place” or “flee” or “die” over *nü* 女 “woman” and means “rash,” “absurd”; *wang xiang* 妄想 (*wang*-thinking) is “delusion” (Harbaugh, 70). The parallelism of *wang yan* with *wang ting* 妄聽 *wang*-listening is striking, as is the sense of *wang* 亡 as “enter concealed place”: and yet is not this 亡 itself already concealed here, it being merely the phonetic or “sounding element” of the character?

¹⁷ Wu notes (241): “Many commentators follow Kuo Hsiang, saying that there is in fact no heavenly piping, which is a literary expression of a collective mutuality of earthly and heavenly pipings. I disagree. Chuang Tzu has many “heavenly” phrases [...] indicating the existence of heaven. More importantly, without heavenly piping things are devoid of their cohering and originating principles [...]” This issue seems finally “undecidable” to me, but I suspect that—seeing holes/wind and the piping they together produce in terms of (a force of) questioning or questionability—the “speculative” questioning of the later discussion suggests Wu’s view, while the “rhetorical” questioning suggests Kuo Xiang 郭象.

¹⁸ One thinks of negative theology and also, naturally enough, of Heidegger’s *Dasein* (human being, “being-there”) as the *Seinsfrage* (question of Being), his ontological difference (Nothing/Being), his fundamental question of metaphysics: “Why are there any beings rather than just nothing at all?” But I also think here of the end of Wallace Stevens’ “The Snow Man”: “One must have a mind of winter / To regard [...] the distant glitter / Of the January sun; and not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves, / Which is the sound of the land / Full of the same wind / That is blowing in the same bare place / For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds /

Especially exciting to me is Wu's notion here of the caves/hollows/holes as "unanswerable questions," questions which cannot be answered but only "filled" or perhaps (I want to suggest) indefinitely "opened" or (inwardly, outwardly) "expanded"; that is, the "wind" which only exists insofar as the questions (*Seinsfragen* of a sort perhaps) are "calling" it, *asking* to be filled by it, can do nothing but further "deepen" the questions.¹⁹

Questioning and the Use of Uselessness

If we see these unanswerable questions as being unanswerable in the normal sense it could mean that there is no single answer that hits the mark, there is too much complexity, there is merely a multiplicity, in which case (as might fit Wu's reading) we could see the wind as this very multiplicity of possible answers that fills the question-holes. But if this is a horizontal model then there may be a more vertical model which is also, perhaps, the properly "metaphysical" model: no matter how we may try to answer the unanswerable (speculative/metaphysical) question (e.g. "Why do I exist?" or even "Do I exist?" "Does the world exist?"), we can still question the ground of our tentative answer, so that we keep getting pushed deeper or "further back." In this case we may seem to enter into an infinite or indefinite regress, perhaps not unlike that given us later by Zhuangzi in the *Qiwulun*: "There is a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be a beginning" (38). Wu's "heavenly wind" as groundless ground may perhaps catch this sense of the groundlessness of the bottomless regress (or pit, abyss) which nonetheless, as wind, is the only ground.

Yet here again there may be two ways to see this expanding-of-question dynamic on the "infinite regress" model. First, there is the properly speculative-metaphysical way: metaphysics as the constant thinking-back, thinking-more-deeply, the never-ending quest, constant motion of speculative thought. This might fit Kierkegaard's and Deleuze's notion of "speculative" questioning, situated by both in close relation to "ironic" questioning.²⁰ But on the other hand we could just see this regress as a purely "formal" or "rhetorical" one: in a rhetorical question the answer is pre-determined (as either positive or negative), thus the answer in effect "repeats the question." Yet this very repetition implies the possibility of an infinite regress in the sense of unlimited self-reflexivity, self-reflecting repetition. Thus the expected "yes" answer to "Nice day, isn't it?" could be followed by the question, "You had to say 'yes,' didn't you?" and that same question could

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Baym, 1754-55). With the "distant glitter / Of the January sun" we also think of Wu's "Northern Darkness" (*Zhuangzi* 1) that nurtures transformation.

¹⁹ Again, I won't try to pursue possible Heidegger-parallels, which may be implicit in Wu's text; see note 12.

²⁰ Thus begging the question of irony as a form of "rhetoricity" or *vice versa*. In his 1841 doctoral dissertation, *The Concept of Irony: With Continual Reference to Socrates*, Kierkegaard contrasts the mode of "interrogation," which is neither totally contingent (lacking a projected unity of the *topos*) nor absolutely necessary (for then it's rhetorical, the answer simply repeats the question), with the Socratic, purely "ironic" mode: "[O]ne can ask with the intention of receiving an answer containing the desired fullness, and hence the more one asks, the deeper and more significant becomes the answer; or one can ask without any interest in the answer except to suck out the apparent content by means of the question and thereby to leave an emptiness behind. The first method presupposes, of course, that there is a plenitude, the second that there is an emptiness. The first is the speculative method; the second the ironic. Socrates in particular practiced the second method. When the Sophists . . . had befogged themselves in their own eloquence, it was Socrates' joy to introduce . . . a slight draft that in a short time expelled all these poetic vapors. [Ironic wind?] [...] Socrates [...] circumnavigated the whole empire of intelligence and found the whole domain to be bounded by an Oceanus of illusory knowledge" (Hong, 35-38).

On the other hand, Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* seems not to make such a clear distinction between these two modes of questioning. "Irony consists in treating things and beings as so many responses to hidden questions, so many cases for problems yet to be resolved" (63): irony is now itself a force that opens each "answer" into a deeper question back behind it, into the field of possibility of the question, into its own "un-grounding" in/as a "moment of difference" (68). This un-grounding of any possible answer by opening (speculatively, ironically) the background question behind it, which will in turn be opened/ungrounded to reveal a deeper-lying or perhaps more encompassing question, for Deleuze begins from a kind of Heideggerian perspective - "the discovery of the question and the problematic as a transcendental horizon, as the transcendental element which belongs 'essentially' to beings, things and events" (195) - yet moves beyond it (195-196).

still be used in response to the predicted answer “yes.”²¹ And then the question becomes: might not Zhuangzi’s regress - “There is a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be a beginning....” - be seen as “self-reflexive/rhetorical” as well as “open-ended/ speculative”? In one sense this rhetorical repetition/regress is asking about the meaning of “questioning” itself, which is especially why it seems appropriate to Wu’s trope or notion of the question-filling wind; that is, it is a purely “formal” (thus again textually self-reflexive or rhetorical) asking about questioning. We also note that Nietzsche’s very Zhuangzi-like question at the opening of *Beyond Good and Evil* - “Given that we always want to ask or know *why* (“Why does x fall?” “Why do I exist?”), *why* do we want to ask/know why?” - might be seen as both formal-rhetorical and speculative-ungrounded:

The will to truth which will still tempt us to many a venture [...] - what questions has this will to truth not laid before us! What strange, wicked, questionable questions [*fragwürdigen Fragen!*] [...] Is it any wonder that [...] we should finally learn from this Sphinx to ask questions, too? Who is it really that puts questions to us here? What in us really wants “truth”? [...] Suppose we want truth: why not rather untruth? And uncertainty? Even ignorance? The problem of the value of truth came before us here - or was it we who came before the question? Who of us is Oedipus here? Who the Sphinx? It is a rendezvous, it seems, of questions and question marks. (Kaufmann 199)²²

Indeed two parables in *Zhuangzi* 26, *Wai Wu* 外物, “External Things,” give us in effect the speculative and rhetorical questioning-modes. First comes the story of the “sacred turtle”: a white turtle has been caught and shown to the king, who “could not decide whether to kill it or let it live and, being in doubt, he consulted his diviners, who replied, ‘Kill the turtle and divine with it - it will bring good luck.’ Accordingly the turtle was stripped of its shell, and of seventy-two holes drilled in it for prognostication, not one failed to yield a true answer” (136). Ironically, the “sacred turtle” must be sacrificed in order to become sacred, that is, yield “divine signs” (answers, meanings) to the diviners. And at a further (still more scathing) level of irony, while the living turtle might have been in some way sacred, the divination ritual performed on its dead body (shell) obviously is not. Rather, the king’s diviners are exercising a totally arbitrary power in “reading” the cracks - which appear when indentations drilled in the shell are burned - as meaning either “yes” or “no” in response to their questions (“Will the king win the battle tomorrow?”).²³ I think of this as a “rhetorical” questioning-mode - and here we have the seeming proximity of rhetorical and ironic - since the

²¹ But here, of course, the respondent might have also replied to the rhetorical question (with its pre-supposed “yes” answer), “No, I don’t think it’s such a nice day” - in which case his interlocutor might respond by asking the “speculative” (open-ended) rather than “rhetorical” (closed) question, “Why don’t you think so?” Or the respondent might have said “No” to “You had to say ‘yes,’ didn’t you?” even after he had initially responded “Yes.” There may be various ways these modes can be combined.

²² Nietzsche concludes that our curiosity is based on the need to survive, it has a “value for life.” Yet paradoxically, in his view, just because logical thought and the scientific laws based on it (as for example in Kant’s analysis in the first critique) may ultimately promote our survival, this does not make these any more “true” than non-logical thought or principles: there is no absolute true/false distinction.

²³ Thus Zhuangzi says that “The sacred turtle [...] knew enough to give correct answers to seventy-two queries but it couldn’t escape the disaster of having its belly ripped open. So it is that knowledge has its limitations, and the sacred [*shen* 神] has that which it can do nothing about” (136; the terms “knew” and “correct” are of course being used ironically here). We also note the relevance of this scene of ritual augury to the “piping” parable on its most transparent level of meaning: all of earth-body’s hollows (pits, indentations) are “sounded” by the wind blowing through them, which then subsides so that they become silent. For while augury (divination) is more likely thought to be a “listening” to the voices of spirits, it could also be seen as listening to the “background noise” of nature. And the latter understanding seems especially suitable in the case of seers who are “reading” (giving sense to, “tuning in”) patterns of cracks that in fact appear quite randomly (contingently, as “static”) within the physical world. Perhaps then one could imagine Zhuangzi wanting to contrast this “false” (rhetorical) divination of the sacred turtle story with a “true” (speculative) one - the latter hinted at in the “piping” and “bird peeps” passages (where the question, “How can we distinguish all human utterances from the peeps of baby birds?” after all fits the scene of “piping,”: “How can we distinguish all the conflicting claims of philosophers from the sounds of mere wind in these caves?”) - in which the contingent marks (patterns of bird-flight and cracks) or sounds (of birds, wind) would now be “read contingently” by the seer. (Perhaps as a *wang ting*, “abandoned listening” to *wang yan*, “abandoned words”; see notes 13, 16.)

answers to the seers' questions are "pre-determined" by the seers, who sometimes may also have *repeated* the drilling-and-burning ritual on a single question until they get the "right answer." Thus if the meaning of the unanswerable speculative *question* is itself unclear, here the rhetorical question is clear but the contingent (in the sense of arbitrary) "answer" (*mark*) is unclear, yet is understood as being clear.²⁴

If the piping parable's "wind of heaven" and the infinitely open-ended (infinitely regressive or backing-up) "speculative question" as described above both suggest a "groundless ground," it is just such a ground that we get in a parable of *Zhuangzi* 26 which immediately follows the "sacred turtle":

Hui Tzu said to Chuang Tzu, "Your words are useless [*yan wu yong* 言無用]"

Chuang Tzu said, "A man has to understand the useless before you can talk to him about the useful.

The earth is certainly vast and broad, though a man uses no more of it than the area he puts his feet on.

If, however, you were to dig away all the earth around his feet until you reached the Yellow Springs, then would the man still be able to make use of it?"

"No, it would be useless [*wu yong* 無用]," said Hui Tzu.

"It is obvious, then," said Chuang Tzu, "that the useless has its use [*wu yong zhi wei yong* 無用之爲用]." (Watson 137)

It is only when it is withdrawn, when it is absent that we see the "usefulness" of this deeper, backing-up ground, which we are normally unaware of and thus think "useless." But it turns out that we needed this ground-beneath-the-ground all along to support the more immediate ground we are standing on. Thus the more immediately "pragmatic" (as well as playful, ironic, paradoxical) point is that the vital usefulness of this underlying ground can only become clear to us once it is taken away, since now we plunge to our deaths. Hence the sense of "radical immanence" (and "imminence") of this groundless ground, which again we might want to compare with the wind of heaven that is really "no wind." And just as that "windless wind" is also the totality of human (indeed even human philosophical) speech/discourse, a speech/discourse perhaps ultimately indistinguishable from nature's background noise (the "peeps of baby birds"), so *Zhuangzi* is here comparing the groundless ground to a "too-indefinite" (an "unlimited") metaphysical discourse, one which while apparently useless – that is, meaningless due to its horizontal multiplicity of possible meanings or its vertical, open-ended or infinite regress of "backing-up" meanings - is actually the most useful/meaningful discourse of all since it grounds/back up all of our ordinary speech/discourse, our everyday meanings.²⁵

Thus we have the *wang yan*, "abandoned speech" (Watson's "reckless words") that needs a *wang ting*, "abandoned listening" of *Zhuangzi* 2, "I-for-one will try to make you some abandoned words about it; / how-about you with abandon listen to it?" (Wu, 149), and the *da yan*, "big saying" of Jie Yu 接輿 in *Zhuangzi* 1, which Jian Wu 肩吾 says is "big and nothing to back it up, going on and on without turning around. I was completely dumbfounded at his words - no more end than the Milky Way, wild and wide of the mark, never coming near human affairs" (27). This "nothing to back it up" - *wu dang* 無當, where *dang* 當 means "value of a 田 field or of a 尙 house; to value, equal to, to compensate, to match" (Wieger, 103), so that the "field" of 當 both locates/grounds and serves to support/to back up - is of course ambiguous, like the groundless ground of discourse itself: on the one hand we have the "positive" regress of grounding/backing-up extending indefinitely backward/downward, on the other the "negative" sense that there is no ultimate ground or absolute "first beginning" here. We can also see this un-grounding as a field's horizontal encompassing - the *da yan* is the widest/most encompassing discourse ("no more end than the Milky Way," *wu chi* 無極 "limitless") which contains all the other, smaller ones. Taken either horizontally or vertically, the *wu dang* as "not giving value to" or "having no value" already implies the "useful uselessness" of a

²⁴ In this ("false") augury there is no real (no spontaneous) *dialogue* between A-B, man-nature.

²⁵ Perhaps these everyday meanings are too narrowly "human," too narrowly tuned-in out of the encompassing background noise of the (earthly/heavenly) wind.

big-saying which simultaneously “gives no value to” and gives the only value (ultimate value) to all the “smaller” discourses.

I am attempting to further explore, then, a point already implicit in Wu’s interpretation of the piping passage (187), where he also refers to these same “abandoned words”: namely, that this “big-saying” has an intimate relationship with, perhaps even is virtually indistinguishable from, Zhuangzi’s “questioning” discourse. For if we take the latter as speculative questioning then the groundless ground of the question may be hard to distinguish from that “big saying” in the form we most often have it exemplified in the *Zhuangzi*, namely as an “affirmative” parabolic discourse, for instance, the one put forth in the disappearing ground parable. Yet this same affirmative-parabolic discourse, in announcing the usefulness of its own uselessness, already entails (embeds) a certain (discursive, textual) self-reflexivity; this in turn suggests the possibility of seeing it as being at the same time a “rhetorical” discourse - that is, as an affirmative-rhetorical discourse which somehow cannot be distinguished from an interrogative-rhetorical (rhetorical-question) discourse.

But again, the “disappearing ground” parable has a very pragmatic sense to it, a “value” sense: the usefulness of useless *da yan* is that it prevents us from falling to our death. Perhaps the skill or knack on which depends our everyday survival (and/or our everyday survival-discourse) means constant awareness of the all-pervasive, porous background *Dao* 道 into which we ourselves (or our *yan*-words, discourses) can always “fit.” The move back toward/into this background is a move toward/into the greater space-between, perhaps into an “indefinitely wide” gap or space-between in which we can “hide” - can become invisible or at least inconspicuous. Thus we have the radically empirical praxis of Cook Ding (*Pao Ding* 庖丁) (*Zhuangzi* 3), who easily carves the ox by finding the gaps within it: “I [...] strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. [...] If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there’s plenty of room - more than enough for the blade to play about in” (47). Here we must wonder: what might be the relation of these hollows within a dead animal’s body to the indentations carved in the shell of a sacrificed turtle, and to those earth-hollows (*qiao* 窠) within which the wind plays, filling and emptying them, filling and emptying their “space of questionability”? Or: what is the relation between the empirical praxis of surviving by becoming invisible and the linguistic strategy of not-answering by expanding the question? In expanding it do we also hide (lose) ourselves within the question, perhaps even become the question?²⁶

To hide from the world by disappearing “within” it, by becoming inconspicuous, is precisely the usefully-useless survival-praxis of the old tree of *Zhuangzi* 1, equated by Hui Zi 惠子 with Zhuangzi’s “big words”: “I have a big tree [...]. Its trunk is too gnarled to apply a measuring line to [...]. You could stand it by the road and no carpenter would look at it twice. Your words, too, are big and useless, and so everyone alike spurns them,” to which Zhuangzi replies that being thought useless and therefore “spurned” is a good thing: “Why don’t you plant it in the field of Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side [...]? Axes will never shorten its life, nothing can ever harm it. If there’s no use for it, how can it come to grief or harm?” (29-30). We get a variation on this survival-value (thus ultimate usefulness) of being thought useless in *Zhuangzi* 4, where the old tree that guards the temple (thus having a purely “metaphysical” function) is never cut down because it is thought useless for any “practical” purpose: “As for me, I’ve been trying a long time to be of no use, and now that I’m about to die, I’ve finally got it.²⁷ If I had been of some use, would I have ever grown this large?” The carpenter (to whom the tree has been speaking in a dream) is then asked whether guarding a temple isn’t a function that, as it serves religion, should still be thought useful. He replies: “It’s only *resting* there” (60-61; Graham 73: “It’s simply using that as a pretext [...]”).

²⁶ This strategy of “becoming-question” might also suggest Kafka’s (ultimately parabolic) strategy of “becoming-parable” in order “to be rid of life’s daily cares” in “On Parables” (Glatzer, 457).

²⁷ A nice irony: to finally learn the “art of uselessness” when one is about to die (for we won’t need to “*know* how to be useless” once we are dead and thus actually useless). It’s a kind of redundancy (the uselessness of death backing up the learned praxis of uselessness), thus suggesting the “rhetorical” mode. It reminds us of Kafka’s hunger artist, who died after having already broken the record for fasting, saying he only fasted because he couldn’t find the food he liked: “These were his last words, but in his dimming eyes remained the firm [...] persuasion that he was still continuing to fast” (Glatzer, 277).

That is, being “sacred” doesn’t really give the tree any more (potentially dangerous) “use”-value, since it is just “pretending” to be sacred, it is not “taking this role seriously.” There are two levels here. On the first level, we assume the discourse, stance, role of the “sacred” is, like that of the “metaphysical,” a *da yan*, something ordinary people think useless; we also assume that if this old tree had remained, like Hui Shi’s 惠施 tree, an ordinary tree by the roadside (or living like a hermit in the woods), it could have been *truly* sacred-metaphysical and lived a long life because “no carpenter would look at it twice.” However, on the second level, this tree which by nature is a “sacred hermit” opts to play the role of an *obviously* “sacred” tree by guarding the temple: we would think this ostentation renders the sacred not-sacred (the big-saying a “little”-saying) yet this tree gets away with it (no one dares cut it down, even though now it is seen to be useful, valuable, a source of beautiful wooden altars and other ritual objects), perhaps because people somehow feel its power, recognize that it is truly sacred. In one sense, of course, this mocks “formal” religion or spirituality by suggesting that its formality renders it somehow non-spiritual (non-sacred) - unless perhaps the game is played by a true man of *da yan*. But in effect the tree is “hiding within the sacred” here (in quite a different way from that in which Cook Ding’s knife “hides” within the inner gaps of the cow’s body): I would suggest that Zhuangzi is also playing here with a certain kind of over-repetition or redundancy, and thus a kind of rhetoricity which, in its irony, somehow “begs the question,” sending us into a dizzying regress which is ultimately more “rhetorical” than “speculative.”

This parable invites comparison with that of the “sacred turtle.” This turtle is also essentially “sacred” and would like to remain inconspicuous; however, rather than choosing to play the role of overt “divinity” like the tree, he gets caught and killed (sacrificed) so that his body may be used for ritual divination. This divination, also a formally (overtly) “sacred ritual” (tied here explicitly to the king’s arbitrary power), involves the pre-determined answering (hiding within the pretext of being a purely contingent answering) of pre-determined questions, that is, blatant rhetoricity (as in the basic sense of a rhetorical question). Perhaps if the tree had been “forced to be sacred” he would also have died, but he chose this role freely. Here of course the speculative question as to whether being “sacred” (metaphysical, a speaker of *da yan*) can ultimately be more than a role, a purely ironic-rhetorical strategy, lingers. Perhaps we can only truly hide by not trying to hide, and yet this is just what the sacred tree does by opting to (temporarily, as someone just “resting there”) guard the temple. But if on the one hand the speculative question about rhetoricity (which might at first seem itself to encompass rhetoricity) lingers, perhaps falling back into an ultimately un-grounded regress, on the other hand the rhetorical question (or rather pure rhetoricity) encompasses all our attempts at “free” speculation. After all, isn’t it really (metaphysical) speculation, rather than (rhetorical) self-repetition, which has from the outset sincerely “posed” as that which is sacred? While we might have thought speculation (*da yan*, big saying in the properly metaphysical sense) was the truly useful sort of uselessness, the rhetorical mode perhaps turns out to be, finally, a more usefully useless (or uselessly useful?) one.

In either (or any) case, in both of these parables we really begin from the problem of survival (that of the tree, that of the turtle) and from there we are “opened into” the question of the question, that is, into the question of open-ended speculation/closed rhetoricity. The whole issue of questioning somehow arises from the prior problem of survival, of life/death and use/uselessness. Even the parable of piping begins as an “answer” to or rather “expansion” of the speculative/rhetorical question, “How is it possible for one to lose oneself?” For the parabolic “question- space” of the piping story was used by Ziqi to show how he could possibly “lose himself, “die,” make his “body become like burnt wood and mind like dead ashes.” Thus the wind that plays in those caves/hollows of the earth’s “body,” making its “music from empty holes” as if it were playing on a skull, is after all in the first place our own, radically finite and vulnerable breath (the breath breathed in and out by Ziqi in his breathing meditation), and only secondarily the breathed/sounded/spoken meanings/discourses of metaphysics (and speculative/rhetorical questions). And yet once again we come round full circle, for the deepest, most properly metaphysical speech/discourse is (paradoxically enough) precisely that which, in its very usefulness, is most useful to our survival. Or is Zhuangzi perhaps not distinguishing, finally, between the “music”

of the breath as it enters/escapes from our lungs and the music of the wind playing through the bottomless holes in the earth's limitless body?

Hun Dun's Face

Keeping in mind the close relationship between survival-praxis (and thus, in a sense, of ethics) and any “question of the question” in Zhuangzi - and the arguable priority of survival itself to “questioning” - I want to suggest, by way of conclusion, a reading of the Hun Dun 渾沌 parable, in which Wu is also very interested. I want to look at this parable, with its rich ethical as well as cosmogonic implications, *via* the notion of “expanding” or “filling” the question rather than “answering” it. Here the problem will be, however, that Hun Dun neither overtly asks nor answers a question, for he never speaks. Indeed until the end he has no mouth with which to speak, and once he gets a mouth he dies:

Emperor of South Seas is Shu; Emperor of North Seas is Hu; Emperor of the Middle is Hundun [渾沌]. Shu and Hu oftentimes meet at Hun-dun's Land. Hundun treats them very well [*dai zhi shen shan* 待之甚善]. Shu with Hu consults to repay Hundun's virtue [of hospitality], saying, “People all have seven holes to see, hear, eat, and breathe; this [person] alone has none. Let's try and dig them.” Daily one hole is dug; seven days, and Hundun dies. (Wu 2006, 1-2)²⁸

Clearly these six apertures for perception and speech/eating - two eyes, two ears, a nose and a mouth - cut in Hun Dun's face by his well-intentioned “friends” can represent rationality. For this rather crude, barbarian fellow to become “civilized” he needs to have holes cut in his otherwise unbroken surface, since the civilizing capacities of discriminating sensation/rational thought are a function of rational division: however, such a self-division is self-destructive.²⁹ This standard reading echoes Laozi's 老子 figure of the Dao as an “uncarved block” upon which the various “virtues” are carved; Zhuangzi's Daoist forerunner wants to return to the time before these carvings or markings began to appear, to the pristine purity and simplicity of that “surface of Dao.”³⁰ A similar sort of nostalgia-for-origin, where the origin itself (as in Derrida) is a non-origin inasmuch as it is a non-determinate or trans-finite one (an indefinitely repeated one), is also found in *Zhuangzi* 2.³¹ Thus to take the holes cut in Hun Dun's face as simply a representation of “sense” (in all its senses) or “rationality” seems a bit simplistic, in the first place because this reading seems to ignore the violence here, the force through which this rational order was enacted, brought about. But even on a more purely “abstract” and “metaphysical” view, to correlate a smooth, unbroken surface with disorder and holes/divisions with order is problematic, since we might just as well make the reverse

²⁸ This is Wu's “almost literal translation,” as he calls it in an article sent to me in a February 2006 email. Here Wu notes that “Hundun” is made of *hun* 渾 (muddy) (or 混, mix) and *dun* 沌 (turbid), to connote rich turgid Con-Fusion, not dark or bright, south or north, order or disorder, being too full-stuffed, ambiguously, to systematize into any definitive order” (3). See note 2. Hun Dun's parable occupies an important position within the *Zhuangzi*: it comes at the end of the first seven chapters, the part of the book traditionally thought to have actually been written by Zhuangzi himself.

²⁹ The violence of reason's differentiating force, or “violence of difference,” is a crucial idea in such poststructuralist thinkers as Derrida (“Violence and Metaphysics”) and his teacher Levinas. The latter's fundamental thinking of the “Other” - indeed “face of the Other” - is ethical (virtually defining what is now known as “postmodern ethics”); Wu's ethical thinking, also beginning from the Other, focuses on Hun Dun's “kindness.”

³⁰ “Therefore, when the Way is lost, only then do we have virtue [*de* 德 power]; / When virtue is lost [...] humanity; / When humanity is lost, [...] righteousness; / And when righteousness is lost, [...] propriety. / As for propriety, it's but the thin edge of loyalty and sincerity, and the beginning of disorder [*luan* 亂], / And foreknowledge is but the flower [*hua* 華] of the Way, and the beginning of stupidity. / Therefore the Great Man / Dwells in the thick [*hou* 厚]” (Laozi, *Daodejing* 38, Henricks 7; Henricks in his *Te-Tao Ching* places this chapter, and not the traditional first chapter, at the beginning).

³¹ “The understanding of the men of ancient times went a long way. How far did it go? To the point where some of them believed that things have never existed—so far, to the end, where nothing can be added. Those at the next stage thought that things exist but recognized no boundaries among them. Those at the next stage thought there were boundaries but recognized no right and wrong [*shi fei* 是非; Graham: ‘That's it, that's not’]. Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured [*keui* 虧 lost, lacking]” (36-37).

correlations. Indeed, as Wu points out (4-6), the paradoxical and ironic reversals enacted by this brief parable start with its cosmogonic “scene”: rather than beginning with a Marduk or God standing “outside” nature and then “dividing the waters” into earth and sky (here *Genesis* echoes the Babylonian *Enuma elish*), we begin with primordial Nature (the chaotic middle-sea) coming-into-“order” by being destroyed.

Wu takes the name Shu 儻 as “speed” and Hu 忽 as “sudden,” suggesting temporal *disruptions* or *discontinuities* of a sort over against which (or between which) Hun Dun stands (lies) in a state of spatio-temporal suspension or floating, a sort of virtually-at-rest “torpor.” In effect then, temporally as well as spatially, it is not Hun Dun but his friends who are, with their “busy dynamics of uncertainty” (Wu 2006, 3), embodiments or harbingers of “disorder.” But more likely we may see Hun Dun as that larger, indeterminately spatio-temporal “thing-ness” which includes (in an indeterminate order or direction) the dynamic process of ordering-and-disordering. What was that state of “higher order,” then, to which Shu and Hu *wanted* to bring Hun Dun by boring holes in his face? Was it a higher order whose excessive speed and complexity, sensation and knowledge would, unsuspected by them, kill him, its ultimate hyper-redundancy (rhetoricity) and “blankness” perhaps smothering his own overflowing life-energy?³² In any event his friends were “kindly disposed” toward Hun Dun, just as he was toward them, and Wu’s key point in his quite original reading of the parable is really the “kindness of Hun Dun’s face”: “Hundun treats them very well (*dai zhi shen shan* 待之甚善). Shu with Hu consults to repay Hundun’s virtue [of hospitality]”; this virtue is again the *de* [德] virtue/power of Laozi’s *Daodejing*.³³ Hun Dun’s *kindness*, perhaps not fully understood by his friends who still think him uncouth and uncivilized, is his ability to be *totally open* to the radical Otherness of Shu and Hu - is it ultimately the Otherness of disorder to order or *vice versa*? - to accept this Otherness not by rationally understanding it but by *already including or containing it* within his wider, more immobile surface or face. Hun Dun is so “open” (already such a “holy” person, potentially just one vast “hole”) as too *allow* his friends to bore holes in him and thus (as he must in some sense have already understood and accepted) kill him: self-sacrifice as the highest form of friendship.³⁴

Now, within the context sketched above, what do we make of the fact that Hun Dun never speaks, that before getting the mouth (and eyes, ears, nose) that kill(s) him he is apparently a *silent* chaos-nature? No doubt we may see his *kind* all-inclusiveness as a function of his silence, since (as for Laozi) speech demarcates and separates, rationally orders. But perhaps, although he never speaks, Hun Dun *himself* presents a sort of question or “questionability” to his two friends. For what is Chaos if not the indeterminate, unknowable Thing and thus itself a sort of “space of questionability”? If so, Shu-Speed and Hu-Sudden may want to (quickly, suddenly) “answer” this question/questionability or at least clarify it, define it, “narrow it down” (“pinpoint it”) by cutting holes in it. In a way this reverses the piping parable, where the earth’s holes-as-questions are filled/emptied (not answered, not defined) by the questioning force of that third element of nature, (not the land or water but) the *wind*. However, there are two ways we could see this reversal. First, we might say the earth’s holes (in Piping) were originally points-of-definition, “answers” (as if this earth were the drilled face of a dead Hun Dun), representing the way in which earth was

³² For Serres (*The Parasite*, 1982, *Genesis*, 1995), the “highest order” is really the over-determined redundancy of hyper-order whose “frenzy” finally arrives at a state of smoothed-out blankness (“blank chaos”): this can either signal a reversion back to the primordial state of “dark chaos” (random disorder) or remain indefinitely suspended as/in the entropic state of “information death” or “terminal equilibrium.” Serres notes the inherent violence of logic (a point already made by Derrida and Levinas, among others) and in particular the violence of hyper-redundancy, as in logical tautology (“A = A”) and in that maximally efficient communication which communicates nothing (read “NASA” and “Microsoft, INC”), since there is no longer any “noise” (pure disorder, dark chaos) to leave “spaces” between elements of the signal and thus make the signal meaningful.

³³ Wiegner says this *de* 德 is “The 直 rectitude of the 心 heart. In modern writing the 目 (eye) was bent down to gain room. [...] 直 Perfectly right, not curved in the least. Ten 十 eyes having looked at something, did not discover any deviation” (36-37).

³⁴ Wu sees Hun Dun as a sort of life-in-death (mobility-in-immobility) and/or (there’s no distinction here) death-in-life. Thus he reminds us of Zhuangzi’s skull (*Zhuangzi* 18), as Wu also suggests.

(pre-)ordered, now themselves “disordered” (or “re-ordered”) by the wind which only opens their (potential) questionability, potential openness, in effect returning earth’s carved-up face to “smoothness.” Or, and I lean toward this reading, we might say the holes were just an inevitable part of that indeterminate, discontinuous, mixed or con-fused Thing (the earth, *da kuai* 大塊 Great Clod) - something like holes in a skull or in the “self” of the “music from empty holes” passage - whose chaotic indeterminacy or questionability is now in effect being (not explained or clarified but) further put-into-question, further “blown open” by the question-wind. But whichever way we see Piping, the Hun Dun story seems to be a sort of reversal of its cosmogonic-discursive “scene.”³⁵

It might also be interesting to bring the “Sacred Turtle” into play here. In that parable, once again, the king’s diviners killed (sacrificed) the turtle so that they could “divine” (practice ritual augury) with its dead body. They did this by drilling a large number of holes in its carapace and then burning each to see what kind of crack appeared: they would proceed to read each crack - this arbitrary power of “reading” apparently had its ultimate ground in the king’s arbitrary power, for “arbitrariness” means precisely “having no final, fixed ground”³⁶ - as a “yes” or “no” answer to a question (“Will the king win the battle tomorrow?”) that they had previously posed. Now, if we see Shu and Hu as drilling holes in Hun Dun’s face because they want to create (pinpoint) “answers” to/for his “questionability, in what sense might they be stand-ins for the king’s diviners and in what sense enacting a quite different praxis, perhaps again some sort of “reversal”? In Shang turtle-shell augury the human seers asked the questions first, and the holes were just drilled and burned to reveal answers to those questions. Did Shu and Hu, then, in their eagerness, impatience, rational efficiency already ask questions to/of/about Hun Dun and then drill the holes in order to divine the answers? Or were the holes themselves the questions they were asking of him, on a variation of Piping where we take the earth’s caves as questions/questionable?³⁷ Perhaps (for they were this rushed, this efficient) the holes were the questions-and-answers, they were questions that answered themselves. Such extremely “closed” self-repeating or arbitrary-rhetorical questions - “Will X happen tomorrow?” when the “yes” or “no” answer has already been decided on in advance - would need to be distinguished from the sort of properly rhetorical (ironic-rhetorical) questions we looked at earlier, which I have placed in close proximity to speculative-metaphysical questions. By the latter I mean, not just “Do dogs bark?” (presupposed “yes” answer) but “Can we finally distinguish all human utterances from the peeps of baby birds, or can’t we?” (where we are forced by Zhuangzi in the *Qiwulun* to answer either “yes” or “no,” yet we are not at all sure which answer to pick).³⁸

Finally, then, the interpretation of Hun Dun that I want to suggest here relates this context of “arbitrary-rhetorical questioning” back to Wu’s notion of Hun Dun’s kindness as an openness, an “inclusiveness of the others” (one’s interlocutors in the “dialogue”). Of course Shu and Hu must know that Hun Dun has no mouth and ears (and eyes and nose), that he therefore can neither hear nor answer any questions they might put to him. (Thus they want to give him these orifices so essential to polite, civilized conversation, to philosophical dialogue.) But what they do not know - what they are too stupid and narrow-minded, too civilized (being already-carved-into-rational-holes) to realize - is that Hun Dun has been silently answering them all along with a resounding “Yes!” answer. For this is the meaning of his kindness-as-openness: he will accept everything (even being sacrificed, carved up like the sacred turtle), he will say “Yes” to everything, his only possible “reply” to any possible question is a pre-existing “yes.”³⁹ Yet we would need to distinguish this “yes” from

³⁵ The one reading we are not allowed is to say that Shu and Hu want, like the wind of Heaven in Piping, to “deepen” Hun Dun’s questionability by cutting question-holes in him; this in any case would not fit Piping, where the wind fills/empties/deepens the questionability of pre-existing holes.

³⁶ Which suggests the possibility that all such grounds are ultimately arbitrary and perhaps power-based, hence in a sense violence-based, as opposed to the mode of speculative-rhetorical questioning which shuns violence and seeks survival. (Again, this has echoes in thinkers like Derrida and Levinas).

³⁷ Though on the face of things this is not the easiest reading of Piping; see note 35.

³⁸ And it is up to us to think about it and decide (or not decide, and be caught in the un-grounded falling back into the speculative-rhetorical abyss); there is no king’s diviner who will decide for us.

³⁹ A sort of “kind” variation on Nietzsche’s not-kind (yet still “generous”) life-affirmation, his Dionysian “eternal yea to existence” which stands over against the pity and compassion of life-denying “slave morality.”

both the freely-chosen “yes” (or “no”) answer of the reader - reflecting on Zhuangzi’s question as to whether we can finally distinguish all human “discourse” (meaning, sense) from (the meaning/sense of) “the peeps of baby birds” - and the pre-determined “yes” (or “no”) answer of the king’s diviners. Perhaps it is a certain kind of all-compassionate, all-inclusive, quintessentially or rather primordially *ethical* yes, the yes of all-inclusiveness. And even after it/he/she is dead, this indeterminate Thing, this indefinitely-extended Chaos can still go on “saying ‘yes.’”⁴⁰

Of course, we might as well be satisfied with Hun Dun’s silence, his primordial and continuing speechlessness. Having no mouth he is like the wind of Heaven which “stands behind” (as groundless ground) the winds of man and earth that play through all the earth-holes simultaneously - thus creating the “piping of man and earth” - while itself remaining *silent*.⁴¹ But lacking a mouth Hun Dun may also be like the *da knai*, great clod of earth itself, for earth’s caves do not really “speak” (any more, finally, than do our own human mouths/caves), they only let the wind *from outside* play through them. This scene could imply that for (an ultimately chaotic) man/earth/Hun Dun there could never be actual “dialogue” in the sense of formal, rational “speech” inasmuch as we cannot *clearly* (only in a muddled or fuzzy way) distinguish the totality of human speech/discourse/meanings from the “peeps of baby birds.” (And we suspect it is just such a chaotic totality of sound which is the “sounded” piping of man/earth, while the piping of heaven standing behind it - its space of questionability, of uncertainty - remains silent.) Or it could imply that the force of questioning itself, which ultimately is silent like the force of (heavenly) wind, needs no mouth; that the expansion of the question is silent, needing no speech; that speech would only kill it. What we really are left with here is the paradox itself: the unthinkable duality or (Wu) multiplicity of a self with its constant changing feelings and perceptions yet “no master,” a self from whose “empty holes” emerges “music.”

Nicely catching the sense of earth/cosmos as *organic body*, Wu states (1990):

[...] I suspect that perhaps we all live in order to listen, not with ears (only) but with our spine of souls. And the growth of a person is measured not by years but by growth in this direction, to be able more and more to “hear” things and “overhear” the silence of things, that is, their actuality [...]. Such hearing and overhearing are equivalent to [...] letting oneself disappear in things [...]. Silence after music is a rest from music in order to digest music, to feed on it and grow silently in it - thereby to become part of it. [...] Such music-digestion [...] is inaudible, silent [...]. Silence after music is a background against which the music just heard stands out as music. It is soil to music [...]. Silence after music is neither music nor unrelated to music. It is something, or rather, a no-thing, that goes with music to make a musical whole. It is something [...] - to make that piping of heaven. (186, 189)

Perhaps music itself might even be the on-going expansion, in time and space, of a certain force of questionability, of the question? Of that question which is unanswerable because it has no ground or because (what may finally come to the same thing) it has already answered itself? But to think the other way around, to think of the force of questioning as something musical, as music, also suggests we are in a purely “aesthetic” space with this asking of unanswerable questions. It suggests that if

⁴⁰ In a way we could somehow compare to the hunger artist’s continuing fast; see note 27.

⁴¹ For it is precisely when the man-and-earth wind *subsides* in the caves and they become silent that we feel the presence of the wind of Heaven, a point also stressed by Wu (1990, 186 ff.) and Watson; in Watson’s translation (32) the question “Who does the sounding?” is the signature or *leitmotif* of the wind/piping of Heaven. This ambiguity (equivocation) of (heavenly) wind/(heavenly) piping is of course crucial, as is the question of whether the heavenly wind/piping can finally be distinguished from the human and earthly wind/piping (see note 17); I tend to see the undecidability of both issues as part of their larger sense or context of “questionability.” Always keeping in mind that Zhuangzi’s wind and piping can be breath, speech and philosophical discourse as well as music/wind in the more “natural” sense, we note that in the case of human-wind and earth-wind, human/earthly “piping” must be the playing-together or harmony of holes-and-wind. But do we see that which “enables all piping” - Wu’s wind/piping of Heaven - as being in the first place a force behind the harmony of holes-wind (technically music, though not necessarily silence, would be this), or as being in the first place a force behind just the wind itself? For it is in the first place wind that is silent (and thus questionable) when it has no holes to “play” through. (If this last point might not be true of the actual physics of wind, it seems to be a notion Zhuangzi is assuming).

(thinking now of Kant on ethics and aesthetics) there were any “ethics of questioning” here, its only “usefulness” must ultimately be (like that of music itself) “useless.”

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