Zhuangzi's *Dao* as Background Noise

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In the *Qi Wu Lun*, "Discourse on Making Things Equal," an extended meditation on the relativity and "equilibrium" of all things/meanings, Zhuangzi asks how we can finally distinguish from one another the claims of rival philosophical schools, given that it is not clear how we could even distinguish "this" (是*shi*, "it is," predication, affirmation of a position) from "that" (非*fei*, "it is not," negation of a predicate or position).[1] The problem is that words, propositions, assertions and negations—"X," "This is (not) X," "This is (not) an X"—have no fixed meaning: "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)

Here it seems we are left in an ambivalent state with regard to the possibility of (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"). Hansen takes *Dao* as a "discourse" that guides human actions; he sees Zhuangzi as having many discourse-*dao*s 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 *pei*-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*]. *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 *dao*s and language are underlined again. (46)

This view of *dao*(s) is of course also not that of the primitive Daoism of Shen *Dao*, 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 *shi*ing in the conventional, shared, therefore useful and

understandable ways." Such a reading would seem to fit the various aspects of Zhuangzi's

playfulness. Yet Hansen (48) also acknowledges Zhuangzi's claim—a seemingly "serious"

if not also "mystical" one—that "[Conformist *shi*ing[2]] 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*."

Hansen's reading of the *Qi Wu Lun* is persuasive, especially given the very Daoist

proviso that (as he says) this reading implies that the "opposite" (Confucianist or mystical

monist) reading is equally defensible, that no reading needs any "defense."[3] Still we must

wonder: are we taking *dao* here strictly as action-guiding discourse, and/or as that which

"mimics" ("plays along with" or even "parodies") such discourse and thus itself becomes a

sort of meta-action-guiding discourse, and/or as something a bit more unfathomable ("*dao*

is that of which we do not know . . ."), a sort of epistemological if not also ontological gap,

suspension, conundrum or paradox? Furthermore, does the second (mimetic) sense,

inasmuch as it lacks its own "essence," perhaps become a case of the third? But consider

Hansen's comment (47) on the "peeps of baby birds" passage cited above, whose last

phrase I quote again in his translation:

> "If you think that saying is different from the twitter of fledglings, can you prove a
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> distinction or is there no distinction?" Language seems to have a certain "aboutness."
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> Zhuangzi suggests that if nothing can "fix" what language is about, then there is no
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> reason to distinguish it from any other sounds in nature. . . . If that relation [of
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> language to reality] constantly changes, how are we to explain the difference between
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> language and sounds? . . . all such ways of speaking are equally natural. All are part of
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> the sound of nature. . . . Our judgments . . . are noises made in a context and from a

perspective framed by systems of judgment . . . . None is privileged or absolute. . . . all

judgments are possible from some particular perspective.

It now seems that Zhuangzi's relativistic *shi*-ing, as mere natural "noise," might not be an

action-guiding discourse at all—though perhaps it could still, on this view, be a sort of parody

of such a discourse (as a barking dog might seem to mock, or someone barking like a dog

might really mock, a speech by the President)—and indeed that it might not even be anything

we would normally think of as a rational, coherent, communicable "judgment"; the blur of "all

possible judgments" from any given perspective might in fact be indistinguish- able from the

"sound(s) of nature." If logical, epistemological and metaphysical claims on the purely

"linguistic" level may result in ethical action on the pragmatic level (*dao* as action-guiding

discourse), these same claims (as mere sounds in a language system enclosed within a wider

"sonic field," within an encompassing physical universe) may also "decay" into noise or (from

the rational human perspective) nonsense.

"Words are not just wind" is, after all, not a randomly chosen image; it further develops

the extended metaphor which opens the *Qi Wu Lun*: "The Great Clod (*da kuai*, Earth or *Dao*)

belches out breath and its name is wind," a wind/breath which plays the "pipes" of nature's

"holes."[4] It seems to me that we might simply begin from a picture or model of Zhuangzi's

Dao/*dao*s as the "background noise" of an encompassing nature, without falling into mystical

monism (or Confucian authoritarianism) but rather maintaining the crucial *ambivalence* of a *Dao* that is both linguistic (possessing human meaning) and supra-linguistic. The various levels of human "meaning" that emerge out of this background—natural sounds, nonsensical human sounds, the chaotic mixture or "babel" of rational human statements (can we clearly distinguish these three?), individually discriminated rational statements, the beliefs and (individual- or socially-guiding) actions incurred by these statements—could then be taken as so many kinds (perhaps stages) of manifestation from or refinement of this background. Here then I would like to suggest a reading of Zhuangzi's *Dao* in the *Qi Wu Lun* which takes *Dao* as the background noise that stands "behind" all human language/meaning, or "between" its specifications—like static behind and between the tuned-in radio stations—as its/their field of potential emergence. In beginning from this *pre-linguistic* field of *Dao* we are beginning at the extreme limit of language, on the margin between language and non-language, in an undifferentiated field that includes all human and man-made (e.g. traffic) sounds/noises as well as all the sounds/noises of nature (animals, wind, sea)— that is, all "sound-*dao*s" or "noise-*dao*s."[5]

Certain elements of Michel Serres' elaboration of physical chaos theory (or non-linear dynamics) which seem to support this interpretation of the *Dao* will also be brought into play. The chaos theory model is very roughly this: all "bodies" (systems, orders, things) self-order through random repetition out of chaotic atomic flows and finally decay back again into these

flows; we can equally well "read" it the other way around, beginning with the flow from order to disorder and ending with the re-ordering" flow.[6] What at first may seem to be a cycle is perhaps more accurately seen as a sort of *Gestalt*-switch between two "virtually equivalent" flows or directions of change.[7] Thus all orders are in effect temporary orders of disorder and *vice versa*; again the sense of virtuality (virtual equivalence), the *Gestalt*-switch. On the first, purely physical level, this chaos-theory model then suggests Dao as a disorder which self-orders (into bodies/systems) and then decays or dissipates into disorder, where we could as well begin with the hyper-ordered Dao as with the chaotic Dao. This self- ordering or self-organizing works through the repetition or duplication of parts/elements to form, say, a physical universe which would then decay back into non-similar, non-duplicated, non-repeating particles.[8] But why does the hyper-ordered state (*Dao*) then begin to decay? Chaos theory speaks of a kind of saturation point at which "terminal equilibrium" is reached; at this point, in effect, thus must be a move back toward increasing randomness and non-repetition in order for future (re)ordering to be possible. We can also see the terminal state of excessive repetition (redundancy) as *Gestalt*-switching back to the initial state of randomness and disorder; that is, excessive order is already disorder.[9]

There are obvious ambiguities or paradoxes with this view of a physical *Dao*-universe. For instance, the chaotic background-Dao would seem to be "differentiated" (as non-repeating particles or flows) in comparison to the "undif- ferentiated" ordering-through-repetition or

duplication of elements/bodies; yet in another sense it is ordered bodies which are differentiated (in their homogeneous logical structures) over against the undifferentiated "continuum" (perhaps Lao-tzu's *Dao* as "uncarved block") of the background. A similar, or converse, dilemma will appear when we try to analyze the structure of hyper-order, pure repetition/redundancy: it looks like an undifferentiated continuum, A=A=A, yet the logical tautology A=A depends on there being at least two A's that are minimally differentiated. And indeed at least one of the two "limit-states," background-disorder or hyper-order, would apparently need to be "paradoxical" in this way in order for the reversal or switch to occur. Here of course we are also left wondering: is the move toward progressive self-ordering of the background a move toward increasing differentiation and/or non-differentiation?

But here I am proposing to interpret Dao as "background noise," as "pre- linguistic" and thus also "linguistic" (or "discursive"). The move from the purely physical level of chaos theory to this linguistic/discursive level, which is of course suggested primarily by Zhuangzi's own text, hardly removes the basic ambiguities or paradoxes but may at least help to "clarify" them. Two aspects of Serres' development of chaos theory seem especially relevant to the background- noise reading of *Dao*. First, Serres suggests in *Genesis* that all human sounds/meanings/languages can be seen, from a certain very "detached" perspective, as having been tuned-in out of the wider natural (and ultimately cosmic) background noise, back into which they inevitably decay or merge (in a presumably continuing cycle); that is, once we

place language and even logic within the wider domain of chaos theory/non-linear dynamics, "chaos" also means nonsense or "noise." Secondly, Serres claims (as in *The Parasite*) that the state of hyper-order or redundancy reached by self-ordering bodies (systems) is the noise/nonsense of formal-logical tautology, of the "A=A" alluded to above— and the mention of formal logic implied that we were already within a linguistic- discursive context—which in fact "tells us nothing we did not already know."[10]

In *The Parasite* Serres develops this notion in relation to information (or communication) theory. The key idea is that a too-efficient communication between two parties (A and B) becomes redundant (A=A=A . . .); thus any two-way "signal" needs a certain amount of background noise to interrupt it, thereby preventing it from reaching the terminal state of "information death."[11] We may also see this noise as the "spacing" (as with radio static between stations) between meaning elements or bits of information, a spacing which would allow for instance the possibly noisy/nonsensical "Whattimeisit?" to become the much clearer "What time is it?" But now another seeming ambiguity (paradox) arises: noise is needed to interrupt a two-way "signal" lest it become hyper-ordered or noisy *in another way/sense*. On the one hand we can see this interrupting noise as the chaotic background which still (virtually) "grounds" the movement toward progressive ordering or *clarifying* of the signal—for too much noise in the background, like "static" when you are talking on the telephone, will of course make communication impossible. On the other hand we can see it as marking the

beginning of the reversal from the state of hyper-ordered noise (called by Serres "blank chaos")

in *Genesis* back to the state of disorderly noise ("dark chaos"). But inasmuch as Serres sees

this reversal from blank to dark chaos as a necessary "renewal" or "regeneration" of what

otherwise becomes the indefinitely suspended state (terminal equilibrium) of that "other" noise,

the nonsensical redundancy of hyper-order, there do really seem to be two different kinds of

noise here, the "blank" noise of terminal equilibrium and the "dark" noise which (hopefully)

"kick-starts" this equilibrium, so that "order" can regenerate itself. Still, a reading in the light

of pervasive virtuality may once again be possible: the opposite directions of flow (and thus

the two noises) may still be virtually equivalent, or to put it in other words, the 妙

miao-subtlety and 徼 *jiao*-manifestation may be "the same but come out with different names"

(*tong chu er yi ming*, *Laozi* 1).[12]

Here then I want to develop this notion of background-*Dao* (as a way of approaching the

Qi Wu Lun) in three steps. First I will briefly review what should already seem an obvious

quality of Zhuangzi's *Dao*, one it shares with Laozi's: this *Dao* emerges or refines itself into

progressively ordered stages (levels) of language or rationality but with a constant sense of

"nostalgia," a sense that it wants to "return" to the initial, undifferentiated state, is perhaps

(always) already returning to it. Secondly I will suggest a reading of two of the *Qi Wu Lun*'s

rhetorical strategies, the infinitely recursive sentence ("There is a not yet beginning to be a not

yet beginning to be a beginning . . .") and the "rhetorical" question which is simultaneously an

"unanswerable" one ("do they really say something?" ". . . is there any difference . . . ?"),

taking these as forms of hyper-order, redundancy, blank chaos. That is, already at *Dao*'s

extreme limit of manifestation these rhetorical structures will tend to revert back or open into

the underlying "equilibrium" of background noise/*Dao*. Finally, I will conclude by looking at

Dao's "doubleness" or "virtuality" as a function of its 隱 *yin* "dependency" or

"withdrawnness": this pattern of "virtuality" also fits the relationship between noise and

emergent sound/meaning. Thus I will interpret Zhuangzi's parable of the "withdrawnness" of

the deeper ground of "big saying"[13] ("indefinite discourse," now read as "background noise")

in relation to the praxis of questioning and of *wu yong zhi wei yong*, "useful uselessness."

Dao's Negative Development and the Problem of Reversion[14]

I am then in effect suggesting that we look at Zhuangzi's *qi*-equal (or *qi*-even) of the

Qi Wu Lun—"Discourse on Making Things Equal" or "Discourse on Evening Things

Out"—in the light (or darkness) of background noise. The character *qi* (齊) depicts "stalks

of grain in a field," thus "even, orderly, neat, together, complete" (Harbaugh 362); Wieger[15]

defines it as "whole, regular and perfect, harmony" and explains: "The idea comes from the

even height of ears in a cornfield. There is, in this character, an intention of representing the

perspective. The [lower of the two horizontal strokes near the bottom of the character]

represents the fore-ground; the upper stroke represents the back-ground. The ears are

ascending when going towards the back-ground" (339). I assume this simply embodies the

natural fact that when we look at a flat (even or equal in height) cornfield from the "normal

perspective" the part further from us appears to be "higher." Of course, this does not mean

that the "plane" or "smooth surface" of original *Dao* (we think too of Laozi's "uncarved

block"), in being *qi*-"level," possesses an actual doubleness; it might however suggest a sort

of "virtual" doubleness. After all, we not only want to avoid absolute monism (or any sort of

absolute); we also want to emphasize background *Dao*'s pre-linguistic nature as a

linguistic/non-linguistic (or supra-linguistic) "betweenness." And if we take this as a

dynamic betweenness (or "suspension") then we cannot be sure whether we are moving

toward greater linguisticality (rationality, order) or greater non-linguisticality

(non-rationality, disorder).

The notion that *qi*-evenness/equality itself already involves a certain "virtual" duality

or interplay of foreground/background, perhaps even of image/ground as in *Gestalt*

psychology, is useful when we ponder Zhuangzi's claim in Chapter 27, *Yu Yan*, "Fables"[16]:

"If you refrain from saying, everything is even; the even is uneven with the saying, saying is

uneven with the even. [*bu yan ze qi, qi yu yan bu qi*]" (Graham 107). "Saying" (*yan*, speech,

language) is itself what disturbs the smooth field or surface (Laozi's uncarved block) of *Dao*,

now seen as a kind of pre-linguistic (or potentially-linguistic, emerging-linguistic) but not

supra-linguistic background. But we may find the second statement a bit more disorienting, feel it comes at us from an unexpected "perspective": "saying and the *qi*-even are not *qi*-even with one another." This implies that we would need another level or dimension of *qi*-evenness (equality)—its "background perspective" perhaps[17]—by which to "measure" or "model" (則*ze*) the relation (difference) between *yan*-saying and *qi*-evenness.

The conclusion from these two statements—"In saying he says nothing" [*gu yue wu yan*]—is also striking. I interpret it thus: because it breaks or ruptures the surface of the even (is uneven with the even), saying says nothing; that is, it can only "say" when it is (even with) the even, with the (its own) background. But the mystical monist view will assume this means a (retreat into) absolute Silence (Being as Silence, as expressed by Silence); taking *Dao* as Background Noise may be a way of preserving Hansen's linguisticality and multiplicity of *Dao* (*dao*s) while still remaining within what would seem a fundamentally meta*physical* (if not quite ontological) view of things. This "in saying he says nothing" already implies *Dao*'s "negative development"— assuming, that is, that we want being rather than nothing, that we want to say something. If we assume that Zhuangzi values "saying nothing," as of course he does in another sense—in the phrase's *Gestalt*-switched or "virtual-other" sense—then we are perhaps already moving "back" into the background, moving in the other direction.

When Laozi speaks of the cultural-historical need to "return to the root" or "return to

the origin"—to the *Dao* as pristine "uncarved block"—he is envisioning a return to the

harmony of a simpler society. He seems to see the marking of the block's smooth surface by

the differentiations of rational thinking, of *zhi*-knowing and *wei*-acting, as part of a wider

"defacing," a more totalized socio-cultural-historical decline away from that state of "pure

mind" which is also the initial state of the *tian xia*, heaven-under, "world." Zhuangzi also

seems "nostalgic" for an original (or at least "more original") *Dao*:

> 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 [封 *feng*] among them. Those at the next stage thought
>
> there were boundaries but recognized no right and wrong [是非 *shi fei*] Graham:
>
> "That's it, that's not"]. Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured [虧
>
> *kui*, lost, lacking, deficient] . . .[18]   (Watson 36-37)

Here we move from the originary stage or state of Nothing—no things, perhaps even

no-thought—to the state of a pure (dis)continuous "Thing" (there were things but no

feng-boundaries between them[19]), and from here to a state of separate "Things" (or perhaps

one continuously divisible Thing). But it is only in the next stage, where logical *shi-fei*

oppositions appear, that *Dao* becomes *kui* (hurt, deficient, lost)—as in another story *Hun-dun* (Chaos) is hurt and so dies when the ("logical") openings are cut in him.[20] Does this mean that "language" only begins after the discrimination of things, with this level of logical (*shi/fei*) cutting; is the level of "mere things" perhaps pre-linguistic in the sense I have already suggested, as a sort of "noise"? Zhuangzi also asks, immediately following his question as to whether we can distinguish *yan*-"words" from the *kou-yin*, "peeps of baby birds": "What is *Dao* hidden *(*隱 *yin*, darkened, hurt) by, that we have true and false (真僞 *zhen/wei*), what is Saying (言 *yan*, words) hidden by that we have *shi/fei*?" We will perhaps most naturally read this *yan*-Saying as being equivalent to *Dao*, so that both questions are being asked about the same (undiscriminated) "thing": this clearly supports the notion that *Dao*-Saying is pre-linguistic, where "fully" linguistic means embodying *zhen/wei* and *shi/fei* distinctions. We could also see here two stages in *Dao*'s "development," a stage of *zhen/wei* differentiation (resulting in Saying) followed by one of *shi/fei* differentiation; then we might still take primordial ("smooth") *Dao* as pre-linguistic, call Saying "linguistic" and the *zhen/wei* distinguished state "logical." But it seems simpler to just take *Dao* as Saying here, distinguishing only between a pre-linguistic ("saying" but not "logic") and fully linguistic ("logical") state.

Similarly we have, in another passage: "The Way has never known boundaries (未始有 封 *wei shi you feng,* not yet begun to have boundaries), Saying (*yan*, words) has no

constancy (未始有常 *wei shi you chang*)." Again, while one might be tempted to take the Way and Saying as two different things, or Saying as a later developmental stage of the Way—especially given the ostensibly negative connotations of "inconstancy"—it seems easier to identify, as before, Way with Saying here, taking this unbounded or undifferentiated Saying as a pre-linguistic background. The fact that Saying is not simply inconstant but rather "not yet constant" implies after all that it is not the final stage; this "not yet constant" could suggest lack of temporal boundaries, just as "not yet *feng*" suggests lack of spatial ones. *Dao* as background noise would then be inconstant precisely because it is a preliminary (pre-linguistic, pre-logical) stage out of which the later, more rationalized (linguistic) stages are about to emerge; in a certain sense of the term background *Dao* is "emergent," the radio stations are potentially or virtually present within the static even if not yet actually tuned in. We also get support for this sort of "emergent" model from the original sense of *feng*-boundaries as a "sealing up of openings": rather than a continuous Thing which is free to keep "extending itself outward" we could picture this *Dao* as an open-and-closed mixture (economy, text, language) which can't be made "continuous" and "determinate" as either something open (void, Nothing, Silence) or closed (Something). And there is no reason after all to distinguish *Dao*'s non-fixity of meaning (semantic indeterminacy) from either its spatial indeterminacy (not-yet-boundedness, the not-yet is already temporal) or its temporal indeterminacy (inconstancy, impermanence).[21]

This *Dao* then I see as being already *yan*-Saying but in an ambivalently pre-linguistic sense, meaning *Dao* is already not silence but also not yet a full-fledged "rational discourse"; it is the noise (the *chui*, wind and *kou-yin*, peeps of baby birds) out of which "language" or "meaningful sounds" emerge. Zhuangzi's uncarved surface or field of undifferentiated language—"pure language" before it gets *bian*-discriminated into self-opposed meanings (this/that, true/false, right/wrong)—is not the absolutely undifferentiated, "smooth surface" of silence but rather the pre-differentiated, slightly "rough"[22] background noise that precedes language in the more proper sense. But the aspect of Serres' thought which particularly interests me here is, again, the notion that super-ordered structures become redundant, just as formal logic is grounded in tautologies (A=A) which "tell us nothing new"—or in effect "tell us nothing," the highest level of the truth that "by saying we say nothing"—and are thus redundant. I am suggesting that Zhuangzi sees the this/that, true/false, right/wrong distinctions which "hurt" *Dao*—or *kui*-lose or *yin*-hide *Dao* by "defacing," obscuring the initial pristine purity of *Dao*'s surface—as moving (negatively developing) *Dao* toward an extreme limit of hyper-rational redundancy; but on Serres' model this "limit" or saturation point, at which meaning has become nonsense, in effect reverts back to or virtually becomes (as in a sort of *Gestalt*-switch) the dark chaos of initial disorder. Yet if we try to read this negative development of *Dao* in Serresian terms we are left with the obvious question: where do we

this "reversion" at work, how does it work, in the *Qi Wu Lun*?

Rather than begin with actual cases of hyper-ordered or blankly chaotic discourse—I will offer two examples in the following section—it seems best to first briefly address the question of how this reversion from blank to dark chaos works. We might see it as the function of *tong*-interchange, which means in effect focusing on the ambivalence (equivocity) of the *qi*-even itself, or of that "one" into which the Way "makes all things":

> . . . the Way makes them all into one (道通唯一 *Dao tong wei yi*; Graham: "the Way interchanges them and deems them one"). Their dividedness is their completeness [*qi fen ye, cheng ye*; Graham: "their dividing is formation"]; their completeness is their impairment [*qi cheng yeh, hui yeh*; Graham: "their formation is dissolution"]. No thing is either complete or impaired, but all are made into one again [*fan wu wu cheng yu hui, fu tong wei yi*; Graham: "all things whether forming or dissolving in reverting interchange and are deemed to be one]. Only the man who sees right through [知通 *zhi tong*] knows how to interchange [*tong*] and deem them one; *shi* ["That's it"] he does not use, but [寓 *yu*] finds for them lodging-places in the usual. The 'usual' is the usable [庸也者,用也 *yong ye zhe, yong ye*], the usable is the interchangeable [用也者, 通也 *yong ye zhe, tong ye*] . . .
>
> (Watson 36, Graham 53-54)

Here the crucial character is *tong* 通 "communication," "passable" (Watson) or "interchangeable" (Graham).[23] We can take it in both a "horizontal" and a "vertical" sense. In the horizontal sense the sage tong-interchanges things/meanings/discourses by finding for them "lodging-places in the usual" (Graham). This pragmatic strategy (庸 *yong*, "usual" is a modification of 用*yong*, "useful") of *yu*, finding temporary places

(ostensibly "fixed" meanings) for all words/discourses, is really that strategy of "miming" or "temporarily playing along with" *shi*-discriminating that Hansen refers to. It may also have a close connection to what is called at the opening of Chapter 27 (Yu Yen, "Metaphor") *zhi yan*, "spillover saying": this z*hi* is "a kind of vessel designed to tip and right itself when filled too near the brim," and *zhi yan* is "new every day, smooth it out on the whetstone of Heaven [天倪 *tian ni*]" (Graham 106-107). Graham interprets this as "a fluid language which keeps its equilibrium through changing meanings and viewpoints," so that he who uses it, and/or this "discursive practice" itself, may just as easily adopt one's/it's "opponent's" position as one's/it's own (107)—after all, *it* will all be smoothed out on the surface of *Dao*.

But if we take this pragmatic *yu*-miming of "normal," logically discriminating *shi*-discourse as a sort of interim position between background *Dao* (dark chaos) and *Dao*'s own hyper-ordering (blank chaos), then perhaps this "man who sees right through" [*zhi tong*,

知通, "knows passing through," "knows right through"[24]] sees, while pragmatically miming

shi-discourse, that ultimately this discourse becomes blankly chaotic and thus reverts to its

darkly chaotic background. We now have a vertical sense of *tong*-interchange: in its

limit-state of hyper-redundancy and information death, *Dao*/discourse, as "logical" oneness,

reverts to (its background in) "indefinite" oneness. That is, the sage *wei*-"sees" this wider or

more grounding oneness and so tong-"makes" this reversal/interchange, but we can also say

it is *Dao* itself that sees this and performs this way: *Dao tong wei yi*, "*Dao* interchanges all

things/meanings and deems them one," where this "one" is the indefinite or unlimited one

of the darkly-chaotic background. Thus the sage's (and/or *Dao*'s) discursive praxis would be

to adopt or *yu*-mime *yong*-everyday discourse, acting *as if* the world were made of rational

distinctions while in fact "deeming all things one" in (or against the background of) *Dao*.

Zhuangzi's claim that "The 'That's it' [*shi*-ing] . . . comes to an end; and when it is at an end,

that of which you do not know what is so of it you call the 'Way'" (Graham 54) could also

imply the reversal from end to beginning: now that *shi*-ing has "come to an end" (A=A=A)

in the limit-state of terminal equilibrium, we enter a blank chaos which reverts (has already

reverted) to background *Dao*.

In Serresian terms we might also take this as a form of virtuality: *zhi tong*

(seeing-through, knowing-through) sees a *virtual* oneness—a "temporary order of

chaos"—at the highest level of (redundant) order, the level of blank chaos which is already

in effect a reversion or switch back to dark chaos. *Yu* as "metaphor" already suggests such a

virtuality, in the sense of momentary configurations, as in figurative language, or

attunements of static/background noise (see note 5). But perhaps we would need to see this

qi-evenness of "saying," once it has become smoothed out on/against the dark-chaotic

discursive background, as a certain sort of "roughness" in relation to the "absolute"

qi-evenness of hyper-ordered discourse. The latter becomes for Serres (as a state of

maximally efficient communication between A and B) "information death" and settles into

"terminal equilibrium," because a certain degree of noise is needed for any information

(rather than the blank A=A=A) to actually be communicated.[25] The "roughness" of a

qi-even background *Dao* into which blank chaos has reverted suggests the possibility of

actual meaning rather than the death or "burning out" of meaning. This roughness also fits

the etymological sense of *qi*-even as (already) a kind of doubleness (the figure-ground

doubleness of "perspective"); it fits our sense of the initial wholeness of *Dao* as

indeterminate yet continuous thing, Hun Dun before holes were cut in him[26], a "thing

confusedly formed" (*wu hun cheng*, Laozi 25), a "great clod (*da kuai*) that belches out

breath" (*Zhuangzi* 2). It also allows us another reading—taking background *Dao* as already

discursive, already the possibility of saying—of "saying is uneven (*wu qi*) with *qi*."

    This indeterminate or "rough" background *Dao* in a certain sense would itself mediate

between silence and blank chaos. Its spontaneous and chaotic speech/discourse

simultaneously points back toward silence (not-saying) and forward toward the redundant

"speech" of hyper-rationality, which has already entered the terminal equilibrium of

information death and so perhaps another form of silence. Thus again: "if you refrain from

saying, everything is *qi*-even; . . . saying is uneven (*wu qi*) with *qi*; . . . 'in saying he says

nothing.'" Hyper-ordered sound/speech approaches a sort of virtual silence (blankness of

meaning), and background *Dao* mediates "in both directions" between silence and noise: on

one side the blank redundancy of hyper-rationality *fan*-reverts or *tong*-interchanges into

background noise; on the other side background *Dao* itself can, as noise, only be defined

against the background of a deeper ("darker") silence.

Embedment, Recursion, Rhetoricity, Redundancy

Immediately after this "man who sees right through" passage Zhuangzi mentions the

problem of those who "wear out [their] brain trying to make things into one [*wei yi*] without

realizing that they are all the same" (Watson 36). The move toward hyper-order is precisely

a move toward "making things into one" through logical thinking or analysis, that is,

through *shi*-division. Yet this drive toward making things one again reverts, once it has

reached the extreme limit of logical division, to the background *Dao*: "The 'That's it' . . .

comes to an end; and when it is at an end, that of which you do not know what is so of it

you call the 'Way.'" To say "all are one" (*yi*) is after all not quite the same as saying "all are the same" (同 *tong*[27]): the latter suggests an originally heterogeneous mixture now "homogenized," not a logical-mathematical unity or identity; logical "oneness" suggests the unity reached by first cutting holes (as in the story of Hun Dun) and not the initial wholeness of a (*Dao* as) indeterminate yet continuous thing, a "thing confusedly formed" (*wu hun cheng*, Laozi 25), a "great clod that belches out breath" (*da kuai yi qi, Zhuangzi* 2), something slightly *rough*.

It is really this drive toward "making things one" that leads to certain sorts of hyper-ordered discourses, or discursive structures, in the *Qi Wu Lun*. Information theory posits, as we have seen, that without a certain degree of interruption by (background) static or noise the hyper-efficient communication between A and B becomes the information death of tautological redundancy; A=A now in effect becomes A=A=A, and we settle into a terminal equilibrium state unless the interruption of noise allows us to "kick-start," that is, to "revert." Indeed the most obvious form of blankly-chaotic discourse in Zhuangzi's second chapter may be that of an indefinitely recursive syntactic structure that leads to a logical, epistemological, metaphysical conundrum. Such "uspension," resulting from the lack of any interruption, in an infinite regress is just what we have in the speculation on "beginnings," itself an attempt (or at least "mimed" or "feigned" attempt, *yu*-"figurative" attempt) to achieve metaphysical certainty and totality, and in this sense to "*wei yi*":

There is a beginning (*shi*, 始). There is a not yet beginning (*wei shi*, 未始) to be a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is being (*yu*, 有). There is nonbeing (*wu*, 無, nothing). There is a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. Suddenly there is being and non-being. But between this being and non-being, I don't really know which is being and which is nonbeing. Now I have just said something. But I don't know whether what I have said has really said something or whether it hasn't said something.　　(Watson 38)

We can picture this recursive pattern of "before the beginning" on a linear time-line (". . . before X before Y before . . .") but also within a spatial pattern; in the latter case we are looking at the beginning as either the "field" (background) of empty space or as an indeterminate "thing" (chaos, background).[28] In either case we clearly have the problem of an indefinite or infinite regress, one which could be compared with certain skeptical dilemmas in Western philosophy and set in relation, perhaps, to Kant's discussion of logical antinomies and Hegel's treatment of "bad infinity." But what especially strikes one here, what belongs more particularly to Zhuangzi's own *style*, is the self-reflexive structure of what might be called discursive or "rhetorical" embedment: "Now I have just said

something. But I don't know whether what I have said has really said something or whether

it hasn't said something." The speaker is self-conscious of himself as a speaker (*rhetor*), one

whose own speech can "say something," say its meaning. There are already at least three

epistemological-rhetorical levels—the speaker, the speech, what the speech "says"—with

the potential again for infinite (positive/negative) regress—what (the) speech says or does

not say can also say or not say something. Thus the structure "saying says" already

foregrounds language as a self-embedding or self-quoting system, a pattern of quoted

statements within wider quoted statements and so on indefinitely, and we might even have

the impression that the speaker is himself embedded within the "saying."[29]

This rhetorical embedment would need to be located in relation to the logical

embedment of the potentially infinite recursive series of a "not yet beginning to be a not yet

beginning to be a not yet . . . ," which leaves us *suspended* in a state of metaphysical

(spatio-temporal) indeterminacy. For this "saying" also has a certain temporal value, is itself

a sort of "beginning," or perhaps a "not-yet-beginning" (to *mean* rather than to *be*). Indeed

this semantic problem of beginning to-mean (rather than the metaphysical beginning-to-be)

is precisely what is foregrounded by our notion of *Dao* as background noise out of which

individual "meanings" emerge. This conception of background *Dao* also suggests that it will

be the discursive or rhetorical pattern of embedment that takes priority here,

encompassing or embedding the metaphysical pattern. But this indefinite suspension in

"terminal equilibrium" of the regress is abruptly interrupted by Zhuangzi: "Suddenly there is being and non-being. But between this being and non-being, I don't really know which is being and which is nonbeing." By directly foregrounding the bi-polar or "horizontal" indeterminacy of "being or not-being," by putting us "between" the *shi* and *fei*, Zhuangzi in a sense jumps back out of the terminal equilibrium of hyper-redundancy into the indeterminate *qi* (smooth-and-rough)-background from which it (negatively) emerged. Having now reached the end-point of *Dao*'s negative development, we might also see the whole regress of the "not-yet-beginning" as infinitely (or infinitesimally) "backing us up" toward such a background, one which we can in fact only "reach" by such a sudden leap out of the tautological-redundant chain "X before Y before . . ." into "mere" bi-polar indeterminacy.

That an overly-complex, self-embedded recursive structure essentially is (or reverts to) "nonsense" is perhaps even clearer in a passage from the "Questions of T'ang" in the *Liezi*, one also concerned with the problem of beginnings that might belong in the first chapter (on "relativity") of the *Zhuangzi*.[30] Here a certain Xia Ge claims: "There is no ultimate [*wu qi* 無極, no extreme limit] in the beginning or end of things . . . The beginning may be the end and the end may be the beginning. Who knows their order [紀, periodicity, record, narration]?" (Chan 312) Xia then goes on to tie the indeterminacy of these two extreme poles on a temporal continuum to the indeterminacy of the spatial limit (outer boundary) of

the universe:

> "As to what exists outside of things or before the beginning of events, I do not know. If there is nothing, then it is infinite [無則無極 *wu ze wu qi*; Graham: 'what is nothing is limitless']. If there is something , then there must be a limit [有則有盡 *yu ze yu jin*; 'what is something is limited'] . . . But beyond infinity there is no more infinity [無極之外復無無極 *wu qi zhi wai fu wu wu qi*] and within the unlimited there is no more unlimitedness [無盡之中復無無盡 *wu jin zhi zhong fu wu wu jin*].
>
> (Chan 312, Graham *Disputers* 80)

Here the indeterminacy of spatial limits, cast in terms of a potentially infinite movement inward paralleling the movement outward, is set beside the indeterminacy of temporal limits, that is, of beginning and end. May we then (as perhaps in a "Big Bang" cosmology) correlate "beginning" with (ultimate) interiority and "end" with exteriority—or might it go the other way as well? ("Who knows their order?" Perhaps it is also Einstein's question.) But the potential infinity of this movement inward and outward must be qualified. On the most standard reading of the passage (e.g. Graham in *Studies*) this is a logical dilemma of infinity: "outside (inside) the unlimited there can be no more unlimited," as there can only be one infinity; if there were two then the first would be limited, not infinite;

on the other hand if there is only one infinity then we may think it limited in another sense.

We could take it as a sort of Kantian antinomy of pure reason: reason pictures or thinks that

it pictures (here arises the problematics of reason and imagination in the Kantian sublime)

an "infinity" which must be one yet also cannot be "only" one. Hegel's discussion of "bad

infinity," arising in the context of that "negativity" which drives his dialectic, also comes to

mind here. In fact our own thinking about such a dilemma may go through a "forced

movement" that fluctuates between the thought of infinitude and that of finitude, as also

(correlatively) between the thought of exteriority and that of interiority. This becomes the

hyper-redundancy (nonsense) of an infinitely open-ended recursive series— "A or B or A or

B or A . . ."—which also has no clear "beginning" or "end."

To complicate matters, Liezi's key passage is interpreted in the reverse way by Wu and

Watson: "Beyond the unlimited another unlimited, within the inexhaustible another

inexhaustible."[31] This "version" in effect presents the same dilemma of infinity "the other

way around," the question now becoming: "How can infinity be a discontinuous series of

infinities rather than one continuous infinity?" Or does this rupture between two infinities

appear even with the Chan/Graham reading, since one infinity (a *wu qi*) is going "out" and

another (a *wu jin*) is going (or coming) "in"? In fact, whether we take it as one infinity or a

multiplicity (infinite number) of infinities going out and in, we will still have this break; it is

really created by our own location (as thinking subject) "here in the middle." That we have

in any case—as in the problem of whether "saying not-x" can itself "say something" in the "not-yet-beginning" dilemma of the *Qi Wu Lun*—a meta-level here of knowing, one which in a sense encompasses and indeed generates the embedded "logical" levels, is already clear from the passage's rhetorical frame, from Xia Ge's (apparently rhetorical) question, "Who knows the order . . . ?" That is, this "not-knowing the order" is already a kind of indeterminacy—not-knowing as an "unlimited"—on another level, and it is this limitation of human thinking which has created the "problem of infinity" in the first place, just as Kant's pure reason generates antinomies.

But if saying and knowing both "encompass" now the physical cosmos taken as an "indefinite thing," what is the relationship between saying and knowing themselves? Which encompasses the other? Since the outer "bound" must be a "boundlessness" and therefore a "not" (as in *non*-finitude, infinity), the question here becomes which is more likely: that we could "say but not yet know" or "know but not yet say?" The whole thrust of my "discursive" reading of Zhuangzi suggests the latter interpretation: the ultimate redundancy of a hyper-ordered discourse signals its reversion to indeterminate background-discourse. The grounding question with which we began, "What is *yen*-saying *yin*-hidden by that we have *shi* and *fei*?" implies after all only that the rational distinctions of knowing *carve up* the smooth surface of *Dao*/Saying, not that they *contain* it as might its own ultimate stage of self-development, its own excessive "saying." Coming back to our initial model of

background *Dao*, it seems that knowing is the mere negative development out of a primordial "pre-linguistic" *Dao*, a saying/non-saying or "noisy" *Dao*; but knowing is still a sort of interim state that is itself excessively ordered into that discursive "nonsense of excess" which then reverts to the dark-chaotic background not just of "unknowability" but of "unsayability."

Another form of redundancy that will "revert" in the *Qi Wu Lun* is seen in the "rhetoricity" of rhetorical questions. We remember the "bird-peeps" passage: "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) If we take these as unanswerable questions then we might say they put us into that zone of horizontal or bi-polar indeterminacy which saved us from the infinite regress; in this case the very undecidability is the heart of the "meaning" which we are after here, and which is a function of the primordial and underlying background "noise" of all discourse. But in the context of questioning there is a new and different problem: we could just as well take these as rhetorical questions, whose answer ("No, they don't say anything" and "No, there is no difference") is presupposed by the author, so that the question itself becomes a redundancy. But this particular manifestation of blank chaos reverts to the dark-chaotic background when we read these questions the other way, as open-ended and indeterminate. Such a

horizontal open-endedness, again, would need to be distinguished from the "linear-temporal" open-endedness of the infinite regress, as too from the horizontal redundancy ("Yes" is "yes" is "yes" . . .) of a text which theoretically might become nothing but rhetorical questions, a single rhetorical question, it's total "meaning" reduced to a single "yes" (or "no").[32]

The actual problem in the text of the *Qi Wu Lun*, of course, is that Zhuangzi's many stylistic and emphatic "questions-to-the-reader" tend to be equivocally or undecidably (indeterminately) rhetorical (predetermined) and unanswerable (indeterminate), suggesting another sort of regress and another possible form of reversion. Reading the questions one way we move in one direction, toward hyper-order and redundancy, reading them the other way we move in the other direction, back into the (*qi*-rough) "equilibrium" of background *Dao*. Yet the undecidability of "how to read them" arguably points us back toward, moves us back into the background. It may be useful to briefly contrast this ambivalence or impasse (*aporia*) of redundancy versus indeterminacy with the "arbitrarily assigned answerability" of initially undecidable (unanswerable) questions presented in the parable of the "sacred turtle" in chapter 26, *Wai Wu*, "External Things." 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.'" (Watson 136)

The bitter irony here is that the king's diviners are exercising a totally arbitrary power in "reading" all the cracks—which appear when indentations drilled in the shell are burned—as meaning either "yes" or "no," but in any case as being the "correct answer" to questions they themselves had asked. These randomly-appearing cracks are in fact the closest we could wish to come to the pure "noise" of nature, a deeper level of "dark chaos" than we have seen (or rather heard) even with the "peeps of baby birds" or the cricket-and-frog chorus of a summer's night—and yet precisely for this reason they are used by diviners to "know the truth." Such divination in fact seeks out the deepest level of noise as the source of truth and applies to it the greatest arbitrariness of interpretation.[33] This arbitrariness hides or depends upon a pure randomness, the basis of its violence. Serres also speaks (in *The Parasite*) of the potential violence, used for authoritarian control, of blank-chaotic super-"order" and its maximally-efficient "communication," whose mere redundancy here appears in the form of a pre-determined "dialogue" between A and B: "Is . . . ?" "Yes." / "Is . . . ?" "No."

We have "holes" of another kind right at the beginning of the *Qi Wu Lun*, and they are read by Wu Kuang-Ming specifically as "questions," or in the light/darkness of "questioning." These are the earth's caves in the "Piping of Heaven and Earth" passage:

Tzu-ch'i said, "The Great Clod (*da kuei*) belches out breath and its name is wind. So long as it doesn't come forth, nothing happens. But when it does, then ten thousand hollows begin crying wildly. Can't you hear them . . . ? . . . [T]here are huge trees . . . with hollows and openings . . . . They roar like waves . . . ."

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?"

Tzu-ch'I said, "Blowing on the ten thousand things in a different way, so that each can be itself—all take what they want for themselves, but who does the sounding?" (Watson 31-32)

Watson (32) in his note: "Heaven is not something distinct from earth and man, but a name applied to the natural and spontaneous functioning of the two." Graham (49): "[This] parable . . . compares the conflicting utterances of philosophers to the different notes blown by the same breath . . . ; don't try to decide between their opinions, listen to Heaven who breathes through them." If we take this Heaven as background *Dao* then it simply means all men "make sounds" when they speak, they have this much in common. But this "sound" is actually nothing but the holes/wind relationship (duality, virtuality) emphasized by Wu (187): "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 . . . with something like the wind."

While Wu might be moving here very subtly toward a sort of Heideggerian view, taking the "question of Being" as that which (like the piping of Heaven) "opens" Being into the ontological difference, this notion of question-filled-by-answer is also interesting when, as "communication" or "dialogue," we try to see it from a Serresian perspective. This takes us back to the problem of redundancy: if the questions can too easily be answered—if in the limit-case they are rhetorical questions—then we are reduced to the nonsense of blank chaos, which reverts to the dark-chaotic background, the "evening out" of sound as mere noise; if on the other hand they are (as we may well expect) "unanswerable"—lacking any clear criterion by which we might answer them, since any such criterion may lead to an infinite regress of meta-languages—then it seems that have perhaps not left this background in the first place. But here we are foregrounding not the heaven-earth difference but the wind-holes (answer-question) difference; or does wind correlate with heaven and holes with earth? If we look specifically at the heaven-earth difference here then we might say the pattern of redundancy "equates" heaven-earth (the "maximum communica- tion" of A = A = A . . .) while that of indeterminacy emphasizes their difference, the space between them. (In *Laozi* 6 *Dao* is the "*tian-di zhi jian*," heaven-earth betweenness"; the Greek *xaos*, chaos in fact originally means "gap" or "gaping mouth.")[34]

Dao and *Yin* 隱 - "Virtuality"

The line translated by Graham as "By what is the Way hidden by, that there should be a genuine or a false?" is rendered by Watson, "What does the Way rely upon, that we have true and false?" That is, Watson reads the *yin*[35] here as "rely" and notes (34): "Following the interpretation of Chang Ping-lin. The older interpretation of *yin* here and in the following sentences is, 'What is the Way hidden by,' etc." The more immediate sense of *yin* is indeed "hide," "cover," "obscure" (as verb and adjective), which already suggests a doubleness, a kind of "virtual" relationship between two surfaces, one of which covers and shades the other so that the latter is the cover's "shadow." It is not too great a leap to think of the "shadow" as "depending on" the body that shadows it, which is indeed the very figure that introduces the *hu die meng*, butterfly dream at the end of the *Qi Wu Lun*:

Penumbra said to Shadow, "A little while ago you were walking and now you're standing still; a little while ago you were sitting and now you're standing up. Why this lack of independent action? [*he qi wu te cao*, Graham 61: 'Why don't you make up your mind to do one thing or the other?']"[36]

Shadow said, "Do I have to wait for something before I can be like this? [*Wu you dai er ran zhe ye*? Graham: 'Is it that there is something on which I depend to be so?'] Does what I wait for also have to wait for something before it can be like this? [Graham: 'And does what I depend on too depend on something else to be so?']"

Watson here assumes the standard meaning of *dai* ("wait") while Graham shifts to "depend on."[37] The point is that in both of these passages—the *yin* passage and the *dai* passage—we have a sense of doubleness, a sense that the shadow-like background "relies on" its model or ground precisely because it is yin-darkened or yin-hidden by it. This raises the problem of the ambivalence of background *Dao* itself: is this background the deepest and truest "ground," or is it rather the mere virtuality of *yin*-hiddenness as *yin*-dependence? We have been trying to suggest a model according to which a hyper-ordered and thus redundant *Dao*/discourse becomes a merely "virtual order" and thus reverts to the/its chaotic background. And yet the "interim" stage of *yong*-everyday discourse—a *yong*-useful discourse which performs the horizontal tong-interchange of *shi/fei*, "this" and "that," a *zhi yan*, spillover saying which pragmatically yu-mimes the "real" *shi*-ing—is already aware of its own "virtuality" in relation to what might have been a "real" *shi*-ing; it is only in taking itself too seriously as a "logic," a "truthful" form of demarcation or *shi*-ing, that it reaches the limit-stage of excessive redundancy where the chaotic background

appears as what is most "real" and, as mere virtual image or simulacrum of order, it must revert to the background. Or perhaps we could say the state of excessive order and "information death" is simply the self-consciously "virtual" spillover saying—the tong-interchanging, provisional and pragmatic everyday discourse—whose "form" as pure overflow is now objectified, formalized.

Redundancy is indeed a form of overflow—*redundare* means "overflow," the Latin root *undare* is related to "water"—as excessive "completeness" or "filling-in," as opposed to the very different "unlimitedness" of a *qi*-rough chaotic background filled with gaps or spaces. This is the contrast between the "porousness" (unevenness) of static on the radio and the evenness or solidity of a purely continuous sound ("Beeeee," A = A = A), that of a single station tuned-in or refined to the limit-point. But the overflowing of the smooth solidity of blank chaos is perhaps already its reversion to the "porous" background, whose spaces may suggest the "caves" or "holes" of the Piping passage but also the praxis of Cook Ting carving his ox:

"There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. 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. That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone."

(Watson 47)

The "spaces-between" can be used by the cook because his knife becomes small enough to fit into (or indeed create) them; the pragmatic skill or knack of everyday discourse means constant awareness of the all-pervasive, porous background *Dao*, into which we ourselves (our yen-words, discourses) will always easily "fit," as do the tuned-in stations once they are reabsorbed and thus disappear into background noise. The move back toward/into this background is a move toward/into greater space-between, perhaps into an "indefinitely wide" gap or space-between. (Chaos, Greek *xaiein* means originally "yawning gap," "abyss.") Yet as physics also tells us, everything is relative: if we ourselves become infinitely small the space surrounding us will become infinitely large. The praxis which arguably "contains" all other praxes in Zhuangzi is that of "big saying," a discourse which can become so infinitely or indefinitely "large" because the speaker himself knows he is already "within" it.[38] This big saying is interpreted by Zhuangzi *via* a parable which compares this too-wide or too deep (too-"abstract," "stretched-out") metaphysical discourse with the deep ground beneath our feet, now suddenly taken away:

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

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*]," said Hui Tzu.

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

It is only when the deeper ground is withdrawn, when it is absent that we see the "usefulness of the useless." We needed this ground-beneath-the-ground (grounding- or groundless-ground of a "too-indefinite" (unlimited) meta- physical discourse all along, to support the ground (discourse) we stand on; yet we did not know this for the deeper ground was always too far away, yin-hidden beneath our immediate ground. The more immediately "pragmatic" (as well as playful, paradoxical, ironic) point is that the vital usefulness of this underlying ground can only become clear to us once it is taken away, thus becoming truly "useless" since now we plunge to our deaths. A Heideggerian (and perhaps Wu-ian) reading will fit insofar as it can speak of *Urgrund*s, *Ungrund*s, *Abgrund*s (*Introduction to Metaphysics*) and groundless-grounds, and insofar as it will see the "question of being" as an open space, the space of "opening into Being" which thereby negates or undermines Being yet gives meaning to the very horizon of its possible meaning. But we can also look

at Wu's caves-as-questions interpretation of the Piping passage in terms of communication theory: the dialogue between A and B, which would potentially become blankly chaotic, gets interrupted by the "questioning" (putting-into-question) of the noisy background, now seen as the indefinitely "porous" surface of background noise; the emphasis on horizontality (gaps in a smooth surface) does after all not preclude a certain potential for vertical "disappearance"—of sound, meaning, logical demarcations.[39]

The excessive usefulness of *shi*-ing, which perhaps is allowed to emerge once *shi*-ing is taken too seriously, becomes the useless redundancy (useless usefulness, excessive ordering) of blank chaos; that noise (useful uselessness) which interrupts the too-efficient tong-interchange or tong-communication of meaning is the dark chaos into which blank chaos reverts or "falls." But the crucial point of communication (or information) theory is that the interruption of communication (of meaning) by noise is necessary in order for new meaning to emerge. The "biggest saying" (most abstract, boundless, indefinite "discourse") offers after all, like static on the radio, infinite potential (via all its possible tunings-in, fillings-in of its numerous gaps) for sounds/meanings to emerge. It might then seem that not to speak, not to say anything at all would be best—"If you refrain from saying, everything is *qi*-even"—insofar as silence is still more boundless than speech, encompasses speech. Yet what we really need is *qi*-roughness, for it will be difficult to interrupt and renew by remaining silent; silence is too extreme, too absolute; we need rather to hum[40], or perhaps

chirp like human birds.

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NOTES

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[1] Scholarly consensus "regards the thirty-three chapters of this text to be composite—the product of several if not

many hands" (Ames, *Wandering* 1) so there may be conflicting views on some of the key issues. But the traditional

division of the book into three sections by Kuo Hsiang (d. A.D. 312)—the first seven "inner," followed by fifteen

"outer" and eleven "miscellaneous" chapters—along with the assumption that a certain fourth century B.C.E. 莊子

Zhuangzi or 莊周 Zhuang Zhou, for whom the whole book is named (with whom it is associated), himself wrote at

least the first seven, seems not yet to have been irrevocably overthrown. I will assume this here. The only passages

which are not in *Zhuangzi* 1, 2 or 3 that I will be looking at in this paper are in 25, 26, 27, and are prominently featured

in Graham's own Chapter 8: "Passages related to the *Inner chapters*" (100-111); that is, I am assuming these *may* be

Zhuangzi's own reflections. I will discuss one passage from the *Liezi* which may belong in *Zhuangzi* 1, though this is

not certain (see note 30). When I refer to Zhuangzi I am thinking of the author; by (the) *Zhuangzi* I mean the book.

[2] Just 是 *shi* in the original text.

[3] It is above all for its "openness" that I revert to Hansen's early-1980's reading here; neither his (very similar) later

reading in *A Daoist Theory* (1992) nor various other interpretations of Zhuangzi in the past ten years can in my opinion

"surpass" this one. There seems to be a general tendency toward "positive" (and "ethical") readings; while the 1994

PEW essays by Kjellberg and Raphalls compare Zhuangzi's skepticism and relativism to those of Sextus Empiricus

and Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, focusing on the issue of what these terms actually *mean* in the Daoist text, Zhuangzi's

skepticism and relativism are more radically questioned, and/or redefined, by more recent studies. Thus for example

the articles in the 1996 *Essays* edited by Ivanhoe are essentially, in the words of Don Levi (reviewing it in *PEW* 49.4,

1999, p. 529), "promoting skepticism as therapy for a variety of problems . . . " (a position whose logical coherence Levi questions), and those in the 1998 *Wandering at Ease* edited by Ames tend to emphasize Zhuangzi's positive and pragmatic view of life, his concern with ethics in a broad sense (one that includes personhood, environment, ethos), his notion of "knowing" as something that presupposes a field wider than that of subject-object (or indeed of all dualisms), his stress on special knacks or skills for survival and long life (pragmatism again), his many forms of liberating or transformative humor. This "anti-negative-skeptical turn" is perhaps nothing new: Moeller's 1999 *PEW* essay on the butterfly dream, arguing that skeptical interpretations of the passage are deluded, returns to Guo Xiang's reading.

Although I (presumably like Hansen) have no problem with any of these views—how could I if "all is smoothed out on the whetstone of heaven" [he yi t'ian ni   和以天倪, Graham 106]?—I do tend to (perhaps naively) assume that the main thrust of many passages in the *Zhuangzi,* and certainly in the *Qi Wu Lun*, is something too "simple" to be considered a formal philosophical "position": we should just relax (and perhaps like Zi-qi "lose ourselves"), not worry about all the troublesome problems (including logical distinctions) that constantly appear in life—or at least not take them too seriously. That is, even though we have to more or less *yu-*"mime" or "play along with" (Hansen) all the logical *shi-*ing for pragmatic purposes (survival, long life) we need not take all this very seriously, for finally it is all (literally) "nonsense," not distinguishable form the "peeps of baby birds." (Actually Nietzsche's view of "logic" at the opening of *Beyond Good and Evi*l is not so different from this: it is a "truthful lie," one necessary for survival.)

I would thus tend to foreground relaxation and (like Sellmann in *Wandering*) humor above all else. The humor is closely tied to Zhuangzi's sense of *pathos*: we are nothing but "music from empty holes, mushrooms springing up in dampness" (Watson 33; this "parasite" as well as the music/holes has possible implications of Serresian "noise"), we

lack any identity or ground, after we die we may well wonder why we had to be born in the first place; in other words, life is a joke, it is quite meaningless but we can enjoy this meaninglessness. In fact I tend to read Zhuangzi as I would read Nietzsche, Kafka, Beckett—who also, on Deleuze's reading in "He Stuttered," generates nonsensical tautological redundancies at the "edge of language" and thus makes "the whole language-system vibrate"—or Shakespeare, whose Hamlet holds up Yorick's skull and calls Yorick "a fellow of infinite jest." (That literature is not really distinguishable from philosophy, clear enough already in the Pre- Socratics, Nietzsche and the later Heidegger, is of course a crucial point in Derrida and to a degree in all "poststructuralism"; see Hayles' perspective in note 5.) To the extent that certain readings want to clarify the *shi*-"positions" that Zhuangzi is or is not taking, the undertaking is perhaps itself "laugh-able"—in the face, that is, of imminent death and nothingness. (Shakespeare and Beckett: tragic as comic.)

Yet here I am not arguing for any such "overview" of Zhuangzi—or any view put in such philosophical terms as (negative or positive) skepticism, pragmatism, the assertion of personhood, spontaneity, a transcending comic ab-surdity or (Schlegel) irony—even if the last comes nearer to my own subjective view of the text. Rather this paper is an interpretation of Zhuangzi's *Dao*, one grounded in a "rhetorical" (if not quite "literary") reading of the *Qi Wu Lun* that attempts to clarify certain "discourses" within it and their inter-relationship—with possible implications for looking at the text in relation to Serres, chaos theory in physics and information (or communication) theory.

[4] See the later discussion.

[5] In this context the etymology of "noise" is suggestive: it comes from the Latin *nausea*, from Greek *nautia*, "seasickness," connoting a general sense of confusion, shouting or clamor.

[6] This is an over-simplification (and/or over-specification) not only of Serres but of a rather complex field. Hayles (12)

speaks of the two main "branches" of chaos theory: once concerned with "the order hidden within chaotic systems"

and the other with the "order that arises out of chaotic systems." Two key notions (images, tropes) regarding concealed

order are those of the strange attractor and recursive symmetry. The "attractor" (Hayles 8-9) is "any point of a system's

cycle that seems to attract the system to it. The midpoint of a pendulum's path is an example. A pendulum, no longer

pushed, spontaneously returns to this point." Analysis of attractors involves mapping such positions or "phases" onto a

sort of second-order mathematical space ("phase space"). But the problem of revealing patterns within the data leads

to that of "the mode of conception necessary to bring the patterns into view" (10), seen now in terms of recursive sym-

metry. "A figure or system displays recursive symmetry when the same general form is repeated across many different

length scales . . . . The importance of recursive symmetry to complex systems derives from the kind of perspective re-

quired to see the predictability [of repetition] that lies hidden within their unpredictable evolutions" (10). The science

of chaos "provides a new way to think about order, conceptualizing it not as a totalized condition but as the replication

of symmetries that also allows for asymmetries and unpredictabilities. In this it is akin to poststructuralism . . . ." (11).

A foundational text for the other branch of chaos theory is Prigogine and Stenger's *Order Out of Chaos*, in which

the second law of thermodynamics is reconceptualized. This law embodies Kelvin's notion that in every real heat ex-

change "some heat is always lost to useful purposes" so that we have a "universal tendency toward dissipation," ex-

pansion and increased randomness; finally "temperature would . . . stabilize at slightly above absolute zero. . . . Prigo-

gine and Stengers argue against this traditional view. They envision entropy as an engine driving the world toward in-

creasing complexity rather than toward death. They calculate that in systems far from [terminal] equilibrium, entropy

production is so high that local decreases in entropy can take place without violating the second law. Under certain cir-

cumstances, this mechanism allows a system to engage in spontaneous self-organization. . . . [suggesting that] the uni-

verse has a capacity to renew itself. Recently [they] have extended this vision to cosmology . . . . They argue that

before the Big Bang there was a quantum vacuum, and that fluctuations in it brought into existence the aboriginal

matter of the universe. Thus the 'order out of chaos' scenario is extended to cosmogonic proportions" (13-14).

Serres combines both of these branches and develops them in relation to information (or communication) theory:

now we can see as an interrupting "noise" (see later note) that chaotic disorder which "renews" an order that has

reached a state of terminal equilibrium. For the purposes of my reading of the *Zhuangzi* this renewal of order by dis-

order, viewed (as by Serres) as a sort of *reversion* or *switch* of order back to disorder, is crucial. Also crucial is the

notion of recursive symmetry mentioned above, particularly the "interpretation" of *this* recursion as one that involves

"the mode of conceptualizing necessary to bring the patterns into view." (See the later discussion of Zhuangzi's

recursive epistemological-discursive structures or patterns.)

[7] One is tempted to say here "directions of flow," but then this second-order flow would need to be distinguished from

the first-order flow of the initial (and final) "chaotic atomic flows."

[8] One version of cosmological Big Bang theory says that the universe keeps expanding toward greater randomness (a

function of entropic heat-loss) until it reaches the stage of "terminal equilibrium" (see note 5), at which point it will

commence to contract back again to the (its) initial, most densely-formed "core." But in the model of *Dao* I am sug-

gesting here we begin in effect from this "expanded" state as chaotic background-*Dao*—which could as well be seen in

terms of Prigogine's notion of "pre-original chaos" (note 5)—and move out from it toward a state of hyper-order (max-

imum density, redundancy).The latter is of course not taken as core or origin but as a Serresian variation on the term-

inal equilibrium of classical entropy theory, one which sees this as maximum order rather than maximum disorder. (An "expanded" background might also suggest Zhuangzi's words that are for Huizi "too big" and thus "useless.") In their "Postface" ("Dynamics from Leibniz to Lucretius") to Serres' *Hermes*, Prirogine and Stengers claim that the "major problematic of Serres' work" is also "what is at stake" in Leibniz, namely, "the assumption that the passage from local to global is always [with every monad] possible," which implies a fully integrable and deterministic world/cosmos; in a sense Serres moves between the Leibnizian system and Lucretius' "rationalism of ancient atomism," with its primordial atomic flow ("fall of atoms") that commences to self-order once it hits an "angle" (the *clinamen*) and thus starts to self-repeat or reduplicate. Ames' comparison ("Nietzsche's Will to Power") of the Taoist 德 "virtuality"— "power" but also "self-displacement"—with the Nietzschean interplay of forces, in the context of the point-field relationship and "aesthetic perspectivism," might also be pursued in relation to this Leibnizian and Lucretian (not to mention Serresian and perhaps also Deleuzian) field-dynamics, and the enduring problem of local-global interaction.

[9] In one model this is because excessive order only "mimes" order. Or: the process of ordering was always merely mimetic ("virtual"), but at the limit-point where reversal to disorder must occur, this mimesis has become transparent.

[10] A good way to test the truth of this would be to ask people, "Did you know that this pen is a pen?"

[11] Combining certain elements from both branches of chaos theory (note 5), Serres sees noise as a "parasite" (literally "beside the grain") which, as the third party, disrupts (interrupts) the communication between A and B; this interruption of hyper-order by disorder allows for the renewal of order. In *Hermes* and *The Parasite* Serres also suggests that late-capitalist societies and (their perhaps correlative) fascist military "orders" demand super-efficiency (A=A, no noise to block the message) in their systems of communication. But since such super-rationality ends in the blank

chaos of information death it will self-destruct unless interrupted, kick-started, renewed by a minimal amount of (creative) "noise." (There cannot be too much noise or the "signal" is destroyed in another way.) We might think here, in addition to structures of political control and high-tech warfare where there is "no room for error," of "Microsoft, Inc." and advertising/mass media, perhaps even of a cultural "postmodernism" which is by definition self-parodic and thus redundant   As White puts it (Hayles 267-268): "It turns out that the model for stochastic self-organization from chaos applies not only to physical and biological systems but describes equally well the production of meaning from noise. From a martial perspective successful communication between two interlocutors depends on the exclusion of a third person . . . who threatens constantly to disrupt the transmission of messages" (*Hermes* 67). Since the optimum performance of any system depends upon communicative transparency, noise must be eliminated. . . . Information, understood in Gregory Bateson's phrase as the "difference that makes a difference," is excluded in favor of informa-tion-free, wholly redundant messages. The system endlessly reiterates, endlessly ratifies itself. But such a system, however self-coherent or optimally efficient, is nevertheless doomed to entropic degradation. Like any closed system, it can only run down. The achievement of redundancy—when everything that needs to be said has already been said— is analogous to entropic homogeneity when matter-energy settles into terminal equilibrium. In cultural systems, just as in physical systems, noise or chaos amounts to a force for renewal. Serres thus imagines a "parasite"—precisely, static in a communication channel who intervenes . . . . By perturbing the routine exchange of messages, the parasite can provoke the production of novelty. The parasite's introduction of confusion into a logically closed system enables the generation of alternative logics.   Like a "simple fluctuation, a chance event, a circumstance," noise to can produce a new system of meaning" (*The Parasite* 18). (In French "static" is both "*statique*" and "*parasites.*") We can also see the

dialogue A-B, once it reaches the terminal state, as the monologue A-A where in effect A=A=A=A=A . . . .) I am

assuming this "reading" in the later discussion of Zhuangzi's self-embedded, recursive structures.

[12] One passage in Serres' *Genesis* gives us the blank/(dark) chaos duality in terms of over- and under-determination of

meaning. Blank chaos is seen as a "blank page," the absence of meaning, over against the over-determined, "noisy"

meaning of dark chaos, a page blackened with writing. Serres suggests that these two pages, black and white (where

the latter is "virtual" chaos), "cannot be exchanged": "Here on this smooth face is the capacity of the multiple that can

be called the possible. There is the complex and noisy possible, there is the blank virtual. There is chaos by a super-

abundance of presence, there is chaos by blank absence . . . . Indetermination is of two kinds: it is either chaotic or

blank. Sometimes one reads pages that are full. So full, so saturated with meaning that they are noisy with it. No one

understands the chaotic, no one understands pure singularity. Those pages cannot be exchanged" (29- 32). In one way

we see how "A = A = A = A = A" (or a single determinate sound like "Beeeep," perhaps "pure singularity" in this sense)

is under-determined, as against the over-determination of noise. And yet in another way (the problem of virtuality and

the "switch" again) we can say this "one meaning" (e.g. A = A or Hegel's "Being" of the *Logic*) contains all meanings

and is overdetermined, just as "noise" is also meaning which is not-yet-determined, has not-yet-emerged out of the

background static. Even if they "cannot be exchanged" we are already exchanging (interchanging) the two pages,

already filling the mere meaning-possibility of blankness with the blackness of words and simultaneously erasing what

we write: thus Hegel's Being "means" Nothing (the first two steps of the dialectic, leading to their synthesis in

Becoming), and we cannot distinguish a white surface that reflects all light from a black one that absorbs all light.

[13] Huizi to Zhuangzi in Chapter 1: "Your words [*yan*] are [like the ugly old tree] big and useless [*da er wu yong*], and

so everyone spurns them." (Watson 29; Graham 47: "This talk of yours . . . .")

[14] "Reversal is *Dao*'s movement, weakness is its use" [*Fan zhe, dao zhi dong, ruo zhe, dao zhi yong*] (*Laozi* 40, the rest of which reads: "All things come from Being, Being comes from Nothing").

[15] Perhaps more inclined toward mystical monism?

[16] This *yu*, 寓 means "sojourn," so *yu yan* are "sojourning words" or words being temporarily used in "another sense" (analogously, metaphorically, parabolically)—as in fables but also as in Hansen's *dao*s as a sort of "imitating" or "playing along with" rationalist and Confucianist (that is, seriously believed) *dao*s. The literal meaning of *yu*, "monkey under roof," if we can take it seriously ("monkey" is the phonetic), could suggest that fables (and perhaps too *dao*s) in some sense domesticize or "textualize" (our) animality, that is, (our) nature. Or, *dao*s like fables are *temporary configurations* (as in "figurative language") or *attunements* of (cosmic) background noise. (With "attunement" I think first of radios, and secondarily of Heidegger's *Stimmung* or "mood" of *Being and Time*.)

[17] Here I may be distorting somewhat, or appropriating, Wieger's more straightforward use of the term. Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* 1.2 (Kaufmann 200): "For one may doubt, first, whether there are any opposites at all, and secondly whether these popular valuations and opposite values on which the metaphysicians put their seal, are not perhaps merely foreground estimates [*Vordergrunds-Schatzungen*], only provisional perspectives [*vorlaufige Perspektiven*], perhaps from some nook, perhaps from below, frog perspectives [*Frosch-Perspektiven*] . . . to borrow an expression painters use" (*KSA* 5, 16). See also Ames' "Nietzsche's Will to Power" and note 8 above.

[18] We will also think here of *Laozi* 38 (which Henricks in his 德道經 *Te-Tao Ching* puts first, and which begins, "The highest virtue is not virtuous; therefore it truly has virtue"): "Therefore, when the Way is lost [失 *shi*], only then do we

have virtue; / When virtue is lost . . . humanity; / When humanity . . . righteousness; / And when righteousness . . .

propriety. / As for propriety, it's but the thin edge [薄 *bo*] of loyalty and sincerity, and the beginning of disorder [亂

luan], / And foreknowledge is but the flower [華 *hua*] of the Way, and the beginning of stupidity. / Therefore the Great

Man / Dwells in the thick [厚 *hou*] . . . ." (Henricks 7; I am assuming the *mawangdui* version has not much "impact"

here.) The state of *luan*-chaos with which we "end" might then, on the Serresian reading, be taken as blank chaos.

Indeed the character 亂 has, on Harbaugh's reading, *luan* "control" ("threads untangled by two hands") with the extra

乙 *yi* (literally "sprouting seed") "redundantly representing thread" (280): as if there were "too many threads" for the

hands to order; as if, quite literally, chaos were an excess or redundancy of order. 失 "lost" as "sprout from the hand"

(乙 seed again) is also suggestive, as is the fact that the master prefers the *hou* thick to the *bo* thin: *bo* could perhaps

be pictured as the *chi*-evenness of a field, *ho* ("generosity under cliff") as the cliff-like unevenness or immanence

(imminence) of the *chi*-rough. 華 *hua* is "flowery," showy," "superficial" . . . perhaps "excessive," "redundant."

[19] This *feng* etymologically suggests the marking of land-boundaries by political authority, the "sealing up" of open

spaces. But marking is also cutting: we need to see *feng* in relation to the "holes" cut in Hun-Dun (following note).

[20] At the end of Z*huangzi* 7—in a parable which might fruitfully be compared with that of the "sacred turtle" in

Chapter 26 (see later discussion—the gods of the North and South Sea think that Hun-Dun (Chaos, god of the Middle

Sea) needs in his head "seven openings like other men" and so each day cut another hole until finally Hun-Dun dies.

This opening of two eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth, organs of ingestion and perception, would seem to make into

something animate (human, rational) what was initially a chaotic, undifferentiated, inanimate thing, an indeterminate

yet continuous background. Here we have the hyper-ordering of "civilization" as not just repression (Freud) but de-

struction, or perhaps "information death" and "terminal equilibrium" (note 10).

[21] Laozi's opening line, "*Dao ke dao, fei chang Dao* (道可道, 非常道), "The dao(s) that can be spoken of is/are not (a/the) constant Dao(s)," of course has both metaphysical/affirmative and linguistic/skeptical readings. The former take "constant *Dao*" as a positive principle, one that transcends human speech and rational knowledge perhaps because already within us, and "spoken *dao*" as objectified, thus separated from us; the latter (e.g. Hansen's reading) takes the *dao* or *dao*s as already linguistic, only linguistic (discursive, textual), in *this* sense impermanent, always changing. ("Language-*dao* is no permanent *dao*.") Henricks' translation, based on the *mawangdui* Text A with its 也 *ye* particles (*Dao ke dao ye, fei hong dao ye*), "As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way" (188) also suggests the latter interpretation. But again the Serresian view suggests taking (Laozi's, Zhuangzi's) *Dao* as neither metaphysical principle (implying a non-linguistic ground) nor as performative utterance or even "speech," but as pre-linguistic (noisy) background. This might imply a position *between* metaphysical and overtly linguistic readings, or at least the more "intermediate" version of the linguistic reading: namely, that the only *Dao* we could possibly talk about (since there could *be* no other Dao) is not constant (i.e. has no constant 名 *ming* name/meaning, i.e. is "noisy.")

[22] Or *chi*-"even" where this evenness maintains a certain doubleness of perspective, of foreground/ background with 甬 *yong* "bud" "bursting forth" or "emerging" on the right, where it serves as more than just the phonetic component. This 甬 puts *han*, "bud" on top of the 用 *yong*, "use" phonetic. Indeed this *yong*-use keeps entering into play in the latter part of the passage, though mainly as (technically) the phonetic component, suggesting perhaps that sound as mere noisy background also has its use, even is what is most useful.

[24] *Zhi*-"knowing" (知) has an arrow on the left, mouth on the right, thus meaning (Wieger 300) "quickly reaching the

target" ("going all the way") with regard to speech or discourse (having an "opinion to express").

25 See note 11.

26 See note 20.

27 Harbaugh 79: 同 is "objects under the same cover," suggesting too a "common background."

28 Thus Graham: "As empty space nothingness is a measurable part of the cosmos; but can we not arrive at the totality by adding Nothing to Something? . . . There can be Nothing only when there is Something, a void only when there are objects with intervals between them, and both divide out from a whole which is neither one nor the other. Each thing has limited properties, is 'without something,' but the whole out of which it differentiates is both 'without anything,' since things have not yet emerged, and 'without nothing," since everything emerges from it." (*Zhuangzi* 55-56)

In this model then we take the linear or purely temporal ambiguity (paradox) of a Nothing that is presupposed to exist before/to be the "beginning of Being" (though it actually" exists only as the discursive "not" of the *wei*-"not-yet") and transpose this into the ambiguity (paradox) of the spatio-temporal cosmos as Chaotic Thing: a "Whole" which, as it "precedes" all separation into parts and yet makes this separation possible, is in effect a mix of Something and Nothing— an indeterminate Betweenness of Something and Nothing. ("Between this Something and Nothing I don't know which is which.") This pervasively immanent, indefinitely extended, indeterminately bounded, equivocally (un)differentiated world is then what Laozi calls *Dao* as a *wu hun cheng* 物渾成, "thing confusedly formed": a "cosmic soup," "mixture" or "fertile void" which is neither a solid indivisible "thing" nor a thing clearly "differentiated" (that is, divided into parts with spaces between them) nor a void filled with things/atoms. In this spatio-temporal model we are looking at the "beginning" (or rather the logical-discursive "not" that always already "precedes" it) as a spatio-

temporal suspension. The suspension of the *wei*-not-yet becomes the ambivalent "progress" of this spatial pattern, or its ambivalent "directionality," perhaps viewed now as or through a kind of Gestalt-switch: "Suddenly there is being and non-being, but I don't know which is which."

But this *Dao*, chaotic thing or field—indefinitely suspended (as in "dissolution") by the *wei*-not-yet—suggests too a pattern of recursive self-embedment. Whether we move from encompassing One into Many ("manifestation") or the other way ("return"), we may read the embedment of Many "within" One (and/or of One within Many) as itself a recursive structure or regress, indeed are invited so to read it by Zhuangzi's overtly recursive or regressive reflection on the "beginning" as the "not-yet of the not-yet." Further support for this reading comes from the much earlier *I Ching*, itself a kind of (discourse upon a) unified, self-generating and perhaps chaotic "field." While the first two hexagrams of the *I* are *Jian* (pure *Yang*-Creativity) and *Kun* (pure *Yin*-Receptivity), the last two are 既濟 *Qi Qi*, "After Completion" and 未濟 *Wei Qi*, "Before Completion" (where 濟 is "crossing the river"). This *Wei*-"Not Yet Across" is an "open ending;" it makes the *I*'s "ending" neither an ending nor a beginning but an indefinite suspension that invites the return of the larger recursive pattern, the more encompassing field. This is a non-teleological (non-Hegelian) "open form": we are always (already) "crossing" but never "get across."

[29] This suggests Derrida's view of language, set forth in "Signature Event Context" over against the Austin-Searle speech-act theory (and thus qualifying if not quite undermining Hansen's reading of the *Qi Wu Lun*): language as an open-ended, iterative, recursive, "citational" system (structure) in which any statement may potentially be quoted/cited, so that there is no "original" or "unquoted" statement, no "original text" not already "interpreted" by another one, no text that does not interpret another. This means there could no self-originating "performative utterance" such as Austin

and Searle assume.

[30] There is some doubt as to whether any part of the *Liezi* passage quoted here was originally in *Zhuangzi* 1 and, if so, where exactly to place it. The translations and notes in Watson (24-25), Graham (*Chuan Tzu*, 44-45) and Wu (49, 62) all express this doubt. Thus Watson (25): "The text may be faulty at this point. The *Pei-shan-lu*, a work written around A.D. 800 by the monk Shen-ch'ing, contains the following passage, said by a T'ang commentator . . . to be found in the *Chuang Tzu*: "T'ang asked Ch'i, 'Do up, down, and the four directions have a limit?' Ch'i replied, 'Beyond their limitlessness there is still another limitlessness.'" But whether this passage was in the original Chuang Tzu, or whether, if it was, it belongs at this point in the text, are questions that cannot be answered." And yet Graham says in "The Composition of Lieh-Tzu" (*Studies* 271): "It is likely that the first three questions and answers of the *Questions of T'ang* are a fragment of the document mentioned in the first chapter of *Chuang-tzu* . . . . The *Pei-shan-lu* of Shen Ch'ing . . . quotes the third exchange with small variants . . . . The commentary of Hui Pao notes 'The saying is in *Chuang-tzu*, slightly different from in *Lieh-tzu* . . . .' The theme is the problem of infinity, discussed in the manner of the pre-Han sophists; but *Lieh-tzu* never elsewhere discusses logical puzzles, except when making fun of the sophist Kung-sun Lung. Chi's second answer is one of the rare rhyming passages." But even if it does not *really* (?) belong there, surely I may be forgiven if I allow one *Liezi* passage to intrude into ("interrupt") my reading of the *Zhuangzi*.

[31] The "another infinity within/without this infinity" reading is also assumed by Watson's T'ang commentator (see previous note) and by Wong, who has a very compressed and smooth translation of the key passage, cutting clean through like Occham's razor (or Ting's carving knife): "The sage then said, "Nothingness is limitless. How do I know where its boundaries are? How do we know that beyond this universe there is not another universe? I can only say that

things are limitless, but I cannot tell you if there are any boundaries" (47). This problem of directly contradictory

readings/translations is perhaps a case in which the textual indeterminacy of a single passage is extended to a sort of

intertextual indeterminacy, where intertextual now means different versions of the same text. That the "encompass-

sing world-text" (or 文-"pattern," as in the *I Ching*?) is indeed unlimited or indeterminate, and perhaps even in a

roughly analogous way, may be considered an assumption of Barthes, Derrida and their various poststructuralist heirs.

[32] We would need to put this in the context of Graham's reading of a *Zhuangzi* passage which both he and Watson

place near the end of the *Qi Wu Lun*, just before the shadow-penumbra dialogue and butterfly dream: "Right [*zhen*] is

not right; so [*shi*] is not so. If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no

need for argument. If so were really so, it would differ so clearly from not so that there would be no need for argument.

(Watson 44; Graham 60: " . . . there is no longer a difference for *bian*-disputation from what is not it/so"). Graham's

comment (60): "Since everything may at one time or another be picked out as as 'it,' if it were really the name of

something . . . it would be the name of everything. Chuang-tzu likes the thought that instead of selecting and appro-

ving something as 'it' one may use the word to embrace and approve everything, to say 'Yes!' to the universe." Here

Graham also cites chapter 25: "Men all honor what wit knows, but none knows how to know by depending on what his

wits do not know [*zhi zhi suo bu zhi er hou zhi*, 'by knowing *behind* what his knowing does not know']; may that not

be called the supreme uncertainty [*da yi*, 大疑]? . . . There is nowhere you can escape from it; is it what one might call

'the alternative which is so together with the alternative which is so'? [*ran yu, ran hu*]" (Graham 102). Do these two

questions not appear to be more rhetorical than unanswerable? This last question perhaps "begs the question," on a

certain meta-level of "questioning," of all such questions.

[33] I could imagine Zhuangzi wanting to contrast this "false" divination with a hypothetical "true" divination (augury);

in the latter the "meanings" which arise purely contingently from the background noise of nature—birdsong and birds'

flight-patterns for Homer's Calchas and Sophocles' Tiresias, the appearance of the cracks for the Shang kings' divi-

ners—would remain contingent (or chaotic), that is, would still be "read contingently" by the seer. (Would this actually

be possible? What would it mean?) Thus Zhuangzi's Chang-wu-zi says to Chu-chueh-zi: "Suppose I put it to you in

abandoned words [*wang yan*, Watson: "reckless words"], and you listen with the same abandon [*wang ting*, Watson:

'listen recklessly']" (Graham 59, Watson 42). *Wang* 妄, "flee" plus "woman," can also mean "absurd."

[34] Thus, while Hesiod's Chaos of the *Theogony* is more commonly understood as an initial "disorder" within which

earth-and-sky appear or out of which they "self-order," Kirk and Raven discuss the other reading: "In view of the basic

meaning of *xaos* (as a gap, i.e. a bounded interval, not 'void' or anything like that) . . . serious attention must be paid to

[another] interpretation . . . *Xaos genet* in the first line . . . implies that the gap between earth and sky came into being;

that is, that the first stage of cosmogony was the separation of earth and sky" (28). While noting that this second

reading "would not be consistent with" the fact that it is actually earth and eros that first emerge out of chaos, while

sky later emerges out of earth, the still suggest the possibility that "production from Chaos . . . and from *Gaia*

[Earth] . . . may take place simultaneously." But if we can see Laozi's Dao as *wu hun cheng*, "thing confusedly

formed" (25) on the model of Serresian chaos theory, then can we not also see the Greek Chaos as simply a pre-

existing disorder out of which things/bodies/elements self-order and back into which they decay, the chaotic back-

ground remaining "virtually present" even during the stages of "ordering" and "disordering"? And why in any case

would we need to draw a clear distinction between Chaos as a "pre-existing disorder" and Chaos as that gap or

difference which naturally marks "disorder" as well as its "self-ordering" and "self-disordering" (or "re-ordering")

through various forms of differentiation?

[35] This yin 隱 is "hills" plus the "careful" phonetic; "hills," a variation on *chi* "even" as a field of grain all of equal

height, could suggest "dependency" as well as "hiddenness" because of the visual contrast or doubleness, the (light/

dark) duality or virtuality; *yin* can also mean "dark," "obscure." We also get *yin* at the opening of the *Qi Wu Lun*:

"Tzu-ch'i of South Wall sat leaning on his armrest" (Watson 30); the "leaning on armrest" (Graham: "reclined elbow

on armrest") is *yin ji*, so clearly *yin* can also mean "depending on."

[36] *Wu te cao* is "no special operation," and the *qi* can mean "other" or "next"; thus Watson takes the *qi wu te cao* as

"no independent action" and Graham as "no deciding [managing] to do either A or B." The *cao* 操 means "manage,"

"operate," "exercise": it is hand plus the *cao* 喿 phonetic, which itself (interestingly enough, especially if *phonetics*

counts for anything in a discussion of *noise*) means "chirping of birds"; it pictures three bird-mouths in a tree. The

Chinese wang-liang—"not-two," though the original sense of *wang* 罔 "not" is "net to prevent escape," and while the

nominal sense is still "net," which suggests an interesting interpretation of this "not"—is translated as "penumbra":

Latin sense "almost shade"; "the partly lighted area surrounding the complete shadow of a body, as the moon in full

eclipse"; the less dark region surrounding the dark central area of a sunspot; "a vague, indefinite or borderline area."

[37] This 待, "small step" plus "court" or "temple," is "wait" and also "stay"—as if perhaps one were standing in the

doorway, hesitating on the edge or margin of the court/temple, thus also "suspended" there in a state of between-ness,

clinging or "dependency."

[38] In *Zhuangzi* 1 Huizi compares Zhuangzi's *yan*-"words" to a tree that is useless because so old and ugly that no

one will cut it down to "use" its wood. "Your words [Graham 47: 'This talk of yours'], too, are , too, are big and

useless [*da er wu yong*], and so everyone alike spurns them!" The irony of "using" the tree (and the discourse?) by

"killing" it reminds us of the parable of the sacred turtle which must be killed so the king's diviners can "divine" with

it, the very act which verifies its "sacredness."

[39] Indeed the "ground" here can also be read horizontally, as the ground surrounding the ground we are now standing

on—our movement (and life) would be greatly restricted if we were suddenly standing on a single island or "station,"

surrounded by empty space. Although the "Yellow Springs" [*huang chuan*, Graham 100: "Underworld"] clearly

suggests the vertical reading, one is somehow tempted not to totally "throw out" the horizontal one.

[40] Would humming a clear and harmonious melody still count as "noise"? Perhaps only in relation to spoken language.

I have decided not to touch on the whole theme of "music" in the *Zhuangzi*, which might nonetheless be approached

from the perspective suggested here.