

Religion and Thought in Ancient China: Chuang Tzu - the Abandonment of Sober Language

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宗教と古代中国の思想：
莊子－まじめな言葉の放棄－

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This paper is a representation and adaptation of Kuang Ming Wu's reading of *Chuang Tzu* as a work of Poetic Philosophy.

One: Saying Nothing

I discuss the question of whether *Chuang Tzu* is to be interpreted as a consistent or a confused text. I present my own account of Chuang Tzu's poetic philosophy, and the centrality of the images of uselessness and saying nothing. Chuang Tzu's thought prospers in dialogue and is presented as dialogue, with a light-hearted anti-rationalism which resists systemisation.

Two: Free as a bird

I explore the themes of freedom, naturalness, poise, skill and balance in *Chuang Tzu*. He uses the images of birds flying and fish swimming to express these themes. His thought is ecological, relying on an understanding of concepts of scale and niche: what you value depends on where you stand.

Three: Pigs and fishing

Chuang Tzu prefers concrete imagery to abstract speculation. Comedy is central to his method. I portray his series of pigs and fishing as poetic parables, and conclude that the chaotic and protean nature of the text justifies a poetic rather than an analytic interpretation.

Key Words (キーワード)

Ancient China (古代中国), Chuang Tsu (莊子), Philosophy (哲学), Religion (宗教), Poetry (詩)

This essay is divided into three main sections, which overlap each other to some extent. The middle section concentrates more on what Chuang Tzu says, and the first and final sections prioritize how he says it. However the essence of my case is that these two aspects of his writing cannot usefully be discussed separately. In his various commentaries Kuang-Ming Wu has clarified the interdependence of poetry and philosophy in Chuang Tzu and I don't wish to take issue with his conclusions. This essay is a reiteration, per-

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sonal variation and slight elaboration on Wu's arguments. I emphasize Chuang Tzu as a writer rather than a thinker which, since I am more poet than philosopher myself, is intended as a compliment.

One: Saying nothing

Taking *Chuang Tzu* as a whole, it is a chaotic jumble. A.C. Graham's translation attempts to make sense of this jumble by identifying different portions as being by different hands. As well as Chuang Tzu and his school there are the Primitivist, the Yangist and the Syncretist. This is a valuable attempt at clarification and assists in a project that would want to see those parts of *Chuang Tzu* that are by Chuang Tzu, at least, as being philosophically precise. Unfortunately too great a straining after precision involves a betrayal of the character of the text; as, for instance, the arguments of Chad Hansen which are supported by limited evidence from Chapter 2 alone. While philosophical minds must be allowed their project of making sense of the jumble it does sometimes look like a wild goose chase. (see note (1)) Chuang Tzu says himself that saying is never fixed; so why attempt to fix it? Humour, as numerous commentators have noted, is central to his purpose, and playfulness characterizes the dynamic quality of his writing. (see note (2)) From this point of view there might be some value in abandoning the attempt to land logical fish. Instead, why not celebrate the confusion evident in the text and try out an explanation which says that if this is not by design then it is, at least, a happy accident? I have no desire to place Chuang Tzu's thought in a consistent pigeonhole. I would rather see what happens if we pretend that the confusion is deliberate and understand that the text is never so direct as when it appears to be rambling. I take as my starting point the final chapter.

I admit that it is unlikely that Chuang Tzu wrote the self-assessment (as it would be) that appears in Chapter 33. Yet the assumption that it is by an impartial and ponderous Syncretist is dull even if it is true. If we imagine that it *was* written by Chuang Tzu himself the passage comes alive as wryly humorous self-deprecation. Graham observes that the portrait treats Chuang Tzu 'as a writer rather than as a thinker' (3) with the assumption that this is a negative judgement and without asking whether the characterization is accurate. The central phrase in the portrait for my purposes is:

He believed that the world was drowned in turbidness and that it was impossible to address it in sober language. (4)

(For 'drowned in turbidness' Graham has the more concrete, and perhaps preferable, 'sinking in the mud'). If written by a Syncretist this judgement is 'sober', dispassionate and implies disagreement with Chuang Tzu's conclusions. If written by Chuang Tzu himself (or one of his favourite disciples) the judgement practises what is preached: it is drunken in striking a fictional Syncretist pose; it is passionate in its expression of Chuang Tzu's manifesto. Either way, I see it as accurate. Chuang Tzu can think as well as write but his thought acknowledges the complexities of language. As Thomas Merton puts it, 'Irony and parable are his chief instruments.' (5) Any critical response which fails to

recognise these characteristics of Chuang Tzu's method is bound to be off the point.

Chuang Tzu's project is one of liberation from pedestrian reasoning processes. He sees no purpose in striving after an artificial consistency. Freedom from constraint means freedom to change:

Said Chuang-tsu to Hui Shih

"Confucius by the age of sixty had sixty times changed his mind; whenever he began by judging 'That's it' he ended by judging 'That's not'. We do not yet know of anything which we now affirm that we shall not deny it fifty-nine times over."

(6)

Having abandoned sober language he is free to adapt his speech to circumstances. His own description of this method is what Watson translates as 'goblet words' and Graham as "'spillover" saying'. Of the advantages of this method he says: 'With words that are no-words, you may speak all your life long and you will never have said anything.' (7)

Saying nothing is, of course, a disaster for a 'sober' philosopher with a precise message to impart. But Chuang Tzu wishes to maintain a position in harmony with a flowing and restless Tao and communicate in a way compatible with rather than damaging to the primal chaos. Apparently unrelated passages in the book can be seen to be connected by describing this fluent use of language. A repeated theme is the importance of being useless. One aspect of this is expressed by the parable of Hun-tun which concludes the Inner Chapters. The efforts of his friends to make him useful prove finally destructive. Stories which Graham wishes to separate off as being by a Primitivist might be superficially merely anti-technological propaganda but they harmonize with this underlying theme of uselessness. Various parables emphasize that useless trees survive when the useful are cut down. All these are connected by Hui Tzu's characterization of Chuang Tzu's language: "'Your words are useless!'" (see note (8))

The passage in Chapter 2 about the monkey-keeper who satisfies the monkeys by switching the nut ration from three in the morning, four at night to four in the morning, three at night might have application as a parable of the sage's conduct or be a philosophic argument for relativity but at the same time it practises and preaches this alternative mode of language. Its symbolic potential is inexhaustible. Appropriate responses might include both laughter and a monkey-like scratching of the head. What won't succeed is any attempt to limit it with a specific meaning. It says nothing; it has no precise 'use'. Anyone who thinks they understand what it was designed to communicate has misunderstood.

Chuang Tzu was not writing a thesis. Unimaginative critics seem unable to comprehend an approach so apparently negative. One difficulty may well be that the writings or sayings of many of Chuang Tzu's contemporaries have not survived: Chuang Tzu's intellectual sparring makes most sense when seen as contribution to a dialogue. He re-animates Confucius and casts him as a leading character in numerous anecdotes, in an eager attempt to engage in debate with the spirit of the sage. His close friend Hui Tzu

is also a foil for his wit. Chuang Tzu makes it clear that their interaction provides the vital spark for his thinking:

Chuang Tzu was accompanying a funeral when he passed by the grave of Hui Tsu. Turnig to his attendants, he said, "There was once a plasterer who, if he got a speck of mud on the tip of his nose no thicker than a fly's wing, would get his friend Carpenter Shih to slice it off for him. Carpenter Shih, whirling his hatchet with a noise like the wind, would accept the assignment and proceed to slice, removing every bit of mud without injury to the nose, while the plasterer just stood there completely unperturbed. Lord Yuan of Sung, hearing of this feat, summoned Carpenter Shih and said, 'Could you try performing it for me?' But Carpenter Shih replied, 'It's true that I was once able to slice like that - but the material I worked on has been dead these many years.' Since you died, Master Hui, I have had no material to work on. There's no one I can talk to any more." (9)

There is a Zen story about a harpist who gave up playing the harp after the death of his friend who did nothing more for him than listening. What both stories recognise is that life is lived in relationship and the point of this passage from Chuang Tzu is that his thoughts are thought out in relationship. It might be helpful to bear in mind the passages from Lao Tsu which assert (unarguably) that it is the spaces, the doors and windows and rooms, in the building that make it useful as a house. The structure of Chuang Tsu's thought is equally dependent on the space provided by those with whom he is in dialogue. In dialogue the context of a remark is all-important. One phrase can have two meanings in differing contexts; contradictory phrases can come to mean the same.

Chuang Tzu's light-heartedness is not, then, a matter of more temperament, but is bound up with his relativistic vision of reality in which, firstly, all things are interdependent; secondly, what things look like depends on where you're standing; thirdly, what you say depends on who you're saying it to, which in turn conditions how you say it. Commentators generally have no trouble in identifying relativism as a persistent theme in Chuang Tzu. Not all of them, however, seem to understand how this conditions his tone and style. Reading a text is not simply a matter of extracting pearls of wisdom. Feeling responses must be equally appropriate: if there is a joke it is necessary to get it. Fortunately there are several commentators who do seem to have managed this. Michael Crandell describes the butterfly anecdote from Chapter 2 as 'eminently playful in its lightheartedness'. (10) Victor H. Mair observes:

Chuang-Tzu is too protean to be confined securely under any single rubric ... He is a profound and brilliant jester who demolishes our confounded seriousness. (11)

Burton Watson's introduction to his translation accurately notes that:

Chuang Tsu uses throughout his writings that deadliest of weapons against all that is pompous, staid, and holy: humor ...[He] makes it the very core of his style. (12)

Kenneth Inada quotes Chapter 29 and draws the inference that

experiential reality is seen "as quickly as the passing of a swift horse glimpsed through a crack in the wall."

He comments

In several passages in the *Chuang-Tzu* we find statements to the effect that experiential reality cannot be expressed at all except in terms of bits and pieces. and sees the relevance of humour: a laugh is 'an expression of a genuine encounter with the reality of things'. (13)

The commentator who most consistently celebrates the lightness of Chuang Tzu's method is Kuang-Ming Wu, who speaks of his 'natural nonchalance'. (14) He pre-empts my opening remarks in this essay by speaking of a way of misreading Chuang Tzu which is to be frankly impatient with the *Chuang Tzu's* unintelligible suggestiveness and to try to replace this with a conceptual system of logical precision. (15)

We have to remind ourselves that Chuang Tzu takes an oblique angle of attack on his subjects, speaking with irony, and irony 'says what it does not mean'. (16)

A.C. Graham is an example of someone who characterizes Chuang Tzu's style correctly, but appears to see this only as a matter of his temperament, rather than as an integral consequence of his whole approach. In the following series of remarks I detect a slight note of disparagement: 'Like all great anti-rationalists, Chuang-tzu has his reasons for not listening to reason.' (17)

Chuang-tzu shares that common and elusive feeling that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, that analysis always leaves something out, that neither side of a dichotomy is wholly true. (18)

[He is] a master of sophisticated argument, aphorism, anecdote, lyrical prose and gnomic verse who professes a boundless scepticism about the possibility of ever saying anything. (19)

Maybe I am misreading Graham but it seems to me that Chuang Tzu's anti-rationalism, common touch and scepticism are here portrayed as forms of a charming obstinacy rather than thoroughly thought out conclusions. Chuang Tzu is not haphazard due to a defect of mental organization, but on principle, as a reflection of a chaotic and crazy universe. The project that would separate Chuang Tzu the thinker from Chuang Tzu the writer is doomed to failure. There is a profound concord between what he says and his chosen methods of articulation. On this matter the accuracy of Wu's portrayal is particularly acute:

To read Chuang Tzu is to be his close friend, feeling intently for how he said it rather than listening to what he meant. (20)

Just as the text itself is a contribution to a dialogue, so we as readers must fill the space it creates. It is not that there is no discernible meaning, but that the meaning cannot be discerned unless we follow closely the fluctuations of tone and style, and know when to smile. Wing-Han Hara writes that

As we follow the lines of Chuang-tzu's thoughts, we can see that the themes are all closely related. They have an implicit logic in themselves although Chuang-tzu himself chose to express them not in terms of systematic discourse but in terms of parables and anecdotes. Perhaps this is also partly due to his scepticism about human

knowledge and regular, rational ways of thinking. (21)

Again, this is accurate as far as it goes but it still suggests that his renunciation of 'systematic discourse' in favour of 'parables and anecdotes' is for no better reason than a personal preference. Wu grasps the nettle much more successfully, by speaking of a "poetic philoso-phy":

Chuang Tzu's poetic thought is a delight; it is both frivolously profound and wholesome ...[It] is a peculiar unity of poetizing, parodying, and philosophizing. (22)

The implication is that a purely philosophical reading is inadequate:

to be poetic is to be open-ended, unfinished, ever ready for future involvement, devolvement, development. These various involvements render the reader one with the poetic writing, involving the poetic writing with the reader. (23)

The rest of this essay will be taken up with looking at examples from Chuang Tzu in the light of these comments about what I understand to be the best mode of reading.

Two: Free as a Bird

'The central theme of the *Chuang Tzu* may be summed up in a single word: freedom.' (24)

So says Watson in his introduction. I wouldn't disagree. There are numerous kinds of freedom; one kind particularly important to Chuang Tzu is mental agility. The book begins with an account of the fish called K'un. Watson's footnote indicates that even this choice of name is paradoxical. It means 'roe' but refers to the biggest of fishes. Already the reader's mental suppleness is tested. It is 'so huge I don't know how many thousand li he measures'. Can our imaginations stretch to accommodate? He 'changes' - how? we are not told; we must accept the fact - to become a bird with 'wings like clouds all over the sky'. To be comfortably borne up by the weight of air beneath it the bird must rise to a height of ninety thousand li before heading south. Our sense of the scale of the universe is perhaps greater than it was in Ancient China, theoretically encompassing the subatomically small and the galactically large. But such scales are generally represented by numbers and analogies, defeating the average imaginative grasp. Anyone engaging in a mental joust with Chuang Tzu must be at ease in the world of the macrocosmic.

Early on, he explores this idea of different scales of being, with their own requirements and horizons. Bits of trash can sail on a cupful of water; a cup requires a larger puddle; a boat requires at least a lake. Freedom reappears as a theme here in a different guise: comfort. Every being has its own set of optimum conditions which must be met before it can flourish. To be free is to be living in a harmonious environment.

In the whole book there are numerous passages which treat this theme from different angles, exploring the idea that each creature has its own ecological niche and requires its needs to be fulfilled before it can be free and unconstrained. Here I will mention four extracts that intersect on this point. To begin with, in Chapter 2:

If a man sleeps in a damp place, his back aches and he ends up half paralyzed, but is this true of a loach? If he lives in a tree, he is terrified and shakes with fright,

but is this true of a monkey? Of these three creatures, then, which one knows the proper place to live? Men eat the flesh of grass-fed and grain-fed animals, deer eat grass, centipedes find snakes tasty, and hawks and falcons relish mice. Of these four, which knows how food ought to taste? Monkeys pair with monkeys, deer go out with deer, and fish play around with fish. Men claim that Mao-ch'iang and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream, if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break into a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world? The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong are all hopelessly snarled and jumbled. (25)

One consequence of things being 'snarled and jumbled' is that an intelligence like Chuang Tzu's is needed to make sense of them. If there were one rule for all, if ideals could be documented and classified there would be no use for a sensitive understanding: existential questions could be solved by reference to a guidebook. The celebration of the complexities of life is repeated in Chapter 18:

A bird hates to hear even the sound of human voices, much less all that hubbub and to-do. Try performing the Hsien-ch'ih and Nine Shao music in the wilds around Lake Tung-t'ing - when the birds hear it they will fly off, when the animals hear it they will run away, when the fish hear it they will dive to the bottom. Only the people who hear it will gather around to listen. Fish live in water and thrive, but if men tried to live in water they would die. Creatures differ because they have different likes and dislikes. Therefore the former sages never required the same ability from all creatures or made them all do the same thing. (26)

The connection with freedom, naturalness and being at ease is made in Chapter 19. It has been implied that a person's appropriate way of life is analogous to an animal's ecological niche. Here this is in turn connected with the absence of moral constraints: force only begins to be applied when things are not as they should be, and is symptomatic of failure and error. Success comes when a person is at home and can follow the dictates of their heart rather than the dictates of external powers or rules. A whole range of implications is contained in this apparently simple aphorism: 'You forget your feet when the shoes are comfortable. You forget your waist when the belt is comfortable.' (27) Wu comments:

Chuang Tzu seems to say that such notions as sanity, health, naturalness, appropriateness, inborn nature, the true self, and the ideal society are negative concepts.

One only knows them when they are no longer in their normalcy. (28)

In Chapter 26 these concepts are explored through a return to the fish imagery with which the book opened. These issues of comfort and discomfort are, for the fish, matters of life and death. Our imaginations must encompass the two extremes, appreciating its happiness when it can indulge its joy and freedom in its natural habitat, and its unhappiness when it is inadequately supported and its life is endangered. Chuang Chou is poor, threatened with hunger, and his attempt to borrow grain from marquis Chien-ho is met

with a promise of gold. He tells a parable of a perch caught in a carriage rut begging for a 'dipperful of water'. The perch laments "I've lost my element!" and this lament can be taken to encapsulate the vision of the entire book. Happiness, perhaps even salvation, is a matter of being returned to your element, to where your heart is at home. There is no easy answer to what this might consist in for the individual, but it is clear that it cannot be imposed or reached by applying generalizations. Thus Chuang Tzu's relativism must not be taken as a counsel of despair. (see note (29)) There is good and bad, but you cannot say what good is without sensitively taking into account the needs of your individual subject. The need of the perch for a certain depth of water also returns us to the imagery of Chapter 1. The repetitions and variations of this imagery weave a poetic texture which ensures that Chuang Tzu's case is rendered vivid and tangible rather than existing as mere intellectual concepts. Fishes and birds express their comfort and contentment in swimming and flying, and these metaphors of skill and exuberance communicate Chuang Tzu's idea of how life could be lived if we were to fulfil our potential. Freedom is dynamic.

The perch in the freedom of the river and the perch struggling in the carriage-rut give an example of a recurring observation in Chuang Tzu: the importance of position and perspective. In Chapter 2 we have the paradoxes:

There is nothing in the world bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, and Mount T'ai is tiny. No one has lived longer than a dead child, and P'eng-tsu died young.
(30)

The simplest explanation of this apparent nonsense is that from the standpoint of the subatomic the 'tip of an autumn hair' is huge and from the standpoint of the galactic Mount T'ai is infinitesimally small. Compared to the duration of a moment the life of a dead child is long; compared to geological time P'eng-tsu's life was over in a flash. Alternatively, all experience is refracted through your own subjectivity, so everyone's life, from the dead child to P'eng-tsu, is one life long. It is also from this point of view that

Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me.

Further on in Chapter 2 Chuang Tzu says:

How do I know that loving life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back? (31)

This is illustrated by the story of Lady Li who, on being taken captive, 'wept until her tears drenched the collar of her robe', but who, after living in her captor's palace, sharing his couch and eating 'the delicious meats of his table ... wondered why she had ever wept'. Life and death, vital considerations though they are, are here used to underline a more general principle. Before or after, inside or outside, or any other change in conditions is bound to effect a change in attitude. The point about death is not dissimilar from that of Socrates: it is something only the dead are qualified to judge.

The next movement of Chuang Tzu's thought is to turn to a discussion of dreams:

He who dreams of drinking wine may weep when morning comes; he who dreams of weeping may in the morning go off to hunt ... someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. (32)

The happiness of a happy dream, or the sadness of a sad dream, last only while the dream lasts. Pleasure or pain are conditioned by our environment and are a reaction; a change in conditions will cause a changed reaction. Any intense experience creates an illusion of permanence, but observation teaches that all experiences are impermanent. What we call reality is only what is subjectively persuasive; whether it has any objective validity is doubtful, but how could we acquire a standpoint from which to make an objective judgement? To be human is to be insecure about what is and to be denied the eternal; we must be content with what seems to be the case and understand that the only predictable thing about this is that it is in a state of flux.

To conclude this portion of my discussion note that these 'lessons' that I have drawn are an inadequate paraphrase. The way Chuang Tzu actually puts his case has a lyrical quality which it is better to dwell on and savour than analyse away. At this point Graham's translation sounds more sweetly than Watson's: 'You and Confucius are both dreams, and I who call you a dream am also a dream.' (33) Dreaming is a natural movement of the mind, unimpeded, unreflected, like the fish swimming or the bird flying. Chuang Tzu is not particularly concerned to find an ultimate standpoint from which to make incontrovertible pronouncements, he is more interested in enjoying the process, relishing the here and now, and performing to the limit of his subjective capacities. The twists and rhythms of his thought are satisfying as a display of imaginative virtuosity, even if we cannot always keep track of his precise meaning.

The art of writing, skill in a craft, retaining poise and balance, celebrating change and coming to terms with death all come together as different facets of Chuang Tzu's Way. The Butterfly story at the end of Chapter 2 suggests that his method is not to try and stand outside a situation and probe for the Truth beyond appearance, but to look at the situation from the inside, go along with the appearances, and change in accordance with 'the Transformation of Things'. He applies these techniques in his own art of writing and effectively describes his own approach by praising the skill of Cook Ting in Chapter 3:

all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-shou music. (34)

Even when the transformations involved are what would ordinarily be judged negatively it doesn't alter the application of the principle. Confucius articulates this way on Chuang Tzu's behalf in Chapter 5:

Life, death, preservation, loss, failure, success, poverty, riches, worthiness, unworthiness, slander, fame, hunger, thirst, cold, heat - these are the alterations of the world, the workings of fate. Day and night they change place before us and wisdom cannot spy out their source ... If you can harmonize and delight in them,

master them and never be at a loss for joy, if you can do this day and night without break and make it be spring with everything, mingling with all and creating the moment within your own mind - this is what I call being whole in power. (35)

In Chapter 6 the family of the sick Master Lai are admonished by Master Li: "Don't disturb the process of change!" Chuang Tzu dramatizes Master Li's nonchalance in the face of his friend's suffering by describing him as leaning against the doorway and having him joke about his condition through exaggeration: 'Will he make you into a rat's liver? Will he make you into a bug's arm?' Lai's response is philosophical (in the sense of consolation not analysis): 'if I think well of my life, for the same reason I must think well of my death.' (36) When it comes to death Chuang Tzu's standards do not alter. The next story has two sages singing in the presence of the corpse of their friend, much to the shock and amazement of Tzu-kung. Confucius has to explain to Tzu-kung that the sages have harmonized with death, and are giving a natural response to a natural process;

the fish forget each other in the rivers and lakes, and men forget each other in the arts of the Way. (37)

Chuang Tzu's attitude is summed up by Crandell:

[Changes should not only] be accepted without fuss, they should be embraced with éclat ...Chuang-tzu suggests that wakes be more festal than funereal... (38)

He advocates the abandonment of sober standards of conduct insofar as they impede the celebration of life's vicissitudes.

Assessing the various parables about death, illness, injury and uselessness, Crandell comments:

Chuang-tzu does not expound the usefulness of the useless in order to fix a standard which happens to be the reverse of the prevailing one. He does so to promote a cheerful indifference in the face of suffering, pain, and loss - an indifference that carries over to life and death, as well as the moral categories of right and wrong. Clearly, Chuang-tzu sees much in people's attitude toward life that is needlessly injurious to both self and others. (39)

The central descriptive phrase here is 'cheerful indifference'. 'cheerful' seems to me to be entirely correct since what Chuang Tzu recommends as a response to all life's challenges is the maintenance of mental equilibrium. However 'indifference' is rather weak and does not do Chuang Tzu's lyrical acceptance justice. There is nothing fixed about his grin or forced about his smile. He positively rejoices in change, which is more than a dispassionate tolerance. What all these examples point to is what Wu calls 'the mysticism of artless naturalness' (40), a motion through life that is swimming, flying, flowing and adjusting effortlessly to alterations of fortune.

Three: Pigs and fishing

According to Wu, Chuang Tzu's evocative methods of communication are the inevitable literary consequence of his philosophy: 'The upshot of evocation is freedom. Goblet words go along freely with the fluctuations of nature.' (41) One characteristic of his

expression is his readiness to abandon the abstract in favour of illustrations which are vividly particular. Often it is simply the liveliness of his chosen imagery which gives it its strangely humorous quality. In Chapter 22 Chuang Tzu gives his account of a conversation with Master Tung-kuo. Tung-kuo is confused by abstractions, the remedy for which is to be confronted by the facts of life:

"This thing called the Way - where does it exist?"

Chuang Tzu said, "There's no place it doesn't exist."

"Come," said Master Tung-kuo, "you must be more specific!"

"It is in the ant."

"As low a thing as that?"

"It is in the panic grass."

"But that's lower still!"

"It is in the tiles and shards."

"How can it be so low?"

"It is in the piss and shit!"

Master Tung-kuo made no reply. (42)

Tung-kuo pleads for something 'more specific' and gets more than he bargains for. The Way is not some topic for idle speculation it is an urgent everyday reality. Chuang Tzu's gentle mockery is at the same time a serious attempt to enlighten his questioner. The bluntness of 'piss and shit' punctures any high-mindedness and brings the discussion literally down to earth. Chuang Tzu continues in a similar vein:

Chuang Tzu said, "Sir, your questions simply don't get at the substance of the matter. When Inspector Huo asked the superintendent of the market how to test the fatness of a pig by pressing it with the foot, he was told that the lower down on the pig you press, the nearer you come to the truth. But you must not expect to find the Way in any particular place - there is no thing that escapes its presence!"

There is a temptation for thinkers with what Carl Jung might call an Inferior Sensing function to bandy about fine phrases like 'there is no thing that escapes its presence' without considering the implications. Chuang Tzu does not make this mistake; he is firmly in touch with basic realities. He does not make his case by referring to a hermit on a mountaintop, he goes to the extreme of commonplace daily activity: the market. He picks one of the humblest of animals: a pig; and concentrates on its most basic quality: fatness. Continuing to keep close to the ground, he speaks of 'pressing it with the foot', and he conjures a hilarious parody of philosophical enquiry: 'the lower down on the pig you press, the nearer you come to the truth'. This may well be true enough, though spoken in jest. What it might mean is that the more fundamental and vividly particular your language, the more evocative, and therefore, ultimately, the more accurate it is. This is essentially the technique of poetry. But he also wants to enjoy himself and not give the game away, so he reassures Tung-kuo in plainer speech: 'you must not expect ...' Any would-be philosophical commentators on this passage must ask themselves whether

their concerns have been anticipated and how closely they have already been caricatured as Tung-kuo.

Pigs are inevitably comical. If Chuang Tzu were desperate to construct a precise philosophical argument he would avoid the use of pigs as examples since they would detonate the seriousness of his case. So it must be, since he does use them, that raising a smile is part and parcel of the point he is making. In Chapter 19 there is a soliloquy from 'The Invocator of the Ancestors' contemplating the pig he is fattening for sacrifice. We have the familiar observation that position and perspective make a crucial difference. This time it is noticed that human preferences differ from animal preferences. Again Chuang Tzu's literary skill is used to dramatize the Invocator's ruminations. We are able to feel the proposed sacrifice almost from the pig's point of view ('spread the white rushes and lay your shoulders and rump on the carved sacrificial stand' (43)). Then we are taken into the Invocator's when he imagines a life of luxury as a human equivalent of what the pig is about to enjoy:

if I could be honored as a high official while I lived, and get to ride in a fine hearse and lie among the feathers and trappings when I died ...

Within the brevity of the anecdote we can still feel the Invocator's attitude to his career and his aspirations. Yet the whole passage is summed up in an absurd-sounding mock-philosophical conclusion: 'I wonder why I look at things differently from a pig?' This is where Chuang Tzu's genius has led us. There is no pretence of any great subtlety of thought; no high and refined doctrine suitable only for the disciplined and initiated; no profound paradox beyond the grasp of the normal human mind. What we have is a stubborn and laughable conundrum of deceptive simplicity in a memorable expression. How apt in Chuang Tzu's self-characterization: 'Words like these will be labeled the Supreme Swindle' (44), and how correct he is to assert that it will take ten thousand generations for a sage to appear who can solve his riddles.

Occasionally Chuang Tzu's metaphors are so vivid that the literal meaning is in danger of being lost or forgotten. This happens with another use of pig imagery in Chapter 24. He lists three classes of people whose lives are unsatisfactory for one reason or another: the 'smug-and-satisfied'; the 'precariously perched' and the 'bent-with-burdens'. The 'precariously perched' are compared to 'the lice on a pig'. We get a superbly detailed picture of their situation:

They pick out a place where the bristles are long and sparse and call it their spacious mansion, their ample park; or a place in some corner of the hams or hoofs, between the nipples, or down around the haunches, and call it their house of repose, their place of profit. (45)

And the danger they put themselves in is rendered equally vigorously:

They do not know that one morning the butcher will give a swipe of his arm, spread out the grass, light up the fire, and that they will be roasted to a crisp along with the pig.

The comparison could not be made more memorably but there is little clear indication of

which class of people it might refer to. Perhaps the satirical reference was much more obvious at the time it was written. As it is, we can draw our conclusions but the imagery of the passage will remain much more durable than any interpretation. In this case Chuang Tzu is more successful poetically than philosophically.

When the point being made is easier to grasp Chuang Tzu's deployment of his poetic skills ensures that his words have maximum impact. A good example occurs in Chapter 17:

Once, when Chuang Tzu was fishing in the P'u River, the king of Ch'u sent two officials to go and announce to him: "I would like to trouble you with the administration of my realm."

Chung Tzu held on to the fishing pole and, without turning his head, said, "I have heard that there is a sacred tortoise in Ch'u that has been dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honored? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?"

"It would rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud," said the two officials. Chuang Tzu said, "Go away! I'll drag my tail in the mud!" (46)

The first significant decision is the choice to dramatize the incident when it might simply have been reported (the king of Ch'u offered Chuang Tzu the prime-ministership and he declined?). This way we get to feel what is involved, what delights he enjoys in his private life and how undesirable is the burden of public office. Before we even know what is at stake the opening scene presents Chuang Tzu in a state of comfort and contentment. Fish, as we have seen, are a recurring image in the book. The delight they take in their element is a natural metaphor for life lived at one with the Way. Later in this same chapter we are to be presented with another riverside scene: Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu 'strolling' along, when Chuang Tzu remarks:

"See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That's what fish really enjoy!" (47) This instigates a sophisticated discussion over how we can know what fish enjoy but that doesn't concern me here. Chuang Tzu 'strolling' is at ease, and the fish are suitable as a metaphor for this ease, even if he is projecting his feelings on to them. So we know Chuang Tzu can experience serenity in contemplating fish. We can imagine that his 'fishing' is more a matter of relaxing and watching the river than of making any desperate attempts at a catch. It could be that he is practising his philosophy in the sense of waiting to see what develops and letting what is to come come. As it happens, the 'fish' that bite are two officials with their honest, polite and euphemistic offer. With Chuang Tzu's dramatic skill, before we get his response in words we are told his attitude by his body language: he holds on to the fishing rod and doesn't turn his head. When he does speak he continues to approach the matter obliquely. He calmly sketches a picture of the boxed and honoured sacred tortoise representing, perhaps, a state of spiritual death, and certainly a clear view of what would await him as prime

minister. With this he contrasts the spiritually alive tortoise, in a state of freedom, whose natural home might be uncoincidentally like his own, by the riverbank. Again, he does not just say 'alive' he gives an image which brings out what being alive means ('dragging its tail in the mud') and, as so often in the book, the image is tangible and earthy. The lack of imagination of the two officials is satirized by their predictable repetition of his challenge, which serves to underline the aptness of the tortoise image. This leads to the brisk and decisive conclusion, in which the point of the metaphorical excursion is revealed. After this we know not only that he values freedom, and that freedom means the avoidance of onerous state responsibilities, we have imprinted on our imaginations a sense of what freedom feels like.

Mair draws attention to Chuang Tzu's 'protean' character. Certainly his chameleon-like qualities mean that there is a temptation for critics to re-create Chuang Tzu in their own image and I don't suppose I am an exception to this tendency. I have tried to suggest not only that form is as important as content, but that so it would have been to Chuang Tzu himself. His oblique approach, his dramatic method and his choice of metaphors (particularly animal imagery) are not merely symptoms of the literary fashions of his time. They are of the essence of what he has to communicate. Vitality and freedom cannot be celebrated second-hand, they must be practised as an example to be followed if his project is to be successful and the world is to be rescued from drowning in its own turbidness.

The strength of his approach is that it respects the chaotic character of reality and makes no attempt to hammer out a stultifyingly ordered system. From this point of view any reader of Chuang Tzu would do well to ponder the parable of Hun-tun which closes the Inner Chapters. If we read him purely for pleasure and do not attempt to make choices among the multiple possible meanings we are perhaps respecting his own original and undivided unity. If, however, we attempt to analyse, select 'correct' interpretations and suggest potential applications we are in danger of doing precisely what he warns against, mutilating the text in order to make it useful. That this goes against the grain of academic culture is unfortunate but you do not have to read very far in Chuang Tzu to discover that he prefers freedom to fame and happiness to honour and I am privately convinced he would have preferred to stimulate a smile rather than a dissertation. Others have noted that he is poetic, playful and humourous; this essay is an attempt to be true to that spirit. Whether it says anything or whether it is just 'blowing breath' is not for me to judge ...

Notes

- (1) cf. Raymond M. Smullyan's (light-hearted) suggested opposition between 'crazy' and 'sensible' philosophies. (Smullyan, p.165) Since Chuang Tzu is clearly 'crazy' he requires 'crazy' interpretation.
- (2) cf. R. H. Blyth's characterization:

The writings of Chuangtse have not merely a witty and light tone throughout them, they contain a large number of anecdotes or rather just because of Chuangtse's transcendental intentions, there is much practical wisdom which makes us smile because of its orininality and surprising truth. (Blyth, pp. 24-5)

- (3) Graham (1986), p. 283
- (4) Watson, p. 373; cf. Graham, op cit. p. 283
- (5) Merton, p. 29
- (6) Graham, op cit. p. 102; cf. Watson, p. 305
- (7) Watson, p. 304
- (8) Useless words lead to 'wordless' teaching after the manner of Nature, 'a teacher in the sense of one who taught passively by the power of example' (Herbert, p. 55)
- (9) Watson, p. 269
- (10) Mair, p. 108
- (11) *ibid.* p. 86
- (12) Watson, p. 5
- (13) Cheng (1988), p. 53
- (14) Wu (1982), p. 21
- (15) *ibid.* p. 9
- (16) *ibid.* p. 42
- (17) Graham (1989), p. 176
- (18) *ibid.* p. 180
- (19) *ibid.* p. 199
- (20) Cheng, op cit. p. 3
- (21) Cheng (1993), pp. 97-8
- (22) Wu (1990), p. 26
- (23) *ibid.* p. 23
- (24) Watson, p. 3
- (25) *ibid.* pp. 45-6
- (26) *ibid.* p. 195
- (27) *ibid.* p. 206
- (28) Wu (1982), p. 136
- (29) Nor is his relativism egalitarian. cf. Hansen:
 For example, when Chuang-tzu talks of the differences in perspective between a frog in a well and a giant sea turtle or between a cicada and a giant bird, we need not suppose that he is taking the view that bigger is better. (Mair, p. 55) but it is clear that the soaring bird in Chapter 1 is *above* the 'self-pride' of the quail, with its limited horizons asking 'Where does he think *he's going?*' (Watson, p. 31)
- (30) Watson, p. 43
- (31) *ibid.* p. 47
- (32) *ibid.*
- (33) Graham (1986), p. 60; cf. Watson, p. 47

- (34) Watson, p. 50
- (35) *ibid.* pp. 73-4
- (36) *ibid.* p. 85
- (37) *ibid.* p. 87
- (38) Mair, p. 105
- (39) *ibid.* p. 110
- (40) Wu (1982), p. 137
- (41) *ibid.* p. 35
- (42) Watson, pp. 240-1
- (43) *ibid.* p. 202
- (44) *ibid.* p. 48
- (45) *ibid.* p. 276
- (46) *ibid.* pp. 187-8
- (47) *ibid.* p. 188

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