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史 CONTENTS

- 1 Stopping, Seeing and Language: an interpretation of Zhuangzi's *Qi wulun*
Jean François Billeter
—translated by *Mark Elvin*
- 33 Temple Lamentation and Robe Burning—Gestures of Social Protest
in Seventeenth-Century China
Chen Kuo-tung
—translated by *James Greenbaum*
- 53 Meeting the Celestial Master
Benjamin Penny
- 67 Tradition and Modernity: the Life and Art of Pan Tianshou (1897–1971)
Claire Roberts
- 97 Indigenizing Colonial Modernity in *Nam Bô*
Philip Taylor
- 129 Political Drama and Emotional Display—Self and Representation in the 1989
Protest Movement
Hung-yok Ip

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STOPPING, SEEING, AND LANGUAGE: AN INTERPRETATION OF ZHUANGZI'S *QIWULUN*

史 Jean François Billeter
Translated by Mark Elvin

You teach me nothing
if you don't teach me to do something
—Paul Valéry

The *Qiwulun* 齊物論 is the densest chapter in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, that in which Zhuangzi's thought is at its most difficult. It is also one of the most disconcerting of ancient Chinese philosophical texts. A volume would be needed to list the commentaries that have been devoted to it, and the interpretations of it proposed over the centuries.¹ After having tried for a number of years to understand it properly, I think that I have found *the position that one has to take* in order to see its meaning and its coherence—to see it, that is, from the angle that seems to me to me, to have been that

Originally published as (1) Tchouang-tseu, "Ts'i wou-louen. Que tous les discours se valent. Chapitre 2 du *Tchouang-tseu* (première partie)," traduction et notes de J. F. Billeter, and (2) Jean François Billeter, "Arrêt, vision et langage: essai d'interprétation du *Ts'i wou-louen* de Tchouang-tseu," in *Philosophie* 44 (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, décembre 1994): 5–11 and 12–51.

¹ There are two complete translations of the *Zhuangzi* into French. The first is that of Léon Wieger, in his *Les pères du système taoïste* [Fathers of the Daoist system], published in China in 1913 (Hien-hien: Mission catholique), and reissued in France by Cathasia and Les Belles Lettres from 1950. Often an approximative paraphrase rather than a translation, it has only a historical interest. The second is that by Liou Kia-hway, *Œuvre complète de Tchouang-tseu* [Complete works of Zhuangzi], published by Gallimard in 1969 and included in the *Philosophes taoïstes* [Daoist philosophers] series of the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in 1980. More serious than Wieger's, it still suffers from grave inadequacies. That by Jean-Claude Pastor, *Zhuangzi, Les chapitres intérieurs* [Zhuangzi. The Inner Chapters] (Paris: Cerf, 1990) has

/some charming passages but represents no progress in comprehension. The best translation into a western language is that of Burton Watson, *The complete works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968). That by Angus Graham, *Chuang-tzu. The Seven Inner Chapters and other writings from the book Chuang-tzu* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), is neither exhaustive nor always convincing in its details, but must be considered an important complement to Watson on account of its introduction and commentaries on the different layers in the work. Graham earlier published an analysis and a translation of the *Qiwulun*, "Chuang-tzu's Essay on Seeing Things as Equal," *History of Religion* (Chicago) 9.2/3 (1969–70): 137–59. I differ from this work on numerous points. I have also consulted the

/notes prepared by Paul Demiéville as a basis for his courses given at the Collège de France on the *Zhuangzi* between 1945 and 1951, which contain *inter alia* a detailed study and translation of the *Qiwulun*. More recently, Christoph Harbsmeier has published a translation of this chapter whose interest is primarily philological: *An annotated anthology of comments on Zhuangzi: Qiwulun* (Oslo: University of Oslo, Serica Osloensia 2, 1992). We may leave on one side the work by Kuang-ming Wu, *The butterfly as a companion. Meditations on the first three chapters of the Chuang Tzu* (Stonybrook: State University of New York Press, 1990). His translation of the *Qiwulun* is unintelligible, and his commentary incoherent. The Chinese and Japanese bibliography is too vast to be dealt with here.

² [Words due to the translator, and not found in the author's original text, are surrounded by braces, as here. Passages from the *Zhuangzi* have been translated directly from the French, without reference back to the Chinese in order to stay as close as possible to the flavour of the author's interpretation. Double quotes “/” are reserved for direct quotes from an identified source, for direct speech, and the titles of articles; single quotes ‘/’ are used for all other purposes. Transl.]

of the author. I have made a new translation of the chapter that I shall publish in due course with a critical apparatus and a commentary. Here I have had to be content with presenting approximately the first third and with appending to it the interpretative essay that follows. It is no bad thing to pause in this fashion over the opening section, where all the principal themes are already in evidence, and to scrutinize with the requisite attention the nature of these themes and how Zhuangzi deals with them.²

Translation

One Discourse Is As Good As Any Other—

The First Part of the Text of Zhuangzi's Qi wulun

³ [Lowercase letters in parentheses mark for reference a section discussed later in the 'Interpretation'.]

⁴ 'Nanguo' means 'southern secondary wall'. Such a surname seems to indicate that someone bearing it lives in the suburb to the south of the city, which is to say in the working-class quarter. In what follows I shall style him simply 'Ziqi'. He was sitting on a mat on the ground. The elbow-rest would have been made of wood, and placed on this mat.

⁵ (*Lai* 籟.)

1.1 (a)³ Leaning on his elbow-rest, his gaze lost in space, Nanguo Ziqi let his breath pass gently out of him.⁴ One would have said that he had lost his body.

“How does one do that?” asked Yancheng Ziyou [later], standing before him in attendance. “Can one really make one's body like dead wood and one's soul like ashes? I have [often] seen you in the past leaning on your elbow-rest, but never like this.”

“The question is well put,” replied Ziqi. “Did you realize that I had just now lost my self? (b) You have [already] listened to human panpipes,⁵ but [in all likelihood] never to the panpipes of the earth. And if you have heard the panpipes of the earth, you have [certainly] never heard those of heaven.”

“I have not,” said Ziyou, “but I would beg you, if I might, to tell me about them.”

“What is the wind?” Ziqi then said to him. “It is the breath breathed out by the great mass. It is better when it does not blow because, when it rises, all the empty spaces start to howl. Have you never heard these roarings? In the gorges, and in the canyons of the mountain forests, there grow giant trees whose hollows are like nostrils, or mouths, or ears, or beakers, or goblets, or mortars, or basins, or pits—and there is a rumbling and a groaning, and a roaring and a rattling in the throat, a murmuring, and ululations and weeping. One hears great ‘o's’ followed by great ‘oo's’, in a lesser harmony when the breeze is blowing and in a greater one when the storm is up. Once the squalls have died away, the empty spaces are unfilled [as they were before]. Have you never seen [how the trees at such a moment] sway and quiver?

(c) “So,” said Ziyou, “the earth's music comes out of these cavities in the same way that human music comes out of the bamboo tubes of the panpipe. But what of the music of heaven?”

“The music of heaven” answered Ziqi, “blows in countless different ways, and in such wise that [each being] resonates in accordance with its own nature, and within its own limits. But who is it who is blowing?”

1.2⁶ The sky turns round. The earth stands still.
 Sun and moon chase after one another.
 But what is it that controls this? What governs it all?
 What is it that, without exhausting itself, imparts movement to it all?
 Or is there, perhaps, some spring within that acts in a continuous manner?
 Or else, maybe, all turns of itself, coming to no term?
 Clouds produce rain,
 Rain clouds.
 But what is it that makes all this come forth?
 What, that without exhausting itself, unleashes this overflowing of joy?
 Winds rise in the north,
 Blow east, blow west,
 Or, whirling around, mount up aloft.
 But what is it that thus breathes out and in?
 What is it, that without effort, sets all in motion,
 makes all submit to its action?
 Let me ask you that!

⁶ This section is placed at the head of chapter 14 (*Tianyun* 天運) in the standard text. On the justification for this interpolation, due to Graham, see below, pp.9–10.

1.3 Great knowledge is ample,
 Petty knowledge narrow.
 Great speech is light,
 Petty speech nags.
 His souls intermingle in sleep,
 In wakefulness his body opens,
 Attaching himself to all of those things of which he has perception,
 Every day committing his spirit to [meaningless] battles.
 There are the anguished, the sly, and the wary:
 Whom small fears stir to activity
 And great fears grip tight,
 Yet they strike like the crossbow's [bolt] when judging
 of correct and false
 While seeming as if vowed to silence to keep a grip on their triumphs.
 [Yet] they pass away as autumn and winter,
 preying upon themselves each day a little more than before,
 so absorbed in what they are doing they cannot be recalled
 to where they started.
 They are as if enclosed in a coffin,
 growing dried out with old age, and with their spirits approaching
 death, nothing can any more revive them.

1.4 (a) Pleasure, rage, pain and delight, cares and regret, whims, obstination—seduction, ease, abandon, arrogance—musics that come out of nothingness, aethers condensed into ephemeral forms—all of this changing shape before us nighttime and daytime without our knowing whence it comes—and yet, enough! Enough that we experience it from dawn till

⁷ Literally, 'a true master' *zhen zai* 真宰. The word *zhen* 'true' has a particular sense in Zhuangzi's language, indicating that which goes back to the origin, and which acts spontaneously. For the moment I prefer to leave it untranslated.

⁸ Literally, 'a true lord' *zhen jun* 真君.

⁹ A free rendering of *qi zhen* 其真, 'his/its real character', 'his/its original character', or 'his/its spontaneous action'. While one can take this to mean that what is at issue here is the spontaneous action of the 'true master' I think that it rather has to do with what is inherent in the phenomena.

dusk, that it is that whereby we exist. But for such [phenomena] there would be no self; but for the self [these phenomena] would have nothing on which to take hold—such is more or less how it is, though we do not know from what they take their orders. (b) It is as if there were a master,⁷ but we can spy no trace of him. We can experience him, but not see his shape. All this is well and truly real, and yet devoid of any shape. To which of the hundred articulations {of the body}, or of the nine orifices, or of the six organs, all of which are within me, am I the closest? Do you hold them all in equal esteem? Or prefer some particular one, or some other? Or are all of them alike menials and concubines? But, cannot menials and concubines establish some ranking among themselves? Or could it be that each one in turn commands the others? Or is there, all the same, a master in all this?⁸ When all is said and done, no matter whether or not I understand how it may be, this will not augment what is going on, nor diminish it one whit.⁹

1.5 Once given his completed form, [a person] stays bound to it till his end. Bumping into things, and wearing himself away against them, exhausting himself at a headlong speed that no one can check—is this not a pity? He exerts himself for a lifetime without achieving anything, takes on tasks and grows weary without knowing where rest may be found—a matter for tears, is it not? "I am alive," he says, but to what good? His body passes away, as does his spirit—is this not something even sadder? Can it be that life is so stupid? Or am I the only one to be stupid, while others are not?

¹⁰ *Sbi-fei* 是非, or 'it-is-this and it-is-not-this'. Here, by extension, the term designates all oppositions between contrary terms that are inscribed in language.

1.6 [Were it only a matter for each of us] of following his completed mind, taking this latter to be his authority, then each one of us would have his own authority. Why should the only one to have such an authority be he who knows that everything is changing, and whose mind makes its own decisions? The idiot has [such an authority] as much as he has. [To wish, however] for there to be oppositions¹⁰ before the mind has taken a definitive shape would be [as paradoxical as] 'leaving today for the state of Yue and arriving there yesterday'. It would amount to thinking that something that did not exist did exist. How can you want me to conceive of such a thing, seeing that even someone like the divine Yu could not do so?

2.1 (a) Speaking is not the same as breathing. When we speak, we speak of something, but what it is, is never determined. So then, are we speaking of something [when we are speaking], or have we never talked of anything? If we take the view that our language is different from the twittering of birds, can we establish a clear distinction between the two or not? (b) How does it come about that the Way hides itself and that [the opposition between] the true and the false is born? How does it come about that language grows opaque and that we have [the opposition] between the

correct and the incorrect? How can it be that the Way can disappear and be no longer there? How can language exist while being at the same time inadmissible? The Way is hidden by individual views, speech grows opaque through its [own] superabundance, and thus it is that quarrels arise between the Confucianists and the Mo-ists, one side regarding as correct what the other side regards as incorrect, and *vice versa*. (c) [Hence], rather than defending the point of view that the other side rejects, or rejecting the point of view that the other side defends, it is better to have a clear understanding.

¹¹ A free translation of an expression for which it is not easy to find an English equivalent. Literally, *zhao zhi yu tian* 照之於天 means 'he illuminates it according to Heaven', or 'so acts that it is illuminated by Heaven', or 'receives its light from Heaven', in other words the natural appearance of things.

- 2.2 (a) Everything is at times a 'that' and at times a 'this'. If I adopt the point of view of the 'that', I no longer see [things as they looked from my point of view]. If I resume the point of view of the 'this', I [once more] perceive things [as I did before]. Hence a 'that' [always] proceeds from a 'this', and a 'this' always derives from a 'that'. This is why one says that the 'this' and the 'that' come into existence at the same moment. (b) Moreover, 'when we are [still] alive we are [already] dead'. At the moment when we are [still] dead we are [already] alive. [In the same fashion], at the moment when [a designation] is [still] applicable it is [already] no longer so; and at the moment when [a designation] is [still] not applicable, it [already] is. [Thus, a given designation] is now correct and now incorrect, while [another] is now incorrect and now correct. (c) Rather than rely on [these designations] the sage therefore allows himself to be guided by the way that things manifest themselves to him,¹¹ and consequently adapts his language to change.
- 2.3 (a) A 'this' is thus a 'that', and a 'that' a 'this'. There are the correct and incorrect from the point of view of the 'that', and those from the point of view of the 'this'. (b) But, this being so, are there, in the last analysis, a 'this' and a 'that'? The place where neither the 'this' nor the 'that' encounter their contrary I call the pivot of the Way. When this pivot turns in its socket, I answer with [either the one or the other] without ever failing, and there is no longer any limit on the use of the correct, nor on that of the incorrect. (c) That is why I said: it is better to have a clear understanding ...

Interpretation

The Title

This has been understood and translated in various ways because the syntactic relations that join the words *qi* 齊, *wu* 物, and *lun* 論 can be interpreted in several fashions. *Qi* is a verb that signifies 'to be equal', or more precisely 'to be of equal heights'. Through a change in syntactic function it can

take the sense of 'to make equal' (that is, of equal height) or of 'to consider as equal' (of equal height), in which case it has a meaning close to that of our 'to place on the same footing'. *Wu* means 'things' in the broad sense of this word, that is, objects, beings, and phenomena. *Lun* is a verb meaning 'to talk about something' or, more exactly, 'to judge things by means of placing them in a particular order of preference'. When used as a noun, *lun* indicates a discourse in which items are arranged in such a way as to make plain the differentiated value judgments that have been made in their regard. Among the different combinations that one may extract from these three words there is one that imposes itself because it gives the title a sense that corresponds to the sense of the text, namely 'to consider as equal [all] discourses on things', or, better, 'to recognize the equal validity of [all] discourses on things'.

Another interpretation that can be imagined is 'discourse (*lun*) on recognizing the basic equivalence of things (*qiwu*),' or, more straightforwardly, 'on considering things as fundamentally equivalent'. This title would also match the sense of the text since, as we shall see, Zhuangzi takes the position that all the 'things' that we differentiate are in the strict sense equivalent the one with the other in that they are all purely the effects of language. It is not likely that this is the correct interpretation, however, since the first seven chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, the core of the book and considered as having been the work of Zhuangzi himself, all have titles of three characters, and in the other six cases each character has a full meaning. Consistency suggests that it is thus appropriate to attribute to *lun* the full sense given in the first translation.

The Unity of the Chapter and its Organization

We do not know how Zhuangzi wrote the *Qi wulun*. Did he conceive it from the beginning as a whole? Did he assemble into a certain order texts originally written independently? Or are we dealing with notes lacking any sequence, as A. C. Graham thought? No Chinese commentator shares this latter opinion. Most of them perceive correspondences between different parts of the text, and note anticipations and repetitions that give it a sort of musical unity. None of them on the other hand is concerned with extracting a plan from it, and still less the elements of a logical demonstration. An additional difficulty is that the *Zhuangzi* that we know is the result of the reworking that it underwent at the hands of Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312 CE). It is possible that in the course of shortening and reorganizing the text he suppressed certain parts of this chapter. It seems that he may have removed some passages in order to put them in other chapters. As it so happens, one finds elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi* fragments that should clearly be reattached to it. An example is the paragraph with which Chapter 14 of Guo Xiang's text begins and which I have replaced near the beginning of the *Qi wulun* (1.2) following a conjecture due to Graham.

I am in agreement with Graham when he observes that the *Qi wulun* produces the effect of an improvisation of genius, but not when he presents it as a collection of notes without any sequence, since for my part I see an order in it. This order, to be sure does not operate in every detail, possibly because it was disrupted in certain places by Guo Xiang, but it gives the chapter a unity that I shall make evident in my commentary. Is this unity that originally desired by Zhuangzi? Or does it result from an arrangement given to the text subsequently? I am inclined to favour a pattern intended by Zhuangzi, or that came to him without his consciously looking for it.

I would distinguish four principal parts, which I indicate by the first numeral in the numbering. For the subsections of these parts, indicated by the second numeral, I follow the subdivision into paragraphs most commonly adopted in Chinese editions. Where I differ, this is explicitly noted.

Part One: Visions

The chapter begins with a scene in which we see Ziqi “leaning on his elbow-rest, his gaze lost in space, letting his breath pass gently out of him”—and thus devoting himself to an exercise in ‘meditation’. When he brings this exercise to an end, a dialogue commences. His companion questions him on the particular state into which he has put himself. The answer is odd: “I had lost my self.” Then, without transition, he begins to tell him about the panpipes of the earth and heaven. I shall return later to this brusque shift in register. Ziqi evokes with extraordinary power the music that the panpipes of the earth produce under the influence of the wind that swells then fades away. This masterly opening has been much admired but it has also put those explaining it into perplexity: they have had difficulty in saying how this storm is connected with what follows afterwards. Some of their explanations are ingenious, but none is convincing.

The reason for their embarrassment is that part 1.2, which describes the music of the panpipes of heaven, and so constitutes the natural sequel of 1.1., is missing in the accepted text. Part 1.1 ends abruptly with the question, “but who is it who is blowing?” The start of 1.3 follows directly: “Great knowledge is ample, / Petty knowledge narrow.” This break made the link between the opening vision of the storm and the rest of the chapter incomprehensible. Furthermore it gave the impression at the outset that this chapter was incoherent, if not in its inspiration then at least in its form.

Graham restored the continuity of the text by putting back, between 1.1. and 1.3, part 1.2 which starts chapter 14 in the received text. This idea is so simple and so logical that it is hard to understand why no one had had it before him. It has important consequences that Graham himself did not see because he thought the *Qi wulun* a set of notes without any sequence, and therefore was not concerned to study its composition. These consequences are as follows:

In the traditional text Ziqi told his companion that he was going to speak to him about the panpipes of the earth and those of heaven, but only described the music of the first of these. It was not clear what the second were, and the meaning of the whole passage remained uncertain. His answer is now complete and perfectly intelligible. It is also possible to see a continuity appearing between this answer and part 1.3 which, in consequence, is shown in a new light. Henceforth it is possible to see it as the sequel to the reply given by Ziqi to his companion, or at the least as a vision of the same nature as that of the earthly and heavenly panpipes. This change in lighting does more than just help a more precise understanding of part 1.3. It extends this understanding across all of the first part of the chapter, as far as 1.6, which now finds its place fully in the prolongation of the opening dialogue. This dialogue, which seemed to have only an anecdotal value, takes on major importance: it provides the key to all of the first part in letting us see that it is composed of a sequence of visions arising from the practice of meditation. This is the starting point for my interpretation of the *Qi wulun*.

Before we approach this interpretation, three questions need answering: (1) What was the nature of the 'meditation' in which Ziqi was engaged? (2) What relationship is there between this practice and philosophical insight? (3) What relationship is there between this practice and the visions of the first part of the *Qi wulun*?

(1) Let us begin by noting that 'meditation' is an unsuitable term because it suggests an *orientated* activity. To us it seems self-evident that one meditates *something* or *on something*. It does not occur to us that meditation might be, in its essence, a non-orientated activity, without content, free of any purpose, and thus basically unmotivated. Now this is the point that has to be accepted if one is to understand the practice in which Ziqi is engaged. 'Meditation' also has the drawback of evoking a *mental* activity. We imagine that it is necessarily the mind that meditates and that the object of the meditation is thus necessarily a mental one. We think that if the body plays a part in this kind of activity it is that of a base that, because of its immobility, temporarily vanishes from the field of consciousness. In other words, our idea of meditation is tightly bound to our dualist conception of body and mind. This is all the more the case in that the practices of meditation that our civilization has developed in the past, in particular in the Christian religion, have themselves been dependent on this conception.

All our views in this domain are linked to a particular anthropological paradigm. If we really desire to know what Ziqi is doing, we have to rid ourselves of this paradigm and adopt another. That set out below seems to me to have the greatest heuristic value. I am proposing it because it seems to me to offer us better access to the texts that we are studying, and also because of its intrinsic interest. It consists in no longer seeing ourselves as being composed of a soul (or a mind or a conscience) and of a body, but only of *activity*—using the term in this indefinite form deliberately. We consist of

activity that may take on various modes and which may, in certain cases and under certain conditions, be aware of itself, that is to say become conscious. This new point of view is easy enough to adopt when we are alone with ourselves and attentive to what is happening within us, but it is difficult to transpose to the level of discourse because our vocabulary is largely based on our traditional dualism and is forever bringing us back to it. In this new paradigm, when we speak of the activity of which *we* consist, the 'we' no longer represents a separate subject. The new paradigm does not admit of any entity exterior to activity. That which we term the 'subject' is not outside activity but within it. This activity perceives itself intermittently and to varying degrees, which is why we can say 'we', 'I' and 'me', and conceive of the idea of a 'subject'. Activity is primary; consciousness is internal to activity, being a sort of quality (an internal reverberation) that activity acquires in certain places and moments. When we interpret the experience which we have of ourselves in accordance with this paradigm, dualism disappears. There is no place at which to apply the dichotomy between 'body' and 'mind'. Since these terms and those associated with them will no longer serve, we have to invent a new language to report on our experience of ourselves and of the world.¹²

Let us now return to Ziqi. Let us try to describe in terms that are as precise, sober, and general as possible the practice to which he is devoting himself. Its starting point is an act of absolute simplicity: bringing oneself to a stop. One decides to stop, and at that same instant ceases to run after whatever it may be. One does not cut short all conscious activity, which would be impossible, but all *intentional* conscious activity. It is not an act that one can accomplish in a partial fashion, or little by little. It necessarily has the character of immediacy, since one cannot both still want something and already no longer want anything. Either one is in the realm of the intentional or one is not. This stopping is familiar to us because it occurs when we fall into a state of distraction or a sudden reverie, or are smitten by a surprise. The stopping in such cases is involuntary, but we can also try and effect it deliberately. We can even train ourselves to do it at any time or place. This apparently insignificant act may then have major consequences.

The standstill is not just mental. When we fall into this state of stasis or put ourselves into it, we immobilize ourselves. We put our directed physical movements into a state of suspension, since such movements are in their nature intentional. For so long as the stasis lasts, we take care not to make even the least motion, since any motion would risk giving rise to a directed physical movement and engendering an intention, hence setting us into commotion once more. Stasis includes both the mental and the physical. It is indivisible.¹³

When we fall into standstill, we find ourselves at a point where two roads diverge. The easy road is to let our state of surprise, distraction, or reverie last for as long as it is inclined to do so, and then to come back to our pattern of accustomed activity. A harder road to travel, a less apparent one, whose

¹² Phenomenology has begun to free us from the constraints of our inherited vocabulary, and has described in diverse fashions some of the data that this vocabulary has not allowed us to report. It has not done this, however, in the manner that I am proposing here. My idea owes much to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and to Michel Henry, but more still to the Chinese philosophers whom I have studied, foremost among them Zhuangzi. I gave an initial formulation of it in *L'art chinois de l'écriture* (Geneva: Skira, 1989), English translation, *The Chinese art of writing* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), a study of the practice of Chinese calligraphy. See in particular pp.136–7. I would note in passing that the notion of projection that I used in this work no longer appears to me defensible as it stands and needs revision. The present study shows the foundations on which this revision might be made.

¹³ In fact, the reality is more complex. The suspension of intention is compatible with a practical activity provided that this activity has been perfectly mastered and can be entrusted to the body in order for it to perform it in 'our' place. On this sort of phenomenon see my "Étude sur sept dialogues du Zhuangzi," *Études chinoises* XIII 1/2 (1994): 295–343, translated in *East Asian History* 9 (June 1995) as "Seven Dialogues from the Zhuangzi." See pp.28–9.

¹⁴ Henri Michaux has described this without any reference to philosophy or religion in his *Survenue de contemplation* [The onset of contemplation]. What matters at such a moment, he says, is to be “very wide awake and supremely detached.” Further on, he adds, “Have I known great detachment, very great detachment?—Once at least, such that I was now aware that along this path there is another way of seeing, a far-ranging way that has no need of one’s self, and that extends and prolongs itself unperturbed” He notes the “surprising importance of suppressing small movements. A humble beginning with immense consequences. Sustained resistance to the desire to move introduces the Unchangeable.” This text is included in H. Michaux, *Face à ce qui se dérobe* [Facing that which hides away] (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

¹⁵ According to Chinese ideas, expiration is the positive moment. It is by means of slow and controlled expiration that one makes the energy first accumulated in the form of air in the lungs pass into the body. Air and energy are designated by the same term, *qi* 氣. Air is one form of energy; energy is a sort of air. In technical terms, the more complete the expiration, the more it induces a subsequent deep intake of breath, and the deeper the intake the more respiration is able to slow down over time.

existence we more often than not do not suspect, is to prolong the standstill. The idea of so doing may seem to be self-contradictory since it amounts to wishing intentionally to abstain from all intention. Nonetheless, it is possible. We have within ourselves a sort of secondary will thanks to which we can maintain ourselves in a state of abstention. At the outset this is a weak and uncertain will, but it grows stronger as we make use of it. In order to make the state of abstention last, it is necessary to adopt a posture in which we can remain a long time without moving, and to allow the desire to shift to diminish little by little within us, and then to let it disappear entirely. When we reach this point, a far-reaching equilibrium establishes itself. Whereas, before, the slightest expressive physical movement risked provoking the reappearance of intentions and the consequent return to the external world, this danger is now removed. Mental and physical abstention reinforce each other, and become unified.

It would be a mistake to think that once this equilibrium is achieved, nothing more happens. On the contrary, a new world becomes accessible to us. The state of equilibrium unfolds itself, comes to life and begins to change.¹⁴ Since we have allowed the idea of acting or reacting to be extinguished inside us, we are now pure spectators—but of what spectacle? The external world has not disappeared, but has grown blurred; it has grown distant, and will henceforth be an indistinct and open periphery. The periphery of what? Of a central space that appears empty because we perceive it equally in all its parts, an emptiness that has its own substance, a soft and luminous presence. It is our own activity, entirely at peace, that perceives itself thus. It apprehends itself as an open space since, in immobility, the body has no more form and no locatable limit. Only breathing remains perceptible. It provides a point of reference and a means of action since, if any residue of impatience remains in us, any desire to break the calm in order to return to our usual agitation, to subdue it only requires that we pay attention to our breathing. We experience its beneficial in-and-out with a pleasure that deepens little by little, growing greater and making us forgetful of everything. As its rhythm slows down, calm increases. When it becomes imperceptible, peace no longer has any limits.

It is to this that Ziqi is devoting himself. His gaze is “lost in space” because his attention is turned wholly inwards. He lets “his breath pass gently out of him” because, when practicing calmness, one makes breathing out as regular, slow and prolonged as possible so as to “empty oneself of one’s breath” before each new intake.¹⁵ His disciple has the impression that there is an inert body in front of him and asks: “Can one really make one’s body like dead wood and one’s soul like ashes?” These images express perfectly the experience of someone who has ceased making use of his body and his mind, and sees them only as barely noticeable remnants. We have here the first occurrence of a formula that later became classical. We have to suppose that it was current in Zhuangzi’s day, because, otherwise, we could not explain

how it came to be placed in the mouth of someone who was not himself familiar with the sensations described by it. Ziqi answers his disciple's question laconically: "I had lost my self." He had, that is, lost sight of his social self, which only existed in terms of its relationship with others.

(2) But why does one practise this sort of exercise? Because of what it does to the organism, say some. It creates a relaxation effect that lets the organism restore itself more deeply than during sleep because it remains fully active and the energy that it generates is not spent externally but circulates internally. Others answer that this kind of exercise brings mental repose. Suspending intentional activity frees us from the effects of *anxiety* that poison our lives. It provides experimental confirmation of the first principle of Buddhist philosophy, according to which intentionality is the sole cause of our sufferings. This principle was not expressed in this formula in ancient China, but it is inlaid like a watermark in Zhuangzi's philosophy; Ziqi's exercise is a practical application of it. One may find a third answer in some of the passages in the *Zhuangzi* where this type of exercise appears to be linked to ancient shamanic practices. Training themselves in calm and internal disassociation without doubt helped ancient Chinese shamans give effect to their gifts as soothsayers and healers. A final reason for devoting oneself to such exercises is that they give access to a form of experience that many thinkers in China (as well as in India and elsewhere) have believed to be the ultimate knowledge of reality. It is this connection between practising calm and philosophical knowledge which is of relevance here. We shall understand neither the *Qi wulun* nor the thought of Zhuangzi taken as a whole so long as we do not have a clear idea of this essential connection. This may be brought home in the following manner.

When our own activity has settled¹⁶ and is directly conscious of itself, it takes on the character of a pure self-knowledge that "is given and received without its borrowing anything from the stuff of the world."¹⁷ This experience of pure knowledge is universal but may be interpreted in two different ways.

Someone who has had this experience can have the feeling that he (or she) has had access to a reality that exceeds him (or her). He may conceive of this reality as immanent within the world of everyday life, or as transcendent. He may choose a positive term to denote it, such as 'God', 'Being', or the 'Way', or else a negative term, such as 'nirvana', the 'void', or 'nothingness',¹⁸ or he may decline to give it a name. This depends on the cultural universe into which he has been born or on personal choice. At all events he imagines himself as having rejoined a reality that is vaster, more durable, and more fundamental than that normally perceived by the senses; and this idea is plausible. This reality seems to him to be vaster because, in a state of calm, the separation between the inside and the outside is abolished, the interior space opens into the space outside, and this unified space seems no longer to be bounded by anything. It seems more durable because it seems to him to be removed from time, even when changes occur and he observes them. And also because it

¹⁶ {The French reads "s'est décantée," that is, 'removed from the lees by slowly pouring off from the surface'.}

¹⁷ Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), p.29. Cited in G. Lanfranchi, *Paul Valéry et l'expérience du moi pur* [Paul Valéry and the experience of the pure self] (Paris: Bibliothèque des Arts, 1993), p.15. Valéry has other felicitous formulae for this experience. For example, "to feel knowledge itself, and not *objects* ...," and "the soul takes pleasure in its light without objects." See Lanfranchi, *Valéry*, pp.23, and 18.

¹⁸ By this I do not mean to say that these terms always denote this reality, but only that when this reality is given a name it is generally in terms of these designations or those of the same order.

¹⁹ Unlike most Chinese and western commentators, I think that Zhuangzi is a radically acosmic philosopher. This will appear a little further on in the analysis of his philosophy of language.

is the same each time he has a new experience of the state of calmness—being always as vast, light-filled, and fresh. Finally, it seems more fundamental because the perception that he has of it is a *complete* perception: he has of it a knowledge that is unmediated, adequate, and sufficient. Let us call this interpretation 'cosmological'.

The second interpretation is that which I shall sketch out here, and which seems to me to be the only one possible today. Only it is compatible with our modern individualism, with the much more precise knowledge that we have gained of ourselves today, and with the abundance of data continually being amassed by the human sciences. Only it is in accord with the idea, which today seems self-evident, that we ourselves *construct*, or ourselves *produce*, in one way or another, our vision of the world. This second interpretation consists in saying that in a state of calm we do not experience *the* primal reality, but *our* primal reality—*our* own activity that, no longer diffracted or refracted through anything, perceives itself in an unmediated and continuous manner. Our own activity is, in effect, the primal reality for us because it is through it that all phenomena reveal themselves to us, that our experiences of ourselves and the world take shape, and that every intelligible order is constituted. To contrast it with the traditional interpretation I shall call this the 'acosmic' interpretation. We should note that this second interpretation represents a step beyond the first in that it allows us to be aware of the illusion that is an inherent part of the cosmological interpretation.¹⁹

The implication is, in the first place, that all the phenomena that we perceive are modifications of our own activity, and, in the second place, that, by means of the practice of calm, we can bring it about that this activity can be purified of any element borrowed from the external world and apprehend itself in an unmediated fashion. Modern western thinkers have neither the experience nor even the conception of this unmediated apprehension of oneself, with the consequence that for them consciousness is necessarily the consciousness *of* something. This consequence seems to me to be of capital importance. It allows us to see that the conditions of philosophical research on essential questions are not the same for those who, like Zhuangzi and other Chinese philosophers, are acquainted with this pure apprehension of oneself, and those who have no knowledge of it. It next allows us to establish a relationship between our modern philosophies and the thinking of Chinese philosophers who were nourished by intuitions drawn from the practice of calm.

This relationship is not simply a negative one. It would be a mistake to believe that because some Chinese thinkers were inspired by the practice of calm this places them in a world completely separated from that of modern western philosophers. Even though these latter have not had the assured access to certain fundamental intuitions that only this practice affords, they have had at times these same intuitions in fragmentary or accidental forms.

Descartes, for one. His *cogito ergo sum* ('I think, therefore I am'), which we think of as a purely intellectual operation, can be interpreted as such an intuition. Descartes is looking for an absolute point of departure, an initial certitude. He doubts everything that has hitherto seemed to him to be assured in order to see if there is one thing in the world that it is absolutely impossible to doubt. He proceeds by elimination and discovers that in the end something remains that may be an appearance (he is not concerned at this moment with its truth or falsity) but whose existence is absolutely impossible for him to deny: namely, the awareness that he has of himself doubting.²⁰ This first feeling, this self-awareness of an elementary nature, he calls 'thought'. He does not seem to hesitate for an instant over this term. It is self-evident for him that this indubitable self-awareness is of the order of thought, or of the mind—but this is not self-evident for us. From the point of view that I am developing here, this self-awareness is our own activity perceiving itself. More exactly, our own activity perceiving itself when we have put ourselves into a state of pure receptivity. Now this is just what Descartes experienced: he felt doubt with respect to phenomena, in other words he ceased positing them as realities independent of his thought, contenting himself with observing them such as they manifested themselves to him. He paid attention to this alone and concluded by perceiving only the pure presence that 'doubted' or 'thought'. We should note that the suspension of intention, about which we spoke above, and the suspension of judgement with regard to the reality of external phenomena are two aspects of the same operation. Intentionality and naive realism are conjoined, appearing and disappearing together.

Descartes' doubt is thus the same act as the stopping with which the practice of calm begins. By prolonging his doubt, he soon arrives where all practitioners of calm arrive, namely the pure experience of oneself. And even if he did not go to the limit (of completely removing impurities) that tested techniques in this domain make possible, he at least had a sufficiently certain experience of this pure perception of the self to make it the cornerstone of his system. But he also betrayed it, to my way of thinking. Because it was a conscious experience, he treated it as an experience of thought.²¹ He wondered for a moment if this 'thought' might not be of a bodily nature,²² but only to answer immediately in the negative. He took the position of considering 'thought' to be the activity of the mind, and the mind to be a substance entirely distinct from the body,²³ thus reinstating the dualism from which he had been close to freeing himself, and giving it a new foundation. He had been on the point of discovering the corporality of consciousness, of admitting the basic unity of our incarnated subjectivity, and so freeing himself from the dualism imposed by scholastic philosophy. Seen in this way, a chance was thus lost at the very origin of modern philosophy. Instead of committing himself to the new way that presented itself, Descartes contented himself with accomplishing a revolution inside the ancient edifice. Searching for an absolute beginning, he thought that he had found it in pure con-

²⁰ Cf. R. Descartes, *Les principes de la philosophie* [Principles of philosophy] I/7: "That we cannot doubt unless we are, and that this is the first certain knowledge that we can acquire," in idem, *Œuvres et lettres* [Works and letters] (Paris: Pléiade, 1953), p.573. My inspiration for this passage on Descartes is the analysis that Michel Henry has made of the *cogito* in his *Généalogie de la psychanalyse* [Genealogy of psycho-analysis] (Paris: P.U.F., 1985), ch.1: "Videre videor" ['I seem to see']. My analysis, which I only sketch here, is based on slightly different premises.

²¹ Cf. *Méditation seconde*: p.279 "... at the very least, it is quite certain that it seems to me that I see, that I hear, and that I grow warm; and this is precisely that which in me is called 'feeling', which, taken in this precise sense, is nothing other than thinking."

²² Cf. *Méditation quatrième*, p.306: "... I am uncertain if this nature that thinks, that is within me, or rather by means of which I am what I am, is different from bodily nature, or indeed if both are not but a single thing."

²³ Cf. *Les principes de la philosophie* I/8, pp.573–4: "It also seems to me that this angle of approach is the best that we may choose in order to know the nature of the mind, and that this latter is a substance entirely different from the body." See also the *Méditation sixième*, pp.323–4: "And therefore ... I rightly conclude that my essence consists solely in my being a thing that thinks, or a substance whose whole essence or nature is only to think. And although it may be the case that (or, rather, certainly is the case that, as I will soon indicate) I have a body to which I am extremely tightly conjoined, nonetheless ... it is certain that this self, that is to say my mind, whereby I am what I am, is entirely and really distinct from my body, and may be, or exist, without it."

²⁴ I am well aware of the unusual nature of this analysis of the *cogito*. No doubt it will be objected that Descartes' enterprise was epistemological and hence purely intellectual. I think for my part that since the consequences he draws from the *cogito* are purely theoretical, we have become accustomed to thinking of the *cogito* as a moment in the theory, but that we may also think of it as an experience independently of the consequences that Descartes draws from it, and interpret it in terms that are not his. Descartes would not have taken it as the foundation of his theory if he had not perceived in it something that was not theoretical, not discursive. What I am proposing here is to bring together the experience of the self that Descartes had in the *cogito* and other forms of the experience of the self. I put the *cogito* into a different setting so as to see it differently.

consciousness, made this into the foundation of knowledge, and by so doing inaugurated the history of the philosophies of the subject that, from Kant to Husserl, have left so deep a mark on modern intellectual culture, and from which we have entirely to disengage ourselves if we are to tackle Zhuangzi.²⁴

No doubt it had to happen this way. In the *Objections et réponses* {Objections and replies} that follow the *Méditations*, the incomprehension that Descartes' intuition met with among his correspondents is very apparent, as is the trouble that he had to take to try to make them understand in what it consisted. It has become easier today to see where, without either being aware of it, modern philosophies of consciousness and Chinese philosophies inspired by the practice of calm touch each other.

(3) Having given some idea of the practice of calm and its relationship with philosophical knowledge, let us move on to its relationship with the visions at the beginning of the *Qi wulun*.

We are made into spectators by the standstill with which this practice begins. It could not be otherwise since we have no more intentions, though remaining fully awake. What should we do but look, listen, and feel? We do nothing else any more but we are not, for all that, entirely passive, for we find within ourselves this second will, which has already come into consideration, and which at first permits us to maintain our attitude of being a spectator, and then to orientate ourselves internally towards certain sensations or perceptions, rather than others, and to focus our attention to a greater or lesser degree on them, or not to focus it at all. The practice of calm thus becomes an initiation into the alchemy of the senses. We discover that we have a certain power over our sensations because in concentrating on them a greater or lesser attention, for a longer or shorter span of time, we act upon the conditions under which they are formed, develop, and metamorphose. In the course of exercising this power we learn the better to enjoy those which are pleasant and the better to dominate, by means of transforming them, those which are painful or disagreeable. It is a remarkable fact that bringing attention to bear on sensations frees us from them to the extent that it gives us the ability to act upon them. In the same way the attention that we bring to bear on our affective states allows us to enjoy them more deeply when they are happy and to free ourselves from them when they are unhappy, to the degree that it gives us the power to transform them. Because our sensations, perceptions, and emotions are all forms of our own activity, it is natural that we should be able to act upon them by our own activity.

We also discover that the internal spectacle of which we are the spectators in a state of calm is not unconnected with the spectacle of the external world. We initially see that the gentle incandescence that we encounter in a state of calm results from a power of manifestation that is inherent in our activity as such. This internal visibility varies in intensity and in extension, and takes on forms that are more hazy or more precise from moment to moment, but it is a single entity and constitutes for us a primary and fundamental phenomenon

because, without it, *nothing would be visible to us*. We observe that this internal visibility is in fact that of our dreams (giving them their evanescent and shifting light); then we discover that it is likewise present in our vision of the external world, that it gives life from within us to our sense of vision in such a way that what we see is visible for us.²⁵ By degrees, we realize that the power of our own activity to manifest itself is the shared, unique source of all that is visible, from the pure luminosity of the calm state to the most precise images of memory, imagination, hallucination, dreaming, *and of our visual perception of the external world*. This requires that we turn back to front the idea that we normally have of 'vision'. We generally consider that this is first and foremost the perception of the external world by our organs of sight, and that the word has thence come to designate either the capacity to represent something to oneself in one's mind, or the object that one sees in one's mind. In reality we have in us first and foremost a power of vision that sometimes, left to itself, gives rise to the images of the imagination, dreams, and hallucination, and sometimes submits itself to the information supplied to it by the organs of sight, producing in us the images of the external world, so that we thereby *see* the world. If it were not thus, how could sight communicate with imagination and dreaming? How could we exert an effect on our visual perceptions, as painters do? Experience shows us that we can modify them or transform them as we do our other perceptions.

When we submit our power of vision to the dictates of information coming in from outside, the visions that this produces are in general more sustained, more coherent, and denser than when we abandon our vision to its own devices. This derives from the consistent quality, the coherence, and the density of the information received. The experience of dreams, imagination, and memory shows well that in general vision is less consistent and has less matter in it when it operates on its own. But the reverse can occur. It happens (sometimes) that our own self-activity spontaneously rises to as high a level of organization and suddenly produces a vision as complex, coherent, and sustained as when it is 'under the dictates of the world outside'. It is at such a moment that we speak of a 'vision' in the strong sense of this term, that is, of 'something seen by the spirit'. Because the body itself is stuffed full of memory, and because as the result of acting 'under the dictates of the world outside' it has recorded the structures of the world outside, such visions can produce a powerful effect of reality. It also happens that, as the result of an even higher degree of self-organization, our own activity may engender visions that not only reconstitute our experience, but condense it or reshape it in a striking fashion, which causes them to appear more real than everyday experience. It is in such manifestations that the creative genius of the body shows itself most powerfully. They sometimes have a sacred character.

It may be that we ourselves are the only witnesses of such visions. Or, alternatively, that, as they develop in us, we communicate them to someone else by language or other means. If the person to whom we are talking is in

²⁵ This is what Merleau-Ponty saw. J. B. Pontalis writes in his "L'attrait du rêve" [The attraction of the dream] in idem, *La force d'attraction* [The force of attraction] (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p.39: "This is how I understand what Merleau-Ponty proposed with regard to 'the visible and the invisible', namely that the model or the original of waking perception has to be sought in the perception at work in dreams. Paradox: it is when our eyes are closed that we see most clearly!"

²⁶ In Billetter, "Seven dialogues."

²⁷ The narrator discovers the principle governing such experiences following a moment of extraordinary happiness that he has enjoyed in the courtyard of the Guermantes mansion, in *Le temps retrouvé* [Time regained]. As he places his foot on a paving-stone slightly lower than the others he recalls the sensation that he had felt long ago on two flagstones of unequal height in the baptistery of San Marco. He thereupon understands that the "miracle of analogy" that had occurred at other moments in his life had resulted from the matching of a presently existing sensation with the memory, recreated by the imagination, of an identical sensation experienced at another time, in the past.

²⁸ Paul Demiéville has studied the interrogative forms in this passage, and in passages 1.2 and 1.4, in a short article of 1954 entitled "Enigmes taoïstes" [Daoist enigmas], reprinted in his *Choix d'études sinologiques* [Selection of sinological studies] (Leiden: Brill, 1973), pp.141–7. In his view, Zhuangzi recognized the existence of a first principle but used the interrogative form in order to avoid naming it explicitly. It was in this context "a part of a sort of doctrine of verbal avoidance that forbade any formal naming of a principle considered to transcend all forms of expression." This interpretation is incompatible with my understanding of Zhuangzi's philosophy.

a similar state of receptivity, and his own activity starts to resonate with ours, a powerful form of communication takes place, with effects that appear stupefying to the ordinary consciousness. Certain dialogues in the *Zhuangzi* contain unforgettable examples of this, which I have studied elsewhere.²⁶

Another case deserves mention, that where the perception of an external event coincides with the vision of an analogous past event. The consequence of this is an overdetermined reality, or a 'surreality'. This is the vanishingly rare and overwhelming conjunction that inspired Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* [Remembrance of things past].²⁷

One thus enters into the realm of calm and into that of visions by one and the same door. This door is none other than the absolutely simple act of stopping. It is of this act, and its sequels, that we have to get some understanding if we are to tackle the *Qi wulun*, and see why, when Ziqi responds to the question of his companion about the deep calm into which he has put himself, he says he has 'lost his self', and then, without transition, talks to him of human panpipes, the panpipes of the earth, and those of heaven. The inconsequentiality is only apparent. Moving from the state of calm to that of visions is natural. By 'losing his self' he has become a visionary.

Think about the panpipes, he says (b). Recall how the player's breath gives life to the sounds; remember the melodies he causes to be born and die. Such is human music. Something similar takes place in a storm. When the wind rises, it makes the great organ pipes of nature resound. It gets carried away, then it calms down and lets silence reign once more. Just as the piper's breath produces the sound in his pipes, so the wind that has come forth from the 'great mass' produces the symphonic outburst of the storm. Ziqi proposes a causal explanation which his interlocutor at once adopts (c): the music of the earth comes out from the hollows in the mountains in the same way that human music comes out from the bamboo tubes of the pipes. He thinks he understands and supposes that an analogous explanation will hold for the music of heaven. Ziqi indeed follows up this analogy: the music of heaven is likewise engendered by a breath whose action makes all beings resonate, each one of them in accordance with its own particular character. But the comparison stops at this point, since who is it, in this case, who is blowing? He poses the question, but does not answer it. Questioning seems to be the only adequate expression of what he feels when faced with the show of phenomena, of his sudden thrill when confronted with the vision that he has of them. The questioning mode does not express doubt or uncertainty here, but rather the suspension of judgement that necessarily accompanies his vision: the absolute character of the vision arises from the non-intervention of the subject. The world becomes pure manifestation. It is born, swells, changes, and passes away leaving not a trace behind, as does a storm or the singing of the panpipes.²⁸

The interrogative form is taken up throughout passage 1.2. After the storm, which represents the music of the earth, Ziqi expands his vision to

encompass the revolutions of the universe, which represent the music of heaven. The interrogative forms that mark this evocation are a sure indication that we have still to do with a vision. Ziqi expresses himself with the authority of the seer. He is not discussing reality, but manifesting it. He reveals it to us in its original freshness. Zhuangzi reminds us here of Lucretius, another visionary: "I see action going on throughout the whole void Thereupon from all these things a sort of divine delight gets hold upon me, and a shuddering, because nature thus by your power has been so manifestly laid open and uncovered in every part."²⁹ That the universe should be an "overflowing of joy" (1.2) shows clearly that it is a vision.

The following passages, that is 1.3 and 1.4, have to be understood in the light of the two preceding them. After the vision of nature and the universe comes the vision of the human world, or, more exactly, of human subjectivity. There is no break between them as the visionary does not have to look in different directions to see the external and the internal worlds. The two show themselves to him within the space of his own body, the unique location of every manifestation. Having contemplated the universe from within, he observes the human universe from within: they are, for him two spectacles on the same scale. But are the visions of human subjectivity that constitute parts 1.3 and 1.4 those of Ziqi, or should they be thought of as being presented by Zhuangzi as his own, taking over at this point? It is hard to decide, and is of no great importance. Let us suppose that it is Zhuangzi who is speaking.

What does he see? 'Great knowledge' and 'petty knowledge', the first 'ample', the other 'narrow'. In the light of what precedes this passage, it seems to me that the former can only be the consciousness of the visionary and the latter the ordinary consciousness of the busy human being. The first is free, since through abstention it detaches itself from its own content, while the second is enslaved, since it is subservient to intention, cannot stand back from itself, and regards its content as reality itself. Passage 1.3 describes the lot of this enslaved consciousness, unable to stop so as to *see*, and to be the witness of its own activity. The person with such an enslaved consciousness, says Zhuangzi, "attaches himself to all those things of which he has perception, and every day commits his spirit to [meaningless] battles." The anguished, the sly, and the wary each become committed in the manner appropriate to their temperaments, but all alike are on the lookout for their own advantage: "They strike like the crossbow's [bolt] when judging of true and false," but "seem as if vowed to silence to keep a grip on their triumphs." Here we see appearing the theme of language to which Zhuangzi will devote the second part of the *Qi wulun*. Language creates dichotomies, such as the correct and the incorrect, that ordinary consciousness takes to be real oppositions, and that create insoluble conflicts of conscience. People waste endless energy in such futile struggles, and in the long run this wears them away, exhausts them, and kills them. Zhuangzi is here depicting the foolish-

²⁹ *De rerum natura*, 3.17 and 3.28–30. The poet is addressing his master Epicurus. On the visionary character of the work, see José Kany-Turin, *De la nature* (Paris: Aubier, 1993), pp.20–2.

³⁰ Once again I part company with Demiéville (on whom see note 28 above), who sees in the two questions about the ‘master’ a way of “indicating without naming a superior principle ... , a principle that is abstract, an absolute” (“Enigmes taoïstes,” pp.146–7).

ness that agitates human beings, harasses them, and wears them out. He takes up this theme again further on, in passage 1.5.

In 1.4 he turns aside from enslaved consciousness in order to tell us how the spectacle of our own activity appears to someone who knows how to *see* our own activity. (a) As our own activity always has an affective value, this show is at first that of our emotions—“pleasure, rage, [etc] ...” —also of the manoeuvres of the heart—“seduction, ease, abandon, arrogance.” All these experiences of ourselves are “musics that come out of nothingness, aethers condensed into ephemeral forms, changing shape before us nighttime and daytime without our knowing whence they come.” There could be no better description of the pure manifestation that is self-activity for someone who is *seeing*, nor better account of the fact that our subjectivity is not distinct from our own activity: “But for [such phenomena] there would be no self; but for the self [these phenomena] would have nothing on which to take hold.” But does such activity have a cause? Does the activity of our body (which as Zhuangzi explains explicitly in that follows is what is at issue here) obey some ‘master’? (b) No. In our vision we find neither a permanent nor a transitory director, nor any sort of hierarchy between the various parts, nor even some parts that have more importance than others as the result of some preference on our part. They all possess the same nature, and are all parts of one and the same vision.³⁰ Zhuangzi himself makes it clear, in conclusion, that the answers that might be given to these questions would have no importance at all.

In 1.5 Zhuangzi returns to the enslaved person who “becomes attached to all of those things of which he has perception.” Once a person has received his “completed form,” in other words his body, he “stays bound to it till his end.” Literally, “he no longer abandons it and [so] awaits his end.” The meaning of this sentence is hard to grasp, but the parallelism between “completed form” *cheng xing* 成形 and “completed mind” *cheng xin* 成心 that appears at the beginning of 1.6 following may perhaps furnish us with the key: what is of primary relevance here is not the body considered as an object (*le corps objet*) but the body in and of itself (*corps propre*). The enslaved person, who does not know how to stop or how to make himself the spectator of his own activity, is incapable of acting on his own activity in such a way as to transform it. He lacks this power of metamorphosis. He remains attached to the “completed form” that has been assigned to him as his lot, and passively watches its slow degradation. He congratulates himself on being alive but is inexorably overcome by death. “His body passes away, as does his spirit.” This passivity cannot fail to show itself externally in his physical appearance, bearing, and expressions, with the result that the term “completed form” also designates the body as it appears in the sight of others. It is a body in which no transformations henceforth show themselves other than those due to the underhand workings of mortality. Zhuangzi is appalled at the unawareness of the common run of mortals, at the ridiculous busyness

in which they live, and at the death that by slow degrees takes possession of them. For a moment he is gripped by terror: “Can it be possible [he exclaims] that life should be so stupid?” Clearly he is thinking of his own, since he goes on: “Or am I the only one to be stupid, while others are not?” The most frightening of all would be to have made a mess of one’s own life while others lived in bliss.

This doubt leads him to ask in 1.6 if the subjective freedom for which he has paid so dearly puts him above others. Do his ideas have more “authority” than those of any halfwit, because he, Zhuangzi, “knows that everything is changing,” and his “spirit makes its own decisions”? Are not the ‘ideas’ to which one holds in any case arbitrary? Zhuangzi then recovers his self-possession and takes up the question once more on the basis of the principle implicit in his notion of a ‘completed mind’ *cheng xin*. This literally means a ‘mind’ *xin* 心 that has ‘become’ *cheng* 成, or in other words taken on a fixed form, and might also be rendered as ‘a mind in a definitive state’ or ‘ideas in a definitive state’. What distinguishes me from the man in the street, says Zhuangzi to himself, is not that my ideas have more ‘authority’ than his do, in other words, that they are truer, but that I know how our ideas are formed in us, while he does not. One thing that is certain, he remarks to himself, is that our ideas are *formed* in us, that there is *a moment* when they take shape, and that this moment defines *a before and an after*. This observation is his point of departure, expressed in the bizarre and complicated sentence: “[To wish] for there to be oppositions *before* the mind has taken a definite shape would be [as paradoxical as] ‘leaving today for the state of Yue and arriving there yesterday’.” ‘Oppositions’ *shi-fei* are inscribed in the structure of language and the mind reproduces them when it submits itself to this structure. To suppose that these oppositions could exist in the mind before they had been formed there would amount to “thinking that something that did not exist did exist”—which is inconceivable. The over-contrived rhetorical question with which the paragraph ends is deemed to reinforce this last observation.

From the practice of calm we have passed to visions—visions of nature, of the universe, and of human subjectivity—and then to the contrast between ‘great knowledge’ and ‘petty knowledge’, in other words between a consciousness conscious of itself, watching in calm the spectacle of its own activity, and consciousness unconscious of itself, which does not understand the nature of this spectacle, taking it to be an independent reality. Zhuangzi has taught us that this {self-}alienated consciousness causes a wearing away, exhaustion, and death. He has explained to us in detail why this is so, and at least sketched out something of an explanation of it: language is based on dichotomies, the self-alienated consciousness takes these dichotomies to be real oppositions, thinks that in every case it is in its interest to take sides with one of the terms against the others, and then to defend its side against those who support the other side, thus being forever engaged with other self-alienated consciousnesses in conflicts that never attain a resolution. To put an end to these causal link-

ages, it is necessary to go back to their source and become aware of the conditioning imposed on us by language. The second part of the *Qi wulun* is devoted to such a critique of language. Paragraph 1.6 constitutes the hinge between the first part and the second.

Part Two: Language

³¹ See A. C. Graham, *Later Mohist logic, ethics, and science* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978). For a more rapid overview see idem, *Disputers of the Tao. Philosophical argument in ancient China* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), pp.137–70. See also Jean-Paul Reding, *Les fondements philosophiques de la rhétorique chez les sophistes grecs et chez les sophistes chinois* [The philosophical foundations of rhetoric among the Greek and the Chinese sophists] (Berne: P. Lang, 1985).

³² I propose 'correct' rather than 'true' as it seems to me to be useful to distinguish between a logic of denomination, which says of a term that it is 'correct', and a propositional logic, which says of a proposition that it is 'true'.

³³ Of his works there survive only the ten paradoxes quoted in chapter 33 of the *Zhuangzi*. See Reding, *Philosophical foundations*, pp.274–382.

In the first part we met the double term *shi-fei* on two occasions, and I translated it on the first of these as 'correct and false' (in 1.3) and on the second (in 1.6) as 'oppositions'. This term is composed of two verbs which mean 'it is this' and 'it is not this'. At all events it was with these meanings that they were used in ancient Chinese logic, in particular in the treatises on logic of the Moist school.³¹ This logic is denominational, in other words it defines the conditions that must be fulfilled if a term, applied to an object or to a factual state, is to be declared correct or false. In the first case, the technical term is *shi*, 'it is [this]', 'it is the correct term', and in the second case it is *fei*, 'it is not [this]', 'it is not the correct term'. Outside of a technical discussion we can render them by 'it is correct' and 'it is false'.³² Joined into a binome they have taken on the sense of 'the correct and the false' and then that of 'an opposition between two contrary points of view', hence of a difference, dispute, or quarrel. It is with this last sense that the binome is still used today. In the *Qi wulun* Zhuangzi several times uses it as the paradigm for all oppositions between contraries, and I translate it on such occasions as 'oppositions', by which I mean oppositions inherent in the structure of language or else the antinomies that this structure produces in our consciousness.

Almost nothing is known about the life of Zhuangzi, but it is possible to form a rough idea of his itinerary by careful study of the work that bears his name. He lived during the second half of the fourth century BCE, at a time when there was an intense intellectual effervescence and numerous schools engaged in rivalry and polemics against each other. It seems that in his quest for self-discovery he belonged to at least two of these, perhaps more, and later broke with them. He was the friend of Hui Shi 惠施, one of the most brilliant minds of the time, a savant possessing encyclopaedic knowledge, a politician who had directed the government of the kingdom of Wei, and seems to have been particularly skilled in the art of persuasion. Hui Shi had reflected on the powers of language, and on the need for someone who wished to use it effectively to adapt the use that he made of it to the constantly changing conditions. He seems to have been the first Chinese thinker to have entirely abandoned arguments from authority in favour of purely rational procedures of decision.³³ It was probably he who induced Zhuangzi to ponder over language and it was probably against Hui Shi that Zhuangzi little by little defined his own position in this domain, that which he expounded in the *Qi wulun*. He opposed Hui Shi's optimism regarding language with a

radical scepticism. His fundamental intuition seems to have been that the polemics to which the schools of thought of that time devoted themselves were essentially futile, because these schools *did not speak the same language*. What mattered therefore was not to come down in favour of the doctrinal position of one or the other, but to understand how it could come about that, seemingly speaking the same tongue, they were all of them able to talk different languages, and thereby to maintain what appeared to be different relationships with reality.

It has often been said, and often repeated, that Zhuangzi was a 'relativist' because he held that any opinion could be true from the point of view of the person who held it, and that, in consequence, all opinions were equally true or equally false. He went further than this, however. He tried to solve the enigma of language, that is to say of the relationship of language with reality. Having noticed that language is often an inadequate expression of reality, he wondered, first, if it might be possible to reach reality independently of language, and to find in it directly the secret of correct action, a secret that the contradictory maxims of the philosophers of his day did not convey to him. Second, he wondered if this secret, once found, might not allow one to act correctly in the sphere of language as well, or, put differently, to spring the trap that it sets for us, and to make use of it in full awareness of what we are doing. What mattered to him was not that one opinion was as good as another, but that our opinions, prejudices, and habits of language—our 'ready-made mentality' (*'esprit fait'*)—cut us off from the living sources of effective action, whether in word or in deed. He is quite different from a 'relativist'.

Zhuangzi gives us his basic intuition at the beginning of 2.1: "When we speak, we speak of something, but what it is, is never determined." (a) We talk of things, of facts, and of events that seem to us to be independent of language, but which, when examined, reveal themselves to be determined in their form by the form of our language. Should we infer from this that they are so many illusions engendered by language, and that this language never reaches any reality external to it? Zhuangzi asks himself the question: "Are we speaking of something [when we are speaking], or have we never talked of anything?" We do indeed have the feeling that we are talking of realities that exist outside of language, but are obliged to recognize that since the form of these realities is determined by the form of our language, they are in themselves undetermined. This is the starting-point.

Where does such an intuition come from? How does one reach it?—Through vision. The return of the interrogative form is a certain sign of this. This is how language appears to someone who, while listening to someone else talking or talking himself, suspends his intentionality and transforms himself into a spectator of what is happening: he *sees* someone else speaking, he *sees himself* listening or speaking, he perceives the words being uttered as if they were the twittering of birds; he hears them resonate in a world

where objects no longer have a name and will soon cease to have distinct identities. Having left intentionality, he beholds strange scenes in which the twitterings produced by others have the appearance of implying a reference to some defined reality that exists for them, but exists no longer for him. He can explore this phenomenon by making the moments of non-participation and participation in language alternate. He can let his intentionality revive, take possession of language, and bring into existence *{réaliser}* that which language means to say, and then once again to reduce its meaningful aspect either partially or totally. The more one is trained in the practice of calm and the more master of one's 'second will', the better this sort of experimenting succeeds. In order to hear nothing but the sounds [of language] it is necessary to have developed a powerful capacity for selective attention. One cannot isolate the elementary phenomenon of intentionality except by acquiring the ability to stop it and restore it at will.

But "how does it come about," wonders Zhuangzi, "that the Way hides itself and that [the opposition between] the true and the false is born?" (b) Put differently, how are the oppositions characteristic of language born, and how does it happen that from one moment to the next they impose themselves and hide the Way? We should note that the 'Way' *dao* 道, presents itself here as a reality that is perceived and then ceases to be when the categories of language impose themselves. How, though, does its occultation occur? "How can it be that the Way can disappear and be no longer there?" wonders Zhuangzi. And how does it happen that when the Way is no longer there, language in its turn 'grows opaque', no one knowing any longer to what it corresponds. More precisely, "how can language exist while being at the same time inadmissible *{irrecevable}*," in other words without there being a correspondence between it and something independent of it? 'Inadmissible' is *bu ke* 不可, and 'admissible' *ke* 可, technical terms in ancient Chinese logic, like *shi* and *fei*.

I do not think Zhuangzi asks these questions with the intention of answering them, but rather to draw the attention of the reader to a primary and irreducible phenomenon, and to induce him to stop before this phenomenon and *see* it. The interrogative form serves to make one *see* in the same way as the affirmative to which he then quite naturally reverts: "The Way is hidden by individual views," he writes. The term *xiao cheng* 小成, 'individual views', recalls the 'completed mind' *cheng xin* of 1.6. These 'individual views' are, literally, 'little things that have become so', 'little fixations' that cut us off from the 'Way'. When the relationship of language with the 'Way' is broken, it develops in accordance with its own tendencies, it proliferates, and it governs the mind wholly by its own logic: "speech grows opaque through its [own] superabundance, and thus it is that quarrels (*shi-fei*) arise between Confucianists and Mo-ists, one side regarding as correct what the other side regards as incorrect, and *vice versa*." The Confucian and Mo-ist schools were the best organized and the most influential of the period, and those whose

mutual opposition was the most notorious. They represent here the ensemble of currents of thought of Zhuangzi's day, and symbolize the general confusion that had thrown him into perplexity. He gives in a single sentence (c) the solution that he has found to escape from it: "Rather than defending the point of view that the other side rejects, or rejecting the point of view that the other side defends, it is better to have a clear understanding." This last phrase, *mo ruo yi ming* 莫若以明, literally means 'there is nothing equal to making use of clarity', in other words of 'one's own clarity'.

This formula is important because it contains the resolution of the problem that seems to have been at the heart of Zhuangzi's existence. Its importance is shown by the fact that he takes it up again twice in the sequel to the second part of the *Qi wulun* (though only once in the part presented here, namely at the end of 2.3). Including his use of three or four analogous expressions, he goes on to express this same idea altogether seven times. This is, as it happens, the structure of the second part of the *Qi wulun* (2.1–2.7): Zhuangzi presents seven times in succession, though using different terms and different perspectives, the vision that he has of language and the trap it sets for us; and seven times he proposes a solution that is in its essentials always the same.

This formula has proved awkward for western translators. Their renderings rest on doubtful conjectures and have little relationship to the context.³⁴ What ought to appear as one of the pivots of the *Qi wulun* remains in their versions something of a blindspot, and their interpretations of the *Qi wulun* suffer the effects of this. I think that the interpretation that I am proposing allows us, *per contra*, to give this term a precise sense, and that, understood in this way, it illuminates the text as a whole. This sense flows from what precedes it: in order to escape from anguish, to act correctly, and to live well, says Zhuangzi, one must not allow oneself to be caught in the verbal jousting of the adherents of the various schools of thought, but to break free from the grasp of language and 'have a clear understanding'. We should turn away from language, which blinds us, and rediscover the source of vision located in our own activity. We must not permit ourselves to be dragged along by the logic of discourse, but stop and *see*, that is to say feel, experience, perceive, and let the totality of our conscious and unconscious resources work together.

Zhuangzi saw that mutual contraries are a linguistic structure we project onto reality. He discovered other linguistic structures that we project outside ourselves. An example is provided by the terms 'this' (*shi* 是) and 'that' (*bi* 彼), which we use respectively to indicate an object near us and one further away, and which someone else, located on the far side of these two objects, uses to indicate the same objects but in a reversed order. Thus "everything is at times a 'that' and at times a 'this'" (2.2). Zhuangzi makes plain the reversibility of spatial relationships, and the interdependence of points of view that derives from this. He could also have observed that I say 'you' or 'he' to denote an individual who refers to himself as 'I', and says 'you' or 'he' when he is talking about me. He could have noted that I call 'right' what he

³⁴ Watson, *The complete works of Chuang Tzu*, p.40: "The best thing is to use clarity." Graham, "Chuang-tzu's Essay on Seeing Things as Equal," p.12: "The best course is to throw things open to the light." Idem, *Seven inner chapters*, p.52, and *Disputers of the Tao*, p.178: "The best means is illumination." Demiéville (MS): "Use your intelligence [vos lumières]." Liou, *Œuvre complète de Tchouang-tseu*, p.96: "The best is to have recourse to illumination." Wu, *The butterfly as a companion*, p.140: "There is none like judging things with the standard of the illumination of clarity." Harbsmeier, "Comments on Zhuangzi," p.76: "Nothing is as good as perfect awareness [of all sides]."

³⁵ Zhuangzi uses the pair of pronouns *sbi/bi* where ancient writers most commonly used *ci/bi* 此彼. In today's language this latter pair may still be found (inverted), as *bici*, in the sense of 'reciprocally'.

³⁶ Cf. Reding, *Philosophical foundations*, p.360. An alternative translation is: "When a being is born, it dies."

³⁷ It is, I think, this context that justifies the free translation that I have given for this expression.

calls 'left', and conversely. The relationship between the opposition of contraries (*sbi : fei*) and the relativity of points of view (*sbi : bi*) should have impressed itself on him all the more strongly because in his language, the same *sbi* was used to express, when functioning as a verb, the positive judgement 'it is that' (in contradistinction to *fei*, 'it is not that') and, when functioning as a pronoun, the relationship of proximity 'this' (in contradistinction to 'that').³⁵ What is more, the value of the pair *sbi : bi*, 'this : that', as a paradigm should have been all the greater because the pronoun *bi* was also employed in the sense of 'he' or 'the other', which brought the meaning of the pair *sbi : bi* ('this : that') close to that of *w● : bi* 我彼 ('I : he' or 'ego : other').

Zhuangzi also saw that language obliges us to use discontinuous terms to describe transitions or gradations that are in themselves continuous, and that the point at which we opt to shift from one term to the next is arbitrary. When we boil water, the moment at which we say that it is warm rather than cold, or hot rather than warm, is not objectively determined. Thus it comes about that "at the moment when [a designation] is [still] applicable, it is [already] no longer so" and that "at the moment when [a designation] is [still] not applicable, it [already] is." (b) This point is just as arbitrary when we only use the two extreme terms of a scale of values, such as 'hot' and 'cold'. It seems that Zhuangzi conceived of the transition from life to death, and vice versa, in the same fashion: it was a progressive transition in which no criterion allowed one to determine in a precise way when one ceased and the other began. Hui Shi, who taught that "when a being is [still] alive, he is [already] dead,"³⁶ appears to have formed the same idea about this.

The sage, concludes Zhuangzi (c), knows that arbitrariness is the very essence of language and therefore does not allow himself to be taken in by the illusions engendered by language. When he makes a judgement and acts, he does not confine himself within the categories of discourse, but "allows himself to be guided by the way that things manifest themselves to him."³⁷ This conclusion is close to the "it is better to have a clear understanding" with which the preceding paragraph ends: the sage lets himself be guided by the manifestation of things because he *sees* this manifestation. Zhuangzi adds that when the sage does use speech, he "adapts his language to these changes [in reality]." This last expression is a free—and somewhat ponderous—rendering of *yinsbi* 因是, an elegant term created by Zhuangzi that has the literal meaning: *yin*, 'embracing change' or 'according to the circumstances', plus *sbi*, 'posit that it is that', or in other words 'posit that such is the sense of the word that one is using.' In place of letting himself be confined within the conventionally accepted meanings of words, the sage acts in such a way that they receive their meaning from the situation in which he uses them, and in return the words act back upon the situation. He uses them in a way that is non-dogmatic, inventive, and effective.

In the following paragraph (2.3) Zhuangzi sums up. 'This' and 'that' are

interchangeable; each point of view may be replaced by a different point of view; from each point of view there derives a different division between 'correct' and 'false'; language is arbitrary in its essence. (a) But how is this arbitrariness born? This is an enigma. Again, are the different points of view to which language gives rise real or unreal? To what sort of reality do they belong? This is, once more, an enigma. These points of view force themselves upon us when we make use of language, but appear as meaningless conventions the moment we contemplate linguistic activity from outside. Either we play the game of language and language has meaning, or we stop playing and language loses its meaning: there is no meaning except in what is done [*en acte*]. This is a primary and completely irreducible datum. It is striking that Zhuangzi reverts to the question form to make this point: "Are there," he asks himself, "in the last analysis, a 'this' and a 'that'?" (b).

It is still more remarkable that he does not stop there. Zhuangzi in no way concludes from the arbitrary character of language that it is powerless or useless. He draws the conclusion that there are two ways to make use of it: the way of those who are unaware of its arbitrary nature, or pretend to be, and wish to make what they say pass for objectively true (being thus dogmatic in either a naïve or else a cynical fashion), and the way of those who acknowledge its arbitrary nature, do not claim to talk of *what is*, and speak all the more freely in consequence. What interests Zhuangzi above all is effective speech, namely that which comes from a correct understanding of the situation and, coming at the appropriate moment, at once modifies this situation. He gives a name to the place whence this speech emerges: "The place where neither the 'this' nor the 'that' encounter their contrary I call the pivot of the Way (*daoshu* 道術)." The speech that springs from this place is not a discursive reply to speech preceding it, but an act that modifies a situation where it is of no great importance whether language may or may not have been playing a part. "When this pivot turns in its socket," Zhuangzi goes on, "I answer ... without ever failing." The image of the pivot suggests both a mobility in reaction and a way of resting within oneself that makes such mobility possible. To react properly, it is necessary to see the situation in all its changing complexity and, to that end, to rest within oneself and *see*. "When this pivot turns in its socket," says Zhuangzi, literally, "I react" *ying* 應, without ever failing. He does not use the verb *da* 答, which means to 'respond' to speech with speech, but *ying*, which has the sense of 'reacting' to an action or a change in the situation. He thus puts back the use of speech into {the context of} our activity.

We should note the reappearance of the 'Way' in a term that indicates a language act, though one freed from the constraints of language. When I have attained this degree of activity, Zhuangzi in effect says, I am quite free to use language and its dichotomies as the moment requires: "there is no longer any limit on the use of the correct, nor on that of the incorrect." This in no way means that I am using language at random, since, if I speak, it is

³⁸ It appears to me that Graham was wrong to speak constantly of Zhuangzi's 'anti-rationalism' and of his 'rejection of logic'. See Graham, *Seven inner chapters*, pp.9–14, and idem, *Disputers of the Tao*, pp.176–83.

³⁹ See the study that I am preparing on the phenomena of apprenticeship and the integration of activity as they appear in the *Zhuangzi*, under the provisional title "Artisans in the *Zhuangzi*."

to make myself understood. I am mistreating neither its structures nor the laws of logic, but rather taking advantage of them to produce the most concentrated and striking effects possible. I let the logical mechanisms that rational thought sets out in a temporal sequence discharge at almost the same moment. Since logic is inherent in language, it is present in all effective language. It is self-evident for Zhuangzi that respect for logic is necessary for the effective use of speech.³⁸ What matters, in his eyes, is that speech should arise from a true vision of the situation in which it presented. Hence his return to the earlier conclusion (c): "That is why I said: it is better to have a clear understanding."

Isn't there a difficulty here? Doesn't this presuppose that one can *see* a situation, in other words maintain oneself face-to-face with it, with the attitude of a spectator in whom *all intentionality is suspended*, and at the same time act *with a certain intentionality*? Haven't I said that the condition of intentionality is not compatible with that in which intentionality is suspended?—I did so to indicate the absolute and immediate character of the cessation by which we pass from the first to the second. To be completely precise, I should have said that there is an absolute incompatibility between these two states at the same level of activity, but that our activity can develop simultaneously on several levels, and does this very often without our being clearly aware of it. Our interaction with the world outside can take place on two, or even more, planes. Zhuangzi envisages here the case where we maintain ourselves in an attitude of complete suspension of intentionality at the higher level while at the lower level allowing our activity to react by itself to outside events. This is the twofold form of activity that we take on when we play at tennis or table-tennis, for example: we are at one level impassive spectators, and, at another, effective actors. This is the twofold activity that Zhuangzi recommends when we are making use of speech: it is effective when we maintain, at the upper level, an undivided attention towards all that is said and done around us, and allow our lower-level processes to concern themselves with reacting and responding. We are then placed at the 'pivot of the Way'.

We should take note that this two-level condition is only possible if the activity that we mobilize for reactions such as the manipulation of a racket, or speech, and so on, is perfectly integrated, and integrated in such a way that we can entrust it entirely to the lower-level processes of the active body.³⁹ When this takes place, there is a similarity between the calm that I am practising in a state of immobility and that which I am practising in my actions. In the first case, I am the observer of my self-activity which has been allowed to settle free of impurities, quietened down, and separated from what is outside; in the second, of an active activity, directed towards goals, and interacting with the world outside—but the impassivity is the same in both. In neither case, it has to be remembered, am I the *external* witness of the spectacle of my own activity. The observer is not separated from the show

in the way that the eye is from a theatrical performance. Rather, one is inside the show, and observation is a sort of impassivity within one's own activity which lets this activity perceive itself as motion and change.

Provisional Conclusion

This commentary on approximately the first third of the *Qi wulun* has laid the foundations for an interpretation of the text as a whole. What subsequently follows in the chapter contributes important and sometimes surprising developments but all of them, in one way or another, extend or deepen the ideas introduced at the beginning. These developments can be summed up as follows: in the remainder of the second section, which is the longest, Zhuangzi expands and refines his analysis of language; in the third section, he deals with the behaviour of the sage who has freed himself from the dominion of language and has attained 'great knowledge'; and in the fourth he himself returns to 'great knowledge', in other words to the visionary understanding of human existence, and enriches this understanding with new harmonic overtones.

I will conclude with two points that complete my exposition of Zhuangzi's philosophy of language. These are based on two passages from the later parts of the *Qi wulun*, namely 2.6 and 3.1.

Feeling that the polemics to which the doctrinal schools of his time devoted themselves were futile because they did not talk the same language, Zhuangzi asked himself how it could happen that so many different languages, implying differing relationships with reality, and indeed differing definitions of reality in general and of man in particular, could be born from one and the same tongue. This led him to ponder over the essence of language. What is remarkable is that he did not answer the question with an explanatory myth, or with abstract speculation, but with the observation of what in fact happens when we speak—a much more difficult feat. To do that, he had to resist being carried away by language. To make such observations we have, in our turn, to rid ourselves not only of our linguistic habits, but of our habit of having recourse to language as such. We have to suspend intentionality within ourselves, to practise standstill—not to allow ourselves to roam far beyond the frontiers of language, this time, but in order to stay close to it and observe it near to.

When we put ourselves so to speak upstream of language in this way, we have a choice: either we can let intentionality, and its companion, speech, be reborn at once within us, or else we can keep ourselves on the far side of language, in a state of abstention. By alternating between these two states, and attentively comparing the impressions that they make on us, we can observe that reality shows itself in two contrasting modes. When we enter into the language mode, we *conceive of* reality to a much greater extent than

⁴⁰ I am moving forward here between numerous hidden hazards. What I am saying here holds within the context of the experiment described, where we assume the body to be motionless, and in which we are in stasis. When we act and make expressive movements {*gestes*} then, to the contrary, the world is structured by the intentionality implied by our expressive movements and by the external disposition of the body.

⁴¹ *Wei shi you wu* 未始有物

⁴² Some interpret this passage as listing the stages of a historical evolution, rather than as the enumeration of levels of knowledge. I doubt if this is sustainable. Harbsmeier, *Comments on Zhuangzi*, pp.106–7, for his part sees this passage as the description of a process whereby things were engendered, or rather of what the sages believed regarding each one of its phases. In my view, such a reading is not defensible.

we *see* it. We conceive of it through language, and if we intermittently perceive it at all, it is still through language. In this mode of activity we *believe in* the reality of the things of which we speak; we *suppose that* the world is as language represents it. When, *per contra*, we are in the mode of abstention, language disappears, and we begin to *see* reality. No longer subject to the forms of language, reality becomes once more for us a show that is wordless, uncommitted {*vierge*}, unmotivated, weightless, and unstable—“musics that come out of nothingness, aethers condensed into ephemeral forms.” (1.4) As we change from one mode to the other, we discover that reality does not possess stable forms or defined structures other than those given to it by our language.⁴⁰ This is Zhuangzi’s fundamental intuition, summed up in the paradox: “When we speak, we speak of something, but what it is, is never determined” (2.1).

He expresses this in an even more paradoxical fashion in the following passage:

2.6 (a) The men of long ago attained an ultimate degree of knowledge. What ultimate degree? Some of them thought that *there have never been things*.⁴¹ These had reached the supreme understanding, so complete that there is nothing more to add. Others thought that there are things but there have never been limits {bounding them}. Others again believed that there are {such} limits, but that there has never been [real opposition between] the true and the false.⁴² Now, when these oppositions get the upper hand, the Way is hidden from sight. To the degree that the Way is hidden from sight, attachments impose themselves. In the last analysis, however, is there such an occultation or such an imposition? Or neither the one nor the other?

The ultimate point of knowledge consists in the realization that “there have never been things.” Let us try to grasp the full meaning of this extraordinary assertion. Zhuangzi is affirming that there have never been *in themselves* distinct things that correspond to the distinctions made by language. There is certainly *a reality* outside of us, but the appearance of the distinct and stable entities we term ‘things’ *wu* 物 within this reality is an artefact of language. It is language that by introducing into reality demarcations, distinctions, oppositions, and suchlike, has created ‘things’ at the same time as giving them names and establishing logical relations between them. Thus, for example, there are certainly differences of temperature in reality (which are measurable) but the distinctions ‘hot/warm/cold’, or the oppositions ‘hot : cold’, ‘it is hot : it is not hot’, and ‘it is hotter : it is less hot’, that allow us to think about this aspect of reality and to speak about it, are artefacts of language. To be fully conscious of this we have to stop moving within language as we are accustomed to do, and to go back, in either memory or imagination, to that moment when we first grasped the meaning of the words ‘hot’ and ‘cold’, and acquired them for our own. We have to rediscover how our world altered at that moment, and thus recapture in living form the world-creating power of language {*le pouvoir démiurgique du langage*}.

Let us try to get hold of this idea by means of another example: let us ask how we learned that there are 'stars'. Suppose that we have noticed that on certain nights there is something like dust in the sky, and that the adult who accompanied us has taught us that *that* has a name, that it is thus a recognized 'thing' about which one may speak. At the same time we will have learned that these are 'stars', and hence distinct and denumerable 'things' (in the plural number). We will have learned that these stars possess names, that they are identifiable, and may be repeatedly located amid the disorder of the heavens because they are parts of patterns known as 'constellations'. There, where there had been nothing defined or sayable, language has created 'things' and at the same time a 'world'. This is our world, the one that we have seen from that time on, that of which we speak, and which appears to us to have existed in this form since all eternity.

The sequence I have sketched is plausible but it is more likely that in fact the word preceded the thing. One night an adult may have asked me if I could see the 'stars', and showed me what he meant by that. Or told me a story about travel between the stars and so given me, with the word, a preliminary idea of the thing. Or else he may have showed me a star in a picture-book. It is more often in this wise that we leave behind *infantia*, that age of life in which, since the names of things do not yet exist, the things themselves likewise have no existence.⁴³ We return to this state when we put language aside, or when language deserts us, leaving us marvelling or terrified before an unnamable reality. Such was the horror that Alberto Giacometti seems to have felt in the midst of the Atlantic when coming home from New York:

What can one say here, in the middle of this ocean that has neither an end nor a name? In the midst of this black water in which I might founder and be devoured by blind and *nameless* fish?⁴⁴

Paragraph 2.6 (a) is exceptionally dense, and I shall only dwell here on one of the questions that it poses, namely, what is the attitude adopted toward language by those who have 'attained the ultimate state of knowledge'? What, in the last analysis, is the attitude recommended by Zhuangzi? One might be tempted to suppose that his distrust of language would have finally led him to condemn it without appeal and to produce an apologia for silence. There is no doubt but that there are texts in the *Zhuangzi* that can be interpreted in this sense, even in the portions attributed to Zhuangzi himself. In the *Qi wulun*, however, and passages from other chapters that support it on this point, his position is subtler and more powerful. This position grows logically from his vision of language. It may be sketched as follows: if there are no 'things' in themselves, but only as a result of language, then language fulfils a crucial function in that it creates that semblance of structured reality required by members of a human community to understand each other and cooperate. The drama arises from its being simultaneously the means of understanding and cooperation on the one hand, and of misunderstanding

⁴³ It would be a mistake to infer from this that the infant who does not yet speak lives in a shapeless world. Even the babe-in-arms makes a distinction between cold and hot, for example: he expresses his preferences, makes choices, from the outset placing the expression of his preferences and needs in a structured system of relations. He has nonetheless still to cross the decisive threshold of language, which gives him access to realities that are absent or fictional, and makes their preservation possible.

⁴⁴ Emphasis added. A little further on he says: "It is impossible to concentrate on anything. The ocean invades everything. For me it is nameless, even if these days it is called the Atlantic. For millions of years it had no name, and one day will no longer have one again—an ocean endless and blind, and as savage as it is today for me." See the extract from "Notes sur les copies" [Notes on copies] (1965) reprinted in idem, *Écrits* [Writings] (Paris: Hermann, 1990), pp. 96–7. One finds comparable moments in others of his writings, such as his "Paris sans fin" [Endless Paris] in *Écrits*, pp. 92–3: "... the entire city, which suddenly became a vast unknown for one to walk across, and to discover, this limitless richness all about one, everywhere," followed at the end by an evocation of the Jardin des Plantes [the Paris Botanic Gardens and Natural History Museum] and the "desolation of the room displaying *nameless* snakes."

⁴⁵ I follow the reading proposed by Graham in *Seven Inner Chapters*, p.57. See the booklet published following this translation, *Chuang-tzu, textual notes to a partial translation* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1982), pp.8–9.

⁴⁶ In other words, when one contrasts two opposed positions in a debate, there always remains something that transcends the terms of the debate.

⁴⁷ *Bian ye zhe, you bu jian ye* 辯也者，有不見也 literally means ‘when one puts into opposition [or distinguishes between] two contraries, there are [then] [things that] one does not see’, or according to a different reading, ‘things that do not appear’.

⁴⁸ The place accorded in this passage to comments made on “What is going on within the world” and to passing judgments on the annals has prompted certain commentators to see here an interpolation inspired by Confucianism. If my interpretation of them is correct, it would seem that this hypothesis is not required.

and conflict on the other. It is thus because of its very essence, which is to be arbitrary. If an organized reality existed independently of language, and if the role of language were simply to describe or represent this reality, language disagreements could be resolved, since all that would be necessary would be to go back from language to the things in order to reach a decision. Since language is arbitrary, however, it is inevitable that different people will make different uses of it, and that these uses will give rise to organized realities that are mutually incompatible. The temptation is to want to put an end to conflicts by imposing a unique language, which implies a unique definition of reality. Any undertaking of this sort is destined to fail. The converse temptation, namely to wish to do without language, is likewise based on illusion. The only possible solution is to make use of it while being aware of what is happening, that is to say taking simultaneously into account its practical necessity and its fundamentally arbitrary nature. This is the attitude advocated by Zhuangzi at the beginning of the third part of the *Qi wulun*:

3.1 (a) The Way has never had limits; language has never been constant. Only when something has been posited is there a delimitation (defining it). (b) Well now, let us talk about delimitations: one may localize and circumscribe,⁴⁵ one may put into a hierarchy and pass judgement, one may make divisions and contrast [one thing with another], and one may [put things into] competition or conflict—such are the eight powers [that we possess]. (c) The sage is aware of what is going on outside the world but does not comment on it. He comments on what is going on within the world, but does not pass judgement. He does pass judgement on what the annals say about the government of the kings of ancient times but avoids being drawn into any dispute about it. [For] when one makes divisions, there [always] remains something undivided. When one puts things into opposition, there [always] remains something outside the opposition.⁴⁶ But what is this [that remains]? you will ask me. It is that which the sage keeps within himself while ordinary human beings take opposing points of view so as to brag about it. It is for this reason that I say that to put two contraries into opposition is to lose sight of something.⁴⁷

Zhuangzi explicitly recognizes that language confers on us the power to organize reality and to speak about the reality that has been thus organized—to comment, for example, on what is going on within the world, or to pass judgement on history.⁴⁸ This power is essentially that of delimiting (*fen* 分), that is, to make transects through the heart of reality and thus to establish distinctions or oppositions (*bian* 辯). When he says that “the Way has never had limits,” he means internal limits. The word that he uses here is *feng* 封, which originally meant the earthen levees that marked the frontiers of the fiefs of ancient China in feudal times, hence the internal frontiers within the realm of the house of Zhou 周. To designate ‘delimitations’ he uses the word *zhen* 埴 which indicates the paths or dykes separating fields. He insists forcibly on the fact that the delimitations created by language within reality

are arbitrary. “Only when *something has been posited* is there a delimitation (defining it).” To express this he forges a new term, *wei shi* 為是, which is hard to render in French: *wei* means ‘do’ in the strong sense of ‘to accomplish an act’, and *shi* is the ‘it is that’ that we have met with earlier. *Wei shi* signifies ‘to create an “it is that”’, or, more simply, ‘to posit something’.⁴⁹ It is with this arbitrary act that language begins, and creates a reality whereof something may be said.

The sage is distinguished by his simultaneous perception of the arbitrary character of language and the arbitrary character of the vision of reality that language creates, while in contrast the ordinary run of human beings take this arbitrary vision to be reality itself and language to be the faithful representation of it. The critical consciousness of the sage allows him to make use of language without ever being caught in its trap, whereas the lack of awareness on the part of the others holds them there fast. Zhuangzi gives a precise description of the nature of such a critical consciousness: the sage knows that “when one makes divisions, there [always] remains something undivided,” and that “when one puts things into opposition, there [always] remains something outside the opposition.” He knows that, at best, the divisions, the oppositions, and the relations derived from these, upon which any given language is founded, create a field of intelligibility that is localized, limited, and uncertain, and which reality necessarily exceeds in every dimension. He knows that “to put two contraries into opposition is to lose sight of something,” and that he who makes use of a system of distinctions and logical contraries inevitably loses sight of a large part of reality.

To take the measure of the interest of what Zhuangzi is saying, it is essential to see that, rather than defending a particular conception of, or perspective on, language, he is urging us to make a certain use of it. He is inviting us to become aware of the underlying arbitrary nature of language at the very moment when we are employing it—and of its narrow limits. He invites us to ‘have a clear understanding’ when we are speaking. For him, the solution to the problems raised by language is to be found in the complex form of activity wherein the intentional mode that is proper to speech is accompanied at a higher level by the mode in which the suspension of intentionality allows us to *see* at the same time that we are acting. Mastery of this higher form of activity is an extension of the natural learning-process required for language. Once we have perfectly integrated linguistic mechanisms there arrives a moment when we become able to start observing what is happening while we are speaking, to observe it in an ever more complete fashion, and in so doing to enter into a sort of second apprenticeship that is rich in new developments. By cultivating this particular type of attention, we are able continually to deepen our sensitivity to what causes and supports speech, to its hidden causal springs, and to the effects that it produces. This provides us with the means of analyzing it or of controlling it in an ever more delicate manner, if that is what we are seeking to do. Paradoxically, this makes us even

⁴⁹ As A. C. Graham has observed (“Chuang-tzu’s Essay on Seeing Things as Equal,” p.143, and “Seven Inner Chapters,” p.54), *weisbi* derives from *yinshi*, “to adapt one’s language to change.” See above, p.24.

⁵⁰ The present study is part of a research project on the *Zhuangzi* made possible thanks to the help of the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange in Taipei.

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more inclined to let language do what it wills, to let it come into being and to act of its own accord.

Zhuangzi is inviting us to perfect the use we make of language by integrating it into a more complex and far-reaching activity, and to discover that the work that we do upon ourselves in this way has a two-fold effect: on the one hand it frees us from the constraints of language and from the inflexible world into which we are shut by these constraints; on the other hand it allows speech to well up from within us, synthesizing as it does so all of our resources, both those of which we are the masters and even more those over which we do not have mastery. When {at some future time} I come to take up once more the study of the *Qi wulun* we shall see that Zhuangzi himself was conscious of having achieved this task, and of having demonstrated, by the unsurpassed use that he himself made of language, the relevance of his philosophy.⁵⁰

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