

Empty Yet Inexhaustible
Reading the *Daodejing*
with Others

BENOÎT VERMANDER



CHISOKUDŌ

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Preface

So tightly condensed is Benoît Vermander's new work that one is tempted to simply list its component parts and cite some of its most penetrating statements. Already the Acknowledgments is a beautifully succinct account of his own spiritual journey in writing this book. The Introduction describes the *Daodejing* as belonging "to a rarefied class of texts ... endowed with an inner life that nurtures our innermost selves." On a first level, it is a "gospel of naturalness," but on a second it is about the "inexpressible origin." That explains why the heart of his book is "reading the *Laozi* with others," Master Eckhart (1260–1328) first and then pseudo-Denys the Areopagite: "I am not looking for 'similarities' between our respective authors, but rather to see how grappling with the question of 'knowing the unknowable' leads them all to shift and go beyond their own categories and ways of thinking."

Each of the book's two parts—"Squaring the Circle" and "Towards the Center"—is composed of three chapters, the first devoted to the *Laozi*, the second to the parallel readings. Chapter 1 provides one of the best presentations I have read of basic Laozian concepts: The Way; Potency and the Saint; Softness, Weakness and the Newborn; Filiation and Motherhood; Acting by Non-acting. In sum, "Ancient China does not speculate about 'absolute Nothingness' but rather about a 'vacancy' populated with endless potentialities." The "commentarial tradition" covered in Chapter 2 includes early religious commentaries, Wang Bi ("mysticism and transcendence"), and nineteenth century interac-

tions with Western philosophy (Hegel, Schelling, and Heidegger). It concludes with stimulating reflections comparing Derrida's notion of *différance* and "the way the *Daodejing* operates displacements that prohibit the reader from safely 'locating' Dao and discriminating among realities whose essence and contours are settled once and for all." In Stephen Burik's words, "The processual emphasis of Daoist thought, with the central notion of continuous change, is clearly sympathetic to Derrida's understanding of *trace* as the impossibility of closure."

The last chapter of Part One, "Christian Encounters with the *Daodejing*," begins with Nestorianism and Jesuit Figurism. Foucquet (1665–1741) comes off as the most consequential, with statements such as this: "Tao [Dao] designates the Sovereign God whom we, Christians, worship." Even more intriguing is the influence of the Kabbalah on the Figurists:

The expression *Eyn Sof* ('*ēn sōf* אֵין סוֹף [Infinite]) found in the Cabbalistic book *Zōhar* (זוֹהַר) evokes a God who is to be thought as essentially formless and nameless before He created the world; it suggests a state of transcendence such that it tends towards non-existence, says Jean-François Foucquet (1665–1741), who finds a similar approach to the divine principle within Laozi S.25 and Zhou Dunyi's *Explanation on the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate* (*Taiji Tu Shuo*, cf. Chap. 2). The same Foucquet also notes that, in Hebraic as well as in Daoist texts, the original divine principle includes both male and female elements, that such a state of things is necessary to the subsequent creation of the world, and that Divine Wisdom is of a feminine nature.

Equally intriguing is the Figurist reading of *Daodejing* 14 and 42 as referring to the Trinity.

The Protestant translation of Dao as *logos* represents a new step forward in the encounter of God and Dao, as does the theology of Wang Weifan 汪维藩 (1927–2015), a professor at Nanjing Protestant Seminary: Wang's theology is centered on the incarnation, understood as a process of unification of opposites ("heaven/earth," "spiritual/material," "invisible/tangible," "unseen and unheard/flesh and

blood”). The *Daodejing* speaks of Dao in a fashion that immediately evokes the meekness, the renunciation of any form of violence associated by the Gospel with the Incarnate Word. Faith is first to be *realized*, traveled upon a pathway, rather than being an object of rational understanding. This goes along with the fact that “the movement of the Way is Return” (S.42), a feature that resonates deeply with the conversion that the person and teaching of the incarnate Son of God trigger in the human heart.

On the Catholic side, both Yves Raguin (1912–1998) and Claude Larre (1919–2001) have made important advances as well. To cite just the latter, “The concern for the people, a love of simplicity, poverty and naturalness, makes the *Laozi* one of the world’s greatest spiritual works. Just as there is an Imitation of Jesus Christ, there is an Imitation of the natural order: the *Laozi*.”

As should already be clear, Vermander’s book is an utterly novel and deeply informed approach to the *Daodejing*. But if Part One consists essentially in a summary of previous research, in Part Two he moves into uncharted territory. In Chapter 4, passages from a poem and sermons of Eckhart cannot but remind of the *Laozi*:

Become like a child, become deaf, become blind! O my soul, go out!—
God, [come] in!

He begets it here in his only-begotten Son, so that we may be the same Son, and his begetting is his indwelling and his indwelling is his begetting. It remains ever the One that continuously wells up in itself.

The three are one.

Since it is God’s nature not to be like anyone, we have to come to the state of being nothing in order to enter into the same nature that He is. So, when I am able to establish myself in Nothing and Nothing in myself, uprooting and casting out what is in me, then I can pass into the naked being of God, which is the naked being of the spirit. All that smacks of likeness must be ousted that I may be transplanted into God and become one with Him: one substance, one being, one nature, and the Son of God.

God is a word, an unspoken word.... Where God is, He utters this Word—where He is not, He does not speak. God is spoken and unspoken. The Father is a speaking work, and the Son is the speech at work.... The Father speaks the Son unspoken, and he remains within.

When God speaks into the soul, he and she are one.... The Father always speaks the Son in unity and pours forth all creatures in him. They all have a call to return whence they flowed forth. All their life and being is a calling and a hurrying back to what they came out of. Chapter 5 consists in a similar parallel reading of the *Laozi* and the pseudo-Denys the Areopagite:

Known through knowledge and unknowing.... [God] is everything in everyone and nothing in nothing, and he is known to everyone from everything and is known to no one from anything.... Or again, the most divine knowledge of God is that which is obtained through unknowing, in a union above the intellect.

And of it there is neither word, nor name, nor knowledge; it is neither darkness, nor light, nor error, nor truth. There is absolutely neither affirmation nor negation of it, but, in positing affirmations and negations of what comes after it, we neither affirm nor negate it, since the perfect and unitary Cause of all is beyond all affirmation, and beyond all negation is the transcendence of the one who is absolutely detached from all and who is beyond all.

For those who know the *Laozi*, they need only read these citations from Eckhart and Denys to begin to imagine the lines drawn between them by Vermander—imaginings I here leave to the reader to discover in all their intriguing detail.

Sometimes one may feel the stretch is too great, but Vermander also draws the reader's attention to the cultural gaps. He notes, for example, that, whereas the *Laozi's* core metaphors are water and motherhood, Eckhart's are fire and fatherhood: "Each of our authors testifies to the One by remaining faithful to his uniqueness." With regard to Denys, he contrasts his systematic, wordy ascension to abstraction and Darkness with Laozi's brevity and focus on water's descent. More-

over, he concludes the chapter on Denys with a fascinating exploration of the “idiot” in Laozi and Jean Gerson (1363–1429):

The illiterate, the simple ones (*idiotae*) can thus possess a knowledge superior to that of the learned... [for they are those] who have direct experience of the mystery of God and whose judgment does not err ... A simple man who prays to God purely is a “philosopher,” says Gerson, who defines philosophy as “any science proceeding from experience.”

In Chapter 6, Vermander stands back to explore “models” of access to knowledge of God or the Dao. What is most remarkable is that only the experiential model is a natural fit for the *Laozi* because of “the importance it gives to (a) the unfolding of a mode of reasoning that privileges synthesis and sense of unity over analysis and categorization, (b) the observation of natural phenomena, and (c) ‘naturalness [*ziran* 自然]’ as a mode of self-organization and self-deployment.” Quotes in the sixth model suggest, also, possible bridges from Pascal (1623–1662) to the *Laozi*, particularly in the recourse to paradox: “‘True religion should teach greatness, misery, self-esteem and self-contempt, [self-]love and [self-] hate. (Se.690). ‘Knowing the white, keeping the black—you will be the standard of the world’ (S.38). Holding opposites amounts to keeping the center.”

The Conclusion, on the “Saint and the Way,” may be summarized simply: “The Saint is the image of Dao in a fashion reminiscent of how Jesus is said to be the image of the Father.”

From this brief preface two things should be clear: this book is the start of a radically new form of dialogue with Daoism; as such, it requires of those who enter its pages a slow, self-reflective read.

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Introduction

The Art of Reading with Others

The short treatise that is known under the title(s) of *Laozi* 老子 / *Daodejing* 道德經¹ belongs to a rarefied class of texts that first strike the reader by their immediacy, their boldness, and their concision, before further study leads one to engage in a voyage that progresses from one layer of difficulties to another. A few epic and mythical tales, presocratic philosophers, or the early Upanishads present similar characteristics. Their intent is disputed, their author(s) sometimes unknown, their process of composition convoluted and largely shrouded in mystery, their lexicon ambivalent, and their textual variants registering significant differences. Besides, as we dig deeper, or simply as we grow older, the more one scrutinizes such texts, the more the meaning they take for us tends to evolve. Despite, or because of, the puzzles they present, these texts arouse a fascination that is constantly renewed. They are endowed with an inner life that nurtures our innermost selves.

1. One may write “the *Laozi*,” “the *Daodejing*,” or “the *Laozi Daodejing*.” Though I allow myself some liberty throughout the course of the present book, in the Western academic literature *Daodejing* is preferentially applied to the received version of the text, and *Laozi* to the pre-canonical and excavated editions (cf. Michael 2023). The distinction to be made between the “received version” and others is specified in Ch.1.

ELUSIVENESS AND EXUBERANCE

A Disappearing Act

The attribution of the *Daodejing* to Li Er 李耳 (aka Lao Dan 老聃 or Laozi [The Old Master]) as well as the biographical elements at our disposal concerning this putative author have no secure historical basis, though present-day Chinese scholars rely more confidently on Sima Qian's "biography" of the Old Master than was the case a few decades ago: a "return to antiquity [*fugu* 復古]" has now taken precedence over critical suspicion (see LIU 2015a). Sima writes in the first century BCE of a sage who is said to have lived in the sixth century BCE, and he mixes seemingly historical information with semi-mythical tales. According to him, Laozi is a native of the state of Chu, a large kingdom, with its capital located in present-day Henan province. Sima Qian even provides us with the names of the county, the village, and the hamlet of his birth. Laozi is said to have been a royal archivist in the court of Zhou and to have met with Confucius, who spoke admiringly of him as a "dragon."² Sima Qian continues:

Laozi cultivated *Dao* and *De* [virtue³]. In his studies he strove to conceal himself and be unknown. He lived in Zhou for a long time, but seeing its decline, he decided to leave; when he reached the pass, the keeper⁴ there was pleased and said to him, "Sir, you are about to retire. You must make an effort to write us a book." So Laozi wrote a book in two *pian* [篇, sections] setting out the meaning of *Dao* and *De* in something

2. The dialogue between Confucius and Laozi is mentioned thrice in Sima Qian's *Records of the Great Historian*. There are seven mentions of an encounter between Confucius and Laozi in the *Zhuangzi*, which function mainly as narrative devices.

3. I keep here the equivalent of *De* 德 offered by LIU 2015b but will qualify and enrich it below.

4. The Keeper of the Western Pass out of the Luo–Yi valley, known under the name of Yin Xi 尹喜, is revered in Daoism as the transmitter of the Scriptures. His cult and legend progressively developed; they were stabilized around the sixth century CE (see KOHN 1997).

around five thousand characters, and then he departed. None knew where he went to in the end.

(Sima Qian, *Records*, “Laozi Hanfei liezhuan
老子韓非列傳,” trans. LIU 2015, 30)

Here, Sima Qian’s record may speak more of the text itself than of its author: we are shown Laozi in an act of disappearance, and we may legitimately infer from it that this author is essentially a fiction, a “character.”⁵ This agrees with the stress that the book itself puts upon the “Nameless” (*wu ming* 無名). Such stress almost precludes ascertaining the author’s name. The latter is meant to inform our understanding of the work by what it suggests: though generally translated as “Old Master,” “Laozi” also means “The Old Child/The Old Infant.”⁶ As we will see throughout this book, this reading resonates with lessons often repeated in the text. Besides, the way the same text avoids references to any historical event or figure (contrary to all other Chinese classics) introduces further distance between the text and its production, its authorship.

Let us underline another point found in Sima Qian’s narrative: the *Daodejing* is said to comprise two sections. This feature, which does not yet clearly appear in the earliest textual testimonies, was firmly established at least one century (and probably more) before the “received version” (see Ch.1) was edited. We will ponder the centrality

5. What could be called the “mythemes” of the Laozi story register several variants, the origins and significance of which are analyzed by SEIDEL 1992 and, before her, KIMURA 1959.

6. The use of the character *lao* 老 has also triggered a few historical speculations: “I suspect that Lao is a surname, and a certain Scribe Lao 史老, known as an adviser of King Ling of Chu 楚靈王 (r. 540–529 BCE), may be the dimly remembered historical figure (or one of the dimly remembered figures—perhaps there were several) who inspired the world-famous text. Scribe Lao was in the right place at the right time: as a member of King Ling’s court, he was from Chu, where Laozi is said to have been born, and he was probably an older contemporary of Confucius, just like Lao Dan. (This is not to say that Scribe Lao was necessarily responsible for any portion of the received Laozi.)” (GOLDIN 2020, 110).

of this binary division when discussing the intent and structure of the work.

One further reference to “Laozi” as the author of our text that differs in nature from the one forwarded by Sima Qian, deserves scrutiny. In the last chapter of another paramount Daoist Classic⁷, the *Zhuangzi* (a chapter that we cannot date but that comes from a late textual stratum), one reads:

Others all grasp what is full; [Lao Dan] alone grasped what is empty.... In his movement, he was easygoing and did not wear himself out.... He took the depth to be the root and frugality as a rule. He said, “What is brittle will be broken, what is sharp will be blunted.” He was always generous and forbearing with beings, and he inflicted no pain on others—this may be called the highest achievement.

(*Zhuangzi*, ch.33, trans. WATSON 2013, 295 [modified])

Does the *Tianxia* 天下 chapter, as it is known, introduce Laozi as a fictional or as a historical figure? The point is difficult to decide. *Zhuangzi* 33 does intend to sketch a history of Chinese thought up until the time of its redaction, but Laozi is presented as “a man of antiquity,” which generally implies an atemporal reference. Whatever the case may be, the short portrait that is drawn here is a striking one: we are presented not only with a thinker but also with an ethical model whose teachings are turned towards frugality, generosity and forbearance. This fact needs to be underlined, for the metaphysical profundity attributed to the *Daodejing* sometimes leads one to neglect the ethical practicality and “everydayness” that also characterizes the work.

From Concision to Proliferation

Almost contextless, the *Laozi* is also an extremely short text—just over five thousand Chinese characters that the received version divides into 81 stanzas (*zhang* 章). (The brevity as well as the style of these textual

7. No other Daoist classic has a status equal to that of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*.

divisions make the term of “stanza” preferable to “chapter.”) Its conciseness contrasts with the exuberance of the literature it has generated. Misha TADD 2019 identifies 2,000 translations of the *Daodejing* in 94 languages. Tadd has come up with the term “Global Laozegetics” to offer a designation of the studies on the *Daodejing* and of the figure of Laozi that belong to the fields of World Sinology and World Philosophy (TADD 2022a, 2022b). In addition, there are some 2,500 classical commentaries and studies on the *Laozi* in classical Chinese—i.e., written in China, Japan, and Korea (TADD 2022 quoting unpublished report by Ding, Wei 丁巍, et al.).

The contrast between the extreme concision of the original and the proliferation of both commentaries and translations raises a specific layer of difficulties for those who embark upon the task of sharing their own reading of the text: it is simply impossible to comment on the *Laozi* without first reading it through the tradition(s) it has generated. The most immediate reason lies in the fact that the Chinese commentarial corpus offers indispensable pointers and suggestions when tackling the lexical, syntactic, and conceptual difficulties scattered throughout the text. Moreover, when offering a reading inspired by part of the Christian spiritual and hermeneutical tradition, as I will be attempting to do from Chapter 4 onward, immersion into the commentarial literature is even more necessary: the *Daodejing* has originated and nurtured a specifically religious exegesis, even if the discussions it has generated are not limited to that field. Readings anchored in a faith-based tradition need to respect, study, and take inspiration from the commentaries and text-inspired practices emanating from another religion that have established the status of the *Daodejing* as a canonical work. This is one of the reasons for which I endeavor here to read this seminal classic “with others.”

READING WITH OTHERS: INTENT, METHODS
AND ISSUES

Reading with Others?

The foregoing consideration is neither sufficient to explain nor justify the primary purpose of this book, its intention and its method: why and how to read the *Laozi* “with others”? Let us stay for a while on this preliminary question, because misunderstandings about both the purpose of this work and my way of dealing with the task can easily arise (I realized the extent of the difficulty when sharing partial results of my reading). I will therefore have to anticipate some of the notions and theses I will present further on, without providing at this stage all the justifications that are required. In the few paragraphs that follow, readers will find a foretaste of the volume as a whole, but above all indications that will help them to better grasp both the nature of the endeavor I engage in and the hermeneutic I develop for dealing with the texts mobilized in the course of our cross-readings.

The writing of this book was preceded and partly triggered by a conviction that has formed within me over the years, and which I wanted to explore further, in order to validate, modify, or invalidate it. As our first chapter will illustrate, there are many different ways of reading the *Daodejing*. We can find there military and political considerations, breathing techniques, a description of elementary organic processes, a short spiritual treatise, a cosmology in a nutshell, the Chinese equivalent of both a gnoseology and a “philosophia prima.”... But we can also reduce the multiplicity of these levels to just two:

The first level is concerned with “natural processes” considered in their principles, their organicity, this beyond the diversity of fields to which they apply: the way in which water, in the course of its cycle and journey, takes on all forms and stops at none; the way in which an infant clings to its mother; the ductility of the living and the rigidity of the dead; the usefulness given to objects (a vase, the axle of a wheel)

by the simple fact that these things are not complete, finished, filled, that they contain at their center a void that determines their function; the pernicious effect of the satiety of sounds, colors, and flavors on our senses and our intellect.... In those who know how to pay attention, in those who know how to find teachings in the most ordinary realities, all these observations engender a wisdom that is both practical and spiritual; they lead them to model their behavior on the great kenotic law that makes life continue, propagate, and flourish insofar as it offers itself, empties itself, spreads downwards. If the *Laozi* were to stop at this teaching (as the majority of its readers do), it would already be one of mankind's great spiritual texts, a kind of "gospel of naturalness."

I believe we can and should detect a second level of reading in this astonishing text. There is a mystery beyond the mystery, as the last sentence of Stanza 1⁸ declares. The same stanza was placed at the beginning of the whole work by those who fixed the text as we know it around 250 years at least after the writing of the earliest manuscripts that have been found. This stanza does not read as an apology of naturalness. It speaks of "ways" that are no more "constant" than the names we can enunciate, as evidenced by the fact that we can walk along these ways and talk about their course—what is truly constant escapes names and paths. It speaks of what lies behind the distinction we usually draw between "There is" and "There is not," of an inexpressible origin. It speaks of a leap from one mystery to another, of "the door toward the secret wonders."

Here is how I understand and approach this second level of reading: there is indeed no other way to move from one level of mystery to another than to begin by observing and contemplating the principles hidden in the simple functioning of the "natural"—principles that are not "material," but rather ignore the false distinction between the

8. "Stanza 1" (from now: S.1). This is the way I will identify the segments being quoted, with reference to the received version. (When the positioning of said segment within other versions proves to be significant, I mention it.)

material and spiritual orders, principles that apply to all manifestations of the living world. But the very contemplation of naturalness leads to its transcendence. The *Laozi* is also about tilting towards an extreme form of gnoseology, about meditating on the knowledge of unknowable things, about standing on the borderline between the impossibility of speaking about certain things and remaining completely silent about them. Using various registers of vocabulary, all of which may be ultimately inadequate, we can then evoke the “mystical” dimension of the *Daodejing*; we can speak of an epistemology of divine things (an epistemology of the infra- or supra-phenomenal); we can simply speak (to repeat a term I used a little earlier) of a “philosophia prima.”

Struggling along the Text

I won't dwell on this aspect any further, since the pages that follow will be largely devoted to the articulation between these two levels of reading. Once we reach this point, the question changes in nature: how can such a reading principle be validated or invalidated? As I will illustrate later in this book, the *Daodejing* has often functioned like a Rorschach blot: because of its elliptical, aphoristic style, too many readers and translators have found in it what they wanted to put there. I have therefore decided to proceed as follows: once the context of *Laozi's* elaboration and its main concepts have been elucidated (Ch.1), I devote two chapters to the history of its readings, in order to assess their diversity and disagreements, their points of encounter, fruitfulness, impasses, development in the course of history.... Chapter 2 first traces the history of Chinese commentaries, then the reception of the *Laozi* in the Western context. Chapter 3 is devoted more specifically to encounters between the *Daodejing* and Christian traditions at different points in time.

This part should pose no particular difficulties. At this stage, let me just say that reading the *Daodejing* “with others” will support the thesis that the field covered by this treatise cannot be strictly limited to the realm of “naturalness” alone; the multiplicity of ways of read-

ing it testifies not only to the inventiveness of the commentators, but also to the openness of the text, the continuous extension of the direction in which it invites its reader to engage. The following section is more controversial and questionable. First, we will read the *Laozi* in a cross-reading mode, with, in succession, two texts fully inscribed at the heart of the question outlined above: how can we speak of that which escapes speech and all ordinary modes of knowledge? One after the other, Master Eckhart (Ch.4) and Pseudo-Denys the Areopagite (Ch.5) will be the two authors with whom we will engage the *Laozi*. Hence the question: how can we read together works whose cultural and historical context, argumentative style, fundamental notions and linguistic characteristics differ so widely?

I am not looking for “similarities” between our respective authors, but rather to see how grappling with the question of “knowing the unknowable” leads them all to shift and go beyond their own categories and ways of thinking. Ultimately, it is a dynamic, the way a system of thought evolves beyond itself that holds my attention. This proposition requires elucidation.

In a previous publication, I expressed the following thesis:

“[Real] perfection looks like being chipped (*da cheng ruo que* 大成若缺),” says *Laozi* 45, and the axiom can be applied to the text itself. The same *Laozi* suggests that no contour, circle or square, really accounts for the movement of the Way (“a perfect square has no angles,” *Laozi* 41). It is the very idea of the Way formed through the writing of a text that prevents the Way from being locked into a parallel world-text.... While their design was indeed meant to evoke finite perfection, ancient texts were challenging their closure into a textual cosmos.... Ultimately, its underlying utopia carries [a text] toward its effacement each time its own artifices intimate that the Great Image eludes all shapes, figures, and patterns.

(VERMANDER 2024, 99–100, 167)

To put it another way, an author and a text rely on a set of procedures that both determine and express their mode of thought and the

cultural world from which they come. And yet, whenever they attempt to go beyond the language on which they depend to speak of That which is “beyond language,” they find themselves resonating with comparable attempts, although produced in entirely different contexts. Let us take an example: while Laozi prefers the metaphor of the nurturing mother, Eckhart, like most Christian authors, has recourse above all to the image of the father. “Dao-Mother does occupy the same functional place as God-Father in the biblical system, but the fact that one is conceived *prima facie* as mother and the other as father leads to radically opposed dualistic choices” (LAGERWEY 2012, 144). This is true. At the same time, if these two metaphors have preeminence, each in its own context, for the natural order, they only point to an image that must necessarily be surpassed for the order beyond language. This muted, subterranean work can be glimpsed in one of Eckhart’s texts, which one can legitimately find disturbing and very far away from the *Laozi*’s atmosphere—a text that we shall be meeting again in Chapter 4:

Nature wrought in my father the work of nature. Nature’s intention was that I too should be a father as he was. He performs all this work for the sake of his own likeness and his own image, so that his work shall be himself. The intention is always the man. But when nature is shifted or hindered so as not to operate with full power, the result is woman; and *when nature ceases her operation, God begins to work and create, for without women, there would be no men*. When the child is conceived in the mother’s womb, it has image, form and material being: that is the work of nature. That lasts for forty days and nights, and on the fortieth day God creates the soul in less than an instant, so that the soul is form and life for the body. *Now ends the work of nature with all that nature can contrive in form, image and material being.*⁹

(Eckhart, Sermon 17, trans. WALSH 2009, 131)

The very imperfection that Eckhart (here a prisoner of sociocultural representations) attributes to the feminine element proves to be the space in which God’s own work can begin. Where nature ends,

9. Emphasis added.

there a shift takes place. What Eckhart intends to “grasp”—that which is beyond “form, image and material being”—drives him to work at the limit, to work on the limits of the images he employs. The difficulty of the task is illustrated by another passage:

Where does the Father-nature have a maternal name? Where it does maternal work. Where the personal nature keeps to the unity of its nature and combines with it, there Fatherhood has a maternal name and is doing mother’s work, for it is properly a mother’s work to conceive. But there, where the eternal Word arises, in the essential mind, there Motherhood has a paternal name and performs paternal work.
(Eckhart, Sermon 90, trans. WALSHE 2009, 442)

In such instances, one may just wonder about the disturbing and disconcerting character of Eckhart’s images. Or one may recognize in this very character an index of the fact that our author is attempting to cross a threshold toward which his thought process has directed him. Similarly, even though Dao is approached through maternal images, its fundamental simplicity forbids us to identify it with this or that. Dao has no characteristic, as Laozi himself declares, and Wang Bi and others will ponder over such absence of identifiable features. To put it another way: we approach Dao through images (cf. *Laozi* S.21), we approach God through names (as Pseudo-Denys begins his journey), but, anchored as they are in contexts and cultures, names and images are necessary precisely because they compel us to deconstruct them when we endeavor to grope our way towards the Beyond of language. Consequently, what we approach in the cross-reading of our texts is the progressive deconstruction of their initial presuppositions. We do not identify a common “content”; rather, we try to discern the process by which the horizons of our texts come to merge.

The same could be said of the following lines from Eckhart’s *Poem*, a work that we will be reading strophe after strophe in Chapter 4:

*If I lose myself,
Then I find you,
O Goodness beyond all essences!*

Here, we can emphasize the presence of an “I” and a “Thou,” contrasted to the impersonality often perceived in Laozi’s prose (which, incidentally, is to overlook the remarkable passages in which an “I” is forcefully expressed—cf. S.20—but no “Thou” indeed appears in the process). Yet the same verses speak of the disappearance of the “I” and, as a result, of the erasing of the distinction between “I” and “Thou.” In parallel, in the *Laozi* the Saint must lose any characteristic of her or his own in order to become one with Dao—Dao which is “beyond essence” or “without essence.” The work on language undertaken by each of our texts is inseparable from the operation of thought in which it is engaged.

It is also worth noting that the same work occasionally takes on opposite forms: the *Laozi* goes to the extreme of conciseness in order to extract insights that are not exactly similar to, but very close to, those expressed in *Zhuangzi*, whereas this classic mobilizes all possible metaphorical and stylistic resources, to the point of dizzying its reader, provoking in her a shock meant to produce paradoxical knowledge.

If one is willing to give credence to my general project as I just summed it up, one will better understand the purpose of my Chapter 6: it no longer reads the *Laozi* with a particular text, but with a series of writings (rooted in the Christian tradition, in some cases challenging it) known to address with particular acuity the series of questions I have begun to detail: why and how do we attribute names (provisional by nature) to That which escapes all naming? In what way does such an operation allow us to sketch out what would be a mode of knowledge of That which nevertheless cannot be known? Does such an ambition make sense, or is it invalid from the moment of its enunciation? Of course, reading the *Daodejing* in association with this series of texts makes sense only if I am granted that our treatise is concerned with very similar questions. If we meet only with a “gospel of naturalness” (and however remarkable the wisdom it delivers), this attempt to “read the *Daodejing* with others” is devoid of interest. If our treatise outlines

an epistemology of the Unknowable, then to read it alongside texts set in very different contexts is to do justice to the project they all carry in their own way.

Following an axiom to be found in the *Dadodejing* (S.9), my conclusion sketches out “a movement of withdrawal” (*tui* 退). It attempts to state a few teachings that will have been learned *a minima* from our cross-readings. It closes the book and turns back to our world. The beauty proper to “slow reading” is that we can always draw abundant honey from it, even when the commentator and his reader end up diverging considerably in their conclusions.

Let me add that the division of this book in two parts, the first circling or “squaring” the outlines of our works, and the second attempting to pierce through to its heart, is inspired by a sentence found at the beginning of the *Laozi*:

That which is constantly without yearning contemplates [the secret] wonders (*miao*).
That which is constantly yearning contemplates the outlines (*jiao*).
(S.1)

As we will see, for the *Laozi* the two paths are complementary. The desire to assess and circle the outlines of a reality that yet escapes our grasp eventually leads the seeker to the tipping point by which we plunge, desireless, into the mystery of the Ultimate. The *Daodejing* awakens our desire to undergo such exploration at the same time as it teaches us to transmute our yearning.

TECHNICAL PRELIMINARIES “Name” and “Designation”

Another aspect deserves elucidation. At times, I will speak of “the Way,” so as to do justice to the core meaning of the character *dao* 道, and, at times, simply of “Dao.” Here, we need to ponder S.25, a stanza of crucial importance:

I do not know its name [*ming* 名], I give it the cognomen [*zi* 字] *dao*,
and, if I am forced to give it a name, I call it “Great” (*da* 大).
(S.25)

The aporia that necessarily surge when endeavoring to ascribe names to things (and in a special way when ascribing names to things divine) are regularly pointed out by Laozi. “Dao” is not the name of a person (though some currents of the Daoist tradition will give it personal, if not anthropomorphic features), but it must be taken and understood as a proper name—with the further paradox attached to the fact of ascribing a name: on the one hand, the operation does indicate a kind of familiarity with the “object” thus designated; on the other hand, the process is clearly arbitrary, and S.25 underlines such arbitrariness by immediately suggesting an alternative designation, shrouded in indetermination (“let us call it ‘Great’”). Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) writes that *dao* is not a name but rather a “designation” (*cheng* 稱): “A name is born from the object. A designation comes out of the subject [the ‘I’].”¹⁰ A name, expounds Wang Bi, originates from one given specificity (*fen* 分) found in the object being considered, and thus neglects its other features. “Naming” becomes a self-defeating operation when applied to the Ultimate: formless, the Ultimate is devoid of any characteristics. Conversely, a designation is the product of my own subjectivity in the process of looking for That which escapes me. In Chapter 6, I will develop more at length the following point: the *Daodejing* takes *dao* as a heuristic designation that it then makes a (provisional) proper name.

To ponder the aporia awakened by the act of designating the unfathomable Way constitutes an appropriate starting point for wandering through the nexus of utterances that the *Daodejing* sinuously patterns, while it avoids closing out its soliloquy into a completed whole. Paradoxical in nature, our text aspires to be voided and yet

10. *Ming sheng yu bi cheng chu yu wo* 名生乎彼·稱出乎我 (LOU 1980, 197, following here the translation offered by HITCHENS 2024, 32, with added interpolation).

neither achieved nor exhausted, in the image of That which it tries to approach and towards which, at times, it achieves sudden breakthroughs.

A Note on Chinese Terms and Translations

This book is not primarily destined for sinologists, but rather for a public concerned with comparative philosophy, theology and spirituality. Still, it needed to follow the norms expected in the field of Ancient China studies, especially as the critical reading of the *Laozi* engages an astounding number of lexical, archeological and hermeneutical issues. I also needed to answer the expectations of scholars with good knowledge of things Chinese while their first area of expertise lies elsewhere. Simply put, I have tried to answer the needs of different publics and to allow for different modes and levels of reading.

For these reasons, I have included Chinese characters for all basic notions. I add the original Chinese below the translation each time there are significant debates as to the meaning of an excerpt I quote, or when this excerpt is of special importance. I have attempted to deal with the lexical and critical apparatus in such a way that readers who are more interested in the stakes of our commentary than in its technical aspects are not unduly hindered by the latter.

Throughout this book, translations from the *Daodejing* are mine. They have been checked with translations by (among others) LAU 1989; IVANHOE 2002; AMES and HALL 2003; MOELLER 2007; RYDEN 2008; REID 2015; LEVI 2018; ZIPORYN 2023.¹¹ For the Guo-

11. As can be expected, no translation of the *Daodejing* is truly satisfactory. The ones I have found more helpful are those penned by LEVI 2018 (in French) and ZIPORYN 2023, though Moeller and Ivanhoe may be considered more accessible. Levi and Ziporyn make choices that are bold and, at times, very debatable, resulting from deliberate *parti-pris*, but this is the reverse side of these translators' brilliancy. Note that several translations interpolate readings taken from Mawangdui or Guodian (see Ch. 1) into the received version when they deem it advisable. I think it better to stick to one given version and conform to its editorial logic, while mentioning in notes the insights brought by the fact of consulting alternative versions. Each version should be considered as an autonomous whole. Finally,

dian manuscripts: JINGMEN CITY MUSEUM 2018 and HENDRICKS 2000. For the Mawangdui material: QIU 2014, LIU 2006 and HENDRICKS 1992. For the Beida *Laozi*, see BEIJING DAXUE 2012. Some of the translation choices I venture are progressively reworked and commented upon anew as we progress through this book.

For all other Chinese writings quoted, I have tried to find reliable translations and to refer preferentially to them. Basing myself on the original, I not infrequently modify the translation I quote (systematically mentioning the fact). These modifications may be triggered by the need to harmonize the lexicon, to underline the use of a notion, or else to emphasize a certain turn of thought, without the changes I bring implying a judgment as to the reliability of the original translation.

as to the criticisms I address to the perspective epitomized by the translation of AMES and HALL 2023, see Chapters 1 and 2 of VERMANDER 2023a. These criticisms do not need to be repeated here.