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Foreword

BURTON WATSON

When Victor Mair first kindly invited me to contribute to a volume of essays on Zhuangzi, I felt that, interesting as the proposal sounded, I had better say no. For one thing, whenever I sit down and try to write seriously about Zhuangzi, I seem, somewhere in the back of my head, to hear Zhuangzi cackling away at the presumption and futility of such an endeavor. More to the point, I felt that I had said all I had to say about Zhuangzi, or the book called *Zhuangzi*—I use the two terms interchangeably, since they cannot really be separated—in the introduction to my translation of the *Zhuangzi*. I doubted that I had any fresh insights or observations that would be worth offering.

Later, when it was suggested that I might contribute something in the nature of an informal foreword rather than a scholarly article, however, I did not think I could refuse the invitation any longer. If attempting to write about the *Zhuangzi* is an unsettling experience, it is in some ways a peculiarly rewarding one, too, for it compels one to look at and consider anew that brilliant and demanding text, and in doing so one can perhaps hit on ways to help others to see the work in a new and more revealing light. Since my own relationship to the text is somewhat different from that of the ordinary reader, I would like to speak in particular about my experiences as a translator of the *Zhuangzi*.

Some years ago, I undertook to prepare for the Committee on Oriental Studies of Columbia College a series of selected translations from the works of four early Chinese philosophers: Mozi, Xunzi, Han Feizi, and Zhuangzi. I give the names in that order because that is the order in which I translated these highly varied thinkers. As the reader will note, I left Zhuangzi until the last. In part this was done in the pious hope that, by the time I got to the *Zhuangzi*, my ability to read classical Chinese and my powers as a translator would have advanced to the point where I could do justice to that difficult text. At the same time, I was motivated by the same feelings as those that counsel a prudent diner to get his hash and potatoes out of the way before starting on his lemon pie. Zhuangzi was to be the lemon pie that would lure me on through the duller fare preceding it.

In spite of the invaluable experience I acquired in the course of translating the works of the three other philosophers, my ability to read classical Chinese—or at least Zhuangzi's variety—was regrettably still not what it should have been by the time I got to the fourth work. On the other hand, the text turned out to be as delicious a finale to the project as I could have anticipated.

It is the special pleasures that accrue to the *Zhuangzi* translator that I would like to speak about first, leaving gloomier matters to be touched on later.

Most early Chinese philosophical works are marked by a single and fairly consistent voice that runs throughout the book. Mozi drones along in his repetitive and preachy manner; Mencius argues in a tone of sweet reasonableness; Xunzi is all lofty manner and rhetorical flourish; Hanfeizi is tough and acerbic. All illustrate their arguments with historical anecdotes, and these serve effectively to vary the tone and pace of the discourse. Mozi's anecdotes in particular, since they deal so often with vengeful ghosts, are at times delightfully spooky, though his intention was assuredly not to delight his readers but rather to terrify them into virtue. But such anecdotes, lively as they may be, represent no more than ornaments to the argument, momentary detours from the expository highroad.

With Zhuangzi the case is quite different. If Mozi, Xunzi, and the others each speak in a voice distinctively his own, Zhuangzi speaks in a babble of voices. With him the anecdote is no longer an appendage to the argument but the argument itself. One historical or pseudo-historical figure, one talking creature after another appears on the scene, each representing a different personality and outlook, and as a result the tone of the discourse keeps shifting constantly. And though the anecdotes are at times preceded by or enclosed in brief passages of argumentation, we have no way of knowing whether the voice in such passages is meant to be that of the author himself or is yet another player in the cast of thousands.

The trick in understanding the *Zhuangzi* is to perceive, among all these shifting voices, just who is being parodied, who is being taken off in any given passage. Like the Japanese *senryū*, those deft sketches of human folly compressed into a mere seventeen syllables of verse, the *Zhuangzi* anecdotes confront us with a parade of wits and nitwits, fools and philosophers, and we must learn to recognize each personage from the merest gesture or turn of speech, and judge his words accordingly.

Assuming that the translator can make these identifications correctly, he is then in the enviable position of being able to take on each of these personalities and voices in turn. When one translates a work of Confucian philosophy, he is given ample opportunity to play the moralist, delivering wise maxims in neatly balanced periods or pausing to cite some cautionary page from history. But the *Zhuangzi* (along with its kindred texts, the *Liezi* and *Huainanzi*) allows him to assume a dozen different roles, to be solemn or quizzical, rhapsodic or paradoxical by turns, to speak in the voice of a madman or a millipede, a long-winded sea god or a ruminative skull.

Not only does the *Zhuangzi* permit the translator to put on a variety of faces and participate in a wealth of droll and fanciful dramas, the very language of the text is marked by a range and vividness unmatched by anything else in early

Chinese literature. At one moment the writer is poking about in the grubby minutiae of everyday life, the next he is soaring off on flights of language so rapturous that they threaten to go beyond the borders of meaning. Passages of this last type allow the translator—indeed compel him—to employ language with a daring and inventiveness that he would never venture when translating more conventional texts.

And finally there is the incomparable wit and humor that lie at the very heart of the *Zhuangzi*. Hanfeizi may at times treat the reader to a sardonic chuckle, but humor is on the whole a rare element in most Chinese philosophical writing. In the *Zhuangzi*, on the contrary, it is the single most potent device employed by the writer to jar the reader out of his mundane complacencies and waken him to the possibility of another realm of experience. The translator of the *Zhuangzi* thus has opportunities to display his talent as a humorist such as would be unimaginable if he were working with any other philosopher. And, as I can state from personal experience, when he manages to get an amusing passage from some two thousand years ago over into language that sounds funny even today, he feels a deeper sense of gratification and accomplishment than if he had translated a whole volume of lamentations.

These, then, are the special pleasures that await the translator of the *Zhuangzi*. And of course, looked at from a somewhat different point of view, these too are the special headaches that await him, for each poses severe demands upon his skill and ingenuity. In the introduction to my translation of the *Zhuangzi* I have discussed at some length the problem of textual corruption, and I will not go into it again here. It is enough simply to note that, with a text that uses language in such unconventional ways and that makes such frequent references to the daily life, customs, and folk beliefs of ancient China, the possibilities for misunderstanding and misinterpretation in later centuries are manifold. Errors have no doubt been introduced into the text by confused or baffled copyists, while other passages remain opaque because we lack the data needed to unlock the sense. All of this means that the translator must constantly be consulting commentaries, which often vary wildly in their interpretation of a given passage, and deciding which interpretation to follow, which emendation to adopt, aware all the time that one false turning may lead him into a forest of difficulties.

And even when the wording of the text does not seem to offer any particular perplexities, there is the larger question of whether one is catching the tone of the passage correctly. When an author spends so much time mocking and satirizing, how can we tell when he means to be taken seriously? If he parodies so many others, is it not possible that he parodies himself as well? Where then is the real Zhuangzi? At this point, the text turns into a hall of mirrors where a frightening succession of images recedes into infinity and illusion becomes indistinguishable from reality. One reviewer of my Zhuangzi translation re-

marked that, although I had translated the text in full, I had failed to throw any light on it. One might be tempted to ask in indignation just what translation is if not a process of throwing light on a text. And yet in the case of the *Zhuangzi*, I'd have to say that I know what he means.

When I was translating the *Zhuangzi*, I would customarily sit down each evening with the day's work, usually two or three pages of typescript. (I accustomed myself to translate prose directly on the typewriter some years ago when I was working on the *Shiji*, in part because my handwriting, particularly if any appreciable period of time elapses after writing, is likely to be unintelligible even to me.) The main decisions concerning interpretations had been made during the day and could not easily be reviewed or reconsidered without tracing back through the labyrinth of commentary that led to them.

But there was an almost infinite amount of tinkering that could be done with the language of the translation, and this was where the real enjoyment came in. I would put a pan of water on the stove, heat some sake (I was living in Japan at the time), place the original and the translation side by side, and methodically question the latter to see whether there was not some better, briefer, or more effective way to convey the meaning and impact of the Chinese. At times, determined to discover just the right diction and euphony to match the eloquence of the original, I would go along rapping on each word of the translation to see if it was sound, while at others I mulled over the question of just how I would express myself if I were an English-speaking oak tree. I knew I would never again face such challenges or have such opportunities as a translator, and I was determined to make the most of the experience. And now it remains with me as a very important memory—those evenings when I sat by the kerosene stove and listened to the wind whistling in the Kyoto night, struggling to conjure up the kind of language that would do justice to Zhuangzi's magic.

If I recall the pleasures of translating the *Zhuangzi*, I also remember the doubts and apprehensions that troubled me at the time, and to some extent continue to trouble me still. That may be one reason why I always feel a greater reluctance to read over my Zhuangzi translation than I do in the case of the other philosophical works I translated. And though in idle moments I sometimes imagine what it might be like to come face to face with Sima Qian or Su Dongpo or some of the other authors I have worked on—would they be pleased with what I've done? angry? or, worst of all, indifferent?—the prospect of such an encounter with Zhuangzi would scare the life out of me. He would undoubtedly see through me in an instant.

The problem, I think, is that so much of the time I seem to be way down here, while Zhuangzi is way up there, and I can see no way to get from here to there. Perhaps because I am a rather timid and unimaginative person by nature, all Zhuangzi's ecstatic talk of spontaneity, of soaring and carefree excursions,

exciting as it may be, seems hardly to pertain to any realm of being that is within my reach. Though he does not mean to be, I'm sure, I cannot help finding him somehow forbidding and unapproachable.

The "way up there" from which Zhuangzi so often speaks, and in which he so persistently urges the reader to join him, is, of course, the realm of nondualistic thinking. But, as the Buddhists noted long ago, it is one thing to talk about nondualism and quite another actually to experience it as a conviction or outlook. Buddhism offers certain practices such as meditation, chanting, or koan study that are in effect exercises in nondualistic experience, and through these the student can gradually initiate himself into the state of mind he is seeking. I cannot help thinking that the *Zhuangzi* must have had some similar practice or set of practices that were meant to accompany the book and assist the student. And, as anyone knows, if you merely read the book but do not do the exercises, you cannot hope to get anywhere in the subject.

Perhaps I am being misled by the recurring journey metaphor, which certainly suggests that there is a great deal of ground to be covered before one can get to Zhuangzi's realm. Zhuangzi would no doubt retort that one is already in it, since in a nondualistic universe, "there" cannot be any place other than "here." But once more I would ask, how can I really come to know this? Though the journey, like that described in koan study, may be a circular one, ending exactly where it began, shouldn't one have undergone the experience of the journey in order to understand once and for all that there is indeed nowhere to go?

But in raising such questions, I am perhaps venturing into areas that will be covered more competently by some of the experts in the essays that follow. Certainly one would have to admit that Zhuangzi exhausts every literary and rhetorical device in his efforts to liberate his readers, to pry their hands loose from their fierce grip on dualism. If his message is ultimately beyond one's grasp, it is not because he has not sincerely tried again and again to state it in terms that are comprehensible. And, the ultimate kindness, he even warns us that mere words are inadequate to the task, so that we need not unduly tax ourselves for our failure.

And yet I open the *Zhuangzi* and read about all these crookbacks and lamegaits and robbers and idiots who are disporting themselves on Zhuangzi's level and I can't understand why I can't get there too. I suppose I should learn to resign myself to the situation, and in time perhaps I will. Meanwhile, writing about the text is one way of trying to make my peace with it.

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Preface

The purpose of this volume of essays is to introduce Zhuangzi to a larger audience than he now enjoys. Currently, knowledge of the *Zhuangzi* in the West remains almost entirely restricted to sinologists and a few students of comparative religion. This is grossly unfortunate, especially in light of the fact that the *Zhuangzi* is superior to many other Chinese works that have received much wider recognition and circulation abroad. The *Zhuangzi* is profoundly entertaining and edifying at the same time. As imaginative literature, there is no other Chinese work that even remotely compares to it before the introduction of Buddhist narrative and dramatic traditions. The *Zhuangzi*'s use of language is exquisitely sui generis and has had a far-reaching effect on many types of belles-lettres in later periods. Zhuangzi, furthermore, is honored as one of the founders of philosophical Daoism and is even considered by many to have had a formative influence on the development of Zen. Regardless of his significance for the past, however, Zhuangzi still speaks to us today with an authentic voice of intelligence and good sense. The *Zhuangzi* adumbrates an intellectual attitude that is both engaging and compelling.

Admittedly, the *Zhuangzi* confronts us with monumental textual and authorial problems. Intellectual historians and stylistic analysts are only now beginning to attack seriously, systematically, and rigorously the difficult questions of which parts of the book belong together and which parts ought to be considered as interpolations, additions, and so on. The fact that apparently contradictory or seemingly incompatible positions emerge from the *Zhuangzi* (such as whether there is one overarching Dao/Way or only many discursive *dao*s/ways) is evidence that we are dealing with a composite text. We are gradually coming to discover that the *Zhuangzi* developed out of a series of dialogues with a number of other schools over a considerable period of time. Hence what may hold true for chapter 2 (or part of chapter 2) may not be directly applicable to chapter 5 and vice versa. Yet most of the book does cohere; those portions which do not fit at all are readily recognizable and can be rejected by the sensitive reader. Zhuangzi himself, as a historical personage, largely remains an enigma. But an identifiable personality does emerge from the core of the book and it reveals him as a man of great wit and wisdom.

The experimental nature of these essays needs to be emphasized. These are attempts to see Zhuangzi in ways that sinologists have not been accustomed to viewing him. Indeed, it is for this reason that several nonsinologists were invited to participate in the writing of this volume. We hope thus to have demonstrated that Zhuangzi is not the sole preserve of the specialist. Philosophers,

psychologists, game theorists, and those who simply have a broad interest in the humanities should all feel welcome to venture inside the covers of the *Zhuangzi*. If they do, they are certain to be richly rewarded. The following essays are indicative of the broad range of responses that are possible to an encounter with the *Zhuangzi*. Perhaps one day we will have the ruminations of a jurisprudent, a neural physiologist, or a poet on the *Zhuangzi*. Already we can read what it meant to a nuclear physicist (Hideki Yukawa), a Catholic monk (Thomas Merton), and a Hasidic sociologist-theologian (Martin Buber). There is no authoritative and final explanation of the "meaning" of Zhuangzi. He is too puckishly protean to submit docilely to any single approach. Only a variety of interpretations, such as those attempted herein, can begin to do justice to this marvelous anthology.

We do not pretend to have attained a unanimity of opinion about our favorite Chinese philosopher. To force such a consensus now would be, we feel, presumptuous in the presence of a work of multifaceted genius. Instead, we have essayed to view Zhuangzi from many different vantage points while using diverse methodological approaches. On the other hand, occasionally when we may appear superficially to be at odds with each other, such as in discussing the notion of "heart-mind," there is deeper agreement in terms of our appreciation of Zhuangzi's intent. A large part of understanding the *Zhuangzi* consists of realizing the limitations and prejudices both of our own positions and of traditional Chinese expositions.

The present volume is offered in the spirit of eliciting interpretations of the *Zhuangzi* from people in many different walks of life. We believe that it bears testimony to the vital power of Zhuangzi's words and ideas to stimulate thought in our own time. It also demonstrates that a provocative mind, no matter what age or place it speaks from, does not go unheeded