Early Literary Forms of Self-Transformation in the *Chuang-tzu*

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Already in chapter one of the *Chuang-tzu* we can discover literary devices which illustrate that the theme of the *Chuang-tzu* as a whole will be that of self-transformation. All too often, such literary devices are brushed aside in efforts to get at the "philosophical meat" of the text. As a result, the messages contained in the myths and literary vignettes are ignored. I would like to focus on a selection of literary forms taken from chapter one of the *Chuang-tzu* for the purpose of showing how the theme of self-transformation is present from the very beginning of the work.

I would like to begin with the aviary and bestiary of chapter one of the *Chuang-tzu.* I believe that the choice of mythical subjects for treatment at the beginning of the text has powerful implications for the message of the text as a whole. I do not believe that the mythical creatures selected are selected at random. For the purposes of this article, I will intermesh mythical creatures with the use of small mammals although the points made with each differ respectively. The thesis which I will be exploring in this article is that the selection of mythical materials has to do with the overall aim or goal of the *Chuang-tzu.* The selection of small mammals and insects has to do with the position the *Chuang-tzu* will take on the question of valuation. The selection of story materials has to do with both the overall message of the *Chuang-tzu* and the correct understanding of the issue of valuation.

The central objective of the *Chuang-tzu* is that of self-transformation. In this article, I will be calling attention to the fact that the *Chuang-tzu* begins with a story of transformation in a mythical form. That the *Chuang-tzu* begins a story of transformation is a fact that deserves our special attention.

The central and beginning myth of the *Chuang-tzu* is the story of a great fish that changes and becomes a bird.[1] Like Genesis, there are two accounts

of this myth, but the first version is, to my thinking, the most important one. The two versions differ in that the first version makes explicit reference to the theme of transformation. The second version differs significantly in that the fish and the bird are treated as two separate creatures. While I cannot account for the discrepancy, I can only think that the second version is possibly in some way spurious and is the result of later editing.[2] While no one, to my knowledge, has drawn attention to the two versions of the myth, I think that the first one is preferable in that it embodies the central theme that is at the core of the *Chuang-tzu.*

In Watson's translation, the *Chuang-tzu* begins with the mythical story:

> In the Northern Darkness there is a fish and his name is K'un. The K'un is so huge I don't know how many thousand *li* he measures. He *changes* and becomes a bird whose name is P'eng. The back of P'eng measures I don't know how many thousand *li* across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky. When the sea begins to move, this bird sets off for the southern darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven.[3] (emphasis mine)

That this is a myth is clear from both the names of the habitat of the fish (the Northern Darkness) and the destination of the bird (the Lake of Heaven). It is also clear from the fact that the measurements of the size of the creatures is contradictory to known scientific possibility. It is even more clear from the fact that the fish changes into a bird which is counter to fact.

The *Chuang-tzu* does not begin by telling us that it is a philosophical treatise which will have as its main theme the subject of transformation. In fact, the message is veiled so subtly in the substance of the story that most if not all commentators have failed to pick it up at all. But the message is there for all that. It is intertwined within the story so that the reader can at most expect to understand it symbolically. But the myth does not simply function as a symbolic message. It embodies the message so subtly precisely because the author does not intend for us to analytically comprehend the point of the story. The mythical content of the story operates on the pre-conceptual level so that it can be appropriated by the intuitive function of the mind.

The elements of the story are that we begin in darkness. The presence of darkness at the beginning is indicative of the epistemological starting

point. We do not begin with any pre-conceptions or conceptions. If we begin with the pre-conceptions or conceptions we are most likely not going to be able to follow the point of the story in the proper sequence.

In the middle of the story the fish transforms itself into a bird. I do not believe that the animals are casually chosen. The idea of beginning with a fish possesses significance. A fish symbolizes a creature with the association that it can be caught. As the fish is introduced at the very beginning, we may easily recognize the fish to stand for the subject reader. The fish, like ourselves, is living in darkness or, epistemologically speaking, in ignorance. The fish, however, possesses the capacity within itself to transform itself into another creature. The creature chosen to stand for the transformed creature is a bird. This, too, is no literary accident. A bird symbolizes a creature that we associate with freedom and transcendence. The thematic message is that a transformation to knowledge is an inner possibility that lies within all of us and the result of that transformation is the attainment of freedom. It is also the attainment of happiness as is symbolized by the choice of destination which is the Lake of Heaven. So much has already been told to us about the entire message of the *Chuang-tzu* in just this mythical starting point! The idea is to catch the unwary or ignorant reader, to teach the reader that the capacity for self- transformation lies within the reader, and that the outcome of this is the attainment of freedom and happiness. While I may be accused of reading too much into this story, I think it may be noted well that the fish does not require any outside agency to transform itself into the bird. It accomplishes this all on its own. The myth, of course, is not the whole argument of the *Chuang-tzu.* Suffice it to say that it is coherent with the central theme of the *Chuang-tzu* which is that of self-transformation. It is remarkable in that it is a microcosm of the argument structure of the *Chuang-tzu* as a whole and it is, in my view, no accident that it is offered at the very beginning. The beginning of any book or story is normally a hook to catch the reader's attention. This hook already contains the fish as well!

I would now like to turn to the reaction to this story, which is the very next set of stories in the *Chuang-tzu.* The immediate reaction to this story is given by the cicada and the little dove or quail.[4] The reaction of the cicada and the little dove is to laugh at the Big Bird. They do not believe that the Big Bird can travel so far. (It is said that he can travel for ninety thousand *li).*[5] The cicada and the little bird are skeptics. They are the first exemplars of the Philistines or the literal and petty minded of the world. The

first reaction of the petty minded is that such a myth as has been presented is a bunch of poppycock. Chuang-tzu knows that the reader's first reaction (of his conceptual mind which reacts while his intuitive mind has assimilated the content of the myth on a subliminal plane) is one of skepticism and disbelief. What is interesting to note is that what the cicada and the little bird are skeptical of is *how* the Big Bird can make such a journey. They are not skeptical of the putative existence of such creatures *per se*. They are skeptical of the possibility of the journey of transformation. In Watson's translation:

> The cicada and the little dove laugh at this, saying, "When we make an effort and fly up, we can get as far as the elm or the sapanwood tree, but sometimes we don't make it and just fall down on the ground. Now how is anyone going to go ninety thousand *li* to the south!"[6]

This cicada and the little bird are applying the laws of common sense or scientific truth to the possibility of the myth. This is more evident from the passage that follows:

> .... If you are going a hundred *li*, you must grind your grain the night before; and if you are going a thousand *li*, you must start getting the provisions together three months in advance.[7]

In the world of empirical fact, the story of the Big Bird is utter nonsense. If we use the standards of common sense then all of this talk about transformation is utter nonsense.

But what is important is the position that the *Chuang-tzu* takes with respect to this issue. The *Chuang-tzu* does not state that both of these viewpoints (that of myth and that of common sense) are of equal value. Early on in the *Chuang-tzu*, a definite stand is taken with respect to the question of valuation. It is very clear and very explicit that the standpoint of the Big Bird and the standpoint of the cicada and the dove are not seen as possessing equal value. The immediate reaction of the *Chuang-tzu* to the objections of the cicada and the little bird is one of disvaluation:

> What do these two creatures understand? Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot

come up to the long-lived.[8]

It is important to note that not only has Chuang-tzu stated explicitly that the viewpoint of these two creatures reflects a viewpoint of a narrow mind, but that his choice of little creatures in the first place (one of which is an insect) has already told us this.[9] Chuang-tzu does *not* present the viewpoints of the cicada and the small bird as being on the same axiological plane as the viewpoint as represented by the Big Bird. The cicada and the small bird are plainly portrayed as lacking a scope of vision and are in this respect contrasted with the Big Bird. They possess little understanding. Retro-spectively, then, the Big Bird has been portrayed as possessing Great Understanding. It is evident that the standpoint of the Big Bird is a preferential standpoint. This is important to note at the outset of the *Chuang-tzu.* For early on in the first chapter of the book, Chuang-tzu is sounding the theme that certain perspectives are of higher value than other perspectives. The perspectives of the Big Bird and those of the cicada and the small bird are not treated as being of axiological equality.

We may also take note of the fact that a distinction has been introduced between different levels of understanding. If we insist upon relying upon the conventional empirical standards of the world, we will not be able to measure or effectively comprehend the level of understanding at which the *Chuang-tzu* aims. Chuang-tzu does not, of course, set this out in prose. He is not interested in arguing on a conceptual plane for the superiority of a certain level of understanding. However, he has effectively prepared the mind to acknowledge the possibility, which at this point is only a possibility, that there is a level of understanding that differs from the ordinary level of understanding. We can see the small bird and the insect as the cynic who laughs at the efforts of the enlightened man to attempt to transform himself to attain to the Heavenly Tao.

I have stated that Chuang-tzu does not state his message explicitly in the first chapter of the *Chuang-tzu.* All that is related here is a story about birds and fish and insects. But, I have argued that this is not a mere literary convention. It possesses too much indirect content to be a literary indulgence or poetic excrescence. As the narrative begins in myth and moves to a more story-like form, it is too fanciful and too fabulous to have a mere historical reference. It seems to me that it most definitely serves an epistemological function.

A two-fold epistemological function is served. First, the conscious

mind that applies empirical standards of judgment is lulled into rest by the mythical form. There is a suspension of the critical faculty as this is plainly a story which need not be tested for its truth value. In the act of suspension, the mind does not become cognitively void. It has switched off its reality testing. After all, fish do not really change into birds and birds cannot really fly ninety thousand *li* and so on. Furthermore, cicadas and doves do not talk. On the other hand, the material presented is taken in, unjudged, and believed in, in a certain, special sense. Does anyone doubt that what is said to happen in a myth really does happen in the myth?

The absence of the application of conventional standards of truth does not imply that the story will be taken as absolute nonsense (except by those who are said to lack the appropriate understanding). In order for there to be truth value in the story, then, it cannot be measured by convention. How then, is it understood? First of all, it is *absorbed.* It is not negated or erased. It is taken in by the mind on some level. Such a preparation by absorption is a propadeutic for the taking in of materials or insights which from ordinary standards might stretch one's credulity to the breaking point.

Myth trades on the cognitive intelligibility of metaphor in general. It presents an idea or a set of ideas which can only be grasped by a total act of cognition. What this means is that part of the mind (here in content labeled as the skeptical understanding) cannot stand back and evaluate while the rest of the mind partakes of the idea. If it does so, the mind as a whole cannot partake of the idea. While the idea is apprehended in either mythical form or the form of fable, it is being apprehended in a pictorical representation. A pictorial representation must be grasped as a whole. In addition, the pictorial representation here is in the form of a child's story that must be believed in implicitly. It is taken in completely or not at all. No one questions whether the Trojan horse could really hold so many Achaens and so on. The total absorption of the idea is a mental preparation for the later transmission of philosophical ideas which also will seem to be ludicrous when evaluated from the common standpoint. These ideas, some of which are already embodied in the content of the myth, whill be ideas which will be extra-ordinary, transformatory and in some sense will answer to our most important hopes and wishes.

If what I have said so far is correct, then the mythical presentation is of enormous cognitive significance. What is being accomplished is not the mere telling of a story. It is the preparation of the reader's mind for a mental journey of transformation. If we can accept such a possibility on the level

of myth, then in some sense yet to be understood, the mind is readied to accept as possible some ideas on a higher plane of philosophy. The mythical origins of the *Chuang-tzu,* then, are a cognitive technology which simultaneously gives us a message and informs us (if we know where to look) how this message is given in the manner of a watch the inner springs of which are left open to the eye to inspect while it also tells us the time.

So far, the examples which I have treated in the first chapter are examples of the main thesis of the *Chuang-tzu* and of the position of the *Chuang-tzu* on the question of valuation. I would like now to take up two more examples from the first chapter which both illustrate the central thesis of the *Chuang-tzu* and the issue of valuation at the same time.

For the first example, I would like to point to the reference made to *mental* blindness and deafness:

> "We can expect a blind man to appreciate beautiful patterns or a deaf man to listen to bells and drums. And blindness and deafness are not confined to the body alone – the understanding has them, too, as your words just now have shown."[10]

This example treats both of the central thesis, albeit indirectly, and the question of valuation at one. The indirect reference to the thesis of transformation is that it is a thesis which cannot be appreciated by those who lack the necessary cognitive tools. Just as someone may be physically blind, a victim of mental blindness is also ill equipped to appreciate beautiful mental patterns. While the explicit reference is merely to a beautiful mental pattern, indirectly the reference must be to the central message of the *Chuang-tzu.* The example also at once is a valuation since it implicitly holds that a mentally blind person is inferior to someone who possesses the requisite insight. There is a hidden implication, as well, which is that if a person could understand, or possessed the necessary cognitive appreciation, he could at once see the beautiful pattern of thought. This implication is that the capacity for insight into that which is beautiful is one which is a self-capacity of the subject seer. It is not so much that the message must be made more and more beautiful. The message already is beautiful. What is lacking is the appropriate capacity for understanding.

The mentally blind or deaf person can be likened to the cicada or the small bird. These images of blindness, deafness and narrowness of understanding are one and all instantiations of the intransigent subject reader or

the inveterate skeptic. What is especially clear in the example of mental blindness is again a hidden reference to self-transformation. If the subject reader could only see, the message would be apprehended at once. The incapacity for not grasping the message is placed on the shoulders of the subject reader. While this may be dismissed as begging the question, it is not designed to be an argument on behalf of the truth of the thesis. It is designed to call attention to the importance of the subject's role in perceiving that truth. At the same time, it is a clear value claim that a subject who can understand with insight is superior to one who is cognitively blind in just the same sense that a subject who can physically see possesses an advantage that the blind subject does not possess. It is evident that the blind is not considered to be the axiological equivalent of the sighted, whether we refer to physical or mental sight.

The final example which I would like to discuss represents the capstone of chapter one. It is the story of the ointment or, as we will understand it, the mental salve.[11] But it is important, before we discuss the story directly, to note its placement. It comes after the reference to mental blindness and deafness. The mind has already been prepared extensively for the proper apprehension of the story of the ointment.

If we try to understand this story, or any other story in the *Chuang-tzu,* in an ordinary or habitual way, it will be as if we are mentally *incapable* of grasping what is to be said. In order to understand, a minimal act of transformation is already required in the sense that one must open one's eyes in order to be able to see. Whether or not what is being said is true is not the point here. All that I am attempting to establish is that Chuang-tzu is indicating that *something of cognitive significance* is being related even though we are in the midst of a mythical and fable-telling form of presentation. This point cannot be overemphasized. There *is* something intelligible here (according to the intentions of the author) which is not on the level of a pleasant fiction. What *is* intelligible will require an effort, if you will, on the part of the reader. Otherwise, the cognitive content will not be noticed or noticeable. In the middle of the telling of fables, we are given such notice.

The final story which I will treat is that of the mental ointment which will heal the pain of the mind. Of course, in the story, it is not presented as a mental salve but as a physical salve. To present it as a mental salve would be to lift it out of the realm of metaphor into the realm of homily. To refer to the ointment as a mental salve would be to alert the mind that this is a message of theme and this would negate its cognitive function. As

we have discussed earlier in this article, the cognitive function of the story telling device can only be successful so long as the reader is not too aware that there is a meaning to the message. Of course, on some level, the reader is perfectly aware that this is a teaching story with an object lesson. But it would not do to call this to the reader's attention too strongly.

We all know, or at least presume, that the *Chuang-tzu* is a book of philosophy and not a book of medicine. Obviously, the physical ointment described in the story is not to be understood on the level of a physical medicine. But this is all known intuitively or inexplicitly by the subject reader.

The hidden premise in the use of the example of ointment is that at some point the reader will be given some clues the function of which will be to ease mental suffering. The mind of the reader is thus being deftly and subtly prepared for the proper reception of such a message to come at some point in the same fashion as a photographic plate is first placed in a solution for immersion before the prints which will be taken from it can take.

The Salve

The story of the salve, in brief, is that a man *in the past* [the Sung], had known how to prevent hands from chapping and as a result his family could bleach silk in water. [What is being said so far is that there is traditional wisdom and its use in the past was only to earn a small livelihood. This could be likened to a much prettier version of the petty minded man or the cicada of earlier examples.] Now, a man comes on the scene who offers to buy the formula. The family sells it for a sum of money, thus confirming the petty mindedness archetype that the family represents. The buyer, who thus represents a man on the road to greater understanding, sells it to a king, who uses it to win a naval battle and awards the seller with a piece of land.

The moral of the story is that the same formula (or brain) can be used in two different ways: one to bleach silk; the other to gain a piece of property. The point seems to be that we all possess the same basic equipment; the only difference is the use to which it is put. Same brain, different uses.

This story is another preparation device which prepares the mind of the reader for the receiving of the higher message of the *Chuang-tzu* which is yet to be given. This message, of course, has already been proleptically contained in the story itself. The story of the ointment is especially designed

to appeal to the intellectual reader; i. e., who considers herself or himself to be more intelligent than the average person. It does so by employing an example from the realm of commerce where one of the chief fortes that is required is the ability to outsmart one another.

Apart from being an especially pointed example for the reader intellectual, this example adds a new element to the examples that have been adduced so far, the element of reward. In terms of the use of the brain, one can obtain a small benefit or a large benefit in the story of the ointment. With respect to the message of the *Chuang-tzu*, the reader, depending upon the use she or he wishes to make of the material, she or he can reap a small or a large benefit.

It is up to the willingness and the cleverness of the reader (aided by the incentive of greed) to think in larger terms than the immediate material reward. In a material sense, the smart man in the story sells the prescription to a king. The correspondent message on a higher level is that the brain can be used for a higher purpose. The brain-power is the same; what matters is the purpose to which it is put. Just as on a material plane, the secrets of the brain can be offered to a king, on a spiritual plane, the secrets of the brain can be used for an elevated purpose, self-actualization on the highest mental level. Or, in another meaning, the subject reader can identify himself with the king, who would know the best use to make of the secret of the making of the ointment.

This last story I have chosen to discuss is both a story of transformation since it shows how one can better oneself by the right use of one's understanding and it also shows how it is by an act of larger understanding that one betters oneself. In other words, it is not a story of transformation *simpliciter* as the story of the fish. It is far more explicit that the transformation is achieved through an act of understanding. It is a story of transformation as a man betters his condition considerably albeit in a material sense. He has transformed himself through his cognitive capacities. The specific mode in which he has transformed himself by utilizing his cognitive capacities is also made explicit here. He must think in larger terms than the ordinary, near-sighted family who only thought in terms of selling the formula for a simple payment. In this respect, the man on the road to enlightenment here is utilizing the Great Understanding of the Big Bird. The man who sells the salve to the king is an exemplar of Great Understanding. It is Great Understanding that leads to enlightenment. In an important sense, Great Understanding is already enlightenment.

This is the mental balm. The story of the balm also takes sides. It is clear from the story that the man who sells the prescription to the king is superior to the family who only sells it for an instant reward. The family who gains only a temporary material benefit is not on the same axiological plane as the man who ultimately gains something permanent, symbolized by the gift of land.

While the ointment story is not exactly a myth, it is told as a legend which can be taken as a lesser form of myth. It appeals to the more intellectual reader both because it is more clearly a teaching story and because its content emphasizes the importance of the intellect in advancement. At the same time it appeals to the greed of the subject reader.

The story of the salve bridges the gap between the pure myth (that which could not have happened), and the legend (that which might have happened). This story falls more in the category of legend than myth. For this very reason, it also appeals to the intellectual reader because it falls more in the level of possibility. While the intellectual reader may not believe that such a story ever actually happened, he does know that something like this story could have happened. This leads him to the hidden belief that something like the transformation possibility to which he is being ever so gradually exposed could happen. It is a possibility. And it is a possibility that carries with it a great reward.

Notes

1. While no one would deny that this is the beginning myth of the *Chuang-tzu,* it is my singular claim that it is the central myth. If one looks closely, one can see it as an earlier version of the butterfly anecdote of chapter two of the *Chuang-tzu.* It is, of course, only a precursor of the butterfly anecdote and, as such not as highly developed. Nonetheless, both the fish-bird transformation and the butterfly anecdote are stories of transformation. They are both exemplars of the theme of transformation, which I take as the central theme of the *Chuang-tzu.* The butterfly anecdote, however, has progressed from the form of the myth or the legend to the form of the co-temporary anecdote, the highest form of the metaphor. This is not to say that the myth is a less important form. It is only to say that it is more primordial or primeval. One can utilize the fish-bird myth to illuminate the butterfly anecdote and vice-versa. There are, of course, obvious differences. But the central idea of transformation is common to both. We can also see elements in common with the Great Awakening or the Great Sage anecdote of chapter two of the *Chuang-tzu.*
2. Graham avoids the problem of repetition through the traditional choice of referring to the contents of the second version (as I have labeled it) as part of T'ang's questions to Chi. This way, it does not appear so much to be a simple repetition as the same story appearing from a different perspective. *Cf.,* A. C. Graham,

Chuang-tzu The Inner Chapters (London: 1981), p. 44. This expedient, however, still leaves the content of the material as repetitious and thus, to my mind, suspect. Graham himself seems aware of some problem as he has placed the entire portion of the second version within parentheses. In any event, there is no notice taken of the most significant difference between the two versions. This is the key issue and one which is not addressed by having it reappear in question form.

3. *The Complete Works of Chuang-tzu,* trans. Burton Watson (New York: 1970), p. 29. There are some issues of translation which center around the name Northern Darkness which can also refer to the name of a Lake. But these sorts of issues do nothing to affect the points at issue.
4. I have left out an intervening example to maintain the continuity of the story.
5. This was said prior to the reaction of the cicada and the dove. Cf. *Ibid.*. p. 30.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Despite such statements as this, a great majority of commentators have seen fit to view Chuang-tzu as some sort of relativist. One explanation for the view that Chuang-tzu is a relativist may be the overwhelming influence of Kuo Hsiang, who in his commentaries on the *Chuang-tzu* develops his own philosophy in addition to being responsible for editing the text which we rely upon.

   So that one can be aware of how even these passages referring to the small minded insect and bird are seen as of equal worth to the large minded Big Bird, consider this passage from Kuo Hsiang's commentary:

   > Although the great is different from the small, yet if they all indulge themselves in the sphere of self-enjoyment, then all things are following their own nature and doing according to their own capacity; all are what they ought to be and equally happy. There is no room for the distinction of superior and inferior. Kuo Hsiang. *Cf.,* Fung Yu-lan, *Chuang-tzu, A New Selected Translation with An Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang* (New York: 1964), p. 28.

   With reference to the choice of the creatures themselves, we may be reminded of the fact that both are well known to keep up an incessant and to some irritating stream of noise. I find the dove's constant crooning irritating although the cricket has always seemed soothing to me. The important factor, however, is that both are constantly making noise or chattering and in this respect can be seen as gossips which do cohere with their role of debunking the alleged feats of the Big Bird.
10. *Op. cit.*, p. 33.
11. *Op. cit.*, pp. 34-5.