

“That nothing which alone makes it possible for a something to be usable”: Benjamin, Kafka, and Daoism

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Abstract: The paper investigates the meaning of the expression used by Benjamin in his 1934 essay to define Kafka’s Daoism: “that nothing which alone makes it possible for a something to be usable.” It first traces Daoist motifs in Kafka’s and Benjamin’s thought. It then examines the notion of “nothingness” that Benjamin links to Daoism, first through a comparison with Hegel’s and Franz Rosenzweig’s conceptions of Daoism, and second through the Daoist doctrine of polarity, Martin Buber’s interpretation of it, and Salomo Friedlaender’s theory of “creative indifference.” What emerges is a conception of nothingness that differs from the one underlying Western logic and Hegelian dialectics, and is more closely related to the Daoist notion of “emptiness.” The paper further shows how the Daoist theory of polarity and the notion of “creative indifference” both converge in Benjamin’s “Dialectics at a Standstill.” Finally, it explores the Daoist concepts of “way” and “reversal” in order to interpret Kafka’s writings and assess his “becoming–Daoist.” In doing so, it highlights both the influence of Daoist thought on the theoretical framework of Benjamin’s philosophy and the intertwining of motifs from the Jewish tradition with elements of Daoist thought in Kafka’s work.

Keywords: Nothingness, *wu wei*, creative indifference, dialectics at a standstill, polarity

1. Kafka and Benjamin as “Daoists”?

Walter Benjamin was probably the first to perceive that Kafka’s spiritual and cultural lineage extends far beyond the Jewish and Greek traditions to include Chinese thought (SW II-2: 799)¹. In this gesture, his reading of Kafka travels symbolically eastward, beyond both the Hellenic world and Eastern Judaism, to the very threshold of the Great Wall of China. It is therefore telling that in one of the preparatory notes for his well-known 1934 essay *Franz Kafka. Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, he wrote: “Kafka’s work: the field of forces between Torah and Dao [*das Kräftefeld zwischen Thora und Dao*]” (GS II-3: 1212). At first glance, this appears to be a rather daring exegetical positioning. Yet, on closer inspection, there is no shortage of philological evidence attesting to Kafka’s genuine interest in Chinese—and more specifically, Daoist—thought.

From the letters to Felice Bauer, we know that as early as 1912–1913 Kafka attached great importance to Chinese poetry—especially to the eighteenth-century poem *In the Dead of Night*, by Jan-Tsen-Tsai (letter to Felice, November 24, 1912, Kafka 1973: 59–60)—and that he was deeply fascinated by the *Chinesische Geister- und Liebesgeschichten* compiled and published by Martin Buber in 1911 (letter to Felice, January 16, 1913: 158)². Moreover, from the *Conversations with Janouch* we learn that Kafka owned five fundamental works of Chinese philosophy in Richard Wilhelm’s German translations—versions that, though sometimes controversial, were widely read among early-

twentieth-century German philosophers and writers. Kafka's personal library included: Kung-Futse's *Conversations*; Laotse's *Dao-Te-King*; Chuang-tse's *Das wahre Buch vom südlichen Blütenland* (*The True Book of the South Land of Blossom*); Liä Tse, *The True Book of the Spring of the First Cause*; and *The Great Doctrine of Measure and Mean* by Tschung Yung. Furthermore, according to Janouch Kafka had studied Chinese thought "fairly deeply over a long period," and had a particular affection for the *Zhuangzi* (Janouch 1971: 153).

It thus seems reasonable to hypothesize that Kafka's sustained engagement with these texts may have oriented his writing toward the kind of Chinese "deterritorializations" that Benjamin so perceptively discerned.

Nonetheless, only a small part of Kafka scholarship has addressed this Chinese "deterritorializations" (cf. Meng 1986; Hsia 1996; Goebel 1997; Zhang 1998; Kaul 2015; Zeng and Chen 2002; Zeng 2022), while most critics have overlooked this dimension of his work—a telling example of this omission can be found in Reiner Stach's monumental three-volume biography (2002–2014), which never mentions Kafka's interest in Chinese thought.

Elias Canetti was among the first to discern in Kafka's work a distinctly "Jewish-Chinese" element. In a notebook entry from 1975, while relating Kafka's work to that of Robert Walser, Canetti observes that whereas Walser is "Daoist by nature [*Daoist von Natur*]," Kafka needs to become: he "becomes Daoist in order to withdraw from himself [*um sich zu entziehen*]" (Canetti 1987: 37)³.

A similar intuition was expressed by the literary critic Marino Freschi, who identified in *Die Acht Oktavhefte* a "mysticism of simplicity" grounded as much in Jewish mysticism as in Daoist and Zen philosophies. Freschi also defines the Daoist theory of "non-action" (to which we shall return later) as "the opposite pole that Kafka occasionally approaches in his rare moments of peace, of crystalline wisdom—so purified and metaphysical as to appear less a state of being achieved than an aspiration pursued" (Freschi 1984: 109). The idea that Daoist thought opens an unexpected breach of serenity within Kafka's otherwise restless writing is later emphasized by Pietro Citati, who traces the concept of "Way" (*Weg*) in the *Zürauer Aphorismen* back to the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*: "I confess to feeling a predilection for this Greek-Chinese experience, for this non-tragic space, nourished by the colors of the Dao and of the *Odyssey*, which Kafka attempted in 1917, on the margins of the tragedy that, for him, was the revelation of his illness. It occupies a unique place in his work" (Citati 1987: 171).

Thus, it is precisely this unique place of Daoism—and this "non-tragic space"—that we must confront if we wish to understand not only a significant aspect of Kafka's work, but also Benjamin's interpretation of it.

In this regard, it must be underlined that key Daoist motifs are also present in Benjamin's philosophical reflections. Recently, Benjamin scholars such as Fenves (2018, 2020, 2023), Ng (2023), and Ty (2023) have significantly advanced the discussion of this dimension. That Benjamin was quite familiar with Daoism is demonstrated by the first occurrence of *Laozi* already in 1914, in the epigraph to the second part of *Metaphysik der Jugend* (SW I: 10). Here he quotes the very same Chapter 80 of the *Daodejing* (from Richard Wilhelm's 1911 edition) that, twenty years later, he would regard as perfectly paraphrased in Kafka's short story *Das nächste Dorf* (SW II-2: 805); and many of the preparatory notes for the 1934 Kafka essay likewise contain explicit references to the Dao (GS II-3: 1190–1264).

Benjamin's reflections, moreover, took shape within a *milieu* in which Chinese thought was the object of a lively fascination among German and German-Jewish intellectuals—from Buber and Weber to Bloch, Brecht, Jaspers, and Heidegger (see Elberfeld 2000). Yet the hypothesis that Benjamin's engagement with Daoist thought went beyond a merely intellectual interest seems especially supported by Scholem's 1918 diaries, in which he noted that "Walter Benjamin's life stands in close parallel with that of Laozi," and that, during those years, Benjamin regarded three books as fundamental: the *Bible*, the *Daodejing*, and—perhaps even more surprisingly—Paul Scheerbart's *Lesabéndio* (Scholem 2000: 146 and 153).

2. The Nothingness of Daoism

Having established these general premises, we may now turn to Benjamin's 1934 essay and, more specifically, to the initially enigmatic sentence in which he characterizes Kafka's Daoism. Toward the end of the essay, referring to the peculiar role of "study" embodied in Kafka's student figures, Benjamin writes: "Perhaps these studies had amounted to nothing. But they are very close to that nothing which alone makes it possible for a something to be usable—that is, they are very close to the Dao [*Sie stehen aber jenem Nichts sehr nahe, das das Etwas erst brauchbar macht – dem Dao nämlich*]" (SW II-2: 813).

It should first be noted that the periphrasis "that nothing which makes it possible for a something to be usable," which Benjamin considers suitable for defining Kafka's Daoism and his conception of nothingness, is an implicit yet exact calque of the definition of the Dao offered by Franz Rosenzweig in the first part of *The Star of Redemption*:

The Dao is only this being effective without action [...] it is that which, by the fact that it is "nothing," makes the something "usable" [*es ist das, was dadurch, daß es „nichts“ ist, das Etwas „brauchbar“ macht*] [...]. It is the non-action as the original ground of the action (Rosenzweig 2005: 45).

In other words, this is one of those quintessential unmarked quotations to which Benjamin's writing has accustomed us. Yet, in keeping precisely with the logic of this method, Benjamin appears to invert the meaning of Rosenzweig's definition. For Rosenzweig, in seeking within the nothingness of action the original foundation of acting, Daoism arrives only at an abstract and absolute nothing—a nothing that is pure "dissolution" (*Verwesung*) and "annihilation" (*Vernichtung*), a "formless night of nothing" (Rosenzweig 2005: 33). Differently said, a "nothing" which, unlike the one that Rosenzweig himself posits as the ground of his own *neue Denken*, possesses no *positivum*—that is, it is not conceived as the methodological condition for the determinability of the "not-nothing" (31; cf. Bertolino 2011). From Rosenzweig's perspective—which reveals here his proximity to Hegel—, Eastern religions remain in fact confined to an early stage of human thought, destined to be surpassed by Greek religion and ultimately abolished by Judaism and Christianity.

In a very similar way had Hegel relegated Chinese and Indian thought to a primordial phase of philosophy, owing to its alleged incapacity to conceive of nothingness in a determinate manner. In the *Einleitung in die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Hegel defines the annihilation (*Vernichtung*) of consciousness—and thus the dissolution of the distinction between subject and substance—as the distinctive and negative feature of Eastern thought. It is precisely from this annihilation, or from this absolute and abstract concept of nothing (*Nichts*) posited by Daoism, that such thought would, according to Hegel—who echoes here his *Wissenschaft der Logik*—, be unable to produce any substantial determination (Hegel 1959: 227-232).

3. *Wu wei*

As said previously, Benjamin inverts the meaning of Rosenzweig's definition—and, implicitly, of Hegel's conception of nothingness. The *Nichts* to which, in his interpretation, Kafka's students "studies" would refer acquires a certain positivity precisely in making the "something" usable (*brauchbar*). But in what sense should we understand this *usability* of the *something* by virtue of the *nothing*? In what sense, that is, can we think the nothing of the Dao in a positive way—contrary to Hegel and Rosenzweig—as it seems to surface in Kafka?

To grasp Benjamin's interpretation, it is helpful to follow carefully the development of his thought. In a note for a 1931 radio address on Kafka, Benjamin writes that Kafka "has always felt nothingness as his 'proper element'" (GS II-3: 1194). He there refers to the text entitled *Er* (Kafka 1970: 156), published in the posthumous collection edited by Max Brod in 1931 under the title *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer*. This hermetic short piece centers on the desire to construct a small table, hammering with such mastery that the act itself becomes nearly identical with "doing nothing at all." It is this text that Benjamin quotes in the 1934 essay, and which we reproduce here at greater length:

[...] Many years ago I sat one day, in a sad enough mood, on the slopes of the Laurenziberg. I went over the wishes that I wanted to realize in life. I found that the most important or the most delightful was the wish to attain a view of life (and—this was necessarily bound up with it—to convince others of it in writing), in which life, while still retaining its natural full-bodied rise and fall, would simultaneously be recognized no less clearly as a nothing, a dream, a dim hovering. A beautiful wish, perhaps, if I had wished it rightly. Considered as a wish, somewhat as if one were to hammer together a table with painful and methodical technical efficiency, and simultaneously do nothing at all, and not in such a way that people could say: “Hammering a table together is nothing to him,” but rather, “Hammering a table together is really hammering a table together to him, but at the same time it is nothing,” whereby certainly the hammering would have become still bolder, still surer, still more real and, if you will, still more senseless (Kafka 1970: 155).

Thus, Benjamin traces this “wish” back to Daoist doctrine (GS II-3: 1243). It is, moreover, not difficult to discern analogies between Kafka’s text and several passages of the *Daodejing*. As is well known, one of the central ideas of Daoism is that of *wu wei*, generally translated as “non-action,” “inaction,” or, according to the various meanings contained in *wu*, as “acting through emptiness,” “*agir sans agir*,” or even as “*agir le non-agir*” (Jullien 1996: 110), in the formula where *wei* is doubled (*wei wu wei*) and in which, as François Jullien explains, the negation concerns not the verb itself but its internal object. Richard Wilhelm renders it in a similar way in chapter 3 of his German edition of the *Daodejing*, read by both Kafka and Benjamin: “*Das Nicht-Handeln üben*” (Wilhelm 1911: 5). The idea of *wu wei* appears also in chapter 37 of the *Daodejing*, whose translation remains a matter of debate, yet many versions agree in rendering the opening lines as: “Dao never makes any ado, / And yet it does everything” (Wu 1961: 75)⁴. In turn, the translations of chapter 48 are more unanimous: “When not acting then there is nothing not done” (Ryden 2008: 101). And also Wilhelm’s German renderings were analogous: “*Der Sinn ist ewig ohne Handeln, / und nichts bleibt ungewirkt*” and “*Beim Nicht-Tun bleibt nichts ungetan*” (Wilhelm 1911: 39; 53).

The gesture of hammering a table together with such mastery that the act itself coincides with a perfect doing-nothing—with pure inaction—thus appears to evoke precisely the Daoist sense of *wu wei*, the “non-action” which should not be confused with mere inactivity, a negative privation of action, or a form of quietist passivity (cf. Zhang 2002; Jullien 1996; Slingerland 2007; Chai 2014 and 2019; Han 2023). From a certain perspective, it is rather legitimate to argue that *wu wei* constitutes a radical questioning of the typically Western primacy of action, grounded in the logics of potentiality-actuality and means-ends, or corresponding to the schema of the realization of the pre-determined will of a sovereign subject.

The question, however, remains as to how we should understand the notion of a “nothing” that makes “something” usable—one that is therefore not an absolute, abstract, metaphysical, or abyssal nothing devoid of any positivity. Here again, it is helpful to turn to chapter 11 of the *Daodejing*, entitled *wu yong*, that is, “the usefulness of emptiness or nothing”:

Thirty spokes held in one hub;
—In beingless [*wu*] lies the cartwheel’s usefulness;
Moulding clay into pots;
—In beingless lies the pot’s usefulness;
Chiselling doors and windows to make a room;
—In beingless lies the room’s usefulness;
Therefore,
Possess something to make it profit you;
Take it as nothing to make it useful for you (Ryden 2008: 25)⁵.

In this case, Wilhelm’s German edition not only concurs but is even more elucidating: “in nothingness lies the usability of the vessel [*Auf dem Nichts daran beruht des Gefäßes Brauchbarkeit*],” and “nothing gives usability [*das Nichtsein gibt Brauchbarkeit*]” (Wilhelm 1911: 13).

4. Polarity

The nothing of the Dao therefore appears neither as a mere *ens rationis* nor as an absolute, unthinkable non-being — a *nihil negativum irrepraesentabile*, as, following Baumgarten, the pre-critical Kant conceived it in his *Versuch den Begriff der negativen Grössen in die Weltweisheit einzuführen* (Kant 1763). As formless, the nothing of the Dao takes the form of emptiness; and in this sense, when the second chapter of the *Daodejing* states that being and non-being generate each other, it clarifies that the Dao is not simply reducible to non-being, nor can it be fully identified with being, but rather stands prior to both being and non-being: it is the emptiness as the condition of possibility for the usability of something.

To shed light on the relationship between being and non-being in Daoism, it is necessary to focus on another fundamental doctrine: the theory of polarity, whose image is well represented by the diagram of the *taijitu*, depicting the union of *yin* and *yang*. Originally, *yin* and *yang* (which we are accustomed to associate with night and day, darkness and light, negative and positive) refer, respectively, to the shaded and the sunlit sides of a mountain. As opposites, *yin* and *yang* are therefore correlated and inseparable — neither from each other (for they belong to the same mountain) nor from the mountain itself. In this sense, as Pasqualotto pointed out, *yin* and *yang* are not merely derivations or emanations of the Dao, but constitute its very “mode of being,” since the Dao never manifests itself solely in the *yin* form or solely in the *yang* form, but always as a relation of “reciprocal polarity between *yin* and *yang*” (1989: 28). In addition, François Jullien (2004: 125) has shown that the Chinese expression “*yin er yang*” may be translated either as “*yin* yet [*mais*] *yang*” or as “*yin* inasmuch [*de sorte que*] *yang*,” since the empty word “*er*” functions as a mediating term and can indicate both a concessive and a consecutive relation. Opposition and consequence are thus inseparable within it: one pole stands in opposition to the other, while at the same time the one can emerge from the other. *Yin* and *yang*—together with the entire series of opposites found throughout the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*—are therefore not to be understood according to the “Western” logic of contradiction, which entails a “logical exclusion between two rival propositions” (ibid.), nor in terms of any presumed “labor of the negative” (destined eventually to negate itself), but rather according to the thought of polarity: as the two polar extremes of one and the same field of forces, both immanent and transcendental, which cannot be eliminated without the dissolution of the field itself.

5. Creative Indifference

If, after this brief excursus into the Daoist conception of polarity, we return to Benjamin, we find in the same note already cited from the 1931 radio address draft a short addition that invites us to follow a similar path. Let us quote again: “Kafka says that he has always felt nothingness as his ‘proper element.’ What does he mean by this? Creative indifference? Nirvana?” (GS II-3: 1194). Setting aside the hypothesis of nirvana, which finds no further development in Benjamin’s interpretation, attention should instead be given to the first interrogative expression: “Creative indifference?” This expression names in fact the key concept of Salomo Friedlaender’s book *Schöpferische Indifferenz*, published in 1918 and strongly taken into consideration by Benjamin. In *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, Scholem testifies that Benjamin had known Friedlaender personally since the days of the Neopathetisches Kabarett, in the 1910s (Scholem 1981: 46), and that the two were still meeting between 1920 and 1923. Moreover, Benjamin brought Scholem as a present “Friedländer’s major philosophical work, *Schöpferische Indifferenz*, which he esteemed highly” (101)⁶.

To summarize some of the key aspects of this work, it is first necessary to note that, by Friedlaender’s own admission, the theory of “creative indifference” is the outcome of a long reflection on polarity which, beginning with Schopenhauer, traces back to Kant’s *Versuch den Begriff der negativen Grössen in die Weltweisheit einzuführen*, and culminates in Goethe’s *Farbenlehre* and in Nietzsche (Thiel 2012: 78). “By polarity, by polarization,” Friedlaender affirms, “one understands the emergence of

difference [*die Entspringung des Unterschiedes*] from what is identical to itself: thus, and in no other way, electrically, the relative forth from the absolute, time from eternity, the world from God, necessity from freedom, appearance from essence, the Dividual [*Dividuales*] from the individual [*Individuum*]" (Friedlaender 1926: XIV).

In this sense, for Friedlaender, polarity constitutes the mode through which the phenomenal-objective world manifests itself in the differentiation of what is indifferent and individual. Indifference and polarity are therefore not opposed but joined in a reciprocity whereby what is created is polar, while what creates is indifferent (5). Yet, to grasp properly the meaning of polarity and indifference, Friedlaender warns, one must neither confuse them with a sharp separation of opposites (*Gegensätze*) nor, conversely, with their ambiguous mingling (*vermischen*). Above all—and this point is particularly relevant for our discussion—polarity must not be conceived according to Hegelian logic of *Aufhebung*, that is, as a dialectical, progressive resolution of extremes through their determined negation (XVI). Rather, emphasis should be placed on their middle, on what Friedlaender calls the “pure middle” (*reine Mitte*, 28), “pure mediality” (*reine Medialität*, 69)—expressions that would later become characteristically Benjaminian—or, indeed, “creative indifference.”

“Creative indifference” is, in fact, that which both generates and articulates polar differences and, at the same time, constitutes the “nothingness of differences” (*Nichts der Differenz*, 3) themselves. It is a “zero” or *Nullpunkt*, a sort of emptiness that is not privative but creative and which, by “medializing” polar extremes—light and darkness, white and black, being and non-being—, opens the possibility of a third term that is not a superior synthesis and that Friedlaender also calls “West-Eastern” (*west-östlich*).

It should therefore come as no surprise that the concept of creative indifference was interpreted by Fritz Perls—the founder of “Gestalt psychotherapy,” who made no secret of his debt to Friedlaender—as “the Western equivalent of the doctrine of Laozi [*das westliche Äquivalent zur Lehre Laotses*]” (Perls 1981: 80). Just as the nameless (*wu ming*) and undifferentiated Dao constitutes the background and unique source of all differentiations and of every name, so “creative indifference” stands as the condition of possibility and the unifying principle of all polarization. After all, this intimate connection was grasped by Benjamin himself, who traced Kafka’s “nothingness” back to “creative indifference” and then further linked it to the Dao. In Benjamin’s recurrent use of the concept of “creative indifference” (cf. Thiel 2013: 107–162), and in his application of it to Kafka’s case, what appears decisive is the fact that creative indifference designates a conception of “nothingness” irreducible to that of Western metaphysics, while at the same time suggesting a dialectical conception of a very particular kind.

6. The Chinese dialectical Schematism

In his 1928 review of Anja and Georg Mendelssohn’s *Der Mensch in der Handschrift*, Benjamin adopts the notion of “creative indifference” giving it a distinctly dialectical inflection. Indeed, he specifies that creative indifference must be understood as an “extreme *milieu*” which “can never of course be found in the golden middle way. It is a constant renewed dialectical balance [*Ausgleich*]; it is no geometric location, but the jurisdiction of an event [*Bannkreis eines Geschehens*], the force field of a discharge” (SW II-1: 133). The following year, in the essay *Juden in der deutschen Kultur* (1929), he presents Friedlaender’s thought of polarity and creative indifference as a “conception that properly oscillates between orthodox Kantianism and a certain static reformulation of dialectics [*gewissenmaßen statischen Ausfonnung der Dialektik schwebende Konzeption aus*]” (GS II-2: 810). Thus, if one focuses on this mutual “dialectization” of creative indifference and “Friedlaenderianization” of dialectics, it would not be wrong to see in this “static [*statisch*] reformulation of dialectics,” in which consists the idea of creative indifference, an anticipation of Benjamin’s later formulation of the *Dialektik im Stillstand*. Yet, as Benjamin himself emphasizes, this latter notion is also connected with Chinese philosophical thinking. Ty (2023) was the first to draw attention to the connection between Benjamin’s dialectics and Daoist thought. In articulating, in the *Passagen-Werk* (K 1, 3), this

new conception of dialectics, Benjamin explicitly refers to a particular “dialectical schematism” found in “Chinese fairy tales and novellas” (AP: 389). But what kind of schematism is at stake here?

We know that Benjamin owned the collection *Chinesische Geister- und Liebesgeschichten*, edited by Buber and also read by Kafka⁸. In his preface to this collection, Buber traces the rhythm of Chinese tales back to the fundamental polarity of *yin* and *yang*, in which opposites neither exclude nor dominate one another, but instead correspond in perfect indifference (Buber 1996: 113). That polarity constitutes the distinctive logical experience of Daoist thought is something Buber had already maintained in the *Nachwort* to *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschang Tse* (1910), later republished in *Die Rede, die Lehre und das Lied* and read by Benjamin⁹. There Buber stated that Daoist thought does not follow the logic of a “dialectic of subject and object,” but rather “takes each pair of antitheses as a polarity, without wishing to delimit the antitheses, and it surrounds all polarities in its oneness; ‘reconciles the yes with the no in the light’” (Hermann 1996: 89)¹⁰.

Perhaps Benjamin has something similar in mind when, in the *Passagen-Werk*, he writes:

There is a wholly unique experience of dialectic. The compelling—the drastic—experience, which refutes everything “gradual” about becoming and shows all seeming “development” to be dialectical reversal [*Umschlag*], eminently and thoroughly composed, is the awakening from dream. For the dialectical schematism at the core of this process, the Chinese have often found, in their fairy tales and novellas, a highly pregnant expression. The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through and carry out *what has been* in remembering the dream! —Therefore: remembering and awaking are most intimately related. Awakening [*Erwachen*] is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance [*Eingedenken*] (AP: 389).

Now, while we cannot dwell here on the notions of *Eingedenken* and *Erwachen*, it is important to note that the experience of awakening itself points to the *Dialektik im Stillstand* and, in a peculiar way, to “creative indifference”. In the “dialectics at a Standstill”, in fact, the opposites are not sublated or reconciled in a higher synthesis; rather, the arrest of the movement of argumentative thought—which would otherwise lead to their *Aufhebung*—takes place precisely at the point where the tension between extremes reaches its highest degree. In this interruption laden with tension a *tertium* thus opens up: the threshold of the “dialectical image” (*dialektisches Bild*), or what, following Friedlaender, we might call the “point of creative indifference” of the dichotomy.

Thus, in the polarity of sleep and wakefulness, awakening presents itself as the experience of their threshold of indifference, since it corresponds to a logic of “co-belonging” (*Zusammengehörigkeit*, OGT: 10), of inclusion and exclusion at the same time, as it contains within itself both the elements of sleep and those of wakefulness, yet as if suspended, brought to a point of indifference (Carchia 2009: 129–137)¹¹. From this perspective, then, it seems legitimate to reject Adorno’s interpretation, who sought to read in terms of the orthodoxy of Hegel’s *Wissenschaft der Logik*—namely through the initial movement of the Concept “Being–Nothing–Becoming”—precisely that “*Nichts, das das Etwas brauchbar macht*” through which Benjamin had defined Kafka’s Daoism (Adorno and Benjamin 1994: 92)¹². By contrast, the “dialectical schematism” of Chinese tales—that is, the schematism of polarity and indifference—points to a mode of thinking in which the *tertium* does not emerge as the progressive unfolding of a “determinate negation,” but rather is given *indifferently* (“*tertium non datur differenter, sed indifferenter*”, Friedlaender 1926: 343), as a “pure mediality” (*reine Medialität*) between one and two, between black and white, between being and non-being—and thus as a potential *reversal* of opposites.

7. Gesture and *wu wei*

If we now return to Kafka’s “nothing which makes it possible for a something to be usable,” keeping in mind Benjamin’s *Dialektik im Stillstand* in its connection with Friedlaender’s creative indifference, we can see that such a “nothing,” once referred back to the Dao, is not a mere non-

being opposed to being, nor an undetermined *Nichts* that coincides with *Sein*, as in Adorno Hegelian interpretation of it. Rather, it is that “nothing of differences,” in Friedlaender’s expression, the *Nullpunkt* between the negative and the positive, the hollow and concave form of the vessel or the wheel, which renders possible, and “usable,” the *tertium* of difference/something. Turning again to Kafka’s text *Er*, from which Benjamin had begun to measure his Daoism, one may notice that the coincidence between perfect hammering and “doing nothing” does not unfold in an actual action, in the realization of a capacity or in the completion of a final object (a table), but rather in something like a suspension of acting itself—a situation of action–without–action, or of “doing the non–doing.” And what is the *gesture*, to which Benjamin devoted so much attention, if not precisely this same suspension of action?

If on the one hand it is well known that the first formulation of the *Dialektik im Stillstand*, in 1931, arises precisely in relation to Brecht’s theory of theatrical gesture as the “interruption of action” (UB: 12), on the other hand, in Kafka’s work Benjamin sees an entire “code of gestures” (SW II-2: 801): the hammering with mastery up to doing nothing; the incessant study of the students in *Amerika*; Bucephalus’s study of law; the natural theatre of Oklahoma, which Benjamin explicitly connects to Chinese gestural theatre (*ibid.*). In all this gestures, what is dissolved is the teleological relation of means to end, of potentiality to actuality, and of a subject to the object. The gesture remains here a “pure means” (*reine Mitte*), a pure *indifference* to teleology or goal—hammering without producing, studying without a Holy Writ, law without application, acting without script or performance—that, nevertheless, exactly as *wu wei*, creates the condition of possibility of an entirely new gesturality. In other words, the gesture in Kafka’s work seems to take the place of *wu wei* in Daoist thought.

8. The Way

At this point, we may ask whether it is to something like this particular experience of nothingness as Kafka’s “proper element” that Canetti refers when he writes that while Walser is “a Daoist by nature,” Kafka must become one “in order to withdraw from himself” (1987: 37). In his 1929 essay, Benjamin (SW II-1: 258) compares Walser’s writing to the figure of a garland, understanding it as an ornament woven around an emptiness that forms the very center of Walser’s *use* of the language, just as emptiness permits, in Daoism, the *use* of the vessel. This emptiness, this “charming, utterly spherical zero [*eine reizende, kugelrunde Null*]” (Walser 1969: 24), is the mark of Walser’s creatures who, though emerging from the nothingness of madness, are, for Benjamin, already “healed” and can blissfully “enjoy themselves” (SW II-1: 259). They have, so to speak, completed their own way, closed the circle of their “zero” (of their healing), and can now devote themselves entirely to *walking*.

Kafka, on the other hand, seems still to be on the way. The image of the “way” (*Weg*) recurs throughout his work; one of the Zürau aphorisms says: “There is a goal [*Ziel*], but no way; what we call the way is only wavering [*Zögern*]” (Kafka 1970: 166). And “way” is both one of the meanings of *Halakhah* and one of the principal meanings of Dao. Yet Dao, as “way”, has a very particular sense: it does not indicate a spiritual path with a beginning, a progression, a growth, and a conclusion. In Daoism, the “way” serves only to reveal that it entirely coincides with the immanence of life: there is nothing at its end or beyond it; rather, it consists in a “reversal” of the will and the impatience for the goal. Dao, one might say, is the way in the figure of the reversal of its destination—where way and goal, in other words, become *indifferentiated*.

After having drawn attention to the elements of the way and Dao, Benjamin centers his concluding interpretation in the 1934 essay on the dialectics of reversal. In a letter to Scholem dated August 11 of the same year, he writes that “reversal” (*Umkehr*)—or the “studying”—is “Kafka’s messianic category” (CWB: 453). Yet, if we continue to hold to that note in which Benjamin described Kafka’s work as the “field of forces between the Torah and the Dao” (GS II-3: 1212), we can now add that reversal is also a Daoist category. Central in chapter 40 of the *Daodejing* is, in fact, the term

“*fan*”, which means “to reverse,” “to return,” but also “opposite” or “contrary.” Even when simply translated as “to return”—as, for instance, in Wilhelm’s translation (1911: 45): “*Rückkehr ist die Bewegung des Sinns*”—, the term emphasizes the inversion of direction.

9. Reversal

If the movement of the way (of the Dao) is reversal, we can understand why Benjamin’s interpretation of Kafka emphasizes all those stories and parables—*Eine kaiserliche Botschaft*, *Ein Landarzt*, *Das nächste Dorf*, *Der neue Advokat*, *Die Wahrheit über Sancho Pansa*—whose subject is a journey or a ride in which there is, in fact, no linear path and no point of arrival, but only a “false movement” that overturns and reverses direction. In Daoism, the word “*fan*”—reversal—means abandoning the forward thrust of action that obeys the logic of means and ends, turning action toward the negation of action itself. It is to a similar reversal that figures such as Bucephalus refer: without Alexander, the “conqueror,” charging ahead in fury, the horse can now “take the road back,” step into the role of a lawyer, and in the “study” suspend the execution of the law, non-acting in such a way that “he does not seem to be practicing law” (SW II-2: 815). Or that of Sancho Panza, who “sent on ahead” his own devil Don Quixote—the devil of action and “impatience”, which is for Kafka original sin (Kafka 1970: 162)—, and can now simply follow his crusades serenely, enjoying “great and profitable entertainment [*Unterhaltung*] to the end of his days” (SW II-2: 816)¹³.

It is precisely in light of this reversal that Benjamin’s interpretation of Kafka comes, in conclusion, to question the possibility of a *positive* transformation of life into script: “Reversal is the direction of study which transforms existence into script [*die das Dasein in Schrift verwandelt*]” (SW II-2: 815). Thus, one may ask whether, in this “empty, happy journey [*leerer, fröhlicher Reise*]” (814), Kafka succeeded in transforming (and redeeming) life into writing—in reversing the punitive script of guilty life (such as *In der Strafkolonie*) into a life freed from demons, including the demon of writing itself.

There is a passage in chapter 60 of the *Daodejing* that recalls Kafka’s parable *Die Wahrheit über Sancho Pansa*, quoted by Benjamin at the end of his essay:

When you employ the Way to approach the world,
Ghosts will have no spirit.
Or rather it is not that ghosts have no spirit, it is that their spirit
cannot harm people (Ryden 2008: 125).

Sabbadini (2011: 452) noted that this passage presents certain difficulties, since the word translated into English as “spirit,” “*shen*”, may denote both “power” and “spirit,” in a sense different from the preceding term “*gui*”, rendered as “ghost,” which specifically refers to the spirit of a deceased person still bound to this world in a malevolent way. The passage could therefore be translated either as “the spirits have no power to harm people,” or as meaning that the spirits of the dead no longer act as harmful ghosts toward the living. This latter interpretation is also the one adopted by Wilhelm (1911: 65), who translates “*gui*” as “*Abgeschiedenen*” (“those who have passed to the other side”) and “*shen*” as “*Geister*.” In any case, the sense remains the same: the “employ” or the “use” of the Dao neutralizes the malevolent power of ancestral spirits, dissolving the mythical and baleful bond with them. Something similar seems to occur with Sancho in Kafka’s parable:

Without making any boast of it Sancho Panza succeeded in the course of years, by feeding him a great number of romances of chivalry and adventure in the evening and night hours, in so diverting from himself his demon [*Teufel*], whom he later called Don Quixote, that this demon thereupon set out, uninhibited, on the maddest exploits, which, however, for the lack of a preordained object, which should have been Sancho Panza himself, harmed nobody (Kafka 1971: 430).

It is for this reason that Benjamin noted, once again in one of his 1931 radio fragments, “Sancho Panza as Daoist” [*Sancho Pansa als Daoist*] (GS II-3: 1198)¹⁴.

And if it is true, as Deleuze and Guattari (1975) have observed, that Kafka's writing unfolds in endless "concatenations of becomings," it is perhaps in this parable—that Benjamin regarded as "his most perfect creation" (SW 2-II: 815)—that what Canetti called Kafka's becoming-Daoist is finally realized. It is here that existence has been freed from its own weight and redeemed in script, and that nothingness has lost its abyssal aspect, receiving at last a "a whiff of gaiety" [*ein Hauch von Munterkeit, den er dem Nichts geben wollte*] (Kafka 1990: 855. Cf. Blanchot 1955: 86). In the Daoist nullification of both the script that condemns life (the murderous, juridical, or bureaucratic writing of *In der Strafkolonie*, *Der Prozess*, *Das Schloss*) and of life that petrifies into writing, Kafka discovered the joyful *indifference*, that is, the transformation of "existence into script" (SW 2-II: 815). In his *becoming-Daoist*, he found a way to make his writing feel at ease within the "element of nothingness," and within it he discovered, if only for a moment, the formula of emptiness and liberation—not a totality, but *something*.

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Notes

- ¹ Quotations from Benjamin are taken from the English editions of the *Selected Writings* (SW followed by volume and page numbers), *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (OGT), *The Arcades Project* (AP), *Understanding Brecht* (UB), *The correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940* (CWB). When a text is not included in these volumes, references are to the German editions of *Gesammelte Schriften* (GS, followed by volume and page numbers) and *Gesammelte Briefe* (GB, followed by volume and page numbers). Translations have sometimes been edited. Excerpts from all the works in the original language have been translated by me.
- ² If one reads Buber's preface to the collection *Chinesische Geister- und Liebesgeschichten*, it is striking to observe how Buber's presentation of the Chinese tales could perfectly apply to Kafka's stories and parables: "It contains about four hundred stories, and they are, in fact, curious communications. They report all kinds of rare and wondrous goings-on, of the adventures of wayfarers and dreams of the lonely, of singing frogs and playacting mice, sea serpents and giant birds, snow in summer, floods and earthquakes, strange diseases and peculiar deaths, travels among the cannibals and travels into the land where beauty counts for ugliness and ugliness for beauty, episodes in the nether world, the sham dead and the resurrected, all kinds of magic arts, of buried treasures, of alchemists, of prophecies, and premonitory dream [*Wahrträumen*]; nor are satires lacking, for instance, of biased officials, corrupt examiners, ignorant doctors, lying priests [...]" (Buber 1996: 112-113).
- ³ It is interesting to note how this diary entry contradicts Canetti's earlier statement, found in *Der andere Prozeß. Kafkas Briefe an Felice* (1969), according to which Kafka was the only Chinese poet (*Dichter*) "by nature" of the West (Canetti 2012: 90). Such a change of view can only have been prompted by the discovery of Walser's work.
- ⁴ Instead, Ryden translates: "The Way is ever nameless. [And so there is nothing she does not do]" (Ryden 2008: 77). See also the alternative translation proposals discussed in Sabbadini (2011: 297-298). In a similar vein, Julien (1996: 106) has also suggested the rendering "*Ne rien faire et que rien ne soit pas fait*."
- ⁵ But this latter sentence has also been translated as "C'est pourquoi l'utilité vient de l'être, l'usage naît du non-être" (Julien 1842: 38), or "Thus what we gain is Something, yet it is by virtue of Nothing that this can be put to use." (Lau 1963: 67).
- ⁶ Friedlaender plays a pivotal role in Benjamin's thought, a role that critics have not yet fully grasped (cf. Bolz 1984; Bolz & van Reijen 1991; Steiner 2001; Moran 2011). Thiel (2013) collects all occurrences of the term "creative indifference" in Benjamin's work. I have highlighted the connection between the idea of "creative indifference" and Benjaminian dialectics in the 1936 essay *Der Erzähler* on Nikolaj Leskov in a previous work (Trotta 2023). Only in 2023 appeared the first important monograph on the two authors (cf. Drews 2023).

- ⁷ It is not possible here to dwell on the connection between Friedlaender's polarity and creative indifference and Benjamin's "dialectics of extremes," which, after the *Trauerspielbuch*, takes shape in the *Dialektik im Stillstand*—a topic that is not fully addressed by Drews 2023 and that deserves further exploration and development. One important difference to note, however, is that while Friedlaender situates indifference on the plane of the subject or *Individuum*, Benjamin shifts it to that of the object — that is, to the "monad," as it appears both in the *Trauerspielbuch* and in the theses *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. These issues were addressed in the recent congress *Southern Benjamin: Mourning, Play, Revolution*, held in Rome from November 17 to 20, 2025, a paper presented by F. Luzi and myself, entitled "Friedlaender's *Indifferenz aller Polarität*. About a neglected Source of Benjaminian Dialectics."
- ⁸ But other works of Chinese narrative were also present in his library (GS VII: 439, 449): *Chinesische Abende. Chinesische Novellen und Geschichten*, übertragen von Leo Greiner (Berlin 1914); *Chinesische Novellen*, Übers. von Paul Kühnel (München 1914); *Die ewige Rache des Fräulein Wang-Kiau-Luan* (Aus dem *Kinkuki-kuan*), Übers. von Eduard Grisebach (München 1920).
- ⁹ Buber's *Nachwort* to *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschang Tse* was later entitled *Die Lehre vom Dao* and included in his anthology *Die Rede, die Lehre und das Lied* (1917). In 1917, Benjamin read Buber's *Drei Reden über das Judentum, Daniel* (1913), and *Die Lehre, die Rede und das Lied* (GB I: 14; 214; 371).
- ¹⁰ It should also be noted that a little earlier Buber had written that in the teaching of Daoism "all antitheses [Gegensätze] of wholeness have been lifted up into the one, as the seven colors into white light [*sieben Farben in weißen Licht*]" (Herman: 72); and an almost identical expression, directly connected to the concept of "creative indifference," is used by Benjamin in his 1936 essay on Leskov to define the writing of history as the creative indifference of epic forms: "Any examination of a given epic form is concerned with the relationship of this form to historiography. In fact, one may go even further and raise the question of whether historiography might not constitute the point of creative indifference [*Punkt schöpferischer Indifferenz*] for all forms of the epic. Then written history would bear the same relationship to the epic forms as white light bears to the colors of the spectrum [*wie das weiße Licht zu den Spektralfarben*]" (SW III: 152).
- ¹¹ Carchia (2009: 26) has noted that the "problem of undifferentiation" was already central for Benjamin in his 1919 dissertation *Der Begriff der Kritik in der deutschen Romantik*, although he makes no reference to Friedlaender.
- ¹² On Benjamin and Hegel cf.: Wagner 1999: 1071-1087; Urbich 2014; Carchia 2009: 71 ff.; Sagriotis 2019: 125-147; Desideri 2021: 47-59.
- ¹³ Just as, at the end of *Jakob von Gunten*, having freed themselves from the last encumbrances of education—an education in which what was truly to be learned was only to *unlearn* everything in order to become nothing but "a charming, utterly spherical zero" (Walser 1969: 24)—, Jakob and the Director of the Benjamenta Institute can set out on their *Don Quixotesque* and *Sanchopancesque* journey, truly "empty and happy" like the one Kafka had long been seeking.
- ¹⁴ This reading appears to be amply confirmed by another note: "Moreover, this vision [*Anschauungskreis*] does not deny Chinese wisdom either. And the study of Bucephalus or of Sancho Panza stands close to that nothing which alone makes the something usable — that is to say, to the Dao [*steht jenem Nichts, das das Etwas erst brauchbar macht, nahe — also dem Dao*]. A small fragment proves that in fact Kafka's center of gravity [*Schwerpunkt*] lies precisely here: 'Two possibilities: to make oneself, or to be infinitesimally small. The second is fulfillment [*Vollendung*], therefore inaction [*Untätigkeit*]. Dao, one may interpret, "the first [...] thus action" (GS II:1243). Benjamin refers here to one of Kafka's aphorisms (1970: 180).

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