

COMPARISON AS POETRY:  
READING EURIPIDES' *BACCHAE* AND THE *ZHUANGZI*

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*Abstract: This essay has two major parts. First, a comparison between poetry and comparative work itself. Second, a comparison of the Zhuangzi and Euripides' Bacchae. Comparison is like a poem in that both are imaginative constructions that rely on the creativity of the comparatist or poet. Comparison and poetry take features of the world and alter them in such a way as to suggest an alternative. The Zhuangzi and the Bacchae, via the theme of forgetting, do the same thing—unsettle our fixed suppositions or knowledge. The argument that a comparative work is like a poem thus relies on the comparison of Zhuangzi and Euripides as an illustration. Both the Zhuangzi and the Bacchae invite a relinquishing of fixed knowledge, and depict a human nature that is tenuous and given to change. This article suggests that a similar experience characterizes the practice of comparison, and that such an experience is something we often see in poetry.*

This essay attempts to describe comparison as a poetic activity, supported by a somewhat freewheeling reading of Euripides' *Bacchae* and the *Zhuangzi*. Questions of method in comparative work dominate the scholarship, but the role of imagination receives relatively little attention. I suggest some ways in which a comparative work is like a poem, and then think through the implications such a view might have carried. Euripides and Zhuangzi bring two things to the discussion. First, these two poetic writers give us texts that act upon us as we read them. Comparison as a poetic activity does the same to the comparatist. Second, I compare the *Bacchae* and the *Zhuangzi* on their incorporation of oblivion into form and content, thus demonstrating the very comparative process that I outline.

For the purposes of this essay, when I speak of comparison, I am referring to a work of scholarship, usually in the humanities, that explicitly compares two thinkers or texts written in different languages or from two different cultures—the

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sort of work one would typically find in comparative literature. Insightful comparison can be done between Plato and Aristotle, for example, but such a work need not be overly concerned with cross-cultural or cross-linguistic or even cross-temporal comparison. I also take it for granted that we generally think of science as tending towards the objective, and of poetry as tending towards the subjective. My goal is to think about scholarly comparison as, like a poem, a work of the imagination.

G. E. R. Lloyd, a major voice in comparative studies of early Greece and China, has criticized two common and opposing approaches to comparison, both overgeneralization that flattens out the variety present in a culture (“the Chinese mindset” or “the Greek spirit”), and piecemeal approaches that cherry-pick apparently similar bits from different cultures incapable of supporting any substantial insights.<sup>1</sup> I accept Lloyd’s argument for the most part, but I want to draw attention to the absence of creativity in his schema. Lloyd, and most comparative scholarship in Greece-China studies, focuses on method, on good or bad comparison, but does not consider *why* we compare. In contrast, I take my cue from Robin W. Lovin, who remarks that “there is more than method here, because the goal we set for our comparison is inevitably a way of bringing some order out of the porous and dangerous reality we are exploring.” (Lovin 2010, 262) A “porous and dangerous reality” is precisely what Zhuangzi and Euripides depict in their poetic works, and this parallels the task of the comparatist: trying to impose temporary order on unstable and chaotic reality.

Good comparison is hard work: choosing comparable points or problems, setting up qualifications and frameworks, trying to treat each object honestly and without distortion. To compare Aristotle and Confucius well, one must know something about Aristotle and Confucius: knowledge of Classical Greek and Classical Chinese, historical background, general skill in literary criticism and philosophical analysis, etc. These are skills that we take to be objective in some way. One can either read Aristotle in the original Classical Greek or one cannot, after all. The entire credentialing process in academia is in some sense premised on the idea that objectivity is possible: we set standards for language ability, for

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd returns to this question of method countless times throughout his work. For a clear and thorough argument on these two pole of comparison, see G. E. R. Lloyd, *Adversaries and Authorities: Investigations into Ancient Greek and Chinese Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

writing ability, for persuasiveness of argument, we review books according to a variety of impersonal criteria, and so on. As a work of scholarship, then, a comparison has some claims to objectivity. Granted, this is ambiguous. We do not think of a book review as being objective in the same way a lab experiment is objective. My point is just that comparison commands the same authority and glamor of objectivity as any other rigorous scholarship.

And yet, a comparison does not yield any objective or permanent knowledge. Comparison is more idiosyncratic than science. Two scholars can compare Plato and Zhuangzi and come away with quite different understandings, with different knowledge even. This points to something whimsical about comparison. There is no particular reason why one should compare Plato and Zhuangzi, or Sappho and Wang Wei. A comparison of Plato and Aristotle makes a kind of obvious sense: one was a student of the other, and the question of how Plato's views evolved and are challenged in Aristotle is almost natural. But in cross-cultural comparison, especially over so large a gap as between ancient Greece and China, this sort of obviousness is not available to us. The comparatist is left not only to compare, but also to explain and justify her comparison in a way the classicist is not. There is something unnatural about a comparison.

Comparing Euripides and Zhuangzi, as I do below, tells us little about the evolution of Greek or Chinese civilization. Neither does it tell us anything broad about Greek tragic poetry. The two texts do not belong to the same genre, and in fact, early China had no tragic drama, and early Greece certainly had nothing like the genre-defying *Zhuangzi* (neither did early China, for that matter). But all this does not mean that we cannot glean something insightful from a comparison. Indeed, one of our motivations for comparison is to see thinkers or texts in a new light. Here we return to the "why" of comparison, to the personal motives and desires involved—something debates about comparative method tend to overlook. It would be dubious at best to claim that one needs to understand Sappho in order to understand Wang Wei. Each poet can and should be grasped on their own terms.

Historian of religions J. Z. Smith once remarked that in the humanities we are denied the power of experiment.<sup>2</sup> Much of what we study is ancient or

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<sup>2</sup> A paraphrase from an interview with Smith conducted by the University of Chicago's campus newspaper in 2008:

<http://chicagomaroon.com/2008/06/02/full-j-z-smith-interview/>.

beyond easy manipulation—we cannot throw human beings or texts together in a petri dish or a particle accelerator to see what happens. Comparison, Smith argues, is our version of experiment. Speaking of creativity in science, we usually point to people who thought outside the box, who asked a question nobody had asked, who tried something different. This applies just as well to comparison. It is not immediately apparent why one ought to compare Sappho and Wang Wei, but a sufficiently creative comparatist might just make such an endeavor worth the price of admission.

Any scholarly work has something of personal interest, of course. In comparison, however, this personal interest takes center stage. Sappho wrote lyric poetry, and describing what Wang Wei wrote as lyric poetry both fits and doesn't fit. It's hard to imagine Wang Wei, famous for his Buddhist-inflected verse focused on nature, writing any of Sappho's lines expressing erotic desire. How to compare a poet known for her intensely personal love poetry with a poet known for her detached and impersonal nature poetry? To take Smith's reasoning, the point of putting Sappho and Wang Wei into the particle accelerator and blasting them against each other is simply to see what happens. Might our presuppositions about lyric poetry be undermined by Wang Wei? Perhaps a defined persona or speaker is not a prerequisite for lyric after all, for example.<sup>3</sup> The possibility of interesting conclusions alone seems somewhat shaky justification for juxtaposing two such disparate poets, and at bottom, the only real reason to compare Wang Wei and Sappho is because one wants to. This is why comparison should take into account personal creativity and imagination.

A comparison is a made object, like a poem.<sup>4</sup> The comparatist uses the powers of imagination and creativity to bring into being something that would not naturally exist. Euripides and Zhuangzi have no historical affinity to recommend comparison—it is only through the imagination of the comparatist that a pairing

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<sup>3</sup> This very point has recently been made by Jonathan Culler, who criticizes the narrow model of lyric poetry that reads lyric as a dramatic monologue, focusing on a speaker, an audience, a context, etc. To my point, however, Culler does not engage in any comparison outside the Western canon. A comparison with someone like Wang Wei, who often eschews any sort of clear speaker, would make Culler's argument even stronger. See Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Here I have in mind the Greek meaning of *poiêsis*—“making” in a broad sense.

takes place. This highlights the subjective dimension of comparison, a dimension often overlooked in scholarship, which is seen as more objective. We are obsessed over comparative method, I suggest, partly because we are invested in finding the “right” and the “wrong” way to compare. This implies objective values. My goal is not to deny that some comparisons are better than others. Rather, I want to push back against the overwhelming tendency, at least in Greece-China studies, that ignores the subjective elements in comparison in a way that we don't do when dealing with poetry. Poetry is an especially rich analogue for comparison because a poem is a made object that in turn shapes us.

Poetry has several qualities that, I venture to suggest, also apply to comparison.<sup>5</sup> First, poetry exercises and thus strengthens the imagination. Second, more powerful imagination means more flexibility when it comes to seeing “internal and external events from different and ever-changing perspectives.” (Yearley 2011, 256) Third, poetry shows us the cracks in life, in the world, from which we might otherwise turn away. Our ability to forget or overlook may be necessary to life (e.g. moving past some trauma),<sup>6</sup> but poetry keeps us honest, and prevents us from flying too far into fantastical denial. Fourth, poetry opens a space for encounters. On a formal level, we encounter unusual syntax or vocabulary that stretches our comprehension. Images and metaphors allow a poet to make ambivalent value claims, to mean more than one thing at the same time. Paradox, ambiguity, and contradiction are all at home in poetry, and this makes the experience of reading a poem potentially transformative. Poet and critic Robin Skelton explains it thus: “because it communicates in intuitive, emotional, sensual, and intellectual ways, and because it involves its reader in sharing as well as recognizing an experience, [poetry] presents a kind of ‘total’ perception which is not available elsewhere. *The reader undergoes and observes an experience at the same time.*” (Skelton 1978, 76. My

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<sup>5</sup> Any sort of complete philosophy of poetry is well beyond the scope of this essay, but I draw here on remarks about poetic language by Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Routledge, 2005) and by Lee H. Yearley, “Poetic Language: Zhuangzi and Du Fu's Confucian Ideals” in *Ethics in Early China*, eds. Chris Fraser, Dan Robins, and Timothy O'Leary (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), pp. 245-266.

<sup>6</sup> I call this “oblivion” and discuss it at more length below in my comparison of Euripides and Zhuangzi.

italics) This last point is perhaps the most important feature of poetry for my purposes here. Poetry is a made thing, but the process of writing or reading poetry in turn shapes us. To borrow Simon Critchley's phrasing:

Poetry allows us to see things *as* they are. It lets us see particulars being various. But, and this is its peculiarity, poetry lets us see things as they are anew, under a new aspect, transfigured, subject to a felt variation... Poetry describes life as it is, but in all the intricate evasions of *as*. It gives us the world as it is—common, near, low, recognizable—but imagined, illumined, turned about. It is a world both seen and unseen until seen with the poet's eyes. (Critchley 2005, 11–12)

Poetry presents us with our world transformed, with a scene or an object or a feeling that is familiar but somehow altered. Poetry suggests how the world or a situation might be other than it is, even if the difference is only minuscule. Crucially, the poet works with the world already present to us, but it is a world that we cannot see until the poet's imagination orients the light for our vision.

Comparison is analogous to this view of poetry. The goal in comparison is not so much generating or acquiring some new knowledge or propositional content (although this *is* involved). Instead, we can think of comparison as an experience that disrupts, challenges, or shatters what we thought was fixed knowledge. Comparison confronts us with reality as we know it but slightly different. Wang Wei is not as alien to a Western reader as to be unintelligible, but he might call into doubt what we think we know about lyric poetry and poetic voice. Zhuangzi challenges the very practice of intelligible discourse, performing linguistic feats unknown to someone trained only in European languages, undermining even the basic safety one feels in making simple subject-predicate claims. What sort of stable knowledge about poetry can one have when "poetry" must include such disparities as Homer, the *Shijing*, Sappho, Sophocles, the *Tianwen*, and Wang Wei? Comparison is an interpretive vertigo constructed by the comparatist, a vertigo that in turn unsettles distinctions and fixed knowledge, offering glimpses of an alternative, of another way of doing things.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For the phrase "interpretive vertigo" I am indebted to Jennifer Rapp, whose article on a poetics of comparison inspired by her own. While following Rapp somehow, I depart from her in several ways, the most obvious of which is that her argumentative focus is on the

Lee H. Yearley describes comparison as “imaginative construction” at the close of his comparative study *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*:

As comparativists we manipulate the different and the common as we work. We choose which to highlight and which to neglect, and we choose when to relate them. We must work from similarities, else we will establish only contrasts or perhaps even in commensurabilities. But even then our work is anamorphic not homologous. The similarities always are just resemblances; they live in and usually are deeply informed by sharply divergent contexts. We must also pursue differences, however, if the comparisons are to be more than juts tautological exercises. If they are to be interesting, revealing, and therefore also inevitably problematic, differences must be highlighted. Neither the equivocal nor the univocal can be neglected; to focus on the analogical is to work constantly with each and between both of them. (Yearley 1990, 199)

I want to make several points here. First, Yearley’s distinction between the equivocal (ambiguous) and the univocal (unambiguous) parallels the distinction between objective and subjective. On Yearley’s model, comparison aims at both multiple interpretations and singular meanings, at subjective whimsy and objective knowledge. The poet must capture the distinctive concreteness of a vase, a fountain, a landscape, an emotion, while also making a poem that communicates to other minds. Second, Yearley describes the comparative process as analogical. Analogies do not exist naturally; they are fleeting and come into being only to better understand one or both of the separate analogues. An analogy is not simply two objects—it is two objects placed in a special relation by the analogist. Likewise, a comparison is not merely two objects juxtaposed (i.e. Lloyd’s piecemeal approach). The comparatist must build a framework within which comparison takes place, and like an analogy, there is great room for creativity here. The same two objects can be analogous in a variety of ways, and one comparatist will bring out something that a different comparatist does not.

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ethical dimensions of comparison. I have also tried to take what seems a good pairing in Euripides and Zhuangzi and make it clearer on several fronts. See Jennifer Rapp, “A Poetics of Comparison: Euripides, Zhuangzi, and the Human Poise of Imaginative Construction” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78:1 (2010), pp. 163-201.

Sappho and Li Qingzhao may both sing of love, but they do it in their own distinct voices.

How are we to understand comparative work if it is imaginative or poetic? Yearley notes that viewing comparison as an imaginative act does not mean “that standards dissolve”—rather, the “possibility of error remains.” (Yearley 1990, 197) We evaluate works of creative imagination all the time, and we need not admit the slippery idea that all opinions are equal when it comes to poetry. Comparison as a poem can be evaluated on three levels. First, there is basic accuracy. Mistakes of language or terminology, inaccurate or incomplete historical knowledge, errors in analytic or logical reasoning—one can criticize a poetic comparison on all these grounds without giving up the poetic model I am describing.

Second, we can evaluate a poetic comparison more conceptually. Poetry does violence to the world and to language itself, twisting words and ideas into strange contortions, defamiliarizing our own world to us. This gives poetry its power to unnerve or to strike us with wonder. What business, after all, does the archaic Greek poet Stesichorus have describing a river as “root-silver” or a child as “bruiseless”? Comparison as poetry should also be understood to twist its objects. The juxtaposition of two thinkers or texts from disparate cultures inevitably comes with distortion, but perhaps distortion *per se* is not the enemy. Comparatists have an ethical obligation to the facts, of course. And because we want any new knowledge generated by the comparison to be valuable, we must strive for accuracy and rigor. We want to take each comparandum on its own terms, but comparison itself undermines that very goal. My point is that comparison as poem can be evaluated for its conceptual construction—how it is framed, how it treats its comparanda—while still taking into account that the construction is going to be a little wobbly. The aim is not fixed and permanent objective knowledge. The aim is a creative juxtaposition that may grant temporary insight. We should no more demand objectivity of a comparison than we would of a poem.

Third, the most common methodological complaint when it comes to comparison is that X and Y are simply “not comparable.” Why? If a comparison is an imaginative construction, something creatively made by the comparatist, then there is a sense in which the comparatist’s imagination is its own justification. What makes Plato and Zhuangzi comparable? A comparatist qualified and willing to compare them. The results of that comparison may be more or less interesting,

insightful, or illuminating, but that is how poems work too. We do not ask the poet to justify her poem—we only read it. In fact, in poetry, two terms that lack an obvious connection make a good metaphor, because they force the mind in new directions. We should not be so quick to dismiss a comparison because of seeming incomparability. Afterwards, we might never read a certain poem again, we might think it missed something essential, we might find it derivative, but we do not ask the poet to justify the creative act itself. The comparison that looks wobbly and incapable of supporting its own weight may, in the end, offer flashes of insight.<sup>8</sup> Zhuangzi and Plato could very well have conspired when nobody was looking: both agreeing to grapple with the problem of language, the dangers of transmitting wisdom in writing, the deployment of a butcher analogy. The two philosophers did not pass notes behind our backs, but by comparing them, millennia after they have died, we construct something that might give us more knowledge about both texts than either text could on its own. As is the case with poetry, we might learn something about humans more generally, we might have our suspicions confirmed. Or, conversely, we might be forced to abandon beliefs we took for granted, to shift our awareness of the world. This is what I mean when I say that a comparison is a made object that in turn affects the maker and the reader; comparison dislodges our fixed knowledge.

The poem as a made object contains two pairs of tensions that also characterize comparison. First, a poet must navigate the conflicting demands of necessity and randomness. Some elements of poetic convention result from bare facts about the language. Ancient Greek poetry, for example, never rhymes, whereas Italian poetry almost always rhymes. Other poetic conventions are more random, such as stanzaic structure. The poet must voice her subjectivity in this pre-existing context. Some conventions facilitate poetic expression while other conventions may stifle or complicate it. In the end, the personal voice of the poet emerges changed—not entirely subsumed or quashed by necessity, but not able to entirely dispense with it either. The poet is situated at a confluence of objective necessity and subjective expression. The comparatist occupies similar ground, constrained by the necessity of doing justice to her comparanda and her distinct traditions but also trying to construct her own imaginative bridges between two far-flung topics.

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<sup>8</sup> Rapp 2010 illustrates this point at length with her insightful reading of Kay Ryan's poem "Ghost Ribs."

Second, the poet must make her subjective experience mesh with a wider audience. We can imagine a poem so solipsistic that it cannot penetrate the public that it does not extend a hand for the reader to clasp in recognition of shared humanity. Formally, this consideration might affect the poet's use of symbolism or imagery, language, diction, and topic. As mentioned above, the poet does not divorce entirely from the common human world even as she gestures to another one. For the comparatist, subjective intuition must still hold up in the wider world of a scholarly audience. Failure would be a comparison of pure whimsy, without any substantive "proof" on the part of the comparatist propping up the juxtaposition.

These shared features of poetry and comparison reflect Yearley's description of comparison as an analogical, imaginative process. He remarks that the comparatist may be driven to compare by "the inchoate but pressing need we feel to put vague ideas into the ordered form that analogical analyses demand." (Yearley 1990, 201) Comparison, like poetry, begins from intuition or a flash of understanding or a vague feeling. The objective and analytical rigor of scholarship offers the comparatist the chance to capture this poetic impulse and sort through it in language. Yearley also calls attention to the ways in which comparison can "produce personally informed, evocative kinds of invention" with "the power to give a new form to our experiences." (Ibid. 197) Comparison begins from the suspicion or the thought that some similarity or difference would exist between two things if only we could draw them together somehow. This suspicion is then either confirmed, denied, or complicated by the comparative act itself. In Yearley's phrasing, "we assume, entertain, consider, and even toy with or pretend that certain constructions of experience are true." (Ibid. 200) Like poetry, comparison involves a perception of how things are, how things might be otherwise, and a willingness to relinquish those perceptions.

I turn now to a comparison of Euripides' *Bacchae* and the *Zhuangzi*, beginning with the following statement by Martha Nussbaum on the former:

In the middle of this cosmos sits the human world, a world of social morality, of pity and compassion, of fellow feeling with other mortal intelligent beings. But the human realm is not shown, here [the play], as self-sufficient. Its walls are highly porous: influences flow in from the other realms, and human beings make strange and sudden exists into them. What is stranger still is that, apparently, their full humanity depends on these exits... So if human beings

close themselves off from Dionysus' call, they apparently become less than fully human. But if they listen to Dionysus, this carries...the risk of another sort of beastliness. Humanness appears as an unstable and temporary achievement, poised among dangers of many kinds. And the deep question of the play is: What is a human morality, and what is its relation to the acknowledgment of Dionysus? Can there be a life that repudiates this religion and also remains moral, civilized, and fully human? (And who are the spectators of this place, seated in an apparently civilized manner in the theater of Dionysus?) (Nussbaum 1990, xx)

Nussbaum's description of the *Bacchae* raises possible similarities between this Greek tragedy and the *Zhuangzi*. The *Zhuangzi* depicts humanness as "highly porous," and also suggests that "full humanity depends on these exits." At the same time, the *Zhuangzi* seems to resist offering any fundamental essence of human life—in Nussbaum's terms, "humanness appears as an unstable and temporary achievement." The *Zhuangzi* repeatedly "repudiates this religion" or that religion—that is, the *Zhuangzi* consistently rejects various ideals and dogmas, and thus confronts the problem of whether such a life "remains moral, civilized, and fully human." Lastly, although the *Zhuangzi* is certainly not a dramatic work, it does have spectators—readers—who might well ask about the intended target of such a genre-defying text. We are "seated in an apparently civilized manner" reading and teaching the *Zhuangzi*, even as the *Zhuangzi* itself undermines formal teaching, direct transmission of knowledge, and legible discourse itself. Nussbaum's remark draws attention to how the *Bacchae* does something similar: Euripides presents good Athenian audiences with a play in which they witness the total breakdown of civilized and familial order, in which the line between reality and illusion blurs to disastrous effect. In both cases, the audience occupies a position that the text seems to take into account.

I have claimed that comparison, like poetry, unsettles our fixed knowledge. In what follows, I explore the role of oblivions in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Bacchae* on the level of form and content. Oblivions also unsettle fixation, incorporate instability and loss into the texts. But such instability or loss is not wholly negative, and Euripides and *Zhuangzi* demonstrate the ambivalence of oblivion. By the end, I hope to have highlighted this point and also to have shown how it bears on comparison-as-a-poem.

The Ancient Greek *lêthê* (λήθη) means “forgetting,” but also, in older Homeric contexts, “place of oblivion.”<sup>9</sup> Related to *lêthê* is the verb *lanthanô* (λανθάνω), meaning “to look away,” “to go unnoticed,” “to overlook.”<sup>10</sup> The Ancient Greek word for “truth” is *alêtheia* (ἀλήθεια), and in the archaic period, *alêtheia* was commonly opposed to *lêthê*, thus giving *alêtheia* a literal meaning of “not forgotten” or “unconcealed” (a “not” + *lêthê*). (Detienne 1999) Forgetting and looking away therefore have a relationship to notions of truth. Forgetting in the context of ancient Greek literature often carries several of these meanings at once, especially in poetic or philosophical usage. In Classical Chinese, *wang* 忘 carries a similar range of meanings: “forget,” “omit,” “neglect.” The semantic components of the character are *xin* 心 (“heart-mind”) and *wang* 亡 (“destroy,” “perish,” “flee”), thus giving *wang* 忘 a sense of something having fled from or been destroyed in the mind.<sup>11</sup> By “forgetting” I intend all of these meanings, literal and figurative. My goal is to just briefly suggest that the *Bacchae* and the *Zhuangzi* display forgetting in similar ways, both in their content and in their written form.

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to make any overarching argument for the importance of forgetting in human life. A brief sketch of the concept will clarify the idea. Ever since Plato, the Western tradition has tended to emphasize the importance of memory. In orthodox Platonism, we are fallen creatures and require rational philosophizing to recollect the Forms, the transcendent objects of pure intellection. Our ignorance of Truth or Justice or Wisdom is thus a forgetting of those Forms. We might also think of the injunctions to “never forget” that circulate the media airwaves after some collective disaster or trauma. This reflects something of the ancient Greek view that forgetting entails an oblivion, an erasure that renders those who are forgotten lost to time. Heroic glory, a form of immortality, requires memory.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Although semantic breakdowns of Chinese characters are not always reliable explanations of meaning, I think that in this case the breakdown is suggestive and not far-fetched. The *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, a traditional etymological dictionary, defines *wang* 忘 as 不識也: “not knowing” or “not acknowledging.” This is similar to the sense of “not notice” or “look away” of *lanthanô*.

<sup>12</sup> For a good overview of memory in the Western philosophical tradition that clearly

American poet C. K. Williams sums up the position I take on forgetting: "Forgetfulness is one of the gods' most precious offerings to us... perhaps that is because we have to look away before we can begin again." (Williams 1998, 91-93) Williams' remark echoes the semantic range of forgetting outlined above. In describing forgetting as a divine gift, however, he hints that forgetting may be more ambivalent than we commonly suppose. Consider this hypothetical, a common example: running up against writer's block, a scholar closes her laptop in frustration, unable to untangle the messy argument into which she has dug herself. After a few days away from her work, as she sits in traffic on her way to meet a friend, her rambling mind returns to the argument and she can no longer even recall why she was hung-up in the first place. Whatever problem had seemed so entrenched now seems inconsequential, and later that night she sits back down to work and breezes through several pages. This is just one mundane instance of how looking away, figurative forgetting, allows humans to move on through life. Euripides and Zhuangzi demonstrate forgetting in this ambivalent sense, both in ordinary and in radical ways.

Human life requires forgetting, requires gaps and inattention. Nussbaum's remarks on the *Bacchae* describe human life as tenuous, poised between an array of competing tensions. One major tension of human life is the pull between memory and forgetting. The *Zhuangzi* and the *Bacchae* show forgetting as an essential part of human existence, a feature and not a bug. In my above example, forgetting yields some new outlook; it allows one to recover insight or move past a fixation. Forgetting may also be destructive, though, as Euripides especially shows. The tension between memory and forgetting is uniquely suited to exploring human life as "highly porous." Nussbaum claims that the human world and human life are characterized by incursions from outside forces (gods, madness, passions, etc.), and by a disruption of the boundaries between beast, human, and god. She emphasizes that "full humanity depends on these exits," on these border crossings. Forgetting is one way that we cross these borders, one way that we experience the precarious poise of human life. This precariousness also characterizes the position of the comparatist, poised among the competing tensions of objectivity and subjectivity, between necessity and whimsy.

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displays the bias towards remembering over forgetting, see: Dmitri Nikulin, ed., *Memory: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

I begin with a comparison between the physical body and the textual body. The body and the theme of embodiment, in Euripides and in Zhuangzi, often involves forgetting or inattention of some sort. Since the two poets also reflect forgetting in their written form, it makes sense to ask about the similarities between physical and textual embodiment. Some concrete examples may make this clearer.

One of the *Zhuangzi*'s more iconic instances of forgetting comes in Chapter 6, "The Great and Honored Master" (大宗師). The scene runs as follows:

顏回曰回益矣仲尼曰何謂也曰回忘仁義矣曰可矣猶未也他日復見曰回益矣曰何謂也曰回忘禮樂矣曰可矣猶未也他日復見曰回益矣曰何謂也曰回坐忘矣仲尼蹴然曰何謂坐忘顏回曰墮肢體黜聰明離形去知同於大通此謂坐忘仲尼曰同則無好也化則無常也而果其賢乎丘也請從而後也<sup>13</sup>

Yan Hui said, "I'm making progress."

Confucius said, "What do you mean?"

"I've forgotten all about humaneness [*ren* 仁] and responsibility [*yi* 義]."

"Okay, but you're not there yet."

He came another day and said, "I'm making progress."

Confucius asked, "What do you mean?"

"I've forgotten all about propriety [*li* 禮] and music [*yue* 樂]."

"Okay, but you're not there yet."

He came yet again another day and said, "I'm making progress."

Confucius asked, "How so?"

"I just sit and forget [*zuowang* 坐忘]."

Confucius, startled, asked, "What do you mean... 'sit and forget?'"

"Limbs and torso drop away, senses and perceptions are chased away.

Disperse physical form and farewell knowledge and become one with vast openness [同於大通]. I call this 'sitting and forgetting.'"

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<sup>13</sup> *Zhuangzi* 6.9. Translation is my own, and follows Ziporyn 2009 and Kohn 2011. See: Brook Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009) and Livia Kohn, *Chuang-tzu: The Tao of Perfect Happiness. Selections Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Press, 2011).

This passage has generated a small sea of scholarship, which I cannot review here. Let me confine attention to a few points. "Sitting and forgetting," *zuowang* 坐忘, is the key term of the passage. Livia Kohn glosses the phrase as "sitting in oblivion," (Kohn 2014, 127ff) which dovetails nicely with the old Homeric meaning of the Greek *lêthê* as "place of oblivion." Yan Hui's senses reel and his perceptions fade. This relinquishing of attention and awareness suggests similarity to *lanthanô*, to a shared ground between forgetting and turning away. In Yan Hui's case, this oblivion, this relinquishing of attention, also means a turning away from social norms like ritual (*li* 禮) and responsibility (*yi* 義). This passage depicts oblivion as a state of simultaneous loss and gain, of annihilation and recuperation. Yan Hui gives up his senses, his bodily form, his place in the social tapestry, and yet this "does not mean eradicating one's self." (Jochim 1998, 55) The self is not destroyed entirely but rather is depicted as something open and shifting, something unstable and temporary. The ambivalence of oblivion is clear: Yan Hui forgets his body and his responsibilities, but he gains a new perspective, a fusion with "vast openness." One might also think of the iconic opening scene of the *Zhuangzi* in which the Kun fish transforms into the Peng bird—the loss of one bodily form coincides with a shift of perspective, literally a bird's-eye view of all creation.

Yan Hui's physical body, his form (*xing* 形) dissolves; the *Zhuangzi* presents this idea not just in the context of an individual human body, but also in the context of the textual body:

荃者所以在魚得魚而忘荃蹄者所以在兔得兔而忘蹄言者所以在意得意而忘言吾安得忘言之人而與之言哉 (*Zhuangzi* 26.13)

Fish traps are there for fish; once you get the fish, you forget the trap. Snares are there for rabbits; once you get the rabbit, you forget the snare. Words are there for meaning [*yi* 意]; once you get the meaning, you forget the words. Where can I find someone who has forgotten words and have a few words with him?

Here language itself drops away, relinquished just like Yan Hui's bodily form and social attachments. The passage reminds one of Wittgenstein's famous ladder: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them,

over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)”<sup>14</sup> Nussbaum’s description of human nature in the *Bacchae* does not reject any sense of identity whatsoever, just as Wittgenstein’s ladder does not deny the possibility of acquiring awareness. The ladder, however, must be cast aside after it does its work which, for Wittgenstein, is to bring the reader to an understanding of the senselessness of Wittgenstein’s own propositions. He uses the ladder as a metaphor for a text that undoes itself. In the above passage, the *Zhuangzi* suggests that its language, like Wittgenstein’s, might be forgotten once the meaning is clear.

Crucially, this is not an endorsement of nihilism—the point is not that everything is devoid of all meaning. Remember that Yan Hui does not turn away from the body and from society to a state of annihilation. Oblivion diverts attention, opens up gaps, and in the process allows something new to form or take place. Oblivion is ambivalent. The *Zhuangzi* demonstrates how oblivion registers on the bodily and the textual level, and how in both cases, this forgetting is nevertheless productive, leading to some new awareness or transformation. The ambivalent nature of oblivion, its potential for destruction and creation, is why human nature is tenuous, poised between competing forces. Forgetting exemplifies this ambivalence, on both a bodily and a textual level, in the *Zhuangzi*. One more example of forgetting in the *Zhuangzi* may help to make my point about this ambivalence.

In Chapter 20, “The Mountain Tree” (*shan mu* 山木), we find the story of Zhuang Zhou and the gamekeeper:

莊周遊乎雕陵之樊睹一異鵲自南方來者翼廣七尺目大運寸感周之穎而集於栗林莊周曰此何鳥哉翼殷不逝目大不覩蹇裳躩步執彈而留之睹一蟬方得美蔭而忘其身螳螂執翳而搏之見得而忘其形異鵲從而利之見利而忘其真莊周怵然曰噫物固相累二類相召也捐彈而反走虞人逐而諱之莊周反入三月不庭蘭且從而問之夫子何為頃間甚不庭乎莊周曰吾守形而忘身觀於濁水而迷於清淵且吾聞諸夫子曰入其俗從其俗今吾遊於雕陵而忘吾身異鵲感吾穎遊於栗林而忘真栗林虞人以吾為戮吾所以不庭也 (*Zhuangzi* 20.8)

<sup>14</sup> *Tractatus* #6.54. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. C.K. Ogden (Sweden: Chiron Academic Press, 2016. Originally published 1922).

While rambling about Diaoling Park, Zhuang Zhou spotted a weird bird coming from the south. Its wings spanned seven feet, and its eyes were a whole hand span wide. The bird brushed Zhuang Zhou's forehead, and then landed in a chestnut grove. Zhuang Zhou exclaimed, "What kind of bird is this? Huge wings but clumsy, big eyes but blind!"

He grabbed his robes and walked out, cocking his crossbow and steadying himself. He then spied a cicada that had gotten itself a pretty patch of shade and forgotten itself [忘其身]. Nearby, a mantis raised its pincers to spring on the cicada, but, concentrating on its prey, the mantis forget itself [忘其形]. The weird bird, behind the mantis, prepared to take advantage and swoop in, but in its own concentration the bird forgot itself [忘其真].

Zhuang Zhou cried out. "Things are bound so tightly together. Even different sorts of creatures [二類] are all bound up together!" He put up his crossbow and turned to leave, but a gamekeeper followed and started scolding him.

Zhuang Zhou went back home, and for three months didn't even exit the house into the courtyard to talk with his students. Lin Qie approached him and asked, "Master, why have you stopped teaching us in the courtyard?" Zhuang Zhou said, "In preserving my own form [守形] I forgot myself [忘身]. I stared into muddy water and confused it for a clear pool. I've heard Laozi say that when you go where common folks go, you ought to do as they do. Recently, I was roaming through Diaoling and forgot myself [忘吾身]. A weird bird brushed my forehead, and I meandered off into the chestnut grove and forgot these truths. The warden of the grove took me for a poacher! That's why I'm not coming into the courtyard."

Here we see the ambivalence of forgetting on full display. For Yan Hui, the oblivion of forgetting allowed a transformation into a new way of being in the world. For Zhuang Zhou, the oblivion of forgetting almost got him killed—the gamekeeper nearly clipped his wings as surely as he attempted to do the same to the strange bird. The repetition of *wang* 忘 ("forget") through this passage drives home an element of danger inherent to all oblivions. The cicada, the mantis, the bird, and Zhuang Zhou himself each fixated on an object of desire and in doing so *forgot*. Following Nussbaum's view of human nature as "an unstable

and temporary achievement,” I propose that the enemy of human flourishing is not oblivion *per se* but rather fixation.

Fixation, inflexibility, obsession—nothing comes under fire more in the *Zhuangzi*. A major interpretation of the text is that distinctions and classifications ossify thought itself, binding us and diminishing our powers. The *Zhuangzi* aims at a way of life more “flexible, tolerant, and aware of the infinite range of possible ways of responding to life.” (Hansen 1992, 284) Forgetting—so often viewed as a negative to be avoided or corrected in Platonism and its descendants—is, in the *Zhuangzi*, an ambivalent oblivion.

Euripides’ presentation of the tension between memory and forgetting, between attention and inattention, is grimmer: bluntly stated, nobody is torn to pieces while still living because of oblivion in the *Zhuangzi*. The *Bacchae* concerns itself with the power of illusion, with the complications that arise from the entanglement of seeing and not seeing the truth. In the content of the play, illusion and delusion abound: King Pentheus denies the truth of the foreign god Dionysus; the women of Thebes have forgotten their responsibilities and roles and fixated ecstatically on the god, retreating into the mountains to dance and sing; Dionysus himself repeatedly transforms and disguises himself; Pentheus is dressed up as a woman to spy on the wild maenads (the Theban women now devoted to Dionysus); the maenads, led by Pentheus’ mother Agave, tear the young king apart limb from limb. That is, in the end, Agave’s forgetting is so annihilative that she murders her own son, only remembering herself when she stands, bloodied, with his head in her hands. One might say that Pentheus fixates on trying to prove what’s real, trying to discredit Dionysus, to the extent that he is unaware of the significance of the world around him, an inattention that ultimately seals his fate.

The *Bacchae* reflects the themes of oblivion not only in its dramatic content but also in its poetic form. At one point in the play, Dionysus summons an earthquake to reduce the Theban palace to fire and ruin. The language of the chorus stresses the element of vision in such a way as to draw attention to the illusory nature of the play itself: “Did you *see* these stone lintels upon the columns spread apart?” and “Do you not *behold* the fire, do you not *see* it around Semele’s holy tomb?”<sup>15</sup> When Dionysus appears onstage, he asks, “Did you

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<sup>15</sup> *Bacchae* 591 ff. Translations and italics come from the translations used by Segal (cited in full below).

*perceive*, as is *likely*, the Bacchic god shake the palace?" (*Bacchae* 604–605) Charles Segal explains the emphasis thus: "The physical reality of the miracle is not denied, but the phrasing stresses the subjective side of the event." (Segal 1982, 221) Euripides uses the language of chorus and of the god to formally underscore the tension between objective reality and subjective perception, a tension that permeates the story of the play (and also the work of the comparatist). The boundary between reality and illusion is one the poet toys with, as Segal elaborates:

[The poet's] concern is not just to depict a coherent reality but to question the symbolic discourse and the aesthetic means that enable him to create the world his characters inhabit... The miraculous power of Dionysus to elude Pentheus' bonds and emerge from the enclosed darkness into the "light" (cf. the Chorus's cry, "O greatest light," *phaos megiston*, 608) contains the kernel of the entire play. The audience that responds to the religious thrill of the god's saving light from darkness is also submitting to the magic of the poet's fiction acted out before them... Within the play, as within the audience's reaction to the play, the real and the imagined event, the act and the emotion, are strangely, inextricably blended. (Ibid., 222–223)

The chorus of Greek tragedy occupies a key role in this in-between quality of the play. More has been written on the complex and puzzling role of the Greek tragic chorus than can possibly be summarized here,<sup>16</sup> but a few brief remarks will make my point. The chorus is not a character, and this means that the chorus is not limited in the way a character might be—by linear or plot progression, by emotional and personal and intellectual unity, and so on. The chorus dances (indeed, this is the original meaning of the word "orchestra," a dancing ground), it moves—similarly, the boundaries of the chorus shift. Renaud Gagné and Marianne Govers Hopman explain:

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<sup>16</sup> For a decent overview, see P. E. Easterling Ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Graham Ley, *The Theatricality of Greek Tragedy: Playing Space and Chorus* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

If the central characters are simultaneously here and there, on stage and in the play, the chorus can simultaneously be here, there, and elsewhere, now and then, this and that, meld one into the other, and pass freely between these different levels through the semantics of word, sound, and movement. Its well-known ability to reference itself and its own dance in performance, or to ‘project’ itself on other, distant choruses, is part of a much wider pattern of mimetic transfer set in motion by the choral song. *Without ever breaking the dramatic illusion, the chorus can radically shift the focus from one level of reference to another and create greater depth through a superimposition of semantic layers.* (Gagné and Govers 2013, 1)

The chorus plays a mediating role, able to shift attention from meaning to meaning, from idea to idea, even from one frame of reference to another (sometimes breaking the fourth wall and sometimes dialoguing directly with characters). The *Bacchae* amplifies this element of the chorus: “One of the decisive features of the *Bacchae* is the fact that it is arguably the only transmitted tragedy where the dramatic and performative roles of the chorus are intertwined, and, as far as dancing is concerned, are practically indiscriminate and identical.” (Bierl 2013, 211) So the chorus, especially in the *Bacchae*, is a form of self-awareness on the part of the text, a way to pull the audience or reader into the action, and a formal manifestation of themes and content in the text.

The *Zhuangzi* has no chorus, but the text does have a feature that performs a similar role. Chapter 27 of the *Zhuangzi*, titled (following Ziporyn) “Words Lodged Elsewhere” (*yuyan* 寓言), identifies three types of language or rather, words (*yan* 言): lodging words (*yuyan* 寓言), double words (*chongyan* 重言), and goblet words (*zhiyan* 卮言).<sup>17</sup> Lodging language “lodges words elsewhere,” meaning to “put one’s words into the mouths of other people.” (Lin 1994, 53 and Wang 2004, 202) In this sense, the meaning behind a word is lodged elsewhere.

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<sup>17</sup> For comprehensive overviews of this schema, see Youru Wang, “The Strategies of ‘Goblet Words’: Indirect Communication in the *Zhuangzi*.” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 31.2 (2004), pp. 195–218, and *Linguistic Strategies in Daoist Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism: The Other Way of Speaking* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003). See also Shuen-fu Lin, “The Language of the ‘Inner Chapters’ of the *Chuang Tzu*,” in Willard J. Peterson, Andrew H. Plaks, and Ying-shih Yü Ed., *The Power of Culture: Studies in Chinese History* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1994), pp. 47-69.

More complicatedly, lodging language allows the speaker in the text (a character or narrator or whoever) to inhabit the position of the intended audience. The most infamous example from the *Zhuangzi* might be the figure of Confucius, usually depicted in dialogue with one of his disciples. Such scenes offer the reader familiar ground on which to orient herself, characters who come with readily accessible viewpoints, an easy entry into the text. This facilitated entry of the reader into the text then makes it even more effective when the *Zhuangzi* undermines or subverts a figure as famous as Confucius. But why would the *Zhuangzi* not simply ridicule or attack Confucius directly? Yearley highlights features of lodging language that separate it from regular *ad hominem* assault: "One feature is the nurture of sympathetic identification. The other is the nurture of our ability to move among positions that differ from those that normally attract and hold us." (Yearley 2005, 510) This second feature is crucial. The *Zhuangzi* presents a kind of wandering as a spiritual or philosophical ideal, as an exemplary way of moving through life. Yearley remarks: "This kind of lodging place language involves wandering among positions in which you might lodge. It exhibits, that is, the spiritual perfection of the wanderer, the person who may temporarily light in one or another place, but whose lodging is always temporary and contingent." (Ibid., 511) Here one is reminded of the striking opening chapter of the *Zhuangzi* and its title, emblematic of the text, "Free and Easy Wandering" (*xiao yao you* 逍遙遊).<sup>18</sup>

Double language (*chongyan* 重言) refers to words that contain multiple layers or rays of meaning that refract an opalescent light and thus convey and conceal a whole host of meanings.<sup>19</sup> Double language corresponds roughly to figurative language, wherein a word expresses more than its denotative meaning. Depending on if one reads 重 as "zhong" instead of "chong," "heavy words" is also an acceptable translation in the sense that these words often carry

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<sup>18</sup> An excellent meditation on the philosophical significance of "free and easy wandering" for the whole *Zhuangzi*, including an argument for why the phrase summarizes the entire text, can be found in Kuang-min Wu, *The Butterfly as Companion: Meditations on the First Three Chapters of the Chuang Tzu* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> For this interpretation of *chongyan* 重言 see Wu, "Goblet Words, Dwelling Words, Opalescent Words—Philosophical Methodology of Chuang Tzu," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 15 (1988), pp. 1-8.

authoritative weight, especially when put into the mouths of traditional figures. According to Yearley, the power of double or heavy language lies in its ability to knock us out of complacency, to ram us with the authority of a speaker or source so as to bring us up short. In this way, double/heavy language might be what dislodges us from our temporary positions occupied via lodging language. For example, near the end of Chapter 2, Ju Quezi asks Chang Wuzi, “So how do I know that enjoying life isn’t just a delusion?”<sup>20</sup> The question is then rephrased and repeated several different ways, each hammering down like an existential blow: “How do I know that those who hate death are not just exiles who don’t know the way home?”<sup>21</sup> “How do I know that the dead don’t regret ever craved life?”<sup>22</sup> Yearley writes of double/heavy language that “initial bewilderment is often followed by the kind of insight that both brings satisfaction, at least temporarily, and embeds within us a notion, phrase, or story.” (Yearley 2005, 512) Bewilderment followed by insight and accompanied by absorption is similar to the effect that poetry often has on us (especially the memorizing, on a bodily, rhythmic level, lyrics that are nevertheless not always clear). Double/heavy language “often brings us up short; our ordinary intellectual inertia is overcome by something both perplexing and exciting.”<sup>23</sup>

Goblet or spillover language (*zhiyan* 卮言) is sometimes understood to describe the *Zhuangzi*’s overall philosophical stance on language rather than any particular linguistic strategy. Shuen-fu Lin describes goblet language as “speech that is natural, unpremeditated, free from preconceived values, always responding to the changing situations in the flow of discourse, and always returning the mind to its original state of emptiness.” (Lin 1994, 65) Goblets fill up, tip over, spill, right themselves, and return to equilibrium and poise. Yearley explains that

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<sup>20</sup> *Zhuangzi* 2.12: 予惡乎知說生之非惑邪。

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 予惡乎知惡死之非弱喪而不知歸者邪。

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 予惡乎知夫死者不悔其始之蘄生乎。

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Yearley gives his own example, but I would offer the following lines by Emily Dickinson: “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain, / And Mourners to and fro / Kept treading – treading – till it seemed / That sense was breaking through –”. See *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. by R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), no. 340. These lyrics are immediately enticing and also confusing, requiring one to slow down and try to make sense of them, but in a way that also lends them to memorization and internalization.

“goblet language is that kind of fluid language in which equilibrium is kept despite (or perhaps because of) the presence of changing genres, rhetorical forms, points of view, and figurative expressions.” (Yearley 2005, 518)

Three features of goblet language are especially salient to my purposes. First, goblet language dampens the authorial voice such that words seem to come from the void. Yearley observes: “We are rarely sure who is speaking and therefore we know neither from what perspective statements come nor with what authority they are delivered. We face...words that seem to come from a void.” (Ibid., p. 523) Without any stable authorial voice to anchor the majority of the *Zhuangzi*, authorial intent fractures and meaning multiplies such that interpretation of the text becomes something of jigsaw puzzle made of glass. The effect is that the reader herself is able to, carefully, try and piece this puzzle back together. Here we are returned to lodging language, which helps the reader enter the text in such a way as to play an active role in the construction of meaning.

Second, goblet words force the reader to respond actively and creatively to the *Zhuangzi*. One instance of goblet language’s spillover and then abrupt reorienting might be the countless *non sequiturs* that populate the *Zhuangzi*. Not only are entire casts of characters regularly replaced with others without warning, the entire topic or theme of conversation is liable to shift at any given moment. The lack of linear argument or plot forces the reader to make sense of things. What is noteworthy is that goblet language pulls us in often by dumping us out. The unstable nature of the text causes us to lose our footing, a loss that paradoxically forces us to scramble for purchase.

Third, goblet language draws attention to the major Daoist theme of emptiness, particularly how emptiness ends up being productive and valuable, and a site of creation itself. The metaphor of the goblet is not that of a cup that empties itself and never fills up again. Yearley notes that “the vessel will never be empty in the sense that absence defines it—and a continuing motif in the *Zhuangzi* is how a perfected person’s emptiness and language always displays fullness not vacuity, stillness not a lack of vitality.” (Ibid., 525) Here one thinks again of Nussbaum’s remarks on humanity as a tenuous poise. Goblet language is poised between overflowing and emptiness, never staying in one state overlong and thus denying us the stability to say of language either that it is empty/meaningless or that it is full/meaningful. Language is both. It is ambivalent, and just as we have seen before, the mistake is in fixating on one state over the other. From a textual point

of view, goblet language (as well as lodging and double language) loses its power to affect the reader if we fixate on only one meaning.

The chorus of the *Bacchae* shares something of the features of the *Zhuangzi*'s three types of language. Studies of the Greek tragic chorus frequently focus on the identity of the chorus. The chorus is often identified as an "ideal spectator" or the "voice of the people," and in some cases as "the other."<sup>24</sup> In the *Bacchae*, where the chorus is explicitly identified as the Theban women who have forgotten their own identities and are swept-up in Dionysian frenzy, the authority of the chorus is called into question or at least problematized. Not a standalone character, not an ideal spectator (since the chorus certainly does not behave in an ideal way here), not the willing or free voice of the people, not the marginalized other (the maenad chorus has terrifying power and centrality)—the *Bacchae*'s chorus is a liminal voice, speaking with neither the knowledge nor the authority of Dionysus. In this sense, the chorus, like goblet language's removal of authorial voice, invites the audience to construct their own meaning. The chorus can be compared to lodging language in opening a space or entry point for the audience. This, however, is not done by voicing any idealized civic wisdom with which the audience could relate. The Bacchic chorus instead exemplifies double/heavy language to speak from a position of *seeming* authority while simultaneously undermining or repeatedly smashing up against conventional wisdom. Anyone looking to the chorus of the *Bacchae* for ideal behavior or knowledge will be shocked and disappointed: the maenad chorus defies easy conceptual categorization and so forces a more active meaning-making on the part of the audience. Both the *Zhuangzi* and the *Bacchae* display oblivion as ambivalent, as an inescapable feature of humanness, humanness that is thus portrayed as tenuous and unstable. Euripides and *Zhuangzi* deny any comforting view of human nature and instead, on the levels of form (the chorus for the former and the three types of

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<sup>24</sup> Schlegel originated the "ideal spectator" theory, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet the "voice of the people theory," and Gould the "marginalized other" theory. See, respectively: August Wilhelm Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. John Black and A.J.W. Morrison (London: George Bell and Sons, 1846); Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*. Trans. Janet Lloyd with Jeff Fort (Zone Books, 2006, original publication by Librairie François Maspero, 1965); J. Gould, "Tragedy and collective experience" in *Myth, Ritual, Memory, and Exchange: Essays in Greek Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

words for the latter) and content (Pentheus, the maenads, Yan Hui, Zhuang Zhou), offer a complicated tangle of the themes of forgetting, inattention, looking away, and fixation. Both texts seem to support Nussbaum's description of human nature as porous and as passing in and out of boundaries. I have tried to give just a few examples of how the *Zhuangzi* and the *Bacchae* illustrate this in content and in form.

Let me close with a remark by Segal about the role of the tragic poet. In discussing how the *Bacchae* blurs lines between reality and illusion in both its form and content, Segal comments on Euripides' own work:

That artificiality or theatricality opens up a suspended, privileged space within the society where the familiar laws and the familiar logic do not apply, where the spectator confronts a hidden, coexisting chaos within the ordered frame of the art-work, the society, and his own personality. While opening that gap for socially useful ends (e.g. cathartic, apotropaic, or monitory), the mask's freedom from reality also prevents complete reclosure. (Segal 1982, 224)

I contend that this description applies to the comparatist as well. Like a poem (dramatic tragic poem in this case), a comparison is artificial. The comparison "opens up a suspended, privileged space" in that the comparative context is, simply, unrealistic—that is, Euripides and Zhuangzi have no intrinsic reason to be compared. Willingness to abide in the temporary juxtaposition of a comparison is a privilege "where the familiar laws...and logic do not apply." The poet asks our indulgence as we see the world refracted through her imagination and not as it really is—the comparatist does the same. In the process, we "confront a hidden, coexisting chaos," or, in other words, we see that what we thought was the case might not be. In presenting alternatives and undermining assumptions, comparison dislodges our fixations, those strangleholds we have on truth or knowledge. The *Zhuangzi* repeatedly tries to pry our fixed grips open, and tragedy, on Segal's reading, does the same. Finally, just as tragedy opens a gap, cracking away our fixed certainty, we are also left without "complete reclosure." I take this to mean that the experience of relinquishing fixation (knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, etc.) cannot be undone. Comparison at its best should have this same effect.

Lovin, describing the act of comparison, remarks: "It is an axiom of the quantum universe described by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle that the objects

of our attention are always changed by being measured, just as it is a methodological axiom of the social sciences that *there are no observers who are not participant-observers. To know a thing is to change it in some way...*” (Lovin 2010, 263. My italics) Comparison as a kind of poetry strengthens the idea that the comparatist is not a purely objective scholar but also a subjective maker, and this recognition should lead us think about comparative work differently. The *Zhuangzi* and the *Bacchae*, in their form and their content, emphasize how observers/readers/audience are incorporated into a work, just as the comparatist is changed by the comparison. For both comparison and these ancient texts, the change arises from oblivion and its ability to unsettle, to leave us tenuously poised.

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