

Verwirklichung einer vollkommenen Glücksmöglichkeit/A perfect bliss-potential realized

“Wunsch, Indianer zu werden” im Lichte des Dao Kafkas übersetzend gelesen/Transreading “Wish, to Become Indian” in light of Kafka’s Dao

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Walking an unexplored path, Huiwen Helen Zhang contextualizes Kafka's pithy and cryptic parable, “Wish, to Become Indian” in his transplantation of Daoist philosophy—an astonishing cross-cultural enigma that Zhang terms “Kafka's Dao”—and parses it through a micro-level approach that Zhang terms “transreading.” Contextualizing “Wish, to Become Indian” in Kafka's dialogue with ancient Chinese philosophers such as Laozi, Liezi, and Zhuangzi enables the reader to comprehend a series of otherwise incomprehensible puzzles. Zhang's scrutiny of Kafka's Dao shows how, through creative writing, Kafka not only penetrates esoteric Daoist classics, but also furthers their spirit in a way that transcends Richard Wilhelm, the pioneer European Sinologist. Transreading “Wish, to Become Indian” illuminates nuances that otherwise might have been overlooked. Wordplay, punctuational oddity, syntactic complexity, lyric density, and the curiously interlaced tenses and cases are all part of the idiosyncratic delivery of Kafka's message. Integrating the four activities of transreading—lento reading demanded and enhanced by cultural hermeneutics, creative writing required and inspired by poetic translation—unravels Kafka's riddle as a historical-cultural phenomenon.

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KEYWORDS

cross-cultural dialogue, Daoist philosophy, Franz Kafka, Laozi, Liezi, Richard Wilhelm, transreading, Zhuangzi

1 | STIMMEN/TUNING

1.1 | *Kafkas Dao: Ein transkulturelles Rätsel/Kafka's Dao: A cross-cultural enigma*

"Wish, to Become Indian," one of Kafka's parables and "one of the pithiest—and most cryptic—sentences of wish-evolution in German literature" (cf. Braun, 2019)¹ first appeared in 1912 in his anthology, *Contemplations* (Kafka, 1912, 77–78). In 1911 and 1912, three Daoist classics, *Dao De Jing—The Book of Old on Sense and Life*, credited to Laozi in the sixth century BC (Laotse, 1911), *The True Book on the Earth's Gushing Springs*, credited to Liezi in the fifth century BC (Liä Dsi, 1912), and *The True Book on the Southern Land of Blossoms*, credited to Zhuangzi in the fourth century BC (Dschuang Dsi, 1912), appeared in the German translation of Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930), a pioneer European Sinologist, and attracted Kafka's full attention:

In Daoism I have engaged myself—so far as it is at all possible in translation—long and deeply. I possess nearly all the volumes of the German translation in this direction, published by Diederichs in Jena [. . .]

They are an ocean in which one could easily go under. In Confucius' conversations one is still on firm ground; but later everything dissolves more and more in the darkness. Laozi's aphorisms are adamantine nuts. I am spellbound by them, but their kernel remains concealed from me. I have read them repeatedly only to discover that, like a little boy with colorful glass marbles, I let them roll from one cranny of thought into the other, without getting even a bit further. Indeed, with the glass marbles of these aphorisms I discovered only the disconsolate shallowness of my own nooks of thought, which could not corral or absorb Laozi's glass marbles. This was a rather depressing discovery; so I set aside the game with the glass marbles.

(Cf. Janouch, 1961, 171–172)²

Kafka's conversation with Janouch reveals his ambivalent reaction to Daoist scripture: fascinated yet frustrated. In spite of the esotericism of ancient Chinese philosophy, Kafka delved into it. Aware of the deepening "darkness" and the risk of going under in this "ocean," Kafka pursued the adventure and recognized in Laozi's aphorisms "colorful glass marbles," which he, "like a little boy," let "roll from one cranny of thought into the other." From this perspective, Laozi was the master who created a patience game for Kafka; while Kafka, the disciple, inferred from his repeated failures to "corral or absorb" Laozi's marbles that he was not yet up to the challenge.³

Further, the insertion, "so far as it is at all possible in translation," suggests Kafka's skepticism toward the German translation of Daoist classics. While the language barrier reduces the likelihood of grasping the original through translation, a spiritual barrier eliminates it, as Kafka asserted in his journal entry: "A friend of action provides for us this (overly Europeanizing perhaps) translation of several old Chinese manuscript leaves. It is a broken piece. The hope that continuity might be found exists not" (Cf. Kafka, 2008, 126–127).⁴

Rather than the linguistic chasm between Chinese and European languages, Kafka's critique of translation targets the contrast between the ancient Chinese mindset and the modern European spirit, that is to say, "action." His choice of "Europeanizing" over "Europeanized" underlines the agency of translation—its distorting effect that renders the original "broken" and "continuity" impossible.

Luckily, neither Kafka's "depressing discovery" of his own incompetence nor his despair at finding the continuity of Chinese classics was definitive. Quite the contrary, in Kafka's creative works such as "Wish, to Become Indian," one discerns an astonishing cross-cultural enigma: without direct access to Laozi, Liezi, and Zhuangzi, Kafka transplanted the seed of Dao and nurtured it in a European mind.

1.2 | *Transreading: Ein Geduldspiel/Transreading: A patience game*

In order to decipher Kafka's cryptic parable in the context of Kafka's Dao, I use "transreading," a method that I have developed precisely to tackle cross-cultural dialogue. Transreading integrates four interdependent activities: lento or slow-close reading sharpens our focus on linguistic and argumentative nuances that might otherwise be overlooked; poetic translation compels us to consider both the content of a message and the delivery that reinforces it; cultural hermeneutics grounds individual works in a panoramic context; and creative writing hones our skills in condensing all of these considerations for a new audience.⁵ A transreader, therefore, fuses four roles into one: lento reader, poetic translator, cultural critic, and creative writer.

Transreaders are called to embark on expeditions through "prompts." Prompts present themselves in the form of ambiguity, paradox, allegorical imagery, absent presence, suggestive architecture, or historical-cultural allusion. They are at once indispensable and irresistible: indispensable to writers and translators, for a text void of prompts is a text without a message; irresistible to readers and critics, for each prompt compels them to mine further.

In this light, Kafka's "Wish, to Become Indian" offers an ideal opportunity to practice and advance "prompted transreading."⁶ Each element of the single-sentence text—wordplay, punctuational oddity, syntactic complexity, lyric density, or the curiously interlaced tenses and cases—is a prompt that demands and enables transreading. Accordingly, the structuring principle of my essay is to follow meticulously Kafka's parable from the title to the period and, along the way, to integrate the four interdependent activities—lento reading, poetic translation, cultural hermeneutics, and creative writing.⁷

What's more, Kafka's idiosyncratic writing habits make two things essential in transreading his parable. The first thing is the gravity of play. As revealed in his conversation with Janouch, Kafka played with Laozi's 81 aphorisms like glass marbles, repeatedly rolling them from different angles and in different directions. Likewise, Kafka played with his own thoughts and phrases like marbles, using an editing pen as a sculpting tool to focus his pondering and polish his poetics. The gravity of Kafka's play calls to mind Nietzsche's observation: "Maturity of man: that means to have regained that gravity, which one had as a child, in the game" (cf. Nietzsche, 1988, 90).⁸ The second thing is the patience with which one follows through. Kafka mined and undermined each word, clause, and punctuation mark throughout his exhaustively edited manuscripts. He was not only driven by artistic perfectionism, but also by desire to leap forward beyond his own restraints in order to spot, ascertain, and penetrate the core—not apparent—issues.⁹

Indeed, Kafka wrote and rewrote with the gravity of a gaming child and the patience of a methodical mind that follows through. Poetics and pondering were his patience game that he never quit playing.¹⁰ Consequently, a transreader of Kafka must read, translate, interpret, and reimagine his writings by joining in his play. Thus, I present my prompted transreading of "Wish, to Become Indian" as a patience game and invite you to play along.

Wunsch, Indianer zu werden

Wenn man doch ein Indianer wäre, gleich bereit, und auf dem rennenden Pferde, schief in der Luft, immer wieder kurz erzitterte über dem zitternden Boden, bis man die Sporen ließ, denn es gab keine Sporen, bis man die Zügel wegwarf, denn es gab keine Zügel, und kaum das Land vor sich als glatt gemähte Heide sah, schon ohne Pferdehals und Pferdekopf. (Kafka, 1912, 77–78)

(Wish, to Become Indian

If only one were an Indian, instantly ready, and on the galloping horse, bent into the air, time and again trembling erratically above the tremoring ground, till one shed the spurs, for there were no spurs, till one released the reins, for there were no reins, and hardly saw the land ahead as flat-cut heath, now even without horse's neck and horse's head.)

2 | SATZ I/ MOVEMENT I

2.1 | “*Wunsch, Indianer zu werden*” vs. “*Wenn man doch ein Indianer wäre,*”/“*Wish, to Become Indian*” vs. “*If only one were an Indian,*”

Kafka's parable “Before the Law” opens with a play on the title: “Before the law, a doorkeeper stood.” That opening momentarily reduces the two dimensions of “before”—temporal and spatial—to one. Here, also, the opening of Kafka's parable “Wish, to Become Indian” twists its title:

- A “Wish, to Become” implies a desired transformation that is yet to occur—or not. “If only [. . .] were” starts with a hypothetically fulfilled wish, turning a hardly reachable end into an imagined point of departure. So imagination begins—and becomes wilder still.
- B “[A]n Indian” replaces “Indian,” turning a nationality or collective identity into an individual—an Indian whose particularity can be further developed. This happens indeed with “instantly ready” and so on.
- C The title does not specify whose wish it is. It can be Kafka's, or it can be a wish that Kafka wants to implant in his reader. The opening chooses “one” over “I”; this choice allows Kafka the parable-teller to cast a wider net.
- D “[W]ere” signals the subjunctive mood—a mood that is only unambiguous at the beginning of the parable.

2.2 | “*wäre [. . .] erzitterte [. . .] ließ*”/“*were [. . .] trembling [. . .] shed*”

“[W]äre (were)” is unambiguously subjunctive. “[L]ieß (shed)” is unambiguously indicative. “[E]rzitterte” in German is grammatically ambiguous, suggesting both subjunctive and indicative moods. One way to transplant this ambiguity into English is through a gerund, such as “trembling.”

With “trembling,” the parable can be divided into three sections: a swift speculative opening; an ambiguous transition from subjunctive to indicative, from hypothetical to tale-telling; and an extraordinary yet definite ascension.

2.3 | “*gleich bereit, und auf dem rennenden Pferde, schief in der Luft,*”/“*instantly ready, and on the galloping horse, bent into the air,*”

“[I]nstantly ready” is the first characteristic of Kafka's Indian. The second, a galloping horse, is emphatically introduced by the conjunction “and.” Kafka's choice of “the” over “a” underlines the particularity of the horse. A reader familiar with Kafka's parable “A Country Doctor” might recall the scenario:

“Holla, Brother, holla, Sister!” cried the coachman, and two horses, colossal animals with robust flanks, legs tucked to bellies, lowering their well-shaped heads like camels, by the power of wiggling

their rumps alone, thrust themselves one after the other out of the narrow gate of the pigsty, which they filled completely.

(Cf. Kafka, 1920, 9–10)¹¹

In that scenario the doubly impossible has become true: Out of a vacant pigsty something leaps forth; out of the narrow gate two fabulous horses burst like camels passing through the eye of a needle. Here, in the sequence of “instantly ready, and on the galloping horse,” the wild stallion is likewise a creature of fantasy, straight out of Kafka’s imagination, drawn from a mustang out of the American West.

Reading backwards, “instantly ready” characterizes more than Kafka’s Indian: The fabulous horse, too, is instantly ready. Both leap forth out of nowhere but Kafka’s creative mind.

Consequently, “bent into the air” depicts the duo instantly ready, already moving so fast that the air is holding them back: They have become an arrow.

2.4 | ***“immer wieder kurz erzitterte über dem zitternden Boden, ”/“time and again trembling erratically above the trembling ground,”***

The last element of the transition features the ambiguous verb, “erzitterte (trembling),” and a verb-turned-adjective, “zitternden (tremoring).”

These words’ conspicuous resonance make them ring louder in the mind of the reader. They emphasize the synchronized motion of horse, rider, and earth, as they are bound together, feeding off each other, growing faster and more energetic through their constructive resonance.

2.5 | ***“immer wieder kurz erzitterte [. . .] bis”/“time and again trembling erratically [. . .] till”***

“[T]ill” stands beyond the limits of eternity, escaping the never-ending trembling of horse, rider, and earth.

Once Kafka’s trio transcends its breathtaking action, what happens next?

2.6 | ***“Wenn man doch ein Indianer wäre [. . .] immer wieder kurz erzitterte [. . .] bis man [. . .] lie”/“If only one were an Indian [. . .] time and again trembling erratically [. . .] till one shed”***

Once action is transcended, the imagination inside reality turns out to be the reality inside imagination. This is because “till” brings out the past-tense verb “shed” and thus the unambiguously indicative mood. It terminates the hypothetical case and begins an old-fashioned tale-telling—a second opening of the parable, which contrasts with its initial opening. The past tense continues to the end of the parable, transforming a hypothesis into a fact while replacing reality with imagination. In reality, becoming Indian is unattainable; in imagination, being an Indian is true-to-life.

Kafka’s play on moods and tenses in “Wish, to Become Indian” forms a striking analogy to a scenario in his later parable, “An Imperial Message.” There, the messenger—just like Kafka’s Indian—is instantly ready for his venture. Yet, rather than resonating with a flying horse and a vibrating ground, the messenger acts against the grand multitude. When trying to defeat an undefeatable myriad through action—“thrusting,” “forcing,” and “pushing”—the messenger, albeit “a powerful, an indefatigable man,” turns out to be an infinitely small swimmer in an infinitely vast sea—“how vainly he is exerting himself”:

The messenger instantly **set** out on his way, a powerful, an indefatigable man, a swimmer without equal, now thrusting out one arm then the other he **cleaves** a path through the multitude, if he **encounters** resistance he **points** to his breast, where the sign of the sun is, he also **moves** forward easily, like no other. But the multitude is so grand, its dwellings **have** no end, if open country **opened** itself, how he **would fly** along and soon doubtless you **would hear** the splendid striking of his fists on your door. But instead of that how vainly he is **exerting** himself, on and on he is still **forcing** himself through the chambers of the innermost palace, never **will he overcome** them and *if he succeeded in this, nothing would be won, descending the stairs he would have to fight his way and if he succeeded in that, nothing would be won, the courtyards would have to be traversed, and after the courtyards, the second encompassing palace and again stairs and courtyards and again a palace and so on throughout millennia and if he finally burst out of the outermost gate—but never never can it happen—only the imperial city lies before him, the center of the world, piled high full of her sediment. No one pushes through here [. . .].*

(Cf. Kafka, 2008, 78–81, emphasis mine)¹²

While Kafka's Indian escapes an eternity of galloping and trembling by transcending action, the messenger is snared for all eternity in the endless throng. Interweaving past, present, and future tenses as well as indicative and subjunctive moods, Kafka shifts from facts to hypotheses and from hypotheses again to facts. After the breathtaking sequence of increasingly fanciful and doubtful subjunctive clauses (italic above), the present-tense verb "lies" pops up, mocking the messenger's hypothetical escape and proclaiming the ultimate triumph of the sensory world.

"An Imperial Message" uses the shift from subjunctive to indicative to deny the hypothetical; "Wish, to Become Indian," in contrast, uses the shift to accept it. With "shed," Kafka's Indian triumphs over a sensory reality and actualizes fantasy. This actualization is reminiscent of attaining "non-action" in Daoist philosophy.

3 | SATZ II/MOVEMENT II

3.1 | *das eigene Werden in einem großen Zusammenhang*/One's own becoming within one grand coherence

Impressed with "Wanderings of knowledge," chapter 22 of Zhuangzi's *True Book on the Southern Land of Blossoms* in Wilhelm's translation, Kafka told Janouch:

I have underlined several passages. For example: *Through life, death is not brought to life; through death, life is not put to death. Life and death are conditioned; they are encompassed within One Grand Coherence.* This is—I believe—the pivotal and fundamental problem of all religion and wisdom of life. The point is to grasp the coherence of things and time, to decipher one's self, and to penetrate one's own becoming and there-going.

(Cf. Janouch, 1961, 172)¹³

Kafka's commentary on the excerpt from Wilhelm's translation of Zhuangzi exemplifies how he approached the Daoist original through yet beyond Wilhelm's appropriation. In spite of Wilhelm's expertise in Chinese, his educational and professional background as a theologian and missionary impelled him to present Daoist classics in a manner and with a vocabulary tailored for a European audience, most notably by alluding to the Bible. By characterizing the Zhuangzi passage as "the pivotal and fundamental problem of all religion and wisdom of life," Kafka acknowledged Wilhelm's allusion in "One Grand Coherence" yet leaped forward from religion to wisdom of life, and, as revealed in the next line, shifted focus from the biblical coherence conceived by Wilhelm to a Daoist coherence that contextualizes Kafka's quest to penetrate "one's own becoming."¹⁴

3.2 | *das Nicht-Tun als höchstes Glück/Non-action as perfect bliss*

On this quest, Kafka became fascinated with non-action, a recurring concept throughout Daoist classics. One facet of this concept—non-action as the perfect state of being—is illuminated in chapter 48 of *Dao De Jing*, titled “The recognizing forgetting” in Wilhelm’s translation:¹⁵

He who walks in inquiry, waxes daily.
 He who walks in Dao, wanes daily.
 He lessens his action and lessens it more and more,
 till he arrives at non-action.
 In non-action nothing remains undone.

(Cf. Laotse, 1911, 53)¹⁶

Here, Laozi juxtaposes two potentials for “one’s own becoming”: walking in inquiry and waxing or walking in Dao and waning. The first potential (line 1) may strike a German reader as an ancient Chinese equivalent to Doctor Faust, the striving mortal reimagined by Goethe, especially since Wilhelm every now and then refers to Goethe’s Faust to elucidate Daoist scripture.¹⁷ By contrast, the second potential (lines 2–4) illustrates an esoteric path to attaining non-action by enacting the negative, suggesting a spiritual transformation through physical reduction. To conclude, line 5 articulates a philosophical paradox via wordplay: by enacting non-action, one attains the perfect state of being.¹⁸ Realizing the superior potential is one’s fulfillment.

Laozi’s depiction of the superior potential is cited in Zhuangzi’s “Wandering of knowledge,” the chapter quoted by Kafka in his conversation with Janouch. Further, Laozi’s juxtaposition of action and non-action is elaborated upon in Zhuangzi’s “Perfect bliss,” chapter 18 of *The True Book on the Southern Land of Blossoms* in Wilhelm’s translation:

I know not if that which the world enacts, which she considers to be bliss, is in fact bliss. As I contemplate that which the world considers to be bliss, I see clearly how men in herds strive towards this goal [. . .] and all name it “bliss.” Yet [. . .] I consider **non-action** to be true bliss, i.e. precisely that which the world considers to be extreme agony. Thus the saying: “Perfect bliss is *sans* ‘bliss’; perfect fame is *sans* ‘fame’” [. . .] Perfect bliss and preservation of life can only be hoped for through *non-action* [. . .] Heaven reaches purity through *non-action*; Earth reaches cohesion through *non-action* [. . .] Heaven and Earth persist in **non-action**, and nothing remains undone. And among men, who is capable of attaining **non-action**?

(Cf. Dschuang Dsi, 1912, 195, emphasis mine)¹⁹

Compared to Laozi’s “Recognizing forgetting,” Zhuangzi’s “Perfect bliss” injects a new concept—bliss—into the equation and juxtaposes the two potentials for “one’s own becoming” in a new light: enacting action and striving in herds towards that which all in the sensory world name “bliss” or modeling oneself on nature, enacting non-action, and attaining that which Zhuangzi considers true bliss, that is to say, “perfect bliss” *sans* and beyond the sensory. Injecting the juxtaposition of “bliss” and “perfect bliss” not only makes Laozi’s differentiation between the two potentials more comprehensible, but also adds a layer to Laozi’s recognition of non-action as fulfillment. Among the six instances of Zhuangzi’s non-action, the first and the last two (bold above) suggest his identification of non-action as perfect bliss—the desired end;²⁰ the three in the middle (italic above) suggest his acknowledgment of non-action as the means to that end. Thus, Laozi’s path to attaining non-action by enacting the negative—waning or lessening one’s action—has evolved into Zhuangzi’s path to attaining perfect bliss by enacting non-action, which is at once the end and the means. To put it another way: non-action is both perfect bliss and a perfect potential for perfect bliss. This conceptual duality exemplifies how Zhuangzi circumscribes, “by way of suggestion,” a philosophical concept whose “every definition necessarily shatters the moment it is applied.”²¹

3.3 | *Glauben und Nicht Streben als eine vollkommene Glücksmöglichkeit/Believing and not striving as a perfect bliss-potential*

Laozi's and Zhuangzi's conceptualization of non-action echoes resoundingly in Kafka. Through creative writing, he transplanted the seed of Dao and nurtured it in a European mind. In his *Züräu* collection, the seed of Dao sprouts and grows most verdantly. Kafka constructed this collection not for a conventional book with page following page, but rather as a solitaire card game: he composed and curated aphorisms as 109 numbered cards in a deck that can be shuffled and experienced in a different order every time. Moreover, this collection enables one to bring out a card at a time, muse over it, pinpoint its philological-philosophical facets, and explore its potential by tilting it at a particular angle and in a particular context.²² Kafka's *Züräu* Card 90, for instance, can be read in the context of non-action as his transplantation of Laozi's paradox:

Two potentials: to make oneself infinitely small or to be so. The first is fulfillment, hence non-action, the second, beginning, hence action.

(Cf. Kafka, 2011c, Card 90)²³

The one potential, "beginning, hence action," evokes the infamous rewriting of the Bible by Goethe's Faust, "In the beginning was Action" (cf. Goethe, 1948, 3.44).²⁴ The antithetical potential, "fulfillment, hence non-action," echoes Laozi's philosophy via wordplay, "In non-action nothing remains undone." Goethe's Faust proclaims action as the impetus of the sensory world, that is to say, "from action springs the law" (Mauthner, 1923, 1.590 ["Genie"]). Laozi, on the other hand, reveals non-action as fulfillment that transcends all action in the sensory world. By depicting the Daoist potential for one's own becoming as "to make oneself infinitely small," Kafka articulates Laozi's path to attaining non-action through daily waning.²⁵ By depicting the Faustian potential for one's own becoming as "to be so," that is, to be infinitely small, Kafka exposes Faust's path to attaining sensory bliss through action as ultimately vain.²⁶ From this perspective, Kafka transforms Laozi's juxtaposition of action and non-action into a cross-cultural contrast between a European archetype and a Daoist ideal.²⁷

Züräu Card 90, however, is not Kafka's ultimate contemplation of non-action. He scratched it out with two diagonal lines while retaining *Züräu* Card 69, in which he narrowed the two potentials to "a perfect bliss-potential":

Theoretically there is a perfect bliss-potential: believing in the indestructible in oneself and not striving towards it.

(Cf. Kafka, 2011c, Card 69)²⁸

The textual architecture of this contemplation is essential to conveying Kafka's message.

On the right of the colon, the injection of a non-Daoist concept—the indestructible—illuminates non-action in the context of European intellectual history. Leaping forward beyond Augustine and Schopenhauer, Kafka ponders "the indestructible in oneself." Unlike Augustine's indestructible God, Kafka's "indestructible" is inside the human being (cf. Augustinus, 1863, 143).²⁹ Unlike Schopenhauer's indestructible will, Kafka's "indestructible" is neither superior to nor independent of an individual.³⁰ The double gerund sculpted into a dual concept—"believing in the indestructible in oneself and not striving towards it"—integrates Kafka's reinvention of "the indestructible" and his allusion to the Lord observing Faust, "Man errs as long as he strives" (cf. Goethe, 1948, 3.18).³¹ Compared to *Züräu* Card 90, "believing in the indestructible in oneself" echoes the Daoist potential, "fulfillment, hence non-action"; "striving towards it," on the other hand, echoes the Faustian potential, "beginning, hence action." Thus, the parallelism, "believing in and not striving towards," illustrates Kafka's discernment of the two approaches to his ideal, "the indestructible in oneself." Cancelling *Züräu* Card 90 and renouncing the Faustian potential with "not striving" demonstrate Kafka's verdict that Daoist non-action is more than superior to European action: it is the only true potential for one's own becoming.

On the left of the colon, Kafka stages the double gerund via wordplay, framing it as a conceptual duality, “a perfect bliss-potential.” Reminiscent of both Zhuangzi’s “perfect bliss” and Bruno’s “perfect potential,”³² Kafka’s combination of the adjective “perfect” and the compound noun “bliss-potential” suggests both perfect bliss (the desired end) and a perfect potential for perfect bliss (the means to that end).

In joining the left and right halves of Zürau Card 69, Kafka not only fuses Laozi’s recognition of non-action as fulfillment with his own quest for “the indestructible in oneself,” but also distills the passage from Zhuangzi’s “Perfect bliss” into a single sentence that revitalizes its philological-philosophical duality: “believing in the indestructible in oneself and not striving towards it” is, for the modern individual, both perfect bliss and a perfect potential for perfect bliss.

In light of Kafka’s Dao, “Wish, to Become Indian” exhibits “a perfect bliss-potential.” In this poetic parable, Kafka lets his Indian reject the illusion of sensory reality, actualize spiritual fantasy, and attain true bliss by enacting non-action.

4 | SATZ III/MOVEMENT III

4.1 | “bis man die Sporen ließ, denn es gab keine Sporen, bis man die Zügel wegwarf, denn es gab keine Zügel,”/“till one shed the spurs, for there were no spurs, till one released the reins, for there were no reins,”

The past-tense verbs “shed” and “released” launch and reinforce the second opening of the parable, transcending its initial speculative opening and its ambiguous transition from subjunctive to indicative mood. From now on, the parable can be read as a Daoist epigram veiled within a fairy-tale scenario.

The first hint of its Daoist kernel is the verb parallel “shed” and “released.” By shedding the spurs and releasing the reins, Kafka’s Indian *wanes* clause by clause. If the gesture of holding is that of action—possessing, controlling, striving, and *having*—then the gesture of shedding or releasing is that of non-action—forgetting, freeing, believing, and *being*.

In this context, the parallel assertions, “there were no spurs [. . .] there were no reins,” take on a new significance. Until the parable’s second opening, Kafka’s Indian wears the spurs and holds the reins. After the second opening, he sheds all his possessions, revels in unbridling himself, and recognizes the vanity of spurs and reins. This transformation evokes Kafka’s two hints toward Zürau Card 69:

The Messiah will come, by the time the most reinless individualism of belief is a potential [. . .] To believe means: to free the indestructible in oneself or more properly: to free oneself or more properly: to be indestructible or more properly: to be [*sein*].

(Cf. Kafka, 2011a, 92–95)³³

The word “*sein*” in German means both: being-here and belonging-to-it.

(Cf. Kafka, 2011c, Card 46)³⁴

Both hints reveal Kafka’s follow-through on what it means to be an individual and the existential affinity between “to believe” and “to be.” The first hint anticipates the conceptual duality suggested via wordplay in Zürau Card 69: “the most reinless individualism of belief”—the belief in “the indestructible in oneself”—has evolved into “a perfect bliss-potential.” The second hint heralds the dual concept sculpted through parallelism in Zürau Card 69: “being-here” resonates with “not striving towards it”; “belonging-to-it” echoes “believing in the indestructible in oneself.” From this perspective, Kafka’s despurged and unreined Indian epitomizes “the most reinless individualism of belief.”

Further, the rationale for the transformation of Kafka's Indian is manifested in Zürau Card 35:

There is no having, only a being, only—yearning for a final breath, for suffocating—a being.
(Cf. Kafka, 2011c, Card 35)³⁵

If there is no having, there is no possession. Both the existence of spurs and reins and the possession of them are illusory. Shedding the spurs and releasing the reins signify rejecting the illusion of reality. Waning into simply being suggests arriving at true bliss. Thus, the mutually enlightening Zürau Card 35 and “Wish, to Become Indian” can be read as Kafka's fusion of Daoist philosophy and Goethe's “Blissful Yearning”:

And so long as you have it not,

This: Die and become!

You are but a mournful guest

Upon the dark planet.

(Cf. Goethe, 1960, 3.22)³⁶

Like Goethe, Kafka ponders the existential yearning for a blissful transformation. Like Laozi and Zhuangzi, Kafka ponders the existential waning and the renunciation of striving. While Goethe's command is prefaced by prescribing possession, Kafka denounces having and portrays only a being; for in truth one cannot *have* this yearning, one must *be* it, so that every breath is suffused with and rooted in this yearning to die and to become.

4.2 | “bis man [. . .] ließ, denn es gab keine [. . .] bis man [. . .] wegwarf, denn es gab keine [. . .] und kaum das Land vor sich als glatt gemähte Heide sah, schon ohne Pferdehals und Pferdekopf.”/“till one shed [. . .] for there were no [. . .] till one released [. . .] for there were no [. . .] and hardly saw the land ahead as flat-cut heath, now even without horse's neck and horse's head.”

As one reads the parable, the acts of shedding spurs, releasing reins, and losing sight of land and horse must be experienced sequentially. The “till [. . .] till [. . .] and [. . .] now” construction, however, overcomes the limitations of language and collapses all of these acts into a single event, where all at once Kafka's Indian shrinks from the sensory reality, speeding past the land in front of him and outpacing “even” the fabulous horse and the period at the end of the parable, so that as the last passage is being read, he is riding still. Thus, “till [. . .] till [. . .] and [. . .] now” conveys the simultaneity of all happenings, while “even” creates a zenith that grants the parable its final surprise.³⁷

Further, “and hardly saw [. . .] now even without” disrupts the parable's rhetoric pattern yet carries its message through to completion. This is because “and hardly saw” breaks the “till one shed [. . .] till one released” refrain yet retains the thematic waning of the Indian's presence in sensory reality as his vision of the spiritual world overtakes the manicured heath in front of him. Similarly, “now even without” terminates the “for there were no [. . .] for there were no” parallel yet completes the Indian's ascension to the realm of pure being by fusing horse, rider, and environment: he has fused with his steed and rides on into infinity.

Further still, the concluding clauses portray Kafka's Indian from complementary angles. “[A]nd hardly saw the land ahead as flat-cut heath” depicts him as an individual who, by casting off spurs and reins and rejecting the illusion of reality, begins to dissolve the sensory world with a hint of the spiritual. By contrast, “now even without horse's neck and horse's head” portrays Kafka's Indian as an individual whose own boundaries begin to dissolve, for now not only the land in front of him disappears, but even the horse's neck and head. This freedom

through dissolution is presented emblematically in Liezi's *True Book on the Earth's Gushing Springs*, a chapter titled "Forgetting the self" in Wilhelm's translation:³⁸

The distinction between I and Not-I was no more. After that the distinctions between the five senses also ceased to be, they all became similar to one another. Then the thoughts condensed, the body became free, flesh and bone dissolved, I no longer felt that against which the body leaned, upon which the foot trod: I followed the wind east and west like a leaf or dry chaff, and I truly know not if the wind drove me or I the wind.

(Cf. Liä Dsi, 1912, 50)³⁹

4.3 | *"kaum das Land vor sich als glatt gemähte Heide sah, schon ohne Pferdehals und Pferdekopf."/*"hardly saw the land ahead as flat-cut heath, now even without horse's neck and horse's head."

By letting go of possession and its relations, Kafka's Indian leaps forth beyond the sensory world and glimpses the spiritual: Rather than being "a mournful guest upon the dark planet," he ascends into a new sphere, expanding into its boundless space. Kafka's Indian has followed the steps suggested by Zhuangzi for a neophyte yet capable disciple to become a sage:

If I had him at my side for instruction, after three days he should overcome the world. After overcoming the world, I would like to take him so far in seven days that he would stand beyond the contrast of subject and object. After another nine days, I would like to take him so far that he would overcome life. After overcoming life he could be as lucid as the morning, and in this morning-lucidity he could see His Oneness.⁴⁰ If he saw His Oneness, there would be no more past or present for him; beyond time he could enter the realm where there is no more death or birth.

(Cf. Dschuang Dsi, 1912, 88)⁴¹

This ascension, when contextualized in Kafka's oeuvre, proves to be the dawning of a new way of attaining true bliss. One aspect of this new way—Kafka's way—is for an individual to become disillusioned with the sensory world and thus dissolve it:

There is, for us, twofold truth [. . .] The truth of acting and the truth of resting [. . .] the first truth belongs to the blink of an eye, the second to eternity, therefore the first truth also dissolves in the light of the second.

(Cf. Kafka, 2011b, 16–19)⁴²

With strongest light one can dissolve the world.

(Cf. Kafka, 2011c, Card 54)⁴³

In these contemplations, Kafka first ponders "perfect bliss"—fleeting actions dissolving in the eternal light of non-action—and then muses over "a perfect bliss-potential"—the potential for an individual to attain that light and actualize that perfect bliss. Against this background, Kafka's Indian who "hardly saw the land ahead as flat-cut heath" can be read as one who fulfills that perfect bliss-potential: with the light of non-action, he dissolves the sensory world.

The complementary aspect of Kafka's way of attaining true bliss is for an individual to allow the boundaries of his being to dissolve as he becomes a denizen of the truer spiritual reality. This aspect is illustrated, above all, in Zürau Card 21:

As firmly as the hand holds the stone. It holds it firmly, however, only to cast it farther still. But also into that farness does the way lead.

(Cf. Kafka 2011c, Card 21)⁴⁴

Like the hand that holds the stone only to cast it farther, Kafka's Indian wears the spurs and holds the reins for a relative eternity only to cast them off as he suddenly escapes. Like the hand that finds the way—Dao—by letting go of the stone it has held firmly, Kafka's Indian attains non-action—the eternal state of Dao—by abandoning the spurs and reins he has possessed as a means of control and manipulation.

With “also into that farness” Kafka maps—after Daoist masters—yet another path to the perfect state of being. “Now even without horse's neck and horse's head” indicates that the hand now casts the stone farther still: by casting off even that which separates him from his steed, Kafka's Indian allows his own boundaries to dissolve and, just as Heaven reaches purity and Earth reaches cohesion, becomes a perfected being—indestructible.

From this perspective, the zenith of the parable can be read as Kafka the tale-teller's dialogue with Kafka the philosopher. The final moment of “Wish, to Become Indian”—the blissful view of one's own boundaries beginning to dissolve in the eternal light of non-action and the infinity of the spiritual—realizes Kafka's perfect bliss-potential.

5 | FINALE: KAFKAS DAO ÜBERSETZEND GELESEN/FINALE: TRANSREADING KAFKA'S DAO

Through transreading Kafka's single-sentence parable, we played a patience game with his transplantation of Dao into a European mind. During this game, his riddle was deciphered, word for word and mark for mark, until its kernel was revealed to us. Compared to the previous studies of “Wish, to Become Indian,” our game exposed an unexplored path at both thematical and methodological levels.

Thematically, contextualizing the parable in Kafka's encounters with Laozi, Liezi, and Zhuangzi enabled us to comprehend a series of otherwise incomprehensible puzzles. Only by scrutinizing Kafka's Dao, one of the most astonishing cross-cultural enigmas, were we able to explain the seemingly inexplicable in “Wish, to Become Indian.” Furthermore, Kafka's pessimistic perception of his own ineptitude to penetrate Daoist scripture and his pessimistic prediction of never finding the continuity of the ancient Chinese ideal—non-action—were disproved. Through creative writing, Kafka not only penetrated esoteric Daoist classics, but also furthered their spirit in a way that transcends Wilhelm, the pioneer European Sinologist. From this perspective, “Wish, to Become Indian” is a historical-cultural phenomenon: distinct from his contemporaries, Kafka delivered the messages of ancient Chinese philosopher-poets in an uncompromising way that informs and inspires.

Methodologically, transreading “Wish, to Become Indian” prompt after prompt enabled us to illuminate nuances that otherwise might have been overlooked. Wordplay, punctuational oddity, syntactic complexity, lyric density, and the curiously interlaced tenses and cases are all part of the idiosyncratic delivery of Kafka's message. Integrating the four activities of transreading—lento reading demanded and enhanced by cultural hermeneutics, creative writing required and inspired by poetic translation—proved to be an effective approach to unraveling Kafka's riddle. The synergy of these activities was essential to our orientation within the fascinating labyrinth of cross-cultural dialogue. What's more, considering Kafka's riddle to be a patience game and playing it with the gravity of a gaming child and the patience of a methodical mind helped us approximate Kafka: not only did we observe how he played with words and thoughts, using an editing pen as a sculpting tool to focus his pondering and polish his poetics, but we also followed him so meticulously that we ourselves became him and played with his parable, using transreading as our principal tool to begin our pondering and cultivate our poetics. From this perspective, our patience game with “Wish, to Become Indian” demonstrated what transreading is and how it benefits scholars—Germanists, Sinologists, and comparatists alike—by combining proven techniques that enable critique with deeper understanding.

6 | ZUGABE: EINE HÖHERE BEOBACHTUNG ALS DER TROST DES SCHREIBENS/ENCORE: HIGHER OBSERVATION AS THE SOLACE OF WRITING

In my venture to crack the adamantine nut “Wish, to Become Indian,” I journeyed across four realms. In the realm of Kafka’s parables, I voyaged from “Once upon a time there was a patience game” to “Before the Law,” “A Country Doctor,” and “An Imperial Message.” In the realm of Kafka’s Zürau cards, I delved into making oneself infinitely small, believing and not striving, being here and belonging to it, casting the stone into the way, and dissolving the world with the strongest light. In the realm of Kafka’s encounters with Laozi, Liezi, and Zhuangzi through Wilhelm, I traversed one’s own becoming within one grand coherence, daily waning, freedom through dissolution, and non-action as perfect bliss. In the realm of Kafka’s dialogue with Augustine, Bruno, Goethe, and Schopenhauer, I tunneled through “perfect bliss-potential,” “blissful yearning,” “the most reinless individualism of belief,” and “the indestructible in oneself.”

Transreading Kafka’s cryptic little parable has revealed an entire intellectual cosmos compressed into a single sentence—a marvel, which prompts me to ponder: how does Kafka create this tiny labyrinth, or more properly: why does Kafka write, or more properly: what is Kafka’s way?

Here, I am beckoned to walk one more garden path—an entry in his private journal:

Curious, mysterious, perhaps dangerous, perhaps redemptive solace of writing: the leaping forth beyond the chain of death-strikers—action—observation, action—observation—by creating a higher type of observation, a higher, not a sharper one; and the higher the observation, the more out of reach of the “chain,” the more independent it becomes, the more in accordance with its own laws of motion, and the more incalculable, joyful, and ascending its way.

(Cf. Kafka, 1990, 892)⁴⁵

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ENDNOTES

¹ I thank Ingrid Brich, Steven Buchele, Devin Raine, John Reaves, Yoonjae Shin, Brennen VanderVeen, and Marion Williams for participating in intense discussions of Kafka’s Dao, which I conducted from October 2018 to July 2020. “eine[r] der kürzesten—und rätselhaftesten—Wunschwerdegangssätze der deutschen Literatur” (Braun, 2019). All translations throughout the article are mine.

² Cf. Janouch, 1961, 171–172: “Ich habe mich—soweit das in der Übersetzung überhaupt möglich ist—ziemlich tief und lange mit dem Taoismus beschäftigt. Ich besitze fast alle Bände der deutschen Übersetzung dieser Richtung, die bei Diederichs in Jena herauskamen [. . .]

Das ist ein Meer, in dem man leicht untergehen könnte. In Kung-Futses Gesprächen ist man noch auf festem Boden; doch später löst sich alles immer mehr und mehr in der Dunkelheit auf, Laotse’s Sprüche sind steinharte Nüsse. Ich bin von ihnen bezaubert, doch ihr Kern bleibt mir verschlossen. Ich habe sie mehrmals gelesen. Dann entdeckte ich aber, daß ich sie—wie ein kleiner Junge bunte Glaskugeln—aus einem Gedankenwinkel in den anderen gleiten ließ, ohne damit nur ein Stück weiterzukommen. Ich entdeckte mit den Glaskugeln dieser Sprüche eigentlich nur die trostlose Seichtheit meiner Gedankenmulden, die Laotse’s Glaskugeln nicht begrenzen und aufnehmen konnten. Das war eine ziemlich deprimierende Entdeckung, also ließ ich das Spiel mit den Glaskugeln bleiben.”

³ In his momentary decision to quit, one sees Kafka’s similar discomfort with the game as the protagonist of his untitled fable, the opening of which reads, “Once upon a time there was a patience game.” There, a personified marble “held the opinion that she was tormented enough with the paths during the game and that she was fully entitled, if not being played, to her recuperation on the free level.” Cf. “Es war einmal ein Geduldspiel” in Kafka, 1992, 414–415: “Sie war der Ansicht, daß sie während des Spieles genug mit den Wegen gequält werde und daß sie reichlichen Anspruch darauf habe, wenn nicht gespielt würde, sich auf der freien Ebene zu erholen.”

- ⁴ Kafka, 2008, 126–127: “Diese (vielleicht allzusehr europäisierende) Übersetzung einiger alter chinesischer Manuscriptblätter stellt uns ein Freund der Aktion zur Verfügung. Es ist ein Bruchstück. Hoffnung, dass die Fortsetzung gefunden werden könnte besteht nicht.”
- ⁵ The synergy of these activities is essential to understanding works that are foundational yet often cryptic. While working on my first book, *Kulturtransfer über Epochen und Kontinente: Feng Zhis Roman Wu Zixu als Begegnung von Antike und Moderne, China und Europa* (Gruyter, 2012), I discovered how Feng’s creative writing originated in his lento reading, poetic translation, and cultural hermeneutics of European writers. This approach enabled him to reinvent his native language and envision a “Chinese Renaissance” that blends Eastern and Western concepts. I learned to read, translate, write, and interpret as Feng did, and developed this practice into an exacting method in “Translated, it is: ...”—An ethics of transreading” (*Educational Theory*, 2014). This article defines transreading and employs it to gain new insight into those who transform the canon.
- I have tested transreading on other intersections of languages and disciplines. “Lu Xun contra Georg Brandes: Resisting the temptation of world literature” (*EU-topias. A Journal on Interculturality, Communication, and European Studies*, 2017) examines the global response to Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* through my inspection of the Danish, German, Japanese, Chinese, and American texts and contexts of Brandes and Lu Xun. “Mu Dan’s poetry as a history of modern China” (*Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, 2018) transreads poetry as history to uncover lost sentiments, struggles, and critiques. “Transreading across cultures: American students decipher a modern Chinese classic” (*Migrating Minds. Theories and Practices of Cultural Cosmopolitanism*, Routledge, forthcoming 2021) demonstrates the pedagogical value of transreading, proving it an effective approach to cultural cosmopolitanism that benefits students and teachers alike by combining concrete techniques and a humble mindset that enables critique with empathy.
- ⁶ As a gem of modern German literature, “Wish, to Become Indian” has inspired rich secondary literature, the newest example being a collection of German essays titled *Wunsch, Indianer zu werden. Versuche über einen Satz von Franz Kafka* (ed. Christoph König and Clenn Most, Wallstein Verlag, 2019). In it, eight philologists, poets, and literary scholars delve into Kafka’s parable. Their endeavor to explain the seemingly inexplicable via varied approaches is not only remarkable, but also invites sequels that further explore avenues to interpret Kafka. As I set out to play my own game with Kafka’s riddle, I detected an unexplored path to contextualize it in his encounters with Dao and decipher it through micro-level transreading.
- ⁷ As the focus of my analysis, “Wish, to Become Indian” will be presented in Kafka’s original, followed by my translation. Those who read German will, I hope, take double pleasure in reading this essay. Non-German speakers will benefit from a visual comparison within and between languages, which illuminates the otherwise concealed nuances of Kafka’s original. To enhance the flow of my analysis, other quotes will be presented in my translation with respective footnotes that provide the original.
- ⁸ Nietzsche, 1988, 90: “Reife des Mannes: das heisst den Ernst wiedergefunden haben, den man als Kind hatte, beim Spiel.”
- ⁹ Comparing Kafka’s writing habits to his Zürau Card 2, one can infer that Kafka used his own work ethic to remedy the “impatience” that he diagnosed as the origin of “all human errors.” Cf. Kafka, 2011c, Card 2: “Alle menschlichen Fehler sind Ungeduld, ein vorzeitiges Abbrechen des Methodischen, ein scheinbares Einfühlen der scheinbaren Sache.” My translation: “All human errors are impatience, a premature breaking off of the methodical, an apparent fencing in of the apparent issue.”
- ¹⁰ In this respect, one sees Kafka’s resemblance to the anonymous player in his fable, “Once upon a time there was a patience game”: “one could pop the patience game into one’s pocket and bring it along, and wherever one was, one could bring it out and play.” Cf. “Es war einmal ein Geduldspiel” in Kafka, 1992, 414–415: “[M]an konnte das Geduldspiel in die Tasche stecken und mitnehmen und wo immer man war, konnte man es hervornehmen und spielen.”
- ¹¹ Kafka, “Ein Landarzt,” in Kafka, 1920, 9–10: “‘Holla, Bruder, holla Schwester!’ rief der Pferdeknecht, und zwei Pferde, mächtige, flankenstarke Tiere, schoben sich hintereinander, die Beine eng am Leib, die wohlgeformten Köpfe wie Kamele senkend, nur durch die Kraft der Wendungen ihres Rumpfes aus dem Türloch, das sie restlos ausfüllten.” When re-publishing the parable in an anthology, Kafka insisted on the book title, *Ein Landarzt. Kleine Erzählungen* (*A Country Doctor: Little Tales*), rejecting the publisher’s proposal, *Der Landarzt. Neue Betrachtungen* (*The Country Doctor: New Contemplations*). Kafka’s choice indicates that he conveys his contemplations through tale-telling.
- ¹² Kafka, 2008, 78–81, emphasis mine: “Der Bote **hat** sich gleich auf den Weg **gemacht**, ein kräftiger, ein unermüdlicher Mann, ein Schwimmer sonder-gleichen, einmal diesen einmal den andern Arm vorstreckend **schaftt** er sich Bahn durch die Menge, **findet** er Widerstand **zeigt** er auf die Brust, wo das Zeichen der Sonne **ist**, er **kommt** auch leicht vorwärts, wie kein anderer. Aber die Menge **ist** so groß, ihre Wohnstätten **nehmen** kein Ende, **öffnete** sich freies Feld wie **würde** er **fliegen** und bald wohl **hörtest** Du das herrliche Schlagen seiner Fäuste an Deiner Tür. Aber statt dessen wie nutzlos **müht** er sich **ab**, immer noch **zwängt** er sich durch die Gemächer des innersten Palastes, niemals **wird** er sie

überwinden und *gelänge* ihm das, nichts *wäre gewonnen*, die Treppen hinab *müßte* er sich *kämpfen* und *gelänge* ihm das, nichts *wäre gewonnen*, die Höfe *wären zu durchmessen*, und nach den Höfen, der zweite umschließende Palast und wieder Treppen und Höfe und wieder ein Palast und soweiter durch Jahrtausende und *stürzte* er endlich aus dem äußersten Tor—aber niemals niemals *kann* es *geschehn—liegt* erst die Residenzstadt vor ihm, die Mitte der Welt, hoch geschüttet voll ihres Bodensatzes. Niemand *dringt* hier durch [...].”

¹³ Cf. Janouch, 1961, 172: “Ich habe einige Stellen unterstrichen. Zum Beispiel: *Durch das Leben wird nicht der Tod lebendig; durch das Sterben wird nicht das Leben getötet. Leben und Tod sind bedingt; sie sind umschlossen von Einem großen Zusammenhang.* Das ist—glaube ich—das Grund- und Hauptproblem aller Religion und Lebensweisheit. Es handelt sich darum, den Zusammenhang der Dinge und Zeit zu erfassen, sich selbst zu entziffern, das eigene Werden und Vergehen zu durchdringen.”

¹⁴ Cf. the complete passage in Wilhelm’s translation of Zhuangzi, “Wanderungen der Erkenntnis,” *Das wahre Buch vom südlichen Blütenland* (Dschuang Dsi, 1912, 233–234, emphasis mine): “*Durch das Leben wird nicht der Tod lebendig; durch das Sterben wird nicht das Leben getötet. Leben und Tod sind bedingt; sie sind umschlossen von Einem großen Zusammenhang.* Es gab Dinge, die der Entstehung von Himmel und Erde vorausgingen; aber was den Dingen ihre Dinglichkeit gibt, ist nicht selbst ein Ding. Innerhalb der Welt der Dinge aber kann man nicht jenseits der Dinge zurückgehen, und da es zu jeder Zeit Dinge gab, ist kein Aufhören.”

My translation: “*Through life, death is not brought to life; through death, life is not put to death. Life and death are conditioned; they are encompassed within One Grand Coherence.* There were things that preceded the emergence of Heaven and Earth; but that which gives things their thing-ness is itself not a thing. Within the world of things however, one cannot go back beyond things, and since there were things at all times, there is no end.”

The continuation of the Zhuangzi passage that Kafka quoted in his conversation with Janouch evokes two moments in Kafka’s transplantation of Dao into a European mind:

1. The never-ending “world of things” resonates with Kafka’s description of the sensory world in his parable “An Imperial Message.” While Wilhelm likely considered the description of the never-ending process to be a Daoist view of human history, Kafka might have been inspired by the never-ending nature of the world of things to create the infinitely frustrating sensory world.

2. The distinction between “the world of things” and the non-thing that lies “beyond things” resonates with Kafka’s distinction between the sensory and the spiritual worlds. While Wilhelm likely associated “that which gives things their thing-ness” with God, as consistently shown in his translation, Kafka recognized in what lies “beyond things” the spiritual world.

From a Daoist perspective, the messenger, albeit “a swimmer without equal,” could never cross the sea and deliver the message to the spiritual world, because he failed to grasp what Kafka deciphered from the Zhuangzi passage: within the sensory world, one cannot “go back beyond” the sensory. By contrast, the addressee got the message despite the messenger’s failure, because “the pitiable subject” had opted not to “push through” the endless world of things, but rather to shrink into what lies beyond. “An Imperial Message” and “Wish, to Become Indian” have in common this observation: one can only ascend to the spiritual world by transcending action—the impetus of the sensory world.

¹⁵ Wilhelm’s German title in the genitive case, “Vergessen des Erkennens,” can be read by a meticulous writer like Kafka in two ways:

1. *das Erkennen vergessen*—objective/gerund: *das Erkennen* (the recognizing) + verb: *vergessen* (to forget)—to forget recognizing; namely, to walk in Dao instead of inquiry, to wane instead of waxing, or to turn from action (i.e. recognizing, inquiry, waxing) to non-action (i.e. forgetting, Dao, waning);

2. *das erkennende Vergessen*—adjective: *erkennend* (recognizing) + noun/gerund: *das Vergessen* (the forgetting)—a unique type of forgetting that simultaneously forgets and recognizes; namely, by forgetting inquiry and knowledge (i.e. wisdom of life at a lower level), one recognizes non-action and Dao (i.e. wisdom of life at a higher level). My way to transplant this into English is through the novel phrase “the recognizing forgetting.”

¹⁶ My translation of Wilhelm’s translation, in *Tao Te King—Das Buch des Alten vom Sinn und Leben* (Laotse, 1911, 53):

Wer im Forschen wandelt, nimmt täglich zu.

Wer im SINNE wandelt, nimmt täglich ab.

Er verringert sein Tun und verringert es immer mehr,

bis er anlangt beim Nicht-Tun.

Beim Nicht-Tun bleibt nichts ungetan.

¹⁷ For example, Wilhelm’s annotated translation of chapter 50 of *Tao Te King* (Laotse, 1911, 55):

Knechte des Lebens gibt es drei unter zehn,

Knechte des Todes gibt es drei unter zehn.

Menschen, die das Leben suchen und dabei ihre sterbliche Stelle regen,
gibt es auch drei unter zehn.

Warum das?

Weil sie des Lebens Völligkeit erzeugen wollen.

Erklärung

“Die das Leben suchen und des Todes Stelle bewegen” sind die, die in ihrem Streben nach Leben das “Verweilende” (vgl. Faust: “Werd’ ich zum Augenblicke sagen: verweile doch [. . .]”) suchen und durch dieses Verweilen dem Tod den Angriffspunkt bieten.

My translation:

Slaves of life, three out of ten.

Slaves of death, three out of ten.

Men who seek life and thereby rouse their mortal place, also three out of ten.

Why so?

Because they desire to beget the fullness of life.

Elucidation

“Men who seek life and thereby rouse their mortal place” are those who, in their striving for life, seek “that which lingers” (cf. Goethe’s “Were I to say to the moment: O linger on [. . .]”) and, by this lingering, expose their vital point.

By referring to Goethe’s Faust—a “slave” to the desire “to beget the fullness of life”—Wilhelm helped a German reader comprehend why Laozi considers those who strive for life, i.e. seek eternity in the sensory world, to be “slaves.”

¹⁸ The paradox, “in non-action nothing remains undone” (chapters 37 and 48), echoes another paradox in *Dao De Jing*, “enacting non-action” (chapters 3 and 63). Both paradoxes are articulated via wordplay in classical Chinese: 為無為 (enacting non-action) and 無為而無不為 (in non-action nothing remains undone). The latter also appears four times in Zhuangzi’s *True Book on the Southern Land of Blossoms* (chapters 18, 22, 23, and 25).

¹⁹ My translation of Wilhelm’s translation, in: “Höchstes Glück,” *Das wahre Buch vom südlichen Blütenland* (Dschiung, 1912, 195, emphasis mine):

“Nun weiß ich nicht, ob das, was die Welt tut, was sie für Glück hält, tatsächlich Glück ist oder nicht. Wenn ich das betrachte, was die Welt für Glück hält, so sehe ich wohl, wie die Menschen in Herden diesem Ziele nachstreben [. . .] und alle sprechen, das sei das Glück.

Aber [. . .] ich halte das **Nicht-Handeln** für wahres Glück, also gerade das, was die Welt für die größte Bitternis hält. Darum heißt es: Höchstes Glück ist Abwesenheit des Glücks, höchster Ruhm ist Abwesenheit des Ruhms [. . .] Höchstes Glück und Wahrung des Lebens ist nur durch *Nicht-Handeln* zu erhoffen [. . .] Der Himmel gelangt durch *Nicht-Handeln* zur Reinheit; die Erde gelangt durch *Nicht-Handeln* zur Festigkeit [. . .] Himmel und Erde verharren im **Nicht-Tun**, und nichts bleibt ungetan. Und unter den Menschen, wer vermag es, das **Nicht-Tun** zu erreichen?”

²⁰ Zhuangzi’s identification of non-action with true or perfect bliss parallels his identification (in line 1 of the cited passage) of action—that which the world enacts—with the false or sensory bliss—that which the world considers to be bliss.

²¹ Cf. Wilhelm’s introduction to Zhuangzi, in *Das wahre Buch vom südlichen Blütenland* (Dschiung Dsi, 1912, 12):

“Er ist Ursprung einer Bewegung, und nur der hat ihn verstanden, der vom Wortlaut los-kommt und die Bewegung in sich zu erzeugen vermag, die von seinen Worten ausgeht [. . .]

Das ist die Ruhe im SINN, von der er redet. Dieses Erlebnis kann nur andeutungs-weise umgrenzt werden; jeder begriffliche Ausdruck zerbricht notwendig bei der Anwendung selbst.”

My translation:

“He is the origin of a motion; only those who leap out of the static letters and can generate in themselves the motion that springs from his words have understood him [. . .]

What he speaks of is resting in Dao. This experience can only be circumscribed by way of suggestion; every definition necessarily shatters the moment it is applied.”

Kafka, when reading Zhuangzi, undoubtedly leaped out of the static letters and generated in himself the motion that springs from Zhuangzi’s words.

²² Throughout this article, several Zürau cards (2, 21, 27, 35, 46, 54, 69, 90, and 109) are cited. The characteristic of Kafka's Zürau collection makes each card not only ideal to be mingled with other corresponding cards, but also with Kafka's parables, journal entries, and conversations, as well as pertinent works of other philosopher-poets. My forthcoming book, *Kafka's Dao: The Patience Game*, uses Zürau Card 1 as the point of departure to develop three interrelated thematic constellations: "The True Way," "The Spiritual World," and "The Sensory World." It invites the reader to peruse a gallery of central figures spanning modern Europe and ancient China, whose intellectual genealogy defies linguistic, ethnic, and ideological boundaries. From this perspective, the current article is a miniature of my book.

²³ Kafka, 2011c, Card 90:

"Zwei Möglichkeiten: sich unendlich klein machen oder es sein. Das erste ist Vollendung also Untätigkeit, das zweite Beginn, also Tat."

Kafka's specific order—identical in both his draft and final versions—has been reversed in the German edition, *Franz Kafka: Gesammelte Werke*, edited by Max Brod (Fischer), 1950: "Zwei Möglichkeiten: sich unendlich klein machen oder es sein. Das zweite ist Vollendung also Untätigkeit, das erste Beginn, also Tat" (Kafka, 1950, 7.50). Kafka's specific order has also been reversed in two English translations of Zürau Card 90: "Two possibilities: making oneself infinitely small or being so. The second is perfection, that is to say, inactivity, the first is beginning, that is to say, action" (Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, Exact Change, 1991, 40). "Two possibilities: to make oneself, or to be infinitesimally small. The second is fulfillment, therefore inaction, the first a beginning, therefore action" (Kafka, *The Great Wall of China*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, Schocken, 1970, 278). The fact that several German editions and English translations have reversed the order of the "two potentials" indicates that the paradox embedded in Zürau Card 90 is almost impossible to solve without approaching it from the Daoist direction.

²⁴ "Im Anfang war die Tat" (Goethe, 1948, 3.44). Goethe's *Faust* rewrote "In the beginning was the Word" three times, replacing "the Word" with "Sense," "Force," and, ultimately, "Action."

²⁵ Chapter 48 of *Dao De Jing* not only casts new light upon Zürau Card 90, but also 27 and 109. Zürau Card 27 can be read as Kafka's continuation of Laozi's suggestion to enact the negative; Zürau Card 109 can be read as Kafka's continuation of Laozi's suggestion to lessen one's action:

"Das Negative zu tun, ist uns noch auferlegt, das Positive ist uns schon gegeben." (Zürauer Zettel 27)

"Es ist nicht notwendig, daß Du aus dem Haus gehst. Bleib bei Deinem Tisch und horche. Horche nicht einmal, warte nur. Warte nicht einmal, sei völlig still und allein. Anbieten wird sich Dir die Welt zur Entlarvung, sie kann nicht anders, verzückt wird sie sich vor Dir winden." (Zürauer Zettel 109)

My translation:

"To enact the negative is still assigned to us, the positive is already given to us." (Zürau Card 27)

"It is not necessary that you leave the house. Stay at your table and hearken. Do not even hearken, just wait. Do not even wait, be wholly still and alone. The world will offer herself to you for unveiling, she can do no other; in ecstasy, before you she will writhe." (Zürau Card 109)

²⁶ On the same day in his journal, Kafka wrote down "Eitelkeit (vanity), Selbstvergessenheit (self-forgetting)" right above his draft of Zürau Card 90 (Kafka, 2011a, 156–159). These two concepts may well have been Kafka's hint toward the two potentials for one's own becoming: "vanity" in the sense of the vain (futile) endeavors of those who are vain (self-regarding), in accordance with the Faustian potential, as suggested in Goethe's tragedy and Wilhelm's annotation; "self-forgetting" in the sense of recognizing the spiritual world by forgetting the self or attaining true bliss by forgetting the sensory bliss, in accordance with the Daoist potential, as suggested in Laozi's "Recognizing forgetting" and Zhuangzi's "Perfect bliss."

Beyond his Zürau collection, Kafka projects the juxtaposition of these two potentials onto the contrast between the messenger (who strives and therefore is infinitely small amidst the infinitely large multitude) and "the shadow who had shrunk from the imperial sun into the most distant of distances" (who, rather than striving, makes himself infinitely small and therefore overcomes the otherwise insurmountable multitude) in his parable "An Imperial Message."

²⁷ Kafka is not alone. Alfred Döblin (1878–1957), who was also drawn to Daoist philosophy, dedicated to Liezi his *Three Leaps of Wang-lun. Chinese Novel*, appropriating Wilhelm's translation of Liezi for his own cross-cultural contrast between the modern European obsession with "property" and the ancient Daoist critique of "possessing":

"Gewinnen, Erobern; ein alter Mann sprach: 'Wir gehen und wissen nicht wohin. Wir bleiben und wissen nicht wo. Wir essen und wissen nicht warum. Das alles ist die starke Lebenskraft von Himmel und Erde: wer kann da sprechen von Gewinnen, Besitzen?'" (Döblin, 1917, 1).

My translation:

"Winning, conquering; an old man spoke: 'We go and know not whither. We stay and know not where. We eat and know not why. All this is the potent life force of Heaven and Earth: who can then speak of winning, possessing?'"

²⁸ Kafka, 2011c, Card 69:

"Theoretisch gibt es eine vollkommene Glücksmöglichkeit: An das Unzerstörbare in sich glauben und nicht zu ihm streben."

The following is worth noting:

On the left of the colon, Kafka combines the adjective "vollkommen (perfect)" and the compound noun "Glücksmöglichkeit (bliss-potential)." This prompts a reading of the phrase as both *vollkommenes Glück* (perfect bliss) and *vollkommene Möglichkeit* (perfect potential). On the right of the colon, Kafka capitalizes the word "An (In)" and omits the word "zu (to)." This accentuates the conceptualization of two verbs, "glauben (believing)" and "streben (striving)," and elevates their juxtaposition as a dual concept, "believing and not striving." The conceptual duality on the left frames the dual concept on the right: "believing in the indestructible in oneself and not striving towards it" is both perfect bliss and a perfect potential for perfect bliss.

Züräu Card 69 demonstrates how Kafka philosophizes with wordplay. The concurrence of his poetics and pondering evokes Wilhelm's remarks of Zhuangzi, "He is the origin of a motion; only those who leap out of the static letters and can generate in themselves the motion that springs from his words have understood him." In this context, Züräu Card 57 can be read as Kafka's dialogue with Zhuangzi through Wilhelm yet beyond him:

"Die Sprache kann für alles außerhalb der sinnlichen Welt nur andeutungsweise, aber niemals auch nur annähernd vergleichsweise gebraucht werden, da sie entsprechend der sinnlichen Welt nur vom Besitz und seinen Beziehungen handelt." (Züräuer Zettel 57)

My translation:

"Language, for all that is beyond the sensory world, can only be used by way of suggestion, but never by way of definition—not even approximately—for in accordance with the sensory world, it treats only of possession and its relations." (Züräu Card 57)

²⁹ Cf. Augustinus, 1863, 143:

"Ich ein Mensch und solch ein Mensch versuchte dich zu denken, den höchsten, alleinigen wahren Gott und an dich, den Unzerstörbaren, Unverletzlichen, Unwandelbaren glaubte ich von Herzensgrund."

My translation:

"I, a human being, and such a human being, attempted to think of You, the highest, only true God; and in You, the indestructible, the invulnerable, the immutable, I believed from the bottom of my heart."

Kafka's journal entry on December 7, 1917 can be read as his dialogue with Augustine on an invested god in whom one's belief is essential to one's being:

"Der Mensch kann nicht leben ohne ein dauerndes Vertrauen zu etwas Unzerstörbarem, wobei sowohl das Unzerstörbare als auch das Vertrauen ihm dauernd unbekannt bleiben können. Eine der Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten dieses Verborgenen-Bleibens ist der Glaube an einen persönlichen Gott." (Kafka, 2011a, 100)

My translation:

"The human being cannot live without a continuous trust in something indestructible, where both the indestructible and the trust may continuously remain unknown to him. One of the manifested potentials of this 'remaining-concealed' is the belief in a personal god."

³⁰ Cf. Schopenhauer, 1977, 4.581:

"Alle Philosophen haben darin geirrt, daß sie das Metaphysische, das Unzerstörbare, das Ewige im Menschen in den *Intellekt* setzten: es liegt ausschließlich im *Willen* [. . .]. Der Wille allein ist das Bedingende, der Kern der ganzen Erscheinung, von den Formen dieser, zu welchen die Zeit gehört, somit frei, also auch unzerstörbar."

My translation:

"All philosophers have erred in this: they placed the metaphysical, the indestructible, the eternal in the human being in the *intellect*: it lies exclusively in the *will* [. . .] The will alone is that which conditions—the kernel of the entire phenomenon, free from its forms, to which time belongs, hence also indestructible."

Kafka's Züräu Card 70 can be read as his dialogue with Schopenhauer on the relationship between the indestructible and the individual. For Schopenhauer, the indestructible *will* conditions humanity from above. For Kafka, each individual human being carries the indestructible within:

“Das Unzerstörbare ist eines; jeder einzelne Mensch ist es und gleichzeitig ist es allen gemeinsam, daher die beispiellos untrennbare Verbindung der Menschen.” (Kafka, 2011c, Zürauer Zettel 70)

My translation:

“The indestructible is *one*; each individual human being is it and at the same time it is common to all, thus the uniquely inseparable bond of human beings.” (Zürau Card 70)

³¹ “Es irrt der Mensch, so lang er strebt” (Goethe, 1948, 3.18).

³² In German, “perfect potential” appears—to my knowledge—only in a Bruno quote cited by Hegel and Schelling. Cf. Schelling, 1907, 2.535:

“Die vollkommene Möglichkeit des Daseins der Dinge kann vor ihrem wirklichen Dasein nicht vorhergehen und ebensowenig nach demselben überbleiben. Das erste und vollkommenste Prinzip fasset alles Dasein in sich, *kann* alles sein, und *ist* alles. Tätige Kraft und Potenz, Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit sind also in ihm ein unzertrenntes und unzertrennliches Eins.”

My translation:

“The perfect potential for the being of things can neither precede the realization of their being nor remain after it. The foremost and perfect principle encapsulates the being of all—*can* be all and *is* all. Within it, active force and potency, potential and reality are an unseparated and inseparable *one*.”

In light of Bruno’s “perfect potential,” Kafka’s “perfect bliss-potential” bears a conceptual duality: both a perfect potential for perfect bliss and perfect bliss itself, i.e. the realization, fulfillment, or completion of that potential.

³³ Kafka, 2011a, 92–95:

“Der Messias wird kommen, bis der zügelloseste Individualismus des Glaubens möglich ist [. . .] Glauben heißt: das Unzerstörbare in sich befreien oder richtiger: sich befreien oder richtiger: unzerstörbar sein oder richtiger: sein.”

On the same day in his journal, Kafka also wrote (pp. 96–97):

“Lächerlich hast Du Dich aufgeschirrt für diese Welt.”

My translation:

“How ridiculous that you have girded yourself for this world.”

This contemplation can be read both as a mockery of the vanity of the striving messenger in “An Imperial Message” and as a melodic counterpoint to the transformation of the rider in “Wish, to Become Indian.”

³⁴ Kafka, 2011c, Card 46:

“Das Wort ‘sein’ bedeutet im Deutschen beides: Da-sein und Ihm-gehören.”

³⁵ Kafka, 2011c, Card 35:

“Es gibt kein Haben, nur ein Sein, nur ein nach letztem Atem, nach Ersticken verlangendes Sein.”

³⁶ Goethe, “Selige Sehnsucht” (Goethe, 1960, 3.22):

Und solange du das nicht hast,

Dieses: Stirb und werde!

Bist du nur ein trüber Gast

Auf der dunklen Erde.

³⁷ *Schon* in German can be used as an adverb or a particle. Here, “*schon*” implies both temporality, i.e. “*now*” (the simultaneity of all happenings) and emphasis, i.e. “*even*” (the zenith of the parable). My way to transplant this into English is through the combination “*now even*.”

³⁸ This passage is untitled in the Chinese original. Wilhelm’s German title “Selbstvergessen” echoes his German title of chapter 48 in Laozi, “Vergessen des Erkennens.” Indeed, Liezi’s “Forgetting the self” can be read as a facet of Laozi’s “Recognizing forgetting.”

³⁹ My translation of Wilhelm’s translation, in: *Das wahre Buch vom quellenden Urgrund* (Liä, 1912, 50):

“Der Unterschied von Ich und Nicht-Ich war zu Ende. Danach hörten auch die Unterschiede der fünf Sinne auf, alle wurden sie einander gleich. Da verdichteten sich die Gedanken, der Leib ward frei, Fleisch und Bein lösten sich auf, ich hatte keine Empfindung mehr davon, worauf der Leib sich stützte, wohin der Fuß trat: ich folgte dem Wind nach Osten und Westen wie ein Baumblatt oder trockene Spreu, und wirklich weiß ich nicht, ob der Wind mich trieb oder ich den Wind.”

⁴⁰ My translation aims to preserve Wilhelm's project of appropriating Daoist philosophy for a European audience. Kafka, however, was able to pierce through the Western canon and imagery and reach the authentic Daoist vision. His writings suggest that he read the passage rather as:

"After overcoming life he could be as lucid as the morning, and in this morning-lucidity he could see his *oneness*. If he saw his *oneness*, there would be no more past or present for him; beyond time he could enter the realm where there is no more death or birth."

⁴¹ Wilhelm titled the originally untitled section "Überlieferung der Lehre vom Sinn," i.e. "Passing on the Teaching of Dao"; cf. *Das wahre Buch vom südlichen Blütenland* (Dschuang, 1912, 88):

"Wenn ich ihn bei mir hätte zur Belehrung, nach drei Tagen sollte er so weit sein, die Welt überwunden zu haben. Nachdem er die Welt überwunden, wollte ich ihn in sieben Tagen so weit bringen, daß er außerhalb des Gegensatzes von Subjekt und Objekt stünde. Nach abermals neun Tagen wollte ich ihn so weit bringen, daß er das Leben überwunden hätte. Nach Überwindung des Lebens könnte er klar sein wie der Morgen, und in dieser Morgenklarheit könnte er den Einzigen sehen. Wenn er den Einzigen erblickte, so gäbe es für ihn keine Vergangenheit und Gegenwart mehr; jenseits der Zeit könnte er eingehten in das Gebiet, wo es keinen Tod und keine Geburt mehr gibt."

⁴² Kafka's journal entry on February 5, 1918, cf. Kafka, 2011b, 16–19:

"Es gibt für uns zweierlei Wahrheit [. . .] Die Wahrheit des Tätigen und die Wahrheit des Ruhenden [. . .] die erste Wahrheit [gehört] dem Augenblick, die zweite der Ewigkeit, deshalb verlöscht auch die erste Wahrheit im Licht der zweiten."

Compared to Zürau Card 90, the twofold truth resonates with the two potentials for one's own becoming: "the truth of acting" echoes "beginning, hence action;" "the truth of resting" echoes "fulfillment, hence non-action." Compared to chapter 48 of *Dao De Jing*, Kafka's journal entry can be read as recognizing "the truth of resting" by forgetting "the truth of acting." In this context, Kafka's twofold truth parallels Laozi's dual process of forgetting (waning or lessening one's action) and recognizing (attaining and enacting non-action).

⁴³ Kafka, 2011c, Card 54:

"Mit stärkstem Licht kann man die Welt auflösen."

⁴⁴ Kafka, 2011c, Card 21:

"So fest wie die Hand den Stein hält. Sie hält ihn aber fest, nur um ihn desto weiter zu werfen. Aber auch in jene Weite führt der Weg."

⁴⁵ Kafka's journal entry on January 27, 1922; cf. Kafka, 1990, 892:

"Merkwürdiger, geheimnisvoller, vielleicht gefährlicher, vielleicht erlösender Trost des Schreibens: das Hinausspringen aus der Totschlägerreihe Tat-Beobachtung, Tat-Beobachtung, indem eine höhere Art der Beobachtung geschaffen wird, eine höhere, keine schärfere, und je höher sie ist, je unerreichbarer von der 'Reihe' aus, desto unabhängiger wird sie, desto mehr eigenen Gesetzen der Bewegung folgend, desto unberechenbarer, freudiger, steigender ihr Weg."

In the light of chapter 48 of *Dao De Jing* and Zürau Card 90, "the chain of death-strikers—action-observation, action-observation" illustrates the action-powered mechanism of the sensory world, where one's vain efforts obey the action-generated law. By contrast, "a higher type of observation" suggests the dynamics of non-action in the spiritual world, where action-independent observations abide by their "own laws of motion." This is Kafka's Dao.

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Dr. Zhang's new book project, *Kafka's Dao: The Patience Game*, demonstrates how, through transreading, Kafka transplants the seed of Dao and nurtures it in a European mind, and how we should transread Kafka in the way he transreads ancient Chinese poet-philosophers. Distinct from the approaches of his contemporaries, Kafka's Dao is a patience game with words and thoughts maneuvered like marbles. Not only does his voice echo Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Liezi, but he also delivers their messages in an uncompromising way that informs and inspires.

How to cite this article: Zhang HH. *Verwirklichung einer vollkommenen Glücksmöglichkeit/A perfect bliss-potential realized*. *Orbis Litterarum*. 2021;76:101–121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12289>