THE WILLING SUBJECT AND THE NON-WILLING SUBJECT IN THE TAO TE CHING AND NIETZSCHE’S HYPERBOREAN

Taoist and Deconstructive Challenges to the Idea of Virtue

Art marks the Sabbath from the penal servitude of willing.

Schopenhauer

Skepticism regarding morality is what is decisive. The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism.

Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

Hence when the Tao was lost there was virtue.

*Tao Te Ching*, XXXVIII

What are we without some form of intention? Some glorified version of the vegetative soul or, in its modern version, the id, or, in a postmodern version, the desiring natal state without a center. Would the world then be a projection of our unrelenting will? Would the willing subject be fated to this monomaniac pursuit, reprieved perhaps by the Schopenhauerian creative act? A critique of some fundamental points in our understanding of consciousness, will, and understanding would elucidate the ground of these questions. The Nietzschean project to undermine the then-understood realm of morals and his solution in the hyperborean’s higher subject may be critiqued by the *Tao Te Ching*. The nihilism of an empty moralized universe (restated in Pascal’s infinity or the expanses of geologic time) is seen in Taoism as a natural progression when a phenomenological break with the presiding life force Tao was made. Without an understanding of the life force, a resultant fear and nihilism, and moralism, is made manifest, excising, however, projects in pure faith. The Nietzschean solution is the hyperborean elevated consciousness. If the so-called “postmodern condition” has produced Heidegger’s “homeless men” and deconstruction has undermined the nature of logos, the hyperborean subject,
like a logos that “glides over its own groundlessness,” could institute a true establishment of virtue in transcending the consumptive willing for “facts,” for materiality, for identity. There is a kind of “unwilling” in the hyperborean subject and a kind of “non-understanding” that might be elucidated by non-Western thought. Thus Ying-An advises: “Do not try to predefine understanding, and do not make a principle out of non-understanding.” In a Zen context, Morimoto Roshi places consciousness into a phenomenological grounding: “There’s no point in translating all of the old Chinese texts—not if you’re serious about understanding Zen. The sound of the rain needs no translation.” In an Eastern Wisdom context, G. I. Gurdjieff uses the same metaphor: “[Gurdjieff] only wished to return [humanity] to something as manifestly real as ‘the rain making the pavement wet.’” These metaphors of consciousness are reflective of the Taoist way of non-contentious willing and non-conceptual understanding in connection with the idea and practice of virtue.

In a booklet accompanying a recent art installation at The Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, Marcus Steinweg, a teacher at the Hochschule fur Bildende Künste Braunschweig and the installation artist’s favorite philosopher, offers a meditation called “Worldplay” upon Nietzsche’s elevated being, the hyperborean, in the context of deconstructionist thought. Steinweg connects the “higher good” of Antigone’s disregard of civil law with Nietzsche’s “hyperborean subject... the hyperbolic subject of love and truth. It loves, it asserts and it defends a truth which destabilizes its objective (sociopolitical, cultural, etc.) identity.” Antigone is in the realm of the gods, so to speak, irrespective of civil law. She becomes a metaphor as a holy outcast for a “higher mode of being.” Steinweg uses quasi-spiritual language and the existential rubric that existence precedes essence to ruminate over the hyperborean. He quotes from Heidegger’s *On the Essence of Ground* to this extent: “to ‘be’ a subject means to be a being in and as transcendence.” The hyperborean thus exists in a space of “higher ontology” that is more “being” than willing.

The world the hyperborean exists in is “Chaos... the lack of ground or the abyss. It is the dimension which forever precedes the ‘Logos,’ reason, language and communication.” This space is the “experience of nonidentity, of incommensurability, of pre-ontological chaos.” This space is juxtaposed to the world of facts, identity in its broadest sense, and the “higher human,” “the human of knowledge, of duty and humanity.” Such humanity prefers “facts” rather than the hyperborean’s “possible truths.” The hyperborean is groundless and doesn’t rely on what Steinweg calls the “idealist of facts.” Rather, the “hyperborean subject inhabits the universe of facts without assimilating itself... to the order of facts.” The hyperborean is in a “strange zone” alienated from any dialectic.