

Chapter I

ALL OR NOTHING?

Nature in Chinese Thought and the Apophatic Occident

Nature, in Western literature and art, is by most accounts a figure of open-handed generosity and nurturing. Iconographically, “she” is represented most palpably and intimately by the nursing breast. Nature, however, can also be epitomized by a cornucopia teeming with delectable comestibles. Enticingly placed on display, her bounty promises to satiate all comers.¹ This latter image represents nature’s more extroverted side turned toward universal outreach. She beckons to all and sundry, spilling her goods from the wide-open mouth of the “horn of plenty.” Mother Nature gives to all freely of her seemingly inexhaustible stores and knows no measure of restraint. At least until recently, her ever-renewable resources have appeared in their fabulous copiousness to be practically beyond all possibility of depletion.

Abundance and productiveness are in this way built in at the foundations of the myth of nature. To this extent, nature evidently presents itself, at first flush, as an eminently positive and saturated concept. What we will find, however, is that it is only as negation and emptiness, as the negative par excellence, that nature can truly serve as a universal source and unlimited resource. Recognizing the intrinsic negativity of nature, moreover, will prove to be the antidote necessary for disabusing us of delusions that we can heedlessly manage and manipulate our environment in accordance with our own self-willed desires. Such recognition makes us realize that we must first mind this vacuum and conform ourselves to nature’s silent dictates.

1. Both emblems figure together suggestively in Peter Paul Rubens’s painting of the Roman goddess *Abundantia* (1630). See figure 1.



FIGURE 1.1. Peter Paul Rubens, *Abundantia*, 1630. Oil on panel. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.

In medieval allegorical poems such as the *De planctu naturae* by Alain de Lille (Alanus de Insulis, 1117–1203), *Natura* appears as a prolific producer of life and letters alike. She pullulates with numberless progeny of material, fleshly things. But she also generates their scarcely containable significances, without stint or limit. Her natural creativity is typically understood through its likeness to the inventive capabilities of language. Things and meanings alike tumble out from the lap of Nature, whose generative powers are fecundated by the creative Word, the divine *Verbum* or *Logos*. This prolific productiveness is then further reflected, or imitated and multiplied, by poets through the fantasy-filled, prodigious words of literature.

Taking up the relay from Alain de Lille, Jean de Meun (1240–1305) continues to elaborate the allegorical representation of Nature and of Nature's priest, Genius, in *Le Roman de la Rose*. Unbound by the normal constraints of convention and culture, *Natura* and her male counterpart Genius, writing with his "pen," his phallic *stylus*, have their own unrestrained capacities of *poiesis*. They produce both words and every species of being according to its kind, as well as freaks and solecisms. Deviations from proper expression and orthography are placed in parallel with the miscarriages of nature by these medieval poets who are employing a practically inescapable analogy.²

Monstrosities (literally "showings," as in "demonstrations"), both material and linguistic, render conspicuous some of the intriguing excesses and ambiguities of natural generation. They do so especially when the human penchant for deviancy mixes its own mischief into the process of engendering—for example, by bastardizing pure, noble genealogical lines.³ The linguistic mode of operation of nature in this medieval imagining may seem, at first, to provide another positive way of representing natural creativity—namely, in terms of manifest, familiar phenomena of language. However, it also brings us near to recognition of the negativity at nature's source and origin, since language is inherently negative, engendered by difference, always *not* what things are themselves in their unmediated simplicity.

Tellingly, a negation projected backward from language can be detected at the root of the very notion of simplicity. The word "simple" is itself produced by negation: it breaks down etymologically into its Latin components *sine* or *sin* (without) and *plic* (fold). The simple is that which is without

2. Illuminating on this score is Alexandre Leupin, *Barbarolexis: Medieval Writing and Sexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

3. R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983) ingeniously elaborates on this vertiginous topic.

folds; it is the negation of *complexity*, which means being compounded of or with (*cum* = *com*) various folds (*plexi*). In these terms, simplicity can first be conceived only in and through the (en)foldings of language.

Despite such inherent negativities, nature commonly stands for the manifest, the positively present: it is a kataphatic concept, if ever there was one. We call nature what is immediately at hand, springing up spontaneously—*sponte sua*—given, or literally birthed (*natus*) of itself. It is thus prior to the transformative activities brought to bear by human agents and their conceptualities and technologies. Is there, then, any warrant for considering what is *not*, or what withdraws from being and speech, to be in any way natural? Are such elusive *non*phenomena or negative phenomena not defined precisely by their being *unnatural*, by their refusing life, and by their denial of being as it is naturally given to us in the world of ordinary experience? Exuberance and positivity, as opposed to all the ascetic, world-denying negations introduced by religion, have long been the keynote of nature in classic representations such as Lucretius's epicurean celebration of the love goddess Venus. So fecund in the production of life throughout the manifest physical universe, she serves as emblem of a rapturously natural way of living.⁴

Admittedly, representations of nature, even in the West, are not uniformly positive. There have been negative moments in Western literature expressing, for example, a sense of being punished and persecuted by nature. Giacomo Leopardi, in "La Ginestra," desperately cries out, from the depths of Romantic melancholia and despair, against "step-mother nature" ("la noverca natura"). And he is only echoing a topos that is forged already within the heart of Roman classicism by Cicero in his *De Republica*, book 3 in a passage best known from a citation by Saint Augustine in book 4 of his *Contra Pelagium*. Many have confessed themselves appalled by nature's indifferent destruction or cruelty. Wordsworth's famous "nature red in tooth and claw" betrays dismay at the ferocious but universal spectacle of natural predation among animals, and Hobbes, with his "state of nature," unflinchingly recognizes treacherous killing as all too natural for humans as well. Although in yet another key of moral consternation, Voltaire's poem on the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon ("Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne") is similarly based on observation of the perversity of the supposed laws of nature as an "empire of destruction" ("De la destruction la nature est l'empire").

Such expressions capture obvious, undeniable facts of nature, crucial facets of its appearance in the world of phenomenal manifestation. In decadent phases of culture, nature can even become an object of loathing

4. Lucretius, *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), book I, lines 1–43.

and horror. Charles Baudelaire's imagining of "the flowers of evil" (*Les fleurs du mal*, 1857–68) pushes repugnance vis-à-vis nature, at least when it is undissembled by art, to pathological extremes. This comes across overpoweringly, for example, in view of a rotting carcass in "Une Charogne." And in "Rêve Parisienne," Baudelaire banishes from his dream utopia the spectacle of "vegetable irregularity" ("végétal irrégularité") in favor of artificial geometrical constructions of marble and metal in a Paris purged of every vestige of nature. The ideal is pure art without nature rather than an equilibrium and symbiosis between the two.

However, beyond any of these richly suggestive and divergent figurations, whether positive or negative in emotional tonality and moral valence, there is another possible face of nature, or more exactly an *effacement*, in which nature is what invisibly and imperceptibly encompasses us all. And this is the relation in which a deeper and subtler sense of negativity emerges. In this case, nature is precisely what never appears as such nor ever can be exactly apprehended or defined. For perception and expression inevitably entail human mediation and cultural transmission by semiotic and hermeneutic means that distort and occult the natural.

To the end of placing this cultural mediation of whatever we can apprehend of the natural order under examination, so as to take up our distance from it, we are well advised to travel east. Certain classical cultures of Asia seem most apt to suggest an original idea of how nature might find its least inadequate image in what does *not* appear at all. They expose the deepest affinities between cultures in their approach to nature as consisting in what *cannot* be articulated.⁵ Specifically, I propose to take up an observation post located in view of ancient Chinese wisdom in both its classical (Confucian) formulation and the (Daoist) dialectical antithesis of that doctrine. This is one strategic position from which we can decri a conception of nature as inherently negative, as the apophatic par excellence.

According to the Chinese conceptions, beneath or within the phenomenal appearances that gaily dance before the windows of our senses as employed in ordinary perception, there is something else, something that does not as such appear, an invisible dimension. In traditional Chinese wisdom, however, this hidden reality is not typically thought to transcend nature into a purely metaphysical, indeed an *unnatural* realm. This invisible dimension is found, rather, in the inscrutability immanent in things

5. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, eds., *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) can serve as a landmark and guidepost along this itinerary.

in nature as a process of ongoing, inarrestable change. The phenomenal universe is taken to be the veil of a mystery that has no name or concept, although, taken as the immanent All, it is commonly identified with nature through a great variety of mythological forms of expression.

In dominant currents in Western philosophy, this numinous and fathomless nature has typically been suppressed for the sake of positively thinking the all, the universal, the whole. In the West, nature typically was and is taken to be a sub-realm of the whole of being, thus the object of only limited knowledge by lower faculties, particularly the physical senses of sight and hearing, smell and taste and touch. This hierarchical domination has involved suppression also of the apophatic wisdom that shadows Western metaphysics at every step along its way through history. Indeed the subordination of nature, its reduction to being merely a resource for human use and exploitation, turns out to be an indicator of a loss of sensibility for the apophatic. I intend to expose this history from an eccentric vantage point by following the lead of one of the great contemporary mediators of philosophical thinking between European and Chinese thought—François Jullien.

As I construe Jullien's project, the key to it is, precisely, apophatic awareness, and this is what places Chinese wisdom on a common ground with certain deep strata in Western thinking, marking out a fertile field for dialogue that can point indicatively to a dimension that is effectively universal. The question of the representations of nature in the West and in the East respectively serves perfectly to bring out the stakes of apophasis as a miraculous "open sesame" in this encounter between cultures. This is so because the characteristic efforts of both cultures clearly show that, taken radically, nature is beyond all possibility of representation.

To begin to pry open this perspective, we might turn first to Jullien's analysis of "silent transformation" as apprehended especially in traditional Chinese wisdom as a peculiarly ungraspable form of negation—the type of negation that I call "apophatic." Jullien explains, through reference to the process of aging, the invisible dimension of nature, which has just been invoked.⁶ Although invisible as such, aging is nevertheless taking place in every moment and in every part of our bodies and of our entire lives. Aging determines every aspect of our being, working at the surface of our skin, but also in our psychological depths. It is continuous and total and,

6. *Les transformations silencieuses* (Paris: Grasset, 2008), trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson as *The Silent Transformations* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

for these very reasons, paradoxically invisible. While specific phenomena tell of our age, the global fact itself is not as such perceptible and escapes our notice minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, month by month. Aging operates silently in us and in the end destroys our earthly existence altogether (provided that we are spared other more precipitous deaths). As such, however, aging escapes our consciousness. We are unaware of its full deployment and ramifications across every aspect of our being . . . even while it is relentlessly going on in us all the time. Only in moments of comparison, for instance, with earlier photos, does the transformation become conspicuous—and then poignantly, even pathetically, so. Jullien is willing to speak here of a “revelation,” albeit with a caveat to the effect that he does not mean thereby anything “mystical” in nature. I take his analysis of the phenomenon of aging, nevertheless, as exemplary of an applied form of apophatic vision. Whether one considers it to be “mystical” or not, I maintain that such vision is accessible equally to Western and to Eastern thought. Whether the apophatic must be differently inflected as transcendent or as immanent as it operates in one or the other of these diverse cultural spheres is a crucial issue that is pursued by this inquiry.

THE NATURE OF *DAO*, OR THE *DAO* OF NATURE

The idea of nature as an All that always eludes us, I contend, is thus a universal theme. Positioned between Eastern and Western paradigms, this theme raises the possibility of a relation to a universal philosophical truth. Such an idea of nature occurs in the sources of philosophical reflection in Chinese tradition with the *Dao-de-Jing* (道德经), which is traditionally attributed to Laozi (sixth to fifth century BC). Its very first composition is emblematic of the book's naturalist vision of an ineffable mystery immanent within all that lives and is:

道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。無名天地之始；有名萬物之母。故常無欲，以觀其妙；常有欲，以觀其徼。此兩者，同出而異名，同謂之玄。玄之又玄，衆妙之門。

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.

The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.

Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets;
But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe
its manifestations.

These two are the same
But diverge in name as they issue forth.
Being the same they are called mysteries,
Mystery upon mystery—
The gateway of the manifold secrets. (Lau, trans.)⁷

The named and the nameless, the secret and the manifest, desire and its absence, form a unity: deeply the same, they diverge *in name* as they emerge into manifest unity as “the same.” Opposites, even when they are distinguished in thought and discourse, do not definitively separate but remain beholden each to a deeper or more intrinsic nature, in which they are really one.

Accordingly, the way or *Dao*, like the moon, has at least two faces, one manifest and one hidden. Still, however, more deeply or inwardly, it remains one and the same. Nature is evoked here, but not under any graspable, definable concept such as the emergent (*ta physis*) or the perceptible or sensory (*to aistheton*), as two common Greek concepts of nature would have it. Such manifestations belong to nature (as does everything whatsoever), but they do not define it. The way remains a “mystery.” Neither does the way exclude what is unchanging and withdraws from manifestation. There is no assertion here of the existence of anything other than nature, but nature itself in this depth dimension is mysteriously other to all that we perceive and know. The nature of the *Dao* is to be without nature and beyond nature in any shape or form that we can grasp or name or measure.

7. I compare different translations of Laozi's *Tao Te Ching*, including those by D.C. Lau (New York: Penguin Books, 1963); Arthur Waley (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1997); Paul J. Lin, *A Translation of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and Wang Pi's Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977); and James Legge, *The Texts of Taoism*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891 / London: Humphry Milford, 1891). The Chinese text is taken from the Legge edition (<http://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>). In the case of the citations, except in the book titles, 'tao' is replaced by the *pinyin* transliteration 'dao' for the original Chinese character '道'.

In this “way” (*Dao*), negation of an indeterminate or indeterminable sort is built in at the fathomless source of nature. Prima facie, nature is a full and robust idea, the epitome of plenty. The *Dao* is clearly figured as Mother of all things, and yet it remains indescribable and formless in itself: it remains apart from any such figurable relation with the universe. This is the case again, and in just these terms, in the twenty-fifth composition of the *Dao-de-Jing*:

有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立不改，周行而不殆，可以為天下母。吾不知其名，字之曰道，強為之名曰大。

There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. How still it was and formless, standing alone, and undergoing no change, reaching everywhere and in no danger (of being exhausted)! It may be regarded as the Mother of all things.

I do not know its name, and I give it the designation of the Dao (the Way or Course). Making an effort (further) to give it a name I call it The Great. (James Legge, trans.)

Prior to heaven and earth and other binary poles producing change, there is here, just as in creation myths, something antecedent and without change, in some sense a Nothing from which everything comes. It may be figured, metaphorically, as the Mother of all. The maternal images of *Dao* as nurturing all things are elaborated further in poem 51: “Thus it is that the Dao produces (all things), nourishes them, brings them to their full growth, nurses them, completes them, matures them, maintains them, and overspreads them” (James Legge, trans.). And again, in poem 52 we read:

天下有始，以為天下母。既得其母，以知其子，

That which was the beginning of all things under heaven
We may speak of as the “mother” of all things.
He who apprehends the mother
Thereby knows the sons. (Waley, trans.)

The sixth chapter of the *Dao-de-Jing* also contributes to this figuring of the *Dao* as a mysterious female source, a sort of Mother Nature, immanent and inexhaustible.

谷神不死，是謂玄牝。玄牝之門，是謂天地根。綿綿若存，用之不勤。

The valley spirit never dies,
It is called the mystic female.
The door of the mystic female
Is the root of heaven and earth.
Being interminable and seeming to endure,
It can be used without toil. (Paul J. Lin, trans.)

Nature, as the ultimate source of all that exists, is at the same time equated here and in Daoist texts more generally with Nothing—certainly with nothing that can be named or known. The figures of Nothing are persistent and pervasive. Here they appear as an emptiness that is inexhaustible, despite the fact that the notion of a thinking, which is a thinking of Nothing, also has something that is most unnatural about it. The sense of Nothing here is all-pervading: it is conceptualized in Daoism as a way without content, a way which cannot be said (as we have just seen in the opening line of the *Dao-de-jing* 1), and as an emptiness—to which a whole range especially of Buddhist schools and texts bear witness. These presumably metaphysical notions of nothingness, if they are indeed metaphysical, are not thought of as exiting from and transcending nature but rather as realizing its inherent process and dynamic. Everything that is anything is considered to be part of one All that does not exceed the bounds of the world: it is all still in the end simply natural.

In the West, too, the All has all along been equated also with the Nothing. However, generally this has been so not so much, or at least not so explicitly, in the mainstream of its metaphysical tradition as in certain of its countercurrents. This idea of Nothing as a universal emanating source is developed penetratingly by the negative theology particularly of ancient Neoplatonic philosophers from Plotinus to Damascius. It is generally to be found, thereafter, as something of a radical fringe in relation to the tradition of orthodox Christian theology that takes it over and builds on it. Such a figure of the Nothing passes from Eriugena and Eckhart through Nicolaus Cusanus and Jakob Böhme to Hegel. It is especially common in esoteric traditions and can be traced specifically to the *Corpus Hermeticum*.⁸ Recent revivals and revisitings of Western apophatic tradition have suggested that

8. See Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

this supposed marginalization is mistaken and that the Nothing (nothing conceptualizable or knowable) should be recognized as hidden at the core of mainstream Christian theology from Augustine to at least Aquinas in the West, as well as in Orthodox theology from its Greek origins.⁹

Clearly, China, even in some of the most widely circulated and authoritative expressions of its philosophy, has conceived of nature as the All and of Nothing as the heart of it. There are, of course, significant tensions between Daoist mystical interpretations and Confucian socially pragmatic approaches. Yet they agree in recommending that we harmonize with nature by erasure, or at least moderation, of ourselves and our own self-willed activity. Non-action, *wú wéi* (无为), is the apophatic path that they indicate as an ethical application of this “natural” apprehension of and response to the universe. The action of non-action aims to enable us to move flexibly in alignment with the ebb and flow of nature. Indeed, it is because nature is itself a disappearing act that a negative form of behavior turns out, paradoxically, to be the best way of harmonizing with it.

The negativity of thought and action that adheres to nature does not produce or posit an abstract metaphysical Nothing. Instead, it releases the ungraspable concreteness of things by removal of conceptual limits and barriers, by letting things be all that they are or can be even beyond our powers of conception. Nature is most truly defined not by anything that it is but only by what it is not. This is the kind of negativity associated, for example, with something tasteless. Insipidness is the negation of any strong flavor or distinct character. Yet the relative nothingness of the insipid is inhabited potentially by every nature or quality that could be positively perceived as a determination in a given register of sensation. This is the negative in the sense of the neuter. Such neutrality can lead us beyond determinate sensation into a more mysterious kind of negativity at the heart of nature itself. For Jullien, this is an emphatically *immanent* form of negativity, as we will see in the next section. And yet he, too, cannot help but describe it also as “the transcendent Font of reality (‘Heaven’)” (“Fonds transcendant de la réalité [le ‘Ciel’]”).¹⁰

9. My own efforts in this revisionary direction of reconstructing the tradition of Western thought can be found in *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

10. Jullien, *Dialogue sur la morale* (Paris: Grasset, 1995). This language appears persistently, for example, at 54, 73, 143, 166.

According to reigning stereotypes, following nature and harmonizing with it is the way to fulfillment in the philosophy of the East, whereas the West is typically held to take the opposite tack of striving to master and contain nature or, alternatively, to escape from it. However, these generalizations can be tested and probed and put under pressure until they metamorphose into their opposites.¹¹ Whenever Western tradition is seen in the light of apophasis as its deepest thinking, true mastery is always found only in the surrender to the Nothing at the core of an all-encompassing Nature that cannot be adequately named in this or in any other way. Such has been the drift of the apophatic logic that counterpoints Western thought all along its course through history, exemplarily in the *De divisione naturae* (Περί φύσεως) by John Scott Eriugena (810–77). What is meant here, however, is not exactly *Nothing* in a strongly abstract, positively metaphysical sense. Let us begin to approach Jullien by following his investigation of nothing rather in the *neutral* sense simply of *blandness* as he derives this notion, working in the gap (“écart”) between Eastern and Western cultures, from Chinese sources.

IN PRAISE OF BLANDNESS: LITOTES OF THE NEUTER

In order to gain a first, global impression of the purport of Jullien’s philosophical vision and its overriding message, specifically in terms of the peculiar logic or *illogic* of negativity, it is instructive to turn to his little treatise on blandness, *Éloge de la fadeur*.¹² This work synoptically encompasses many of his seminal insights in an accessible and paradoxically *poignant* manner. Its outlook and overview can serve for a preliminary probing, in an

11. Modern Western sciences of nature, especially the postclassical physics of quantum mechanics and relativity theory, are seen to converge with Daoist mysticism in their discovery of an enigmatic nothingness at the heart of nature by Fritjov Capra in his cult-creating book *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1975). This book was followed up by *The Hidden Connection*, *The Turning Point*, *The Web of Life*, and others.

12. *Éloge de la fadeur: À partir de la pensée et de l’esthétique de la Chine* (Arles: Éditions Philippe Picquier, 1991). The work is available in an English translation by Paula M. Varsano as *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics* (New York: Zone Books, 2004). However, citations in this subsection and throughout the book are translated directly from the French.

apophatic key, of the connections between Nature, Nothing, Immanence, Universality, and Originality (the topics to be explored in turn in the successive chapters of this book).

The bland (“le fade”), *dàn* 淡, seems, at first, to be merely negative. It lacks any distinguishing quality. Yet this apparently neutral condition can turn out to be the most potent and productive condition of all, for it is potentially all qualities: and it can be them in an indeterminate and infinite way. Spiced with a little imagination, there is nothing that the bland cannot become, for there is nothing that it excludes. With no distinctive property of its own, it is open in all directions and can be the basis for suggesting every other quality into which the neutral receptivity to any and every quality whatever might metamorphose. Blandness has no intrinsic limits. The bland transgresses the law of the excluded middle: it becomes rather an all-*inclusive* middle confounding logical oppositions and antitheses.

As Jullien presents it, in relaying ancient and perennial Chinese wisdom, in which the tastelessness of water is exemplary, the bland absorbs every other quality or savor that could possibly contrast with it. In its own amorphousness, it is open to all forms and consequently has infinite potential for expansion. The bland is *in* all savors and *is* them virtually: it is, at least potentially, their truth. It expands dynamically on a horizontal plain without requiring any vertical, metaphysical breakthrough to some other, higher order of reality. It is a dynamic infinite that is constantly in act and knows no stable, achieved state of completeness. Its completeness and perfection remain part of an infinite, ongoing process from which no abstraction need or can be made.

One suggestive vocabulary for this neutral state of blandness is that of the neuter. Blandness, in the sense that Jullien derives from many centuries of Chinese literature and landscape painting, as well as of critical commentary and theoretical reflection on art and music, compares closely with the idea of the neuter as expounded by Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes.¹³ These authors, among others, have pursued kindred insights in the margins of Western philosophy and aesthetic reflection. My claim is

13. Roland Barthes, *Le neutre: Cours au Collège de France* (1977–78) (Paris: Seuil, 2002), trans. Rosalind E. Krauss as *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France* (1977–1978) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Maurice Blanchot, *Le pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973). On this pervasive motif in Blanchot, which is diffused throughout his mature works, see Christophe Bident, “The Movements of the Neuter,” in *After Blanchot: Literature, Criticism, Philosophy*, eds. Leslie Hill, Brian Nelson, and Dimitris Vardoulakis (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 13–34.

that the natural and yet negative forms of thought that Jullien finds in the East have been gestated also in the West, particularly in its apophatic currents. These currents develop especially from the critique of idolatry, in which worship of nature, in the form of concrete objects taken as gods, is negated.¹⁴ Bringing out this affinity can give us a perspective on Jullien's treatment and expose some of his own biases. Such a procedure is meant to further the self-critical process by means of which apophatic thinking remains continually in evolution through thinking always also against itself.

Another of Jullien's works, *La Grande image n'a pas de forme* (*The Great Image Has No Form*) is a veritable manifesto of apophatic thought in relation to the experience of painting and particularly of the invisible at the extreme limit of the visible—at its frayed ends, where visibility fades into indistinctness. Rather than separating from the visible altogether so as to constitute itself as an intelligible order, visibility in this manner turns into invisibility. This type of insight is concentrated particularly into chapter 4 on the “vague” and “indistinct.”¹⁵ The techniques of Chinese landscape painting are designed not to paint reality as a positive object but to de-paint, to disfigure, and to de-signify. More than discreet objects, such painting presents the circumambient atmosphere from which all distinct visible aspects emerge and into which they are once again reabsorbed. The special vocation of this painting is to show or to intimate the great process of reality underway in everything not as a state of being but as the continual appearing and disappearing of all into all.

Venetian painting from Giorgione to Titian and Tintoretto is similarly concerned with the enveloping atmosphere of all, as Bernard Berenson so memorably showed in his *Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* (1894). But Jullien minimizes the development of these insights in the West, briefly alluding only to Poussin and Chateaubriand as fugitive and irresolute exceptions and only in order to maintain that a clear contrast nevertheless exists. He denies that his method does anything more than enhance the readability and thus the fecundity of each tradition in its own intrinsic coherence. But he nevertheless insists on the exclusion of theology and even on its impossi-

14. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. (from Hebrew) Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

15. *La Grande image n'a pas de forme: À partir des Arts de peindre de la Chine ancienne* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 59 (cf. 35, 43). Available in English translation by Jane Marie Todd as *The Great Image Has No Form, On the Nonobject through Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Jullien extends key aspects of this argument in *Vivre de paysage ou l'impensé de la raison* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014).

bility in Chinese thought (*Grande image*, 58, 27, etc.) in order to ground the two traditions' supposedly completely different approaches. The one works through transcendence, hence theology, and the other completely without it in order to express what in the end is a common reality or shared experience ("une commune expérience ou du moins qu'on peut partager," 72).

While there is certainly a warrant for Jullien's saying that the Chinese aesthetic of the invisible does not impose another plain of reality separate from the visible, he is perhaps not fully justified in concluding therefore that in Chinese thought all transpires on a single, continuous plane of immanence. Such a *representation*, if taken to exclude transcendence or anything not on the same plane of immanence, is as erroneous as is the representation of an other world or a higher (intelligible) order, for both types of representation are in reality but relations to something unrepresentable. However, both are also potentially—and poetically—fertile as forms of inevitable *misrepresentation*. What is activated or called up in either case is, in effect, the unrepresentable. To the extent that we can approach it only through inadequate representations, the field of representation that is opened is one of infinite potential planes (one is reminded of Deleuze and Guattari's *mille plateaux*) like parallel worlds. These worlds, I submit, should be recognized as including other worlds, even other worlds such as Dante has imagined in his *Divine Comedy*, without limit. Such openness to other even so-called "fictional" worlds is compatible with and even required by an ontology of the non-existence of *the* world such as Markus Gabriel develops in *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt*.¹⁶

Jullien should not be allowed to substitute another representation—"immanence"—as if that were the one truly adequate representation and fundamentally unlike the representations propounding transcendence, which he shows to be inadequate. The question is not one of transcendence or of immanence but of the limitations of representation per se and of its "beyond" (or its "before," "upstream" from the source). Daoist theorists of painting from medieval Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) times down to early modern theorists, notably Shitao (1644–1707) in the Qing dynasty, agree that painting concerns something absolute at the origin of all. They contemplate this origin without the figures of God or the Demiurge. Indeed, they envision it as undifferentiated and formless, and therefore as not representable or articulable at all, except in its evasion of expression and

16. Markus Gabriel, *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2013), trans. Gregory S. Moss as *Why the World Does Not Exist* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015).

comprehension. Hence the tops of mountains are lost in fog that shades into sky, and the tips of trees blend into the indefiniteness of the background.¹⁷ This manner shows Laozi's unnameable, undifferentiated bottom (*fond*) of the invisible, as Jullien writes, citing *Laozi* profusely, in *La grande image* (see especially 44–47).

The first stroke (“trait”) of a painting in its uniqueness and before all differentiation contains all existents in itself, the whole of creation in its emergence and in the full amplitude of its potency (53). Jullien expressly recognizes that Chinese theorists, particularly Shitao, envisage painting's “vocation to the absolute” and to expressing “the unsayable” (54). Such a metaphysical quest becomes explicit at many junctures in the history of European art. Modern painting in the West, with Picasso and Braque, finally exceeds the constraints of linear perspective—which had been taken since the Renaissance as canonical for representing the real—and shows things simultaneously from multiple perspectives. This is to transcend the bounds of any one determinate form in the direction of the great image that has no form, to evoke once again as leitmotif this paradoxically self-negating figure forged by the *Laozi*. In the fourth chapter of his homonymous book (*La grande image n'a pas de forme*), Jullien describes a logic of non-exclusion of the great form that remains open to all “compossibles.” It is a unity that is neither synthetic nor symbolic, as would be the case in Western onto-theological conceptions, but rather “Daoesque, in the sense that one [determination] does not exclude the other, one [applies] at the same time as the other” (95). We might just as well say that this is an apophatic logic, one availing itself of non-exclusive terms that do not appropriate and circumscribe such conceptions within one culture to the exclusion of others. According to such a logic, every conception is rather a de-conception. Not even conceptions of transcendence can by rights be excluded from the *Dao*—on the condition that they be taken as conceptions (and therefore as a species of representation), even if always as conceptions of what transcends conception itself. As such, they are only determinate (com)possibilities among others.

The virtue of Jullien's representation of the plane of immanence is that this plane is presumably infinite and open to all, all that cannot be seen *yet* in the temporal succession of images on a plane in which each presence is always already yielding to its own absence. Jullien's image can be very persuasive inasmuch as it seems to allow for heterogeneity and for the invisible in the form of always further images or presences (presences-absences)

17. Paintings by Ni Zan (1301–74) offer suggestive illustrations. See figures 2 and 3.

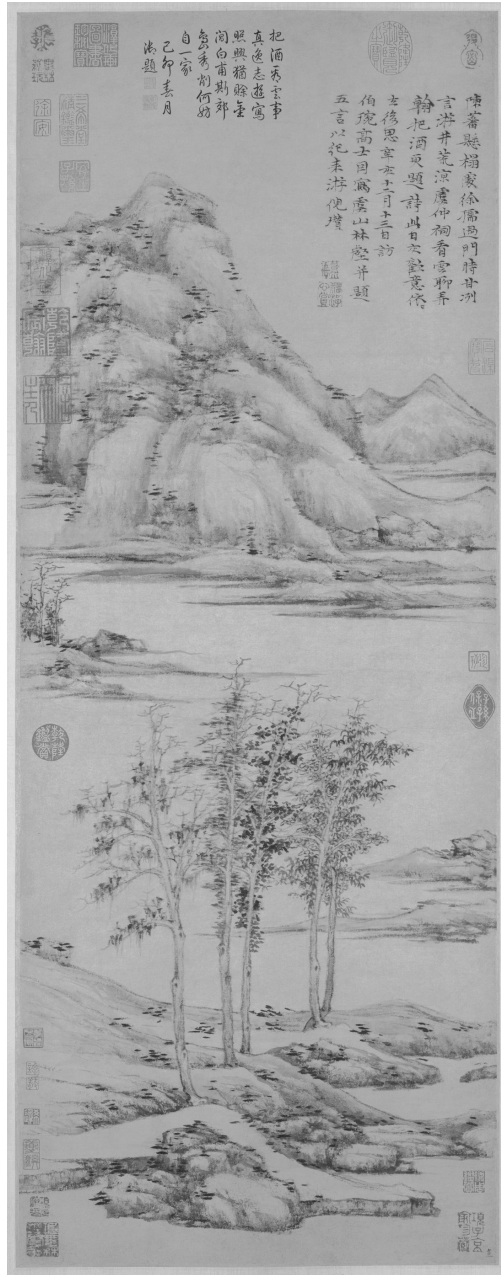


FIGURE 1.2. Ni Zan, *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yü*, China, Yuan Dynasty, 1372. Hanging scroll; ink on paper. Image © Metropolitan Museum of Art.



FIGURE 1.3. Ni Zan, *Twin Trees by the South Bank*, China, Yuan Dynasty, 1353. Hanging scroll; ink on paper. Image © Princeton University Art Museum.

that are not yet visible and that will be different, even very different, from the present ones. Such a plane of immanence is open to the invisible and infinite. Yet there is also in Chinese wisdom a sense of the radical difference of what cannot be grasped or represented. The sacred or holy is such a heterogeneous element, and it cannot be located and confined to the plane of immanence. The world does not consist only in an unending series of images all on the same plane. Things are governed from a higher level, even though this principle, the *Dao*, like God, cannot be represented as a member of the series. Chinese wisdom does work without the representation of God, but it nevertheless knows the dimension of the unrepresentable. Jullien, in following Chinese wisdom (to the extent that he adheres to it), is explicating apophatic logic in its approach to the unrepresentable.

At the end of *Éloge de la fadeur*, Jullien characterizes “blandness” in Chinese thought and culture as a sort of immanent transcendence active at the root and center of the whole process of reality: it does not open upon “another world,” and it dispenses with “faith”:

Ni simple litote ni fadeur affectée (ou conduite à se compliquer) l’insipidité chinoise, celle que symbolise la limpidité de l’eau “à la base de toutes les saveurs,” est une conversion dont l’*au-delà* est en elle-même: conduisant la conscience à la *racine* du réel, au *centre* dont découle le procès des choses, elle est la voie de l’approfondissement (vers le simple, le naturel, l’essentiel), du détachement (loin du particulier, de l’individuel, du contingent). Sa transcendance ne débouche pas sur un autre monde, elle est vécue sur le mode même de l’immanence (pris dans cette perspective, les deux termes cessent enfin de s’opposer). La fadeur est cette expérience de la “transcendance” réconciliée avec la nature—dispensée de la foi. (127)

Neither simple litotes nor affected blandness (induced to complicate itself), Chinese insipidity, that which the limpidity of water “at the base of all savors” symbolizes, is a conversion of which the *beyond* is itself: conducting consciousness to the *root* of the real, to the *center* from which flows the process of things, it is the way of deepening (towards the simple, natural, essential), of detachment (far from the particular, the individual, the contingent). Its transcendence does not enter upon another world but is lived in the mode even of immanence (taken in this perspective, the two terms cease finally to oppose one another).

Blandness is this experience of “transcendence” reconciled with nature—dispensed from faith.

Part of my purpose in what follows is to probe the possible “partis pris,” or biases, and the discernible “atavisms” lurking within these otherwise lucid judgments.¹⁸ It is important to bring reflection to bear on what might represent imperceptible automatisms hailing from what remains unthought in the shadows of this brilliantly illuminating thinking. In particular, the concluding statement here is arguably skewed by Jullien’s own anticlerical prejudices, along with those of French lay culture generally, against any type of religious faith or otherworldliness, especially those characteristic of Christianity.

Jullien embraces a form of immanent transcendence within the real rather than of transcendence to a reality beyond. He seems to find the solution to the impasses of Western metaphysical thinking in what purportedly, at least in an initial moment of representation, is the wholly other thinking of an ancient Chinese Orient. He has been criticized by certain fellow sinologists for this alleged use of Chinese cultural capital converted into his own currency of Western philosophy and inflated by the exoticism of the other.¹⁹ To demonstrate the purportedly alien nature of Chinese thought, Jullien typically starts from examples of Western thinkers, like Hegel, who could not really appreciate a value in Chinese culture such as blandness, which is distinguished only by what it is *not*. For Hegel, Confucius’s “insipid” prescriptions lacked all speculative content and did not say anything that attained to the genuinely philosophical (12).²⁰ Even Roland Barthes, after his Chinese voyage in 1975, lacked confidence that “blandness” (*dàn* 淡) could really be the right word for the most revered quality

18. The terms within scare quotes are often repeated in Jullien’s own *oeuvre* and were among the signposts adopted for the 2013 Cerisy Colloquium “Des possible de la pensée: Autour des travaux de François Jullien” staking out the contemporary import of his work. The colloquium’s acts have since appeared as *Des possible de la pensée: Autour des travaux François Jullien*, eds. Françoise Gaillard and Philippe Ratte (Paris: Editions Hermann, 2015).

19. See Jean-François Billeter, *Contre François Jullien* (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2006). This is discussed below in the subsection “Universality in the (Apophatic) Gap between China and the West” of chapter 4.

20. Hegel’s critique of Laozi is analyzed carefully and answered judiciously by Kwok Kui Wong, “Hegel’s Criticism of Laozi and its Implications,” *Philosophy East & West* 61/1 (2011): 56–79, in terms of Laozi’s own form of dialectic and concreteness, which are missed by Hegel.