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Understanding each other without crossing the threshold: Martin Heidegger and the *Daodejing*

Heidegger's interest in the *Daodejing* (道德经), one of the most relevant classics of Daoism, and his attempt to translate it during the summer of 1946, represent a unique event in the tradition of Western philosophy. The encounter between these two remarkable ways of thinking – distant both in time and space – may be one of the steps on the way to disclose the “another beginning” of philosophy sought by Heidegger, in contrast to the metaphysical choice. Therefore, by examining Heidegger's translation of chapter 11 of the *Daodejing*, which he provided at the end of his essay *Die Einzigkeit des Dichters*, the aim of this essay is to demonstrate how the words used by Heidegger to translate the key concepts of chapter 11, although they are proper to his philosophy and are often understood with metaphysical meanings, share decisive similarities with the original meaning of the core concepts of the *Daodejing*.

Heidegger's citation of chapter 11 is extremely valuable, as it demonstrates that the German philosopher was familiar with the *Daodejing* and that he was interested in the ideas of the classic Daoist book as well. His choice to translate the ancient Chinese key concepts with the fundamental terms of his own philosophy makes chapter 11 a fertile ground for experimentation with concepts from different traditions of thought. The unique linguistic style of the *Daodejing*, obscure and allusive rather than affirmative and defining, is in many respects similar to the evocative language of poetry. Therefore, given the importance of the relationship between thinking and poetry in Heidegger's late philosophy, his involvement with the *Daodejing* appears much more valuable and makes this research relevant not only for Heideggerian, Daoist and transcultural studies, but also for the field of aesthetic studies.

After a brief introduction on Heidegger's relationship with the *Daodejing*, a comparison between his translation of chapter 11 and the original Chinese version will follow. The analysis will focus on the key concepts of that chapter, in order to find how Heidegger's translation interacts with the original meaning. I will consider the concept of “void”, *wu* 無, translated as *Leere*, and the concept of “use”, *yong*

用, translated as *Sein*. Then, the analysis will focus on how both Heidegger's philosophy and the *Daodejing* share an affinity with respect to the topics of language and poetic saying.

Heidegger's approach to the *Daodejing* and his translation of chapter 11

We know that Heidegger engaged in a preliminary confrontation with the Daoist classic text thanks to the testimony of Paul Shih-Yi Hsiao, a Taiwanese scholar who helped him with the translation of eight chapters of the *Daodejing* (Hsiao 1977, p. 126). Hsiao attended the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and, during his studies in Milan, he devoted himself to the translation of the entire work of *Daodejing* into Italian. In 1942, when Hsiao had the opportunity to attend one of Heidegger's seminars, he handed him his translation of the *Daodejing*. In the summer of the year 1946, they started a collaboration to translate the first eight chapters of the *Daodejing* into German, a commitment which unfortunately went no further. Although the result of their collaboration was not published, some citations and references to the *Daodejing* are present in several passages of Heidegger's writings. The essay *Die Einzigkeit des Dichters* ("The uniqueness of the poet") (Heidegger 2000, pp. 35-44) is particularly relevant in this regard, since at the end of the essay Heidegger cites chapter 11 of the *Daodejing* in its entirety. The essay aims to answer the question of how to determine the uniqueness of the poet. At first, two approaches are considered: the historical approach, which aims to discover the uniqueness of the poet by comparing the poets and their works within the history of literature, and the unhistorical approach, which focuses on finding the uniqueness of the poet by examining the conformity to the nature of poetry. Heidegger eventually rejects these two approaches, as they are both separated from the "originary event", *die Ereignis*. In Heidegger's view, poetry can only originate from *Geschichte*, the coming time, intertwined with the present and the past, and the uniqueness of the poet is determined by the poet's capacity to make his poetry spring from the coming time. Hölderlin represents the highest example of that: his poetry is a *nachsagenden Vorsagen*, it speaks of what has passed and of what has to come, responding to the call of Being. Once established where the uniqueness of the poet resides, however, a problem remains: how can the contemporary man learn the attentiveness towards the uniqueness of the poet and become aware of it, after so many centuries of inattention? This attentiveness can be learnt only through the unnoticeable simpleness (*unscheinbare Einfache*) of simple things, which allows man to become aware of Being (*Sein*) as opposed

to beings (*Seiende*)¹ (Heidegger 2000, p. 43). Then, Heidegger quotes chapter 11 of the *Daodejing*:

*Dreißig Speichen treffen die Nabe,
Aber das Leere zwischen ihnen gewährt das Sein des Rades.*

*Aus dem Ton ent-stehen die Gefäße,
Aber das Leere in ihnen gewährt das Sein des Gefäßes.*

*Mauern und Fenster und Türen stellen das Haus dar,
Aber das Leere zwischen ihnen gewährt das Sein des Hauses.*

*Das Seiende ergibt die Brauchbarkeit.
Das Nicht-Seiende gewährt das Sein.* (Heidegger 2000, p. 43)

Of the four translations available to him, Heidegger's² translation is the closest to Ular's. (Ma 2006, p. 160):

DER ELFTE SPRUCH

*Dreißig Speichen treffen die Nabe,
aber das Leere zwischen ihnen erwirkt das Wesen des Rades;
Aus Ton entstehen Töpfe,
aber das Leere in ihnen wirkt das Wesen des Topfes;*

*Mauern mit Fenstern und Türen bilden das Haus,
aber das Leere in ihnen erwirkt das Wesen des Hauses.*

*Grundsätzlich:
Das Stoffliche birgt Nutzbarkeit;
Das Unstoffliche wirkt Wesenheit.* (Ular 1903, p. 11)

There are several minor changes in Heidegger's translation, such as the use of the verb *gewährt* instead of *erwirkt* (Ular's vv. 2 and 6) or *wirkt* (Ular's v. 4), the use of *ent-stehen* instead of *entstehen* (v. 3), *Gefäße* instead of *Topfes* (vv. 3 and 4), the verb *darstellen* in place of *bilden* (v. 5), *zwischen*

¹ Cfr. Ma, Lin, "Deciphering Heidegger's Connection with the *Daodejing*", *Asian Philosophy: An International Journal of the Philosophical Traditions of the East*, 16:3 (2006), 149-171, 159.

² At the time Heidegger was involved in the translation of the *Daodejing* four translations of the Daoist classic were already available in German: Ular, Alexander, *Die Bahn und der rechte Weg*, Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1903, Ulenbrook, Jan, *Lau Dse, Dau Dö Djing. Das Buch vom Rechten Wege und von der Rechten Gesinnung*, Bremen: Carl Schunemann Verlag, 1962, Von Strauss, Victor, *Lao-Tse's Tao Te King*, Leipzig: Verlag der "Asia Major", 1924. Wilhelm, Richard, *Laotse Tao Te King: Das Buch des Alten vom Sinn und Leben*. Jena: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1921.

instead of *in* (v. 6) and *ergibt and Brauchbarkeit* in the place of *birgt and Nutzbarkeit* (v. 8). However, the most relevant changes refer to the key concepts of this chapter: Heidegger replaces *Wesen* and *Wesenheit* used by Ular (vv. 2, 4, 6 and 9) with *Sein* and *Stoffliche and Unstoffliche* (vv. 8 and 9) with *Seiende* and *Nicht-Seiende*. Finally, he maintains *Leere* as in Ular's translation. It can be easily noticed that Heidegger uses fundamental ideas of his own philosophy in his translation and thus one may suspect that he deliberately interpreted the meaning of chapter 11 under the influence of his own thinking, betraying its original meaning. Therefore, before proceeding further in the analysis of Heidegger's translation, it is necessary to look directly at the original version in classical Chinese first, in order to better grasp the meaning of these verses.

三十輻，共一轂， 當其無，有車之用。	<i>san shi fu, gong yi gu dang qi wu, you che zhi yong</i>	<i>Thirty spokes, together in a nave, Right on the empty space the use of the wheel depends.</i>
埴埴以為器， 當其無，有器之用。	<i>shan zhi yi wei qi dang qi wu, you qi zhi yong</i>	<i>Clay is fashioned into vessels, Right on the empty hollowness the use of the vessels depends.</i>
鑿戶牖以為室， 當其無，有室之用。	<i>zhao hu you yi wei shi dang qi wu, you shi zhi yong</i>	<i>Doors and windows carved to form a room, Right on the empty interior the use of the room depends.</i>
故有之以為利， 無之以為用。	<i>gu you zhi yi wei li wu zhi yi wei yong</i>	<i>Thus, what is present serves for profit, (While) on what is empty the use depends³.</i>

The translation presented here is far from achieving the original effect of the verses written in classical Chinese, since English, which uses an alphabetical writing system, has a completely different structure from classical Chinese: the former makes use of articles, verbs conjugations, subordinate clauses, while the latter makes use of coordinated clauses and rejects any form of verbal conjugation or noun declension. Due to its peculiar linguistic structure, each ideogram can be considered as a stand-alone element, which does not require further grammatical specifications⁴. However, this translation aims to adhere as closely as possible to the original meaning of

³ Here and in the following citations from the *Daodejing* I propose my personal translation, taking J. Legge's (1962) and A. Andreini's (2018) translations as references.

⁴ Cfr. Jullien, François, *Parlare senza parole. Logos e Tao*, trans. Bernardo Piccioli Fioroni e Alessandra De Michele, Bari: Laterza, 2008, pp. 116-128.

the classical Chinese verses and for this reason it differs significantly from Heidegger's and Ular's translations, especially with regard to the fundamental concepts of chapter 11. These concepts are: *wu*, 無, "there is not", "absence", *you*, 有, "there is", "presence", and *yong*, 用, "activity", "use". It is important to emphasize that these concepts do not bear any metaphysical value at all. *Wu* and *you* indicate a state of absence or presence ascribable to something, rather than the strongly opposed metaphysical hypostases of Being and Not Being⁵. *Yong*, "use", is related to the *wu/you* alternation: it is the condition that displays itself in *wu*, the emptiness delimited by the physical element of *you*. Through these three fundamental concepts, chapter 11 introduces one of the most relevant ideas of the *Daodejing*: the idea of "productive void". Far from being considered in an absolute, nihilistic way, the void is seen as an inexhaustible and fruitful dimension. It is in the void and not in some substantial elements that the usefulness, and therefore the purpose, of a thing displays itself. The empty space between the spokes of a wheel is what allows the wheel to function, the jug's emptiness is what allows it to be filled and emptied several times, the windows and doors of a room allow light to enter and people to live inside. The purpose of a thing, its fundamental aspect, does not reside in its substantial elements, it is instead linked to the void.

Leere as Wu: the concept of void

Looking back at Heidegger's translation we can now compare his rendering of the key concepts of chapter 11 with their original meaning, starting with the concept of *wu*. As pointed out earlier, Heidegger translated *wu* at verses 2, 4 and 6 as the word *Leere*, "void". Although *wu* does indicate "emptiness", it does so in a way that diverges from the meaning that the word *Leere* conveys. *Wu* means "what there is not, absence of physical elements": the ideogram "無" portrays the meaning of "emptiness" in a dynamic way, representing a pile of burning wood (Wieger 1965, p. 36). "What was there", the woodpile, is now absent because it has been burned by fire. In contrast, the word *Leere* expresses the meaning of "void" in an absolute sense. Meanings related to *wu*, such as the "dynamically-generated" void that appears through the contrast with *you*, and the "generative emptiness" on which the usefulness (*yong*) depends, are not present among the meanings of *Leere*. Instead, *Leere* refers to an absolute "void", which is seen in stark contrast to the realm

⁵ Hsiao, in his Italian translation of the *Daodejing*, translates *you* and *wu* in chapter 11 as "Essere" and "Non Essere", literally "Being" and "Non Being". Von Strauss does the same, translating in chapter 11 *you* 有 and *wu* 無 as "Seyn" and "Nichtseyn".

of things that exist and it does not share any connection with the dimension of existence: it is, therefore, a “void” understood in a metaphysical sense. Then, following Ular’s choice to translate *wu* as *Leere*, it seems that Heidegger does not grasp the authentic meaning of *wu*, relying instead on a word with metaphysical connotations.

This is not the only occurrence in which Heidegger uses *Leere* in referring to the Eastern concept of void. In *A Dialogue on Language* (Heidegger 1971, p. 1-56), a dialogue between an Inquirer (Heidegger himself) and a Japanese, Heidegger uses the word *Leere* to refer to the Japanese ideogram *kū* 空, meaning “void” in the sense of “cleared, unoccupied”. The same ideogram exists in Chinese, it is pronounced *kong* 空, and it carries the same meaning as the Japanese one. In the dialogue, the Japanese illustrates the distinction between *Iro*, “color”, and *Kū*, “emptiness”, “the open”. However, he states, this distinction cannot be understood by following the Western metaphysical logic:

J: With this reference to the distinction that pervades metaphysics [between sensuous and suprasensuous a.n.], you now touch the source of that danger of which we spoke. Our thinking, if I am allowed to call it that, does know something similar to the metaphysical distinction; but even so, the distinction itself and what it distinguishes cannot be comprehended with Western metaphysical concepts. We say Iro, that is, color, and say Ku, that is, emptiness, the open, the sky. [Wir sagen Iro, d. h. Farbe, und sagen Ku, d. h. das Leere, das Offene, der Himmel (Heidegger 1985, p. 97)]. We say: without Iro, no Ku (Heidegger 1971, p. 14).

The meaning of “void” expressed by the word *Kū* is different from the meaning expressed by the word *Leere*, which is related to the metaphysical sense of “void”. However, in the text *Kū* is translated precisely as *Leere*. The danger of interpreting the *Iro/ Kū* distinction in a metaphysical sense, the same as the *aistheton/noeton* distinction, is clearly perceived by both the Inquirer and the Japanese. The influence of Western metaphysical concepts may obscure the authentic nature not only of East-Asian art, as it is pointed out here, but also of East-Asian thought.

I: This seems to correspond exactly to what Western, that is to say, metaphysical doctrine says about art when it represents art aesthetically. The aistheton, what can be perceived by the senses, lets the noeton, the nonsensuous, shine through.

J: Now you will understand how great the temptation was for Kuki to define Iki with the help of European aesthetics, that is, as you pointed out, define it metaphysically.

I: Even greater was and still is my fear that in this way the real nature of Eastasian art is obscured and shunted into a realm that is inappropriate to it. (Heidegger 1971, p. 14)

After a few pages, the discussion focuses on how Europeans conceive of concept of void:

I: That emptiness then is the same as nothingness [Die Leere ist dann dasselbe wie das Nichts (Heidegger 1985, p. 103)], that essential being which we attempt to add in our thinking, as the other, to all that is present and absent.

J: Surely. [...] We marvel to this day how the Europeans could lapse into interpreting as nihilistic the nothingness of which you speak in that lecture ["What is Metaphysics?" a. n.]. To us, emptiness is the loftiest name for what you mean to say with the word "Being" [Für uns ist die Leere der höchste Name für das, was Sie mit dem Wort "Sein" sagen möchten (Heidegger 1983, p. 103)]. (Heidegger 1971, p. 19)

Here, Heidegger, as the Inquirer, compares the "emptiness" (*die Leere*) with "nothingness" (*das Nichts*), the dimension which we (Europeans) attempt to think of as "the other" to all that is present and absent. An absolute "void" which does not allow the Being any chance of being. In the Japanese's view, it is surprising that the Europeans interpret the "nothingness" in a nihilistic way. Instead, emptiness is the highest name to express what Heidegger means by *Sein*. Thus, Heidegger seems to be aware of the metaphysical implications hidden in the word *Leere*. Nevertheless, it is still the word *Leere* that is used to express the Japanese meaning of "emptiness", the closest name to the concept of "Being" as Heidegger interprets it. The word *Leere*, therefore, is here resemantized. By translating *Kū* as *Leere*, the connotation that the German word has in the Western metaphysical tradition does not obscure the Japanese meaning of *Kū*, for both the Inquirer and the Japanese are aware of these metaphysical implications. They do not blindly compare *Leere* with *Kū*, letting the meaning of the former overlay the meaning of the latter. Instead, they focus their discourse on this very issue, bringing to light its problematic nature.

Thus, Heidegger is well aware of the metaphysical implications of the word *Leere*, and in *A Dialogue on Language* he takes care to clarify them with respect to the Japanese concept of *Kū*. Therefore, with regard to chapter 11 of the *Daodejing*, the fact that Heidegger translates *wu* as *Leere* does not preclude him from being aware of the different meaning of "void" that *wu* expresses, just as he was aware of the peculiar meaning of *Kū*. A clue that Heidegger was indeed aware of the peculiar meaning of *wu* may be found in the lecture *The Thing*, held on the 6th of June, 1950, at the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts:

The jug's thingness resides in its being qua vessel. We become aware of the vessel's holding nature when we fill the jug. The jug's bottom and sides obviously take on the task of holding. But not so fast! When we fill the jug

with wine, do we pour the wine into the sides and bottom? At most, we pour the wine between the sides and over the bottom. Sides and bottom are, to be sure, what is impermeable in the vessel. But what is impermeable is not yet what does the holding. When we fill the jug, the pouring that fills it flows into the empty jug. The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel's holding... [...] Sides and bottom, of which the jug consists and by which it stands, are not really what does the holding. But if the holding is done by the jug's void, then the potter who forms sides and bottom on his wheel does not, strictly speaking, make the jug. He only shapes the clay. No – he shapes the void. For it, in it, and out of it, he forms the clay into the form. From start to finish the potter takes hold of the impalpable void and brings it forth as the container in the shape of a containing vessel. The jug's void determines all the handling in the process of making the vessel. The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds. (Heidegger 1971, p. 169)

First, the fact that Heidegger cites the jug (*das GefäÙe*) as an example is remarkable: although he does not make an explicit reference to Laozi or the *Daodejing* in his text, the jug is one of the examples cited in chapter 11 (vv. 3 and 4). Then, he proceeds to analyze where the jug's thingness lies. The jug's thingness resides in its being a vessel, which has a "holding" nature: it holds what we pour into it. The holding nature is not performed by the jug's sides and bottom (the wine flows between them) but by the jug's empty space. Therefore, if the jug – as a vessel – has a holding nature and the holding is done by its void, the potter does not make the jug: he shapes the void. It is in the jug's void that holds that the vessels' "thingness" lies. Chapter 11 echoes in Heidegger's explanation: the jug's sides and bottom are the elements by virtue of which jug "is there" (*you*). They delimitate the jug's void (*wu*), which is what performs the vessel's holding nature and which is where the vessel's thingness, or we can say the vessel's usefulness (*yong*), lies in. It seems at least unlikely that Heidegger's text was not influenced by the ideas expressed in chapter 11, and the striking similarity is denounced by several scholars⁶. Such

⁶ "Chang Chung-yuan says: "The idea of the void which is useful as interpreted in this chapter also seems to appear in Heidegger's explanation of the void of the jug." E. Feist Hirsch also refers to the similarity of Heidegger's thoughts and of the *Laozi*. Otto Pöggler – after a discussion of Heidegger's examination of the jug in his lecture, "The Thing" – comes to the conclusion, in his article "West-East Dialogue: Heidegger and Lao-tzu": "This view of the jug from the aspect of its emptiness rather than its 'being' is supported by chapter 11 of the Lao-tzu." Kah Kyung Cho more plainly comments: "Heidegger's description of the 'void' of the vessel appears inspired by Laotse's verses in chapter 11 of the *Tao-te-King*, both in the choice of motif as well as in the choice of words." Graham Parkes speaks of a probable influence of the *Laozi* upon Heidegger: "Heidegger was later to write of a jug in a manner reminiscent of – and probably influenced by – Lao-tzu, in the 1950 essay 'Das Ding'." Reinhard May expresses it most clearly, who establishes an "influence of East-Asian ways of thinking" – namely, an influence of *Laozi* chapter 11 –

a thorough dissertation of the concept void, interpreted precisely in the sense in which it is expressed by the ideogram *wu* in chapter 11, leads us to think that, in translating *wu* as *Leere*, Heidegger not only understood the concept of *wu* in its original meaning, but also the whole chapter 11 in its entire meaning.

Throughout chapter 11, Heidegger translates *wu* as *Leere*, except in the last verse, where he translates it as *Nicht-Seiende*. The reason is that probably he wanted to maintain the contraposition with *Seiende*, the term which he uses to translate *you*. Heidegger took great liberty by interpreting *you* and *wu* as *Seiende* and *Nicht-Seiende*, which are key concepts of his own philosophy and literally mean “a being” and “not a being”. According to Heidegger, “beings” are characterized by a finite and objective nature, while “Being” (*Sein*) is qualitatively different, although it maintains a connection with “beings”, since is what makes a being be what it is. *Seiende*, “being”, conveys the meaning of a concrete and finite element, in contrast to the original meaning of *you*, which indicates a state of a thing rather than a thing. A similar consideration can be made about *wu* translated as *Nicht-Seiende*. In *Seiende* and *Nicht-Seiende*, as Heidegger conceives of them, there is not a connection to the original meaning of *you* and *wu*. Ular’s version instead is closer to the original Chinese meaning: he translates *you* as *Stoffliche*, literally “what is material”, and *wu* as *Unstoffliche*, “what lacks material properties”.

Revealing *Sein* and *Dao*: the evocative power of poetry

A different consideration, instead, can be made about Heidegger’s choice to translate *yong*, “use”, as *Sein*, “Being”. As we mentioned earlier, *yong*, “use”, depends on the interplay between *wu* and *you* and it is not a substantive element, but rather an activity. This is a rather surprising aspect to note, since for the metaphysical tradition the concept of “Being” was closely related to the concept of “substance”. In the metaphysical perspective, a thing is defined by its “essence”, the core element which determines what a thing is. In the concept of “essence” there is a reference to “Being”, since there are traces of the Latin infinite verbal form *esse* (to be) in it, and a reference to “substance”, since the “essence” is the foundational core of a thing and, therefore, what defines a thing and keeps it stable. The fact that Heidegger chooses to translate *yong* as *Sein* may reveal a great deal

upon Heidegger’s examination of the jug in his lecture, “The Thing.” (Wholfart Günter, “Heidegger and Laozi: Wu (Nothing) – On chapter 11 of the Daodejing”, trans. Marty Heitz, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 30:1 (2003): 39-59, 50).

about his idea of “Being”. Since *yong* is the result of the interaction of two aspects, *wu* “what is not there, the absence (of physical elements)”, and *you* “what is there, the presence (of physical elements)”, in his view, *Sein* is not referred to something substantial, but rather to a condition that manifests itself in the void. Recalling what Heidegger says in the passage from his lecture *The Thing* cited above, “the vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds”. This can be seen as an intermediate step between the metaphysical viewpoint and the ideas conveyed by chapter 11 of the *Daodejing*, as Heidegger talks about vessel’s “thingness”, its “essence”, and he relates it to the void that performs the act of holding, rather than anything substantial. His translation of *yong* as *Sein*, then, may not be a complete betrayal of the original meaning, similarly to what we noted with *wu* and *Leere*.

Shifting our focus on the linguistic level, according to the metaphysical tradition the concept of “essence” is closely linked to the definition: it is through a clear definition of its essence that a thing is finally grasped in its nature, both in senses of being understood and dominated. Therefore, the word, through which the definition is expressed, exerts this power on the thing it refers to, limiting it and exposing its core meaning.

Heidegger strongly rejects this conception and at the beginning of *Being and Time* he affirms:

The concept of “being” is indefinable. [...] Thus the manner of definition of beings which has its justification within limits – the “definition” of traditional logic which is itself rooted in ancient ontology – cannot be applied to being. The indefinability of being does not dispense with the question of its meaning but forces it upon us. (Heidegger 1996, pp. 2-3)

In Heidegger’s view, Being and language share a completely different relationship than the one they share according to the traditional logic: he calls language the “house of Being” (Heidegger 1971, pp. 5), meaning that it is in language that Being dwells and it is through the authentic language, *das Sagen* (Saying), that Being is revealed. In his three lectures gathered under the title of *The Nature of Language* (Heidegger 1971, pp. 57-108), Heidegger reflects on the relationship between Being and language. He introduces Stefan George’s poem, entitled *The Word [Das Wort]*, where the poet sings of his return from a distant land with a wonder in his hand. Having arrived at a spring, he asks the Norn who lives there to find a proper name for it at the bottom of the spring. But the Norn does not find a suitable name to describe the thing the poet is carrying. Therefore, the poet sadly concludes:

“Where word breaks off no thing may be”. (Heidegger 1971, p. 60)

Heidegger focuses his analysis on the last verse, and commenting on the poet's sad renunciation, he says:

Stated more explicitly, the poet has experienced that only the word makes a thing appear as the thing it is, and thus lets it be present. The word avows itself to the poet as that which holds and sustains a thing in its being. (Heidegger 1971, pp. 65-66)

The relationship between the word and the thing seems to be the same as in the metaphysical perspective. The word grasps the thing in its essence and, therefore, is what "holds and sustains a thing in its being". We understand, then, the poet's sadness: without a name to define it, the wonder he carries in his hand is doomed to disappear.

There is some evidence that the essential nature of language flatly refuses to express itself in words- in the language, that is, in which we make statements about language. If language everywhere withholds its nature in this sense, then such withholding is in the very nature of language. Thus language not only holds back when we speak it in the accustomed ways, but its holding back is determined by the fact that language holds back its own origin and so denies its being to our usual notions. (Heidegger 1971, p. 81)

It is proper to the essential nature of language to withdraw from the explicit language, characterized by statements and definitions. From this fact, it follows that the adopted language cannot be considered separated from the topic that is discussed: on the contrary, it is closely interconnected with it and affects the possibility of understanding it correctly. As Heidegger points out at the beginning of *A Dialogue on Language*, talking about the dialogues he had with count Kuki:

I: The danger of our dialogues was hidden in language itself, not in what we discussed, nor in the way in which we tried to do so.

[...]

I: Yet the dialogue tried to say the essential nature of East-Asian art and poetry.

J: Now I am beginning to understand better where you smell the danger. The language of the dialogue constantly destroyed the possibility of saying what the dialogue was about. (Heidegger 1971, pp. 4-5)

The uniqueness of the theme under consideration requires a specific language that is able to express its authentic nature, otherwise the danger is that it is not even possible to start a discussion about it⁷. Likewise, the

⁷ The same problem emerges at the end of the lecture *Time and Being* (Heidegger, 1998, p. 126), where Heidegger states that the very mode of the lecture fails to fully express the *Ereignis*, the event of the revelation of the authentic "Being" through the authentic and

authentic essence of language cannot be grasped and exposed in any way by the defining language, hence it remains concealed. This passage is reminiscent of Heidegger says about the Greek word *aletheia*⁸, which means “truth”, but which he literally translates it as “unconcealment”: “truth” is what, from a state of concealment, comes to light. Rather than letting itself be exposed in an assertion, the essence of language *reveals* itself.

Perhaps the poet knows them. But his poetry has learned renunciation, yet has lost nothing by the renunciation. Meanwhile, the prize escapes him nonetheless. Indeed. But it escapes him in the sense that the word is denied. The denial is a holding-back. And here precisely it comes to light how astounding a power the word possesses. The prize does in no way crumble into a nothing that is good for nothing. The word does not sink into a flat inability to say. The poet does not abdicate the word. It is true, the prize does withdraw into the mysterious wonder that makes us wonder. (Heidegger 1971, p. 88)

Thinking through poetry, Heidegger points out that the renunciation experienced by the poet is not a complete renunciation. It means that the word is denied, yet it does not result in nihilism. Through the withdrawal of the word, a new aspect of language comes to light: the ability to allude and evoke, which characterizes the language of poetry. Then, Heidegger concludes, modifying the last verse of the poem:

An “is” arises where the word breaks up.

To break up here means that the sounding word returns into soundlessness, back to whence it was granted: into the ringing of stillness which, as Saying, moves the regions of the world's fourfold into their nearness. This breaking up of the word is the true step back on the way of thinking. (Heidegger 1971, p. 108)

For an “is” to arise, the word must return into the soundlessness, back to whence it was granted. As *yong*, the use, (or the *thingness*, as Heidegger says in the passage on the jug from the essay *The Thing*) displays itself in the empty space of a thing, the essence of language,

appropriating dimension of Time, because it forces him to speak through statements. A shift in language is necessary in order to let the auditors experience the authentic meaning of *Ereignis*.

⁸ The Greek word *aletheia* (ἀλήθεια) is composed of α-, the “alpha privative” which expresses negation, and the name *lethe* (λήθη), which means “oblivion, forgetfulness”. Therefore, *aletheia* literally means “not-forgetfulness” and, in this way, it discloses a movement that proceeds from *lethe* to its negation. The significance of truth conveyed by *aletheia* is related to the movement of coming to light of truth from a precedent state of oblivion.

represented by the “is”, *unconceals* itself where the word withdraws. The essence of language is *re-vealed, a-letheia*, in an interplay between “concealment” and “unconcealment”, “presence” (*you*) and “absence” (*wu*). Rather than being expressed by explicit and limiting words that describe beings, Being, *Sein*, is revealed and evoked in a space left open by the withdrawal of words. The same occurs with regard to Dao:

道可道，非常道。	<i>dao ke dao, fei chang dao</i>	<i>The Dao that can be trodden is not the enduring Dao,</i>
名可名，非常名。	<i>ming ke ming, fei chang ming</i>	<i>The name that can be named, is not the enduring name.</i>

The purpose of the *Daodejing* is to properly convey the authentic nature of Dao, the all-encompassing principle which gives rise to all the things existing in reality. However, as these lines from chapter 1 highlight, the Dao that can be referred to as “Dao” is not the authentic Dao, since if it can be identified and limited in a thing or dimension its authentic nature is already lost. Therefore, an affirmative description of Dao through statements is destined to fail, because words, which define and thus limit what they refer to, would betray its authentic nature. As some verses of chapters 41 and 56 say:

道隱無名	<i>dao yin wu ming</i>	<i>Dao is hidden and has no name.</i>
者不言，	<i>zhi zhe bu yan</i>	<i>He who knows, does not speak,</i>
言者不知。	<i>yan zhe bu zhi</i>	<i>He who speaks, does not know.</i>

Dao cannot be defined by words, therefore is hidden, obscure, and has no name and no definition. He who knows Dao and is aware of its nature does not care to speak: words are useless and an obstacle to the understanding of Dao. On the contrary, he who is eager to speak, does not understand the nature of Dao and his discourses are in vain.

To convey the authentic nature of a principle as hidden and obscure principle as Dao, the *Daodejing* resorts to an obscure and evocative language, characterized by a restricted use of words, repetitions and logical contradictions, which breaks with the logic of ordinary language and gives a hint of the authentic and transcending nature of Dao. Chapters 21 and 22 are clear examples of that:

道之為物，唯恍唯惚。	<i>dao zhi wei wu, wei huang wei hu</i>	<i>Such a blurred, indistinct thing Dao is!</i>
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忽兮恍兮，其中有象；	<i>hu xi huang xi, qizhong you xiang</i>	<i>Overlooked, indistinct, but images emerge within it,</i>
恍兮忽兮，其中有物。	<i>huang xi hu xi, qizhong you wu</i>	<i>Indistinct, overlooked, but there is something inside it.</i>
窈兮冥兮，其中有精；	<i>yao xi ming xi, qizhong you jing</i>	<i>Hidden, mysterious, but a peculiar reality reveals within it.</i>
其精甚真，其中有信。	<i>qi jing shen zhen, qizhong you xin</i>	<i>Its nature is so peculiar and true that gives evidence of itself.</i>
曲則全，	<i>qu ze quan.</i>	<i>It is bent, then complete,</i>
枉則直，	<i>wang ze zhi,</i>	<i>Crooked, then straight,</i>
窪則盈，	<i>wa ze ying,</i>	<i>Hollow, then full.</i>
弊則新，	<i>bi ze xin,</i>	<i>Consumed, then new,</i>
少則得，	<i>shao ze de,</i>	<i>Shortage brings gain,</i>
多則惑。	<i>duo ze huo.</i>	<i>Excess generates uncertainty.</i>

In both chapters considered here, whatever is asserted on the nature of Dao is immediately negated by the following opposite statement, in a series of paradoxes. The repetitive structure of these chapters is more evident when looking at the original Chinese version: in chapter 21, *xi...xi* “兮…兮” and *qizhongyou...* “其中有…” or, in chapter 22, *ze* “則” are fixed parts, while the other ideograms are constantly changing, recalling the alternation between *wu* and *you* and which suggests a strong sense of movement. Between the “stable” parts of the chapters, and into the words emptied of logical constraints, the Dao flows and is revealed for an instant in the space of a few verses.

The ideas presented in chapter 11 characterize the entire composition of the *Daodejing*. Each chapter is structured by words, ordered in verses, which are what can be read and understood but, also, on a sensory level, what is visible and present (*you*). However, words, emptied of their definitory characteristics and logical constrictions (*wu*), suspend the usual progression of logical discourse and they point to an indeterminate dimension that transcends themselves. By withdrawing and alluding, the words let Dao appear between the verses (*yong*). Each chapter of the *Daodejing* can thus be compared to an “empty jug”, made up of words but, at the same time, empty at its core, letting the authentic nature of Dao reveal itself and effuse into the verses.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis focused on chapter 11 of the *Daodejing* and the translation that Heidegger provided in his essay *Die Einzigkeit des Dichters*, has shown that even though Heidegger chose to translate the key concepts of chapter 11 with terms belonging to his own philosophy and rooted in the Western philosophical tradition, he interpreted those same terms according to meanings that recall those of the original Chinese terms.

The meaning of the word *Leere*, used by Heidegger to translate *wu*, is generally conceived of as an absolute void, with a strong metaphysical connotation. However, examining the texts *A Dialogue on Language* and *The Thing*, where Heidegger uses the word *Leere* and reflects on the concept of void, it emerges a conception of void close to the idea of “productive void” as expressed by *wu*. The anti-nihilistic conception of void expressed by the Japanese term *Kū* (in Chinese *kong*) and the example of the jug, which recalls chapter 11, prove that Heidegger understands the Eastern idea of “productive void” and he attributes this meaning to the word *Leere*. The word *Sein*, which Heidegger uses to translate *yong*, may suggest a deliberate imposition of the meaning of “Being” on the original concept of “use” and a misinterpretation of the ideas of chapter 11. However, as it emerges from the lectures *The Thing* and *The Nature of Language*, Being unconceals itself in the space left open by the withdrawal of the word, in a withdrawing/revealing dynamics close to the *you/wu* alternation that allows *yong* to display itself. The correlation between the vessel’s thingness – its essence- and the void, and the fact that the authentic Being appears only when revealed, rather than being defined through statements, prove a close connection between the ideas of Being and *yong* and Being and Dao. Since the purpose of the *Daodejing* is to convey the authentic nature of Dao, its chapters can be seen as “jugs”, composed of words emptied of their logical constraints, which let Dao appear, even for a moment. Therefore, Dao can be interpreted, to some extent, as the *yong* of the chapters, their use, their purpose⁹.

These results prove an affinity between the ideas of the *Daodejing* and some of the fundamental concepts of Heidegger’s philosophy. Although Heidegger uses words from Western philosophical tradition in his translation of chapter 11, this analysis proves that Heidegger had some understanding of Daoist ideas, since he attributes to the words he uses values

⁹ In chapter 1 we read “Having no name/it is the Originator of heaven and earth;/having name, it is the mother of all things”. In the original Chinese version, “having no name” and “having name” are written as *wu ming* 無名 and *you ming* 有名. These two aspects, an example of *wu/you* alternation as in chapter 11, are used to describe the nature of Dao.

and meanings similar to the original Chinese concepts. Such a degree of understanding between two extremely distant ways of thinking could have been thought impossible. In *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, Heidegger himself writes, about thinking and singing:

“Und unbekannt einander bleiben sich,
solang sie stehen, die nachbarlichen Stämme.” (Heidegger 1983, p. 85)

“And they remain unknown to each other,
until they stand, the neighboring trunks”

Heidegger’s poem refers to the activities of thinking and singing, related and yet distinct, and, quoting these lines from Hölderlin at the end, he compares them to trunks in a forest, close together and yet so sharply separated that they are unknown to each other. Such a comparison can also be referred to the relationship between thoughts developed in different cultural environments and shaped by languages with radically different structures. This is the case of Heidegger’s thought, expressed in modern German, and Laozi’s thought, expressed in classical Chinese. They can be compared to trunks in a forest, close to each other as they both question about fundamental principles such as Being or Dao, and yet unknown to each other as their thoughts are formulated through two extremely different languages. However close they can get to each other in their questioning on the fundamental principles, there remains an immeasurable linguistic distance that emerges in the polysemy of each word which express the key concepts, either Chinese or German. Saying *Leere* cannot be the same as saying *wu*, just as saying *Sein* cannot be the same as saying *yong*. However, although the trunks appear to be clearly separated, the roots of each tree intertwine with one another underground, just as their branches intersect at the top. In the same way, two such different thoughts can hope to find a common ground of understanding, thanks to a shared interest towards similar philosophical issues that founds the research for both thoughts, and thanks to a work of continuous transcultural confrontation that can, by means of translation, find several meeting points, such as words or concepts, where both thoughts share affinities of meaning.

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**Understanding each other without crossing the threshold:
Martin Heidegger and the *Daodejing***

This paper carries out an analysis of Heidegger's translation of chapter 11 of *Daodejing*, cited in the essay *Die Einzigkeit des Dichters*. My purpose is to demonstrate that, although Heidegger uses key terms of his own philosophy to translate the Chinese core concepts of chapter 11, the words he uses share, to some extent, several similarities in meaning with the classical Chinese concepts. In particular, I examine Heidegger's translation of *wu* 無, "productive void", as *Leere* and his translation of *yong* 用, "use", as *Sein*. Then, I argue that both Heidegger and the *Daodejing* share a similar perspective on the role of language and on the evocative power of poetry.

KEYWORDS: Martin Heidegger, Chinese language, Poetry