

Not Lao-tzu's Magna Carta, xxxviii - xlv

by strannikov

xxxviii

because the righteous do not strive for ethics,
they are free to practice righteousness.
because moral sticklers observe moral codes,
they do not attain to righteousness.

the righteous take no action out of motive:
the virtuous do not act out of motive.
moral sticklers take action with a purpose:
the lovers of law love to enforce—
their laws ignored, they stretch their arms to compel.

when the Way was lost, morality appeared.
when morality was lost, ethics appeared.
once ethics was lost, justice appeared.
once justice disappeared, only rules remained.

mere rules are gaudy paint applied to the good,
the scent of pigment—fresh whiff of disorder.
foreknowledge is mere decoration,
a pretty tile, first on the path of folly:
thus the sage prefers the substance to pigment—

the nutritious fruit or the pretty flower?
he forsakes the latter to taste the former.

xxxix

in ancient days did these achieve unity:

Heaven achieved unity and became clear,
Earth achieved unity and became peaceful,
spirits achieved unity and found power,
valleys achieved unity and found fullness,
kings and princes found unity to lead realms.

—and yet, following this to its end:

clarity without end would rupture Heaven,
peace without end would shatter the Earth,
power without end would dispel all spirits,
fullness without end would sweep away valleys,
kingdoms without end would be the death of kings.

the root of nobility—humility.

what is raised up must rest on its foundation.

kings styling themselves “friendless”, “worthless”, “inept”—
take themselves the root of humility, no?

So:

a fleet of carriages, but no carriage called.
being fine as jade is to be cold as stone.

xl

the Way moves, but by stepping backwards:
the way the Way works is with weakness.

Heaven, Earth, and the ten thousand come to be:
but Being itself emerged from Non-being.

xli

once good students encounter the Way,
they apply themselves to its practice.
when lesser students take up the Way,
their efforts are on-again and off-again.
poor students coming across the Way
erupt in rude and raucous laughter—
if it could not provoke their laughter,
the Way for them would hold no appeal.

—and so, following this to its end:
the Way, though bright, is but dimly lit,
the Way leads forward but guides backward,
the Way is a smooth path strewn with rocks.

high virtue is a deep-sunk valley,
gleaming white sands mingled with black dirt:
abundant virtue seems bereft of all strength,
strong virtue seems spindly and puny,
simple sincerity seems pretense.

the Great Square has lost all four corners,
sacred vessels are never consecrated,
booming alarms tinkle like a child's hand-bell,
the Great Image appears shapeless and unformed.

the Way is great while being nameless,
good as affairs commence, good as they conclude.

xlii

the Way begets the One, the One begets two,

two beget three, from which rise the ten thousand:
the ten thousand then shoulder the yin
and wrap their embrace around the yang—
breathing vital energy, they inhale poise.

folks despise the names “friendless”, “worthless”, “inept”,
yet kings and princes dub themselves with these terms:
thus, some things are enhanced through diminishment,
others are diminished being added to.

So:
on reflection, I take up what others teach—
“the violent come to no natural end”—
this lesson has become my sure guide.

xliii

a barefoot infant trampling, crushing sharp stones—
soft dew pries into, sunders, splits large boulders.

the force exercised by inaction:
so few can comprehend the voice of silence,
the exertion exercised in poise.

xliv

reputation or person—which one is you?
possession or self—which is more dear?
gain or loss—which brings more suffering?

miserly hoarding entails expense,
crated goods are prey to vermin and bandits.

So:

those who know the measure of “enough”
know when to stop and danger is averted:
content with enough, enjoy long life.

xlv

acmes of perfection seem like damaged goods,
but their measures persist age to age:
grand colosseums remain vacant
until grand tournaments are convened.

a straight path up might consist of hair-pin turns.
a master craftsman might often drop his tools.
an eloquent speaker might mangle his lines.
a warehouse stuffed with goods might seem to lack room.

stay active in order to stay warm,
stay still to overcome wilting heat:
serene and still can you rule the world.

