

Not Lao-tzu's Yellow Brick Road, i - xvi

by strannikov

i

the Way that can be mapped leads nowhere.
names on a map can never chart the Nameless.
from the Nameless have come all things that exist,
by their Mother are ten thousand children named.

only with no desire to see can you glimpse:
desire to see only what unwilled eyes see.

Nameless and named come from the same place,
on arrival they appear distinct:
dark shadows emerge from dark shadows,
their gate stands beyond all horizons.

ii

beauty, praised by all, soon appears hideous.
when good is advertised, evil stink escapes.

To Be and Not to Be reflect each other,
stern discipline and ease define each other,
the long and the short both measure each other,
heights pile upon depths, depths are carved out of heights,
song and voice each sing and speak to each other,
face and ass both sit down in the same moment.

So:

the doer does deeds with no effort displayed,
teaches without empty words, with vocal deeds.

when the ten thousand clamor, he does not rile:
he confers benefits, demands no reward,
accomplishes tasks without claiming merit,
claiming no merit, earns enduring merit.

iii

men of worth not honored—people do not strive.
rare goods not highly prized—people do not thieve.
desired goods not displayed—people are not stirred.

So, under the wise rule of a sage:

men's minds are starved that their bellies may be filled,
men's ambitions weaken as their bones strengthen.

he ever curbs knowledge, to stifle desire.
he keeps smart-asses from being too clever.

by effortless rule, affairs are all ordered.

iv

the Way is a thin gourd that pours emptiness,
a gorge that was first home to the ten thousand.

it blunts sharp edges, unknots tangles,
softens harsh glare, keeps dust company.

a sink of dark and ageless shadows:
was it ever born of the Ancient of Days?

v

Heaven and Earth are heedless of us,
the ten thousand to them are straw dogs.

the sage is heedless of all people,
the ten thousand to him are straw dogs.

between Heaven and Earth, a bellows pumping:
empty without collapsing, it pumps yet more.

too much talk fills the head with more holes:
plug up the holes, retain what remains.

vi

the spirit of the gorge never dies—
its name, “the Woman of Mystery”.
—and the gate to the Woman of Mystery
is named “the root of Heaven and Earth”:
of bare substance, of bare appearance,
with indefatigable fecundity.

vii

Heaven persists and Earth hangs around:
how in the world do they manage it?
they do not live for themselves alone,
this is the reason they last so long.

by their example do the wise stand apart:
the wise discount their own agendas
that they may pursue other matters.

viii

water is the highest image of the good:
it blesses the ten thousand for no reward,
it falls from on high to find the lowest spots—
water closely follows the path of the Way.

the good resides in the low places,
the good resides in minds of plumbed depths,
the good resides where generosity thrives,
the good resides where trust can abide,
the good lives in prudent governance,
the good lives in capable service,
the good resides in well-timed action.

content not to quarrel, it finds its own course.

ix

folly to fill your cup just to see it spill.
a sharpened sword dragged through mud is soon blunted.
gold and jade adorn rooms no guard can defend.
fame and wealth breeding pride, breed broods of contempt.
the Way of Heaven: rest once the work is done.

x

your head heavy with your struggling soul,
can you wrap your arms around the One?
with discipline of breath, become an infant?
polish your dark mirror so that it might shine?
lead people and love the throne without effort?
the Gates of Heaven open and close—
can you be what a woman can do?
when discernment sweeps the four corners,
can you refrain from knowing it all?

enliven the people to feed them,
enliven them without owning them,
lift them up without weighing them down—
these are but clues to living virtue.

xi

thirty spokes fitted into one hub—
empty space has helped compose the wheel.
molding clay for pots with their hollows,
but just who molded their emptiness?
rooms without doors and windows stand bare—
rooms without exit or view, useless.
we make with substance that yields to empty space.

xii

five colors blind with intensity.
riding and hunting, pursuit can drive men mad.
goods hard to find can impede the search.
five flavors can strangle the tongue's taste.
five notes alone can render ears deaf.

thus the ruling sage tends to bellies, not eyes,
forsaking the eyes to care for the bellies.

xiii

“fame and disfavor are both things that startle.”
“rank is a hardship that wearies the body.”

what means “fame and disfavor are both startling”?
once favor is conferred, its gain and loss vex.

what means “rank wearies the body with hardship”?
my body has a talent for affliction:
without my body, would I find affliction?

So:

who values his person more than rule

will conduct a body fit to rule:
who is stingy with his own body
can be trusted to rule the whole world.

xiv

what we see (not seeing) we call “obvious”.
what we hear (not hearing) is what we call “loud”.
what we touch (not touching) we call “palpable”.
these three are incomprehensible—
thus are the three united in mystery.

nothing more general, naught more specific:
barely with appearance, otherwise unnamed—
convexity of concavity,
mute assertion of wordy silence.

follow it: you will not see its ass quiver.
meet it: you'll wonder why you don't see its face.
the Way is its own path through the now,
to order the tumults of today.
the antiquity it emerged in
is the unbroken thread of the Way.

xv

the ancient ones who hewed to the Way
were profoundly subtle and perspicacious,
discerning beyond comprehension.
because they discerned beyond comprehension,
they can hardly be fully described:
cautious, as any crossing a frozen stream—
tentative, as if neighbors would overhear—
souls of decorum, as if invited guests—
yielding, like ice about to split and break off—

solid, like wood that never tasted an axe—
vast, wide, and deep, like an enormous valley—
murky, as a puddle of muddy water.
who can clean a pond of mud, remove its murk?
who can be so still as to calm a torrent?
those hewing to the Way have other concerns:
though tired and worn, they get to where they're going.

xvi

surrender your effort and become empty.
then will poise possess you to your core.

the ten thousand arise, just watch them return:
they burst with their seeds, which then plant their own roots.
returning to roots is the model of poise.
returning to roots is what is called “stillness”.
returning to stillness is how the Way wends,
ignoring the Way makes rocks sprout underfoot.
to set forth on a rocky path is risky:
but embarking in stillness will see you through,
a measured tread reveals the measures of things,
the steps of princes and kings along the Way—
to the end of this journey, never one threat.

