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On Lao Tzu

Robert Wood · Wednesday, July 11th, 2018

I am reminded of the fact that there is a way and then there is The Way. The Way is the path the master takes. I have seen master printers at work, their *habitus* is a ritual, the smooth movement of muscle memory belying the hours and skill it takes to make a book by hand. They are at his most impressive when they are rolling the ink, setting the type, printing page by page of letterpress. I was reminded of this work some time later when I sat speaking with a friend at Harvard's Woodberry Poetry Room. Here, between a visit to Emily Dickinson's desk and lemonade on the street, we spoke about the history of printing and a number of pieces they housed in their archive. The letterpress they had was, in someone else's words, the labour of the *shokunin*. This was from the master of the book as a work of art. There were, of course, hobbyists who used the same machinery, the people who printed zines in between wedding invitations and greeting cards. But here in Woodberry, they collected great works of the printing arts.

When Don Quixote goes to the printers, Cervantes writes:

> Don Quixote looked up and saw above a doorway a sign with very large letters that read: BOOKS PRINTED HERE. He was delighted at this, for never before had he been inside a print shop, and he was quite curious to learn what one was like. Going inside with all his retinue, he observed persons in various parts of the shop casting and setting type, proofreading, and revising – in other words, the entire process that is found in a large print shop. Don Quixote went up to one of the cases and asked what was being done there. The workman gave him a full account, all of which he found fascinating.

Upon speaking with a printer's assistant about translating languages, Quixote himself says:

> Still it seems to me that translation from one language into another, if it be not from the queens of languages, is like looking at tapestries from the wrong side; for though the figures are visible, they are full of threads that make them indistinct, and they do not show with the smoothness and brightness of the right side; and translation from

> easy languages argues neither ingenuity nor command of words, any more than transcribing or copying out one document from another. But I do mean by this to draw the inference that no credit is to be allowed for the work of translating, for a man may employ himself in ways worse and less profitable to himself.

But the knowledge that language is everywhere, and that everything is a text after the linguistic turn, means that it is always translation. There is translation from Spanish to English, or from the specific dialect of Cervantes to me now, or from the hand to the page in the printing process itself. It is all tapestries somehow, but we have the ability to weave them or to turn them over in our hands to know what they depict on one side and another, and, in the process we can see how the stitch-work sits from inside out.

I am reminded of the master and of the teacher, of how one becomes a student and is an apprentice, then a journeyman, then a guild member, then a teacher. But even the teacher is not a master who might well be a muse or an idea, who might be the Way not as a particular embodiment but as a universal life force that we cannot name at all. I thought of all this, as I stood in Shanghai's Power Station of Art staring at Cai Guo-Qiang *The Ninth Wave.* This sculptural installation was an old commercial fishing boat laden with 99 stuffed animals – pandas, cheetahs, polar bears lay exhausted, the cargo of our extinction era, which neglects them so. The boat had sailed down the Huangpu river, a comment and critique of global warming, a haunting not of Noah but of the industry and lifestyle that means we are living through the sixth death on a dinosaur like scale, a memory too of the 16,000 pig carcasses that floated down the same river one year prior.

I am reminded of when Lao Tzu says, "The Way is to the world as a small gully is to rivers and seas." The world is impossible because it is everything, but those small gullies, those rivers, that sea all feed into an idea of what the book is, all give life to the blue planet that is our world. The book we need, the book still worth printing and translating and sending out to sea like a message in a bottle, follows some sort of way in the world that allows us to speak on behalf of, and for, the panda and the cheetah and the polar bear as well.

I am reminded too of when I was younger, when the China I knew came through the restaurants that had popped up all over Western Australia. I did not know of the gold rush and the immigrants, of the Hop Hing grocery store, of the Fongs in Broome supporting the pearl divers or the hunger for iron ore. I did not know the difference between where xiao long bao came from as opposed to prawn toast. I did not know the way to travel the world and come home. One realises where one belongs, be that in a printing shop, an archive or a modern gallery of art, until one has a labour to negate, to put into words what one is not, but also how to form the utopian dreams of what it is to come into the reality of being a positive force in the world.

I have a memory of the future where worms reclaim the paper that holds the words that this book was printed on, the book that you hold in one hand while you touch silk, the book that you were given by a friend as something to be read on the subway home, and maybe, the book you questioned when you saw its cover and its promise. This is a memory of the Way as it was taught to me by my older self, the lesson that the teacher gave the student who is a knight errant and growing towards a vision of belonging that may yet prove to be a sinecure and a translation of Time itself.

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