

## Kathleen McPhilemy reviews

*Daodejing*

by Laozi, versions by Martyn Crucefix

Enitharmon Press (London 2016). Pbk. 112 pages. £9.99.

Having read and admired Martyn Crucefix' translation of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, I was intrigued by this volume but uncertain whether to approach it as a religious or a philosophical text or as a collection of poems. I also wondered how much I needed to know about Daoism and indeed how accessible this central text of Daoism could be to Western patterns of thought. In his introduction Crucefix encourages 'contemporary readers to approach them [the texts] in large part as language, I mean as poetry.' The *Daodejing*, also known as the *Tao te Ching*, is the central text of Taoism, whose origins can be traced back at least seven centuries BCE. In legend it is attributed to the sage, Laozi. Dao means the Way but its significance is more or less untranslatable and can only be approached through the intuition of metaphor, as in this text where recurrent images 'uncarved wood', water, way, path and direction attempt to convey what Dao is. According to the introduction, it is 'a mode of being that is all encompassing, a phenomenal, an existential primacy – perhaps akin to the Western idea of original chaos.' We might also link it to the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein* or perhaps to the Romantic notion of the sublime. Certainly, its attraction to the poet is its recognition that every form of words is limited and limiting, that words cannot express the inexpressible. This is the opening premise of the text:

*that the path I can put a name to  
cannot take me the whole way*  
'Nursery' (1)

Also in his introduction, Crucefix speaks of translating, but the title page refers to a 'version' rather than a translation. 'Versioning' provides the freedom to produce a text which can speak to our own time. If you glance at a page or two of the literal translations of the *Daodejing* you can see the Chinese characters with two or three possible English translations where varying combinations could lead to a range of very different 'versions'. This fluidity allows Crucefix to import his own references and to introduce his own oblique allusions to Western literature, thought and contemporary politics, e.g. 'they [leaders] like to say "we are all in this together"'. To criticise this approach as culturally imperialistic Westernisation is pointless; as Crucefix says, Westernisation is inevitable in any English version. He has taken the process one step further, using the *Daodejing* as the basis for creating his own 21<sup>st</sup> century text. Sometimes his allusions to

popular culture can be disconcerting, as with 'shiny happy people' in 'Adrift' (20); also jarring but perhaps inevitable in a text of this nature is the occasional cliché: 'the journey that lasts ten thousand miles/ begins with taking one initial step'. 'A Tender Sapling' (64). Major English poets lurk in the shadows.

In 'Resistance' (chapter 10) he writes 'can you latch and unlatch the doors of perception', a clear reference to Blake and later, in 'Rituals' (38) we find:

*understand how it was after the way was lost  
then virtue came and after virtue human kindness  
after kindness codes of morality  
after morality  
our reliance on ritual...*

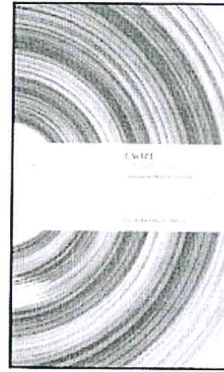
This again could be Blake or, behind Blake, Rousseau. Keats is another presence:

*the true teacher is like a poet  
who has no self to speak of  
using the self of others as his own*  
'Dazed' (49)

In 'Dead Inflexibility' (chapter 25), there is a direct quotation 'irritable reaching'. These references to Keats' theory of Negative Capability, 'that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (letter to George and Thomas Keats, 1817) are unsurprising, because the Dao which Crucefix presents seems very close to Keats. Yet despite these familiarising comparisons, the text remains elusive and also contradictory, perhaps because 'without contraries there can be no progression' or perhaps because it is untranslatable.

The poems are very attractive and I enjoyed their clarity – limpidity derived from murkiness – 'Uncarved Wood' (15). Nevertheless, while I will value them as poetry, I will not become a convert. There are contradictions I cannot resolve such as the relationship between self-abnegation and good government and while the poems acknowledge violence they do not, in my view, accommodate it. I will stick with *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, another gnomic and often contradictory text, but, for me, more comprehensive.

Katherine McPhilemy's poetry collections include *The Lion in the Forest* (Katabasis, London 2004).



reviews