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A Way

Laozi (trans. Martyn Crucefix)
Daodejing
(Enitharmon Press, 2016) £9.99

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LAOZI'S *DAODEJING* (or Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*) is one of the best-known Chinese classics in the West. Written using five thousand Chinese characters, *Daodejing* is composed of two sections with a total of eighty-one chapters. The book sets out to explain the philosophy of *Dao* through a variety of juxtaposed examples Laozi observed in nature. This philosophy later provided the founding principles of Taoism. The text owes some of its popularity to Winnie-the-Pooh and his adoption of *Tao* as a way to demonstrate his life's philosophy. It is not uncommon for readers of *Daodejing* to take the text purely as a philosophical and spiritual guide to life. What is rarely discussed in academia or in public is the literary value of the text.

Laozi's sophisticated literary techniques are clear: he uses neat paralleled rhymed verses, repetition, metaphors, and vivid images drawn from everyday objects to convey his thinking. The Chinese language's tonal system adds to the musicality and pace of these verses. Given the literariness in *Daodejing*, and the difficulty in deciphering ancient Chinese texts' economical diction, translating Laozi's philosophy and poetics into languages distant from the Chinese language system poses real challenges to translators.

These challenges have not deterred translators from producing new translations; a simple search discloses more than a thousand versions available to readers, ranging from Arthur Waley's translation in 1934 to the *New York Times* best-selling translation by Stephen Mitchell.

Martyn Crucefix follows in the footsteps of these translators to produce his new 'versions' of *Daodejing*. By calling his work a 'new version', Crucefix acknowledges his debt to the works of his predecessors and insists that his interpretation is a different one. The Introduction to the collection begins with a brief overview of the Chinese original. Archaeological discoveries continue to uncover fragments of versions of *Daodejing* from different ancient dynasties. Which version should he follow? This question opens a space for the poet to exercise his creative imagination, listening to Laozi's teaching and reflecting on it. Crucefix transposes Laozi into the Western contemporary as a teacher who speaks a modern English vernacular to probe the unnameable *Dao* and its manifestation. Each poem is given a title to guide readers on the journey of realisation.

The poems begin with a long dash to suggest the effect of speech associated with the Chinese classics. Crucefix abandons rhymed verse and arranges the spoken words in unrhymed, unmetred free verse. To compensate for the loss of end rhyme, he makes frequent use of alliteration and internal rhymes to generate pace, texture and musicality. His arrangement of sounds entails repeating words and paralleling syntactical structures to evoke a feeling that these verses function as a rhetorical vortex. This feeling is enhanced by the absence of punctuation to mark pauses and sentence breaks. This strategy underlines the antiquity of the ancient text where punctuation was not used; but at the same time it challenges the reader's grasp of Laozi's philosophy, creating unnecessary syntactical obscurity. If the poet intends contemporary readers to appreciate *Daodejing* through his language, then his deliberately unpunctuated lines increase the mythical aspect of the text, at the same time encouraging readers to hear the words and experience the paradoxes the world presents through the irreconcilable syntax.

Crucefix captures the spirit of Laozi's philosophical inquiry through a poetics of 'indirect direction' that speaks in a transparent yet seemingly solid way. Language is imperfect, and languages present different world views. Crucefix's Laozi overcomes some of the unresolvable differences inherent in languages and offers another way into the mysterious *Dao*.