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Foreword

This book is the first in a series from Three Pines Press exploring the territory of Dao today. John Leonard's *Way of Poetry* is thus not just a book about poetry; it is a book about Dao. But since if the Dao is anything it is a state of mind, poetry with its allusive, metaphorical language may be the most appropriate medium. The *Daode jing* is, after all, one of the world's great poems.

John Leonard organizes his analysis of western Daoist poetry around three classic Daoist virtues: compassion, restraint, and humility. The question I want to address briefly here is, why Daoism now? What might Daoism offer as a resource during our increasingly troubled modern era? In fact, these times are no more troubled than the era during which Daoism emerged in China—the aptly named Warring States Period (403-221 BCE), when the *Daode jing* offered an alternative vision of existence. Daoism shifted the focus from warfare to relationship, from attempting to control the external world to shaping perception and thus experience.

One of the challenges confronting our modern era in the West has been resolving the subject-object dichotomy proposed by Descartes and refined by Newton—the belief that reality consists of matter and motion, and that all questions can be answered by means of the scientific method of objective observation and measurement. This dualistic perspective has been cast into doubt by evidence from quantum mechanics that matter and motion are interdependent forms of energy, and that the observer is always in an experiential relationship with the observed.

To suggest that the universe of quantum physics is similar to the cosmos of Daoism is nothing new. Nevertheless, understanding ourselves as interconnected beings, who experience time and space rather than being subject to them does require a radical shift of perspective. It should not be surprising, in our increasingly globalized era, that Asian perspectives regarding the nature of reality have been a crucial factor in effecting this shift.

Nor should it be surprising that poets and other artists have been at the leading edge of this exploration. Art is making what previously was unseen available to the senses, including the mind. This is also the fundamental process of Dao, as it vibrates between “nameless” and “named.” Daoism’s view of the cosmos as a continuously self-balancing system, its emphases on perception and perspective, and its assumption of the self-transforming power of the individual and rejection of social conventions have all resonated strongly for Western poets, as John Leonard demonstrates here. If art, as Marcel Duchamp famously claimed, is in the mind of the observer, then poetry happens in the mind of the reader. Prepare, dear reader, to change your mind.

Jacquelynn Baas

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The Sea Ranch, California, October 2010

Preface

This book is an attempt by a practicing poet to understand how the principles of Daoism can be applied to the writing of poetry in the modern age.

The work also contains my own work, and poems, or excerpts from poems, by other poets which I believe can be read usefully in a Daoist sense.

The choice of these poems is not meant to establish a prescriptive canon; a work of this size could hardly establish this anyway. They are meant as a series of illustrations of the principles from the Daoist texts applied to the reading of poetry.

I would like to thank Livia Kohn of Three Pines Press for her interest in the work and her editorial help. Thanks also to Donald Fairhall for his advice on my Rilke translation.

Peter Marsack, a leading Australian bird-artist drew the “Roosting Knot” picture.

Finally I would like to acknowledge my partner Felicia, her love and companionship, and thank her for discussions about the concerns of this work. I dedicate it to her, and to our sons Sylvius and Oliver.

In the second edition the discussion has been expanded in a number of places and some helpful suggestions have been incorporated.

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Poetry and the Way

Poetry serves the Way, but then so does everything.

“Way” is a translation of the Chinese term *Dao* (Tao), the fundamental principle of the universe according to the way of thought known as Daoism.

A description of the Way—how it operates and how people should behave with respect to it—can be found in the early texts of Daoism: the *Daode jing* (4th c. B.C.E.), the *Zhuangzi* (3rd c. B.C.E.), the *Huainanzi* (ca. 140 B.C.E.), the *Liezi* (4th c. C.E.), and other works. These four works come from different authors and different periods. The *Zhuangzi* and the *Liezi* are obviously the products of several authors, and some of the passages in those two works are not particularly Daoist. The *Huainanzi* was written by a committee of scholars.

It would be easy to allege differences between the outlooks of these works—and later Daoist texts that are again different. Nevertheless a strong resemblance can be detected between the ways of thought they embody. It is also quite appropriate that there should be differences, and different voices, in these texts. Daoism seems refreshingly free from any kind of dogmatism, which seems to be a problem with many other religions and philosophies.

One way to think of the Way is to say it is simply the way things are, what happens. It is, obviously, immanent in the universe, not transcendent, in the way that the Western notion of God is. It is also non-dual in the sense that it is itself neither good nor evil, but contains within it things which humans call “good” and “evil” (see *Daode jing* 58; *Zhuangzi* 13; Mair 1994, 127).

The very first words of the *Daode jing* set limits on possible human knowledge of the Way:

The Dao that can be trodden
Is not the enduring and unchanging Dao.
The name that can be named
Is not the enduring and unchanging name.
(ch. 1; see Legge 1891)

In other words human beings will never have a complete view of the Way, and any attribution of qualities to the Way necessarily falls short of it. It might be thought, therefore, that trying to describe the Way in words in is a fruitless task. However, these lines opening lines also imply that humans will never cease to try to interpret, or live by the Way. And areas in which they will try to do this include thought, politics, literature, art as well as other aspects of life.

Although the *Daode jing* begins with this famous line it does carry on for over 5000 words (in ancient Chinese)—other Daoist works are less succinct (this paradox is discussed in *Zhuangzi* ch. 13 [Mair 1994, 128] and elsewhere in that work).

I will be arguing in this work that a “Way of Poetry” can be argued for—this would be the way of writing and reading poetry so that the understanding acquired does not serve as truth, but as instruction.

Following the Way

One way in which Daoist works overcome the problem of thinking about the Way and trying to discuss it is by means of metaphors and analogies (*Zhuangzi* Ch 27; Mair 1994, 279-80)—usually with reference to nature and natural processes. It is clear that if the Way is the Way of the Universe then it is through nature that it can best be understood. Daoism is unanimous that the way closest to nature is closest to the Way, for all things.

In the western context this may sound like dualism (“humanity versus nature”), but it is not. Everything, including humanity, is part of the Way, the Way is generally conducive to human life, but not every part of it. Antarctica is part of the Way, but it isn’t very hospitable to human life. Typhoid is part of the Way, but you don’t want to catch it. You are supposed to look after yourself, you are supposed to avoid things that are deadly, or bad for you.

Daoism values naturalness. Things which have more of natural process are about them are better and more befitting for humans than things which have a lesser element of natural processes about them. Humans are to associate with and emulate natural processes wherever possible, especially as the human body itself is full of flows and natural processes. Along the same lines, the modern standing or moving practice of qigong, adapted from traditional medical and Daoist healing exercises, tries to aid the natural flow of *qi*-energy in the body.

In associating with natural flows and processes humans are finding out for themselves their best habitat, the one in which they will have most success, just as any other animal does.

It is true that nature in the widest sense does include everything, including the works of industrial society. It’s just that in general those things which are “non-natural” are also likely to be more harmful and are to be avoided. This is the explanation behind the shorthand of “nature.” And it is a fact that the early Daoist texts are mainly concerned with people aligning themselves with natural processes, and deemphasising less “natural” parts of the whole (the province of Confucianism and other philosophies). Technology for Daoism is fundamentally about directing natural forces in ways that are appropriate to them, not trying to “harness” or “control” nature.

This emphasis on “humanity-in-nature” is an essential part of the humility which Daoists are to approach existence. Indeed, one later Daoist contrasted Daoism with other ways of thinking by remarking that if other ways of thinking are followed then the person gains an increasingly elaborate knowledge of those ways over time, however, if a person follows Daoism

then they progressively unlearn a great deal of what they once knew. Finally, if they approach closer to the Way, they know no more than a frog in a pond does (cf. *Daode jing* 48; *Zhuangzi* 17; Mair 1994, 164).

In contrast to the goals of Christianity, or other religions, the Way does not need to be strived for, because everything already belongs to it. The only thing that needs to be done is remove impediments to recognizing this fact.



