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A dao of poetry? Non-intentional composition, emergence and intertextuality

Abstract:

Ten poems are presented, sampling my PhD research and exploring how poetry might harmonise 'Western' scientific and 'Eastern' spiritual worldviews. The poems invite a liminal consciousness where science's epistemic authority may meet on equal—not privileged—terms with the more ancient authorities of body and Earth. My chosen primary foci are modern physics, philosophical Daoism, and the ecosystemic perspective afforded by complexity theory (Capra & Luisi 2014), in which large-scale patterns emerge unpredictably from relatively simple processes. This emergence, as Smith (2006: 172) remarks, is helpful in theorising how an artwork frequently 'develops its own autonomous identity and ... takes the creator in directions quite different from his or her original intentions.' My methodology carries this further by seeking to abandon intention entirely. To achieve this I choose randomly from lists of sources and writing experiments. Influenced by found poetry (Perloff 2012) and by the aleatory processes of conceptual writing and LANGUAGE poetry (Dworki n.d.; James 2012), I appropriate, combine and re-present ideas and text from creative and non-fictional works. I take words from books or from what Tobin (2004: 126) calls the mind's 'other place' of poetry. A poem may or may not emerge; if one does, I have little idea what it may say or do. I work with eyes and fingers, pointing, highlighting, cutting and shuffling. I select and place text using body and instinct, not the thinking self. This non-intentional composition strives for the Daoist ideal of *wei wuwei*, action without action—egoless, selfless, apparently-effortless action. Moeller (2004) likens *wei wuwei* to Csikszentmihályi's (1990) concept of flow, the focused, effortless mental state also called 'the zone'. Aspiring to become *daojia shiren*, 'poet of Philosophical Daoism', I practise *yun you*, 'wandering like a cloud', 'searching everywhere' for the Way (Chen & Ji 2016: 178, 188).

Biographical note:

Jackson is a computer science graduate and poet. Her doctoral research at Edith Cowan University explores how poetry might harmonise 'Western' scientific and 'Eastern' spiritual worldviews. Her journal and anthology publications include *Westerly*, *Plumwood Mountain*, the *Australian Poetry Journal* and the forthcoming *Fremantle Press Anthology of Western Australian Poetry*. Jackson has published two books, a chapbook, seven zines and a CD. She won the 2014 Ethel Webb Bundell Poetry Prize. Jackson's many guest appearances include the Queensland and Tasmanian Poetry

Festivals. She is the founding editor of online poetry journal *Uneven Floor*. The National Library archives her collected works website www.thepoetjackson.com

Key words:

Poetry – non-intentional composition – emergence – Daoism – intertextuality

Ten poems

Note:

Following current scholarly practice, for Chinese words I use pinyin romanisation (as in *dao* and *Zhuangzi*) except where quoting sources that use the Wade-Giles system or its variants (*tao*, *Chuang-Tse*, *Chuang Tzu*).

between the bones of my temples

the silence has no colour no temper
and yet is as warm as my blood
according to Husserl¹, Descartes'
cogito includes not just thinking
as red as my reddest meat
on paper fingers riffle
but also feelings desires
I love therefore
in my throat a clicky gulp
refrigerator snarles and screams
I am if you're human love is a thing
of the flesh we don't speak of
its discordant gasmetal anthem
the wide sigh of a car passing
even platonic
love is about physical

the silence is the liquid inside
my eyes like ultrasound gel
the Enlightenment without love is
yang without yin anarchy without
a transmission medium the sounds so cold
the riffle white the sigh a black swathe
empathy or land unable to touch

that is the god that
when my breath goes out of my nostrils
goes out and becomes all the air
justifies murder in the name
drives the father to sell
the silence between

the stars in space my ears
into slavery that instructs
the mother abandon her
between the bones of my temples
a crow's voice from a blue
baby that legislates
the lovers they cannot
aeroplane's voice collecting sky
spitting it everywhere

but the Divine if you actually
experience for example
the rails singing green heralding
a crow's open voice
by the Headless Way²
is love benevolent

Process notes:

2016-06-07 Edited interleave from original texts
sounds.txt (cut into 10-syllable lines)
descartes.txt (cut into 9-syllable lines)

1. Husserl, 1913/2004
2. Shollond Trust, 2005

A coat of ashes

I fell into conversation with an ash-smeared and completely naked sadhu...

William Dalrymple (2010)

If I leave I will not order boxes
There will be no packaging tape
no moving men
no truck
I will take none of it

A blanket, a water bottle
A coat of ashes
A poem attributed
to the wrong author
A corrupt index
A broken database
A partial catalogue of songs
A blanket, a water bottle
A coat of ashes
A sky, a sun, a system
of monosyllables
The pure tone
of each electron
The pure functions
The math inside the atom
The muscles connecting
the trunk to the legs
The tendons connecting
the moon to the earth
The ligaments connecting
the brain to the bones
A blanket,
A coat of ashes

Spangles

*The Tao that can be trodden is not*¹ | *The random clicks of a geiger*²
All in the world know | *Sun flung spangles, dancing coins*³
Not to value and employ men | *Through very short times of space*³
The Tao is the emptiness | *Between the bones of my temples*

Heaven and Earth do not act | *Their books do not proceed*⁴
The valley spirit dies | *The mountain spirit rises up*
Heaven is long-enduring and earth | *Of newly-minted leptons*⁵
The highest excellence | *Spun in a synchrotron's shining turn*

It is better to leave a vessel unfilled | *Or leave it out in the rain*
When the intelligent and animal | *Meet, the ands are given back*
The thirty spokes unite in the one | *For thirty years of protest*
Colour's five hues | *Music's ∞* ⁶ *harmonies*

Favour and disgrace would seem equally | *Luminous compared to concrete*
We look at it, and we do | *Nothing we don't know how to do*
The skilful masters in old times | *Had cunts that curved space*
The vacancy should be brought | *To the feet of the blonde-eyed anarchists*

In the highest antiquity, did not know | *The arguments of men*
When the Great Tao | *Counting the sounds of an acausal realm*²
If we could renounce our sageness | *Without going bankrupt*
When we renounce learning | *And watch repeats of a reality show*

The grandest forms of active force | *Are all derived from hunger*
The partial becomes complete | *For something even more precious*⁷
Abstaining from speech marks him who is | *Who truly glarks*⁸ *the light*
He who stands on his tip toes | *Still can't reach the bulb*

1. The left-hand half-lines are the opening words of each of the first 24 chapters of the *Daodejing* in Legge's translation (Lao-Tse & Legge 2008), selected according to a metrical pattern.
2. Friedman & Donley 1985: 120.
3. Joyce 1922/2000: 45.
4. Durrell 1952: 31.
5. A certain type of elementary particle, such as an electron; also a small coin. From Greek *leptos*, small. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/lepton>

6. Infinity.
7. Jackson 2013: 89.
8. Computer hacker jargon: to understand something's meaning from its context.
<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/glark>

A failed poem



it was only when I had scrunched it up
to stop it trying to say something
that I felt I had made
a piece of art

trace

This dropped
as a bird fluttered free
from a claw. This:
black waves, soft sines
gathered and stitched
along a wand. This

is not an artefact. Between
its closed hooked ranks
its flaw, a slit, diffracts
the light. I long
to give the smooth folds
of this to my fingers, take
its intricate truth, but if

I caress, my adamant
digits will unrender this,
unpick, unzip, split, crush,
scramble its whispered Is.

On the turned face
of my fist, with the breathy tip
of this, I tickle the trace
of a wish.

The title may refer to Derrida's (1968/2004) concept of the trace.

The thing U2

how long to sing this song¹

rains bass-drum toms lights them with *qi*
pairs and sets
them down in the light *my feet*
upon a rock
on a good night

Larry plays his solo and hands it over

the cymbal-shimmer-rains
the bass-drum the seeking toms
underpins and lights them
showers them with glitter
sprinkles them with *qi*
then neatly pairs his sticks and sets them down
leaves
them in the light

Process notes:

2016-06-06 This is one of the two results of
doing a 5-syllable constraint and remix
on teaching-without-words-31aug15.txt

1. The quotations are from U2 (1983).

What is Tao?

An erasure from Zhuangzi, as quoted in Reninger (2015). Translator unknown.

out a hand

down a foot

a knee

like a dance what

is Tao?

when I first began

I would see me

all in one mass

after three years I saw

but now I see

with the eye free to work

space finds its own way

I cut no joint chop no bone

a year I have used this

it has cut

its edge

keen

when this finds space

there is all the room

I feel slow down watch

hold back move

and whump the part falls away

like a clod of earth

then I the blade

stand still

clean and put it away

The fundamental forces dream

There are five fundamental forces,
said my son.

Gravitational, Electromagnetic, the Strong, the Weak,
and Hunger.

Hunger

is the fundamental force
from which all the others are derived,

I said.

And there are accordingly five
fundamental particles.

The one associated with Hunger is called

[]

the universe	an opera
composed	of enormous
and microscopic	silences

Process notes:

2015-07-24 edited from original draft

Deleted a line about John Cage

Deleted a line about my own subjectivity

2015-10-01 retyped from edited printout where I deleted unnecessary words, changed symphony to opera, tried two-column layout (aha!) and changed title.

Then had a go with "centred caesura" columns as used by Ron Pretty (2015): but the silences in this are all the same length!

Played further with layout possibilities.

Original version was left aligned + right aligned.

Both columns right aligned seems best. Sense of motion. Starts with a silence. Looks a bit like the Enterprise.

The light

The light has to get somewhere, touch something, to exist
You take acid as we're sitting in the air
The old woman pours whitewash over her husband's head
We're on the left
There's no box, no comfort zone
Anything but raw paper is a compromise
Two girls with acne and stringy bleached hair
Occupy Wall Street
A month in the hole
In solitary
The way to connect is to work together
I had a clear vision
Looming orange clouds, an apocalyptic sunset
Something that makes you smaller or channels your movement

The light has to get somewhere
A curve through spacetime
A function
A journey, transmission, idea
In the dream we're on a plane, rows of seats, going somewhere
We don't know what we want but it isn't this
People keep pets
The husband is grey and decrepit
If your mother couldn't hold you while you cried
hold yourself now
Try to hide yourself
If you throw up the next morning
does that mean you've poisoned yourself?
When you look for yourself as a thing
there is nothing there

The light has to get somewhere, touch something
Is that the same t-shirt?
Occupy Breastfeeding
Howl, keen, be the banshee of yourself, announcing your death
I take scissors out of your hand
You're taking acid
Seeing the nothing inside yourself
A curve through spacetime
A function
A journey, transmission, idea
In touching something, the light

is not destroyed, but changed
In the dream
the husband is grey and decrepit
The woman pours whitewash
Anything but raw paper is a compromise
The noises when I cried and cried frightened me

The light has to get somewhere, touch something, to exist
People keep pets instead
Curl into a ball, try to hide yourself
We don't know what we want but it isn't this
Fenced in, fenced out
You in the aisle seat
I in the middle
Light is nothing, only
potential
When you look for yourself as a thing
there is nothing
The way to connect is to work
against each other
In touching something, the light
is not destroyed, but changed
Reflected, absorbed, refracted
Tear at your clothes and hair, bite yourself

The light has to get somewhere
I smile a little
Acid, you're taking acid
Light is nothing, only
potential, just
an idea
Occupy Everything
Looming orange clouds
The window seat free
No-one looking out
This is not conditional
A month in the hole
Two months
Give you time to think
What if the neighbours come
and try to cheer me up?
Not depressed
Not ill

Don't need anything
In full control
of self, life, responses
An adult
Tear at your clothes and hair, bite yourself
I don't know what I want
If your father couldn't hold you while you cried
hold yourself now
In touching something, the light
is not destroyed, but changed
Polarised, amplified, focussed
There's no box
This is not
conditional
You don't have to be
a good boy, a good girl
I had a clear vision
The light
has to touch something



“The light” under construction

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The poem “[]” was first published in *foam:e*.

“The light” was published first in *Uneven Floor* and later in *Writ Poetry Review*.

Research statement

Research Background

These poems sample the author's PhD project, which explores how poetry might harmonise 'Western' scientific and 'Eastern' spiritual worldviews, focusing primarily on modern physics, philosophical Daoism, and the ecosystemic perspective afforded by complexity theory. During the past two hundred years relations between poetry and science have been characterised by struggle, but recently, as shown by the critical scholarship of Robert Crawford (2006), Kurt Brown (2001) and others, they have started to become more complementary. This is partly because environmental and political concerns have provided a common enemy, but also because the nature of science has changed to accommodate relativity, quantum theory and the study of complex systems. These poems acknowledge science's authority without privileging it over more ancient investigative modes such as the mystical or meditative.

Research contribution

These poems add significantly to the small corpus of Daoist-influenced English-language poetry, which includes twentieth-century work by Randolph Stow and Judith Wright, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century work by Ursula K. Le Guin. The project innovates thematically by attempting to juxtapose the insights of Daoism with those of physics and complexity theory. It also innovates theoretically, contributing to the scholarly discipline of creative writing by drawing upon both conceptual and orthodox poetics to propose and test a methodology, non-intentional composition, that strives toward the Daoist ideal of *wei wuwei* (action without action). It builds on Hazel Smith's (2006) emergence-based writing model.

Research significance

Some of these poems have been published in well-known literary journals *foam:e*, *Writ Poetry Review*, and *Poetry Matters*. 'A coat of ashes' was shortlisted for the *Poetry Matters* Competition. Another poem from this project is to be published in Australia's leading online poetry journal *Cordite*. To date, the project has resulted in two invited public readings: Perth Poetry Club (24 September 2016) and Smiths Alternative Bookshop, Canberra (4 December 2016). At the 2016 Australian Universities Language and Literature Association Conference the author will speak on 'Poetry meets science'. UK-based literary journal *The High Window* has accepted her proposal for an essay on Daoist influences in Australian and overseas poetry.

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