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TAO TE CHING

by Lao Tzu

Publisher Sebastiano Vottari

Preface

On the threshold of every wonder

There's a particular embarrassment, almost vertigo, in speaking before a book that opens by declaring the deception of every word. "The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name." These are the first two lines of this work, and they are also, for those who prepare to introduce it, a sort of warning and preemptive condemnation. Because what a preface promises—to explain, to orient, to disclose meaning—is precisely what the Tao Te Ching, with its first sentence, declares impossible. The book is born by turning its back on discourse; and whoever prefaces it finds himself in the paradoxical position of having to speak at length about something whose first lesson is silence.

Yet Lao Tzu, assuming this name truly designates a man and not rather a tradition, a chorus of ancient voices condensed into a single breath, wrote. Despite everything, he wrote. Five thousand characters, or thereabouts: a small book that fits in the palm of a hand and has spanned twenty-five centuries without running out, like the bellows in the fifth chapter that "is empty but does not run out; the more it moves, the more comes out." Even the sage, therefore, yields to the word—provided that the word knows its insufficiency, provided that it points to the moon and does not pretend to be the moon. It is in this spirit, with the same conscious insufficiency, that these introductory pages dare to precede the text: not to replace it, not to domesticate it,

but to accompany the reader to the threshold and then withdraw, as befits any good guest, of whom the fifteenth chapter says he must be "respectful, as a guest," and then vanish, "like melting ice."

I. The legend and the origin

Tradition recounts a scene, and it tells it with the moving sobriety of true things, or things that deserve to be true. Lao Tzu, the "Old Master," was supposedly an archivist at the court of the Zhou dynasty, guardian of the documents and memory of a world that was crumbling. These were the centuries historians call the Warring States: ancient China was torn apart by endless wars, principalities devoured one another, and the word "order" had become a nostalgic name for something that no longer existed. In that chaos, the old guardian decided to leave. He mounted a buffalo—so the image handed down by painters has it—and headed west, toward the mountain pass beyond which began the unknown, the land of the barbarians, the nothingness of borders.

At the pass, a guard named Yin Xi recognized him, or sensed who he was, and asked him not to depart without leaving a trace of his wisdom. Lao Tzu stopped long enough to write this book, then continued on his journey and disappeared forever. No one heard from him again. It is a perfect end, worthy of his thought: the master who completes his work and retires, "Having accomplished his work and gained fame, retire: this is the Way of Heaven" (chapter nine); the man who "leaves no trace," like the good traveler of the twenty-seventh chapter; the one who "estranges himself and preserves himself," according to the marvelous formula of the seventh.

Scholars have debated for centuries whether this man ever existed, whether the book is the work of a single hand or the stratification of generations, whether "Lao Tzu" is an individual or an institution of wisdom. The question, however legitimate and fascinating, ultimately matters little to the reader. The Tao Te Ching has the quality of the great waters it itself speaks of: it does not have a single, recognizable source, but seems to be fed by a thousand underground veins, and like the rivers and seas of the sixty-sixth chapter "are the kings of a hundred valleys because they know how to live beneath them," so this text dominates the centuries precisely because it does not impose itself, because it has no author's name to defend, because it offers itself humbly and thus becomes indelible. "From antiquity to today, his name has never faded" (chapter twenty-one): and it has not faded, perhaps, precisely because his name was never a possession.

II. The architecture of an absence

The book you hold in your hands is divided, according to the traditional order, into eighty-one short chapters, divided into two parts. The first, from chapters one to thirty-seven, is dedicated to the *Tao*, the Way: that bottomless principle, "empty, yet not exhausted by use," which precedes heaven and earth and from which all things come and then return. The second, from chapters thirty-eight to eighty-first, is devoted to *Te*: a word that translates, imperfectly, as "Virtue," but which rather signifies the power, efficacy, and intimate force with which the Tao manifests itself in things and men. It is not the moralistic virtue of precepts, nor obedience to a code; rather, it is the natural goodness of that which follows its own nature effortlessly, like falling water, like wood that has not yet been carved.

Hence the title, *Tao Te Ching* : the "Book (*Ching*) of the Way (*Tao*) and of Virtue (*Te*)". Three words for a work that distrusts words; a title that is already, in miniature, the entire paradox of the text.

Anyone who opens it for the first time expecting a philosophical treatise, with its definitions, its demonstrations, its orderly progression from premise to conclusion, will be disoriented. The *Tao Te Ching* doesn't demonstrate: it says. It doesn't argue: it shows. It proceeds through flashes of inspiration, through images that flash on and off, through aphorisms that at times seem contradictory yet, like two sides of the same coin, support each other. "Being and non-being generate each other. Difficult and easy complement each other" (chapter two). Its logic is not that of either/or, of either/or, but that of both/and, of the breath that alternates inhalation and exhalation and never chooses just one of the two. It is a thought that moves like the *Tao* itself: "It wanders everywhere and never tires" (chapter twenty-five).

For this reason, the book must be read in its own way, which we'll discuss at the end. For now, suffice it to say that its brevity is deceptive: each of these chapters, which often take up less than a page, contains worlds. They are wells, not puddles. You can gaze into them for a long time, and the longer you gaze, the deeper you descend.

III. The great waters: the themes

If one were to indicate—against the very spirit of the work, but for the sake of the reader who is just beginning—the main paths that run through this ancient forest, at least a few could be highlighted. They are not separate chapters or distinct doctrines: rather, they are

the veins of that single water that flows from one end of the book to the other.

First of all, there is **non-action**, the famous *wu Wei*, perhaps the most misunderstood and most precious concept in all of Taoism. It is not laziness, it is not passivity, it is not renunciation. It is action without force, the gesture that follows the nature of things rather than violating it, the supreme efficacy of those who operate without leaving traces and achieve without fighting. "The Tao never acts, yet nothing remains undone" (chapter thirty-seven): this is the heart of the mystery. Just as the farmer does not pull the plants to make them grow but lets them grow, so the sage governs by emptying rather than filling, yielding rather than imposing, "and teaches without speaking" (chapter two). It is the most difficult of disciplines, because it requires unlearning the anxiety of doing, that mania for intervention that in the modern West we have erected as a supreme virtue and that the Tao Te Ching, with gentle obstinacy, unmasks as a source of ruin: "He who acts fails, he who grasps loses" (chapter sixty-four).

Intertwined with inaction is the great **metaphor of water**, which runs through the book like a water table. "The highest virtue is like water. Water benefits all things and does not contend. It dwells in places that men despise" (chapter eight). And again, in chapter seventy-eight, with one of the most beautiful formulas ever written on the strength of the weak: "In the world nothing is softer and weaker than water, yet nothing is better for conquering the hard and the strong." Water does not fight, yet it erodes rock; it yields to every obstacle, yet it reaches the sea; it lies low, yet it becomes river and ocean. In it, Lao Tzu saw the perfect image of his teaching: the victory of yielding, the triumph of that which bends over that which resists. "The soft conquers

the hard, the weak conquers the strong" (chapter thirty-six). Those who have lived long enough know how true this is, and how difficult it is to believe.

There is the surprising, almost scandalous **utility of emptiness**. No chapter says it better than the eleventh, which is perhaps the clearest parable in the entire book: the thirty spokes of a wheel converge at the hub, but it is the empty hole at the center that allows the wheel to turn; clay is shaped to make a vase, but it is the empty cavity that makes it useful; doors and windows are opened in a room, but it is the empty space that makes it habitable. "Therefore: being is opportunity, non-being is utility." In an age—ours—obsessed with fullness, accumulation, the saturation of every moment and every surface, this praise of emptiness sounds like a salutary heresy, an invitation to leave blank spaces in the densely packed page of our lives.

There is **raw wood**, the uncarved block— *pu* in Chinese—which is the Taoist emblem of original simplicity, of the integrity that precedes all artifice. When wood is worked, it becomes a tool, that is, an instrument, something specialized and therefore limited; as long as it remains raw, it potentially contains all forms. "Preserve raw nature, diminish selfishness, reduce desires" (chapter nineteen). The Taoist sage aspires not to refinement but to simplicity, not to accumulated wisdom but to a kind of learned ignorance: "He who studies increases every day. He who follows the Tao decreases every day" (chapter forty-eight). It is a journey backward, a return to the origin, a subtraction rather than an addition. In a world that measures value in terms of growth and possession, the Tao Te Ching proposes the dizzying opposite challenge: to become like a newborn, return to the root, strip oneself to the essential.

There is the **dark feminine**, which is perhaps the book's most profound and unconventional insight. Against every mythology of virile strength, domination, and conquest, Lao Tzu exalts the valley, the female, water, darkness, emptiness—everything that is lowly, welcoming, receptive, and maternal. "The spirit of the valley never dies. It is the Dark Female. The door of the Dark Female is the origin of heaven and earth" (chapter six). And again, in the twenty-eighth: "Know the masculine, but guard the feminine." Authentic power, for the Tao Te Ching, lies not in striking but in welcoming, not in rising but in lowering, not in taking but in giving. "The Female always conquers the Male with stillness. In stillness lies humility" (chapter sixty-one). It is a theology of the womb rather than of the sword, and its relevance, in an age that is just beginning to question its own idols of dominion, needs no underlining.

Finally, there is **political wisdom**—because the Tao Te Ching is also, and perhaps originally above all, a manual for those who govern. But what a strange government it teaches! The ideal sovereign is one whose "people barely know exists" (chapter seventeen), one who acts so little and so discreetly that, once the work is done, the people can say: "We did it alone." He is the exact opposite of the charismatic leader, the strongman, the savior who occupies every stage: he is the invisible ruler, who "governs a large state as one would fry a small fish" (chapter sixtieth), that is, without constantly turning it over, without stirring, letting things find their own order. And there is, underlying this, a melancholy distrust of laws, prohibitions, and decrees: "The more laws and decrees are promulgated, the more thieves and plunderers there are" (chapter fifty-seven). The political dream of Taoism is a small state with few inhabitants, where people rediscover the sweetness of food, the beauty of simple clothing, the security of their homes, and live

peacefully into old age, so close to the neighboring village "that one can hear the cocks crowing and the dogs barking," yet serene, contented, without the need to look elsewhere (chapter eightieth). It is a utopia, of course. But utopias serve to measure the distance between what we are and what we could be.

Above all these themes, gathering and transcending them, finally watches over the teaching of the **three treasures** that Lao Tzu confesses to carefully guarding: "the first is compassion, the second is parsimony, the third is not daring to stand before the world" (chapter sixty-seven). Compassion, moderation, humility: if one had to summarize in three words a book that distrusts any summary, perhaps these would suffice.

IV. The Necessary Betrayal: On Translation

Every translation is a betrayal, says the old Italian adage— *translator, traitor* —and in the case of the Tao Te Ching, the betrayal is more radical than elsewhere. Classical Chinese, in which the work was written, is a language of a density that our Western languages can only dream of: characters that have no defined number, gender, or tense, sentences balanced on deliberate ambiguities, verses that can be read four or five different, yet legitimate, ways. A single ideogram can mean, depending on the context and the reader's ear, things that in Italian require entire, divergent sentences. Translating this text means, with every line, choosing; and every choice is both a gain and a loss, a path taken and a hundred paths abandoned.

Translations of the Tao Te Ching are now countless, in every language of the world, and no two are alike. Some have turned it into a poem, some into a mystical treatise, some into a political breviary, some into a meditation

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manual. Each era has read its own question and found its own answer, which is not a flaw but a testament to its greatness: truly living books are those capable of answering questions their authors could not have foreseen.

The version offered here has chosen, it seems to me, the path of clarity and sobriety. It has renounced frills, preciousness, and the temptation—always lurking when translating sacred texts—to obscure the profound, as if depth and obscurity were the same thing. It has preferred a plain, clear, flowing language; a language that neither hides nor winks, faithful in this to the very spirit of the Tao Te Ching, which repeatedly warns us that "sincere words are not elegant, elegant words are not sincere" (chapter eighty-one). The reader will find, in these pages, a Lao Tzu who speaks with the voice of water: without fuss, without argument, with that disarming simplicity that is the most difficult thing to achieve and convey. And this, in a text that makes simplicity its pinnacle, is no small achievement.

Naturally, one can argue about this or that rendering, prefer a different nuance elsewhere, return to the Chinese text, or compare other versions: it's the perpetual and fruitful game that every great classic inspires, and a sign that it's still alive. But one essential thing can be expected of a translation: that it open doors. This one does.

V. Wisdom is one: the curator's plan

Those who reach the end of this volume will discover that the Tao Te Ching is not offered alone. The final pages contain the *Teachings* of the editor, Sebastiano Vottari, and it is right that the reader know, from the very beginning, with what intention and in what spirit this ancient Chinese wisdom is offered to him.

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The intuition that animates these pages, and gives meaning to the entire undertaking, is universalistic and ecumenical in nature. The editor explicitly compares the Tao Te Ching to the *Gathas* of Zarathustra, the Torah, the Gospels, the Koran, the Sikh *Guru Granth Sahib*— "and every ancient or modern text in which there is hidden or manifest wisdom"—in the belief that beneath the multiplicity of names and forms lives a single truth, a single breath of wisdom that human traditions have each grasped and transmitted in their own way. It is an ancient and noble position, which scholars sometimes call "perennial philosophy": the idea that the great religions and the great wisdoms are so many paths ascending, from different sides, toward the same summit; so many dialects of a single original language; so many fingers pointing, each from its own point, to the same moon.

There is something profoundly coherent in preceding, or rather following, the Tao Te Ching with such a vision. For Lao Tzu's book is itself, above all others, the great master of distrust of names. "The name that can be named is not the eternal Name": those who have assimilated this lesson understand that the names by which different traditions refer to the absolute—the Tao, Ahura Mazda, YHWH, God, Allah, the Name the Sikhs chant—are so many different gateways to a single "Mystery of mysteries" that none of those gateways can contain or exhaust (chapter one). The editor's proposal, with its personal synthesis and its firm profession of faith in "one greater God, who is more than one God," should be accepted for what it avowedly is: not a neutral historical exposition of religions, but a spiritual testimony, an invitation, a personal path offered with conviction to those who wish to follow it. The reader will approach it with the freedom and respect due to any sincere search for the absolute; and will find in it, whether or not he agrees with the individual formulas, an echo of that same

aspiration toward the One that runs through the Tao Te Ching from one end to the other—"In ancient times these things attained the One" (chapter thirty-nine)—and which unites, beyond the centuries and latitudes, all those who have raised their gaze beyond the visible.

Whether truth is truly one under all names, or whether each tradition preserves its own irreducible difference, is a question for each individual to judge according to their conscience and reason: the Tao Te Ching, after all, teaches us to be wary of overly square certainties. "The wise man is square but not sharp, angular but does not wound" (chapter fifty-eight). Suffice it to have alerted the reader to the horizon within which the editor has chosen to place this work: a horizon of peace, of dialogue, of the search for the hidden unity of things. Which is, ultimately, a very Taoist horizon.

VI. How to read this book

And so we come, almost without realizing it, to the last thing a preface can usefully say: how to read such a book.

Not like a novel, whose pages one devours to find out how it ends—nothing ends here, or rather, it ends where it began, because "the return is the movement of the Tao" (chapter fortieth). Not like a manual, from which one extracts operating instructions—those looking for ready-made recipes here would be disappointed, and perhaps rightly so. Not, above all, like a text to be understood once and for all and then put away on the shelf of known things.

The Tao Te Ching should be read like drinking from a spring: little by little, returning to it. A chapter a day, perhaps, and the same chapter reread after months, years, or even stages of life. Because the most

extraordinary quality of this book is that it changes with the reader. Verses that seemed obscure at twenty become illuminated at forty; those that seemed obvious at forty reveal unsuspected depths at sixty. It's not the book that changes—it's five thousand characters that have remained immobile for twenty-five centuries—it's we who, as we age and change, bring fresh eyes each time, and thus find a new book each time. "What is old is renewed" (chapter twenty-two): this also applies to the way we read it.

It must be read slowly, then, against every instinct of our hasty age. Its sentences are short but not quick: they ask to be paused, ruminated upon, left to settle. Many of them will seem, on first reading, paradoxical or even absurd—"He who knows does not speak. He who speaks does not know" (chapter fifty-six); "True words seem paradoxical" (chapter seventy-eight). The editor himself, moreover, knows well that "precisely because it is great, it seems absurd. If it seemed wise, it would have become small long ago" (chapter sixty-seven). We must not rush to resolve these paradoxes: we must inhabit them, let them work within us like yeast in dough, trusting that, beneath the apparent contradiction, lies a truth that ordinary logic cannot grasp but that something within us, deeper than logic, recognizes.

And finally, it must be read with humility—the same humility the book preaches on every page. Not to possess it, for it cannot be possessed, but to let it possess us a little. "My words are easy to understand, easy to put into practice. But no one in the world knows how to understand them, no one knows how to put them into practice" (chapter seventieth): it is the sweet, smiling melancholy of all true wisdom, which knows itself to be simple and knows that its very simplicity makes it, to the complicated men that we are, almost inaccessible.

VII. Leave

I end where I began, with silence.

I have spoken too much, as always happens to those who set out to introduce the inexpressible; and now it's up to these final lines to do what the entire book teaches: to retreat. "Once the work is completed, he does not linger on it. And precisely because he does not linger on it, it does not abandon him" (chapter two). Let my words, then, retreat before his, as is fitting; let this preface vanish as every threshold must vanish once crossed.

To the reader who is about to enter, I wish what one might wish for one who approaches water: that he may drink without exhausting it, that he may reflect on it without disturbing it, that he may emerge quenched and yet thirstier than before. The Tao Te Ching offers neither definitive answers nor cheap consolations. It offers something rarer and more enduring: a lifelong companionship, a patient voice that never tires of repeating, in a thousand guises, a single ancient truth—that strength lies in yielding, fullness in emptiness, wisdom in humility, and peace in non-strife.

"The Way of Heaven benefits and does not harm. The Way of the wise is to act without arguing" (chapter eighty-one). With these words the book ends; and with them, wishing you a good journey, I too leave.

The door is open. Beyond, "the door of all wonder."
Enter.

PART ONE: THE TAO (Chapters 1-37)

1.

The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name. Nameless is the origin of heaven and earth. Named is the mother of all creatures. Thus, he who is without desire contemplates its secret. He who has desire contemplates only its boundary. These two have the same origin but different names. Their unity is mystery. Mystery of mysteries, the gateway to all wonder.

2.

Under the sky everyone recognizes

END PREVIEW