Sarah Howe - Artefacts of Writing

In her exquisite first collection, Sarah Howe [1] explores a dual heritage, journeying back to Hong Kong in search of her roots.

1. So says the publisher’s blurb on the back of Howe’s Loop of Jade [2] (2015). Rehearsing other familiar phrases, it goes on, calling the collection a meditation on hybridity? and praising Howe for crossing the bounds of time, race and language?. This is blurb-speak and so perhaps forgivable. And yet what really makes Loop of Jade worth taking seriously, as a collection of poems rather than a disguised autobiography, are the many ways in which it challenges this kind of language?and the dubious organicist legacy all that talk of ‘roots’ and ‘hybridity’ unthinkingly recalls?by inventively confronting questions of heritage, writing, translation and language itself as conundrums, not givens or known quantities, opening up fresh streams of intercultural thought and feeling for a new generation of readers. Unlike many of the contemporary writers I discuss in this book and elsewhere on this site, the youngest of whom are baby boomers of the early 1960s, Howe was born in 1983. The daughter of a Chinese mother and an English father?hence the ‘dual heritage’?she moved as a child from Hong Kong to England where she has lived ever since.

2. The challenges start with the collection’s epigraph: an extended quotation from The Analytical Philosophy of John Wilkins [3] (1942), Jorge Luis Borges’s [4] characteristically jocoserious fable-essay critiquing European language philosophy, or at least the branch that dreamed of creating a perfectly transparent, universally comprehensible language that might serve as a secure ground for knowledge. Wilkins’s main contribution to this tradition, which can also be traced from Francis Bacon [5] to the positivists of the early twentieth century (see the ?Strip Teasy? post), was An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language [6] (1668). Borges is not wholly critical of these aspirations. In his mock-scholarly voice, he calls Wilkins’s classificatory schemes ‘gifted’. He also acknowledges that the ‘human patterns? language inescapably creates serve many vital purposes. Yet, like Fritz Mauthner [7] whose Wörterbuch der Philosophie [8] (1910) he references, and indeed like David Hume [9] whose Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion [10] (1779) he quotes, he doubts these ‘patterns’ can ever be definitive or secure and insists on ‘the impossibility of penetrating the divine pattern of the universe?.

2.1 To highlight the foibles of Wilkins’s project, Borges compares it to a wholly fictional catalogue of animals, citing an actual German sinologist as his spoof-source, giving Howe her epigraph:

These ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies remind us of those which doctor Franz Kuhn [11] attributes to a certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge. In its remote pages it is written that the animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine
camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies?

This is as Howe has it except for one detail: she changes the category ?et cetera? to ?others?. She also modifies the encyclopaedia?s title slightly, but otherwise her version is identical to the wording Lilia Graciela Vázquez chose in her translation from 1999. It worth noting that this translation itself raises questions relevant to the linguistic and philosophical concerns Howe shares with Borges. For instance, where Borges has ?que se agitan como locos [12]? (literally ?that are shaken like crazy?) for (i), Vázquez gives ?frenzied?, arguably a different category of animal altogether.

2.2 This is not the end of the epigraph?s challenges, however. In the first of a series of scholarly notes at the end of the volume, Howe identifies her own source not as Vázquez but as Michel Foucault?s [13] The Order of Things [14] (1970; Les Mots et les choses, 1966), the wording of which is none the less the same as Vázquez?s. This not only makes her epigraph a citation of a citation which is itself a translation of a translation. It gives it a further, specifically literary significance. Often taken as a re-statement of the linguistic relativity thesis in (French) postmodernist terms?language is a prison-house, all categories are arbitrary, etc. (see the ?Re-reading Humboldt? post?)Foucault?s citation of Borges in his own preface is itself tricky to read. In that context it is both a biographical anecdote describing the initial inspiration for his own enquiry into language and forms of knowledge, and an object lesson in why literature is so central to his thinking. For him, Borges?s parodic catalogue provoked a peculiarly literary experience of, as he puts it, ?the laughter that shattered?all the familiar landmarks of my thought?our thought, the thought the bears the stamp of our age and our geography? (xxv). The ?our? here refers primarily to French thinkers of the modern era (roughly from the late-nineteenth century), though, given the scale of Foucault?s ambition, it would be fair to say it includes the inheritors of a wider and longer Euro-American intellectual tradition as well.

2.2.1 Foucault explains this literary experience more fully in the book itself. In a section entitled ?The being of language? (2.V) he notes that innovative literary writing?i.e. what he meant by the term ?literature???achieved autonomous existence? over the course of the nineteenth century?he traces a line ?from Hölderlin [15] to Mallarmé [16] and on to Antonin Artaud [17]??making it a kind of ?counter-discourse?, not least to certain forms of scientific and philosophical thought in the Euro-American tradition, capable of shattering ?the representative or signifying function of language? and thereby recalling or unforgetting its ?raw being? as a culturally-embedded, visceral and sensory experience, whether aural or visual (43-44). Later in the book he argues that signs of this emergent ?counter-discourse? can first be seen in Don Quixote [18] (1605). The Foucault who hovers around Loop of Jade via Borges is, then, not the caricature hyper-relativistic ?French postmodernist? but the figure who insisted, like the late Wittgenstein [19], that ?the role of philosophy is not to discover what is hidden, but to make visible precisely what is visible, that is to say, to show that which is so close, which is so immediate, which is so intimately linked to us, that because of that we do not perceive it? (1994, 540-41). All we need to add is that philosophy done in this spirit takes its inspiration in part from some forms of literary writing?consider not only Foucault?s response to Borges and Cervantes [20] but the shattering koan [21]-like way in which Joyce?s Finnegans Wake (1939) makes it impossible to forget that writing is a mode of graphic communication in its own right (see Chapter 3 of the book and ?Fourth Proposition?).

3. Drawing on her ?dual heritage?, Howe uses the interplay of English [22] and Cantonese [23], and of the English and the Chinese writing systems, to foster her own koan-like forms of unforgetting, provoking laughter, bafflement, curiosity and more, particularly for readers intimately familiar with the graphic medium of English or the landmarks of Euro-American thought. In ?Islands?, for instance, the I-figure, relishing the sound of words, rolls the names of Hong Kong?s surrounding islands, rendered in Cantonese and italicized pinyin [24] as ?Ping Chau [25], Cheung Chau [26], Lantau [27], Lamma [28]??, round her mouth ?till they were strange again, like savouring/those New Year candies/small translucent moons/waning on the tongue?. By contrast, in ?(m) Having just broken the water pitcher?, one of the fourteen poems in the
collection that take Borges’ encyclopaedia as their starting point, the I-figure, this time savouring the (invisible but not hidden) graphic details of writing, is surprised it was not till her ?thirtieth year? that she ?learned to see? the poignant connection between the phrase ?plum blossom? and the word ?regret? through the subtle variation in the radical [29] of the associated Chinese characters, ? and ? respectively, which make the one a ?sidelong stroke/of gum-suspended soot away? fr...
diplomatic familial tensions these customary differences provoke have a linguistic dimension as well. Referring to the seemingly arbitrary interdict against pork, the I-figure wryly notes: \textit{Wikipedia\cite{43}] says it comes down from Leviticus,/how your God labelled creatures unclean to ingest?.
5. The questions of culture and language Howe poses across the collection come together powerfully in ?(l) Others?, her one alteration to Borges?s spoof catalogue, which uses four writing systems (English, Chinese, Hebrew and Greek), six languages (the four plus Latin and French), as well as quotations from Genesis 22:17 [44] and Darwin?s [45] On the Origin of Species [46] (1859), to reflect mordantly on the puzzle of inheritance, beginning with its dubious organicist legacies: ?I think about the meaning of blood, which is (simply) a metaphor/and race, which has been a terrible pun. After recalling the etymological genealogies linking the Latin ?castus? (?clean?) to the English words ?chaste? and ?caste?, the I-figure then contemplates ?our future children?s skeins? which include mixed (polluted in Pound?s radio lexicon) threads of ?English, ??? [Cantonese], Francaise d?Egypte, ?????????? [Yiddish, literally ?mother-tongue?]?. Like Loop of Jade itself, the poem plays with interlingual etymologies, cross-scripts and punning sounds, offering ?a personal Babel?, unique to Howe, ?a muddle. A Mendel [47]!? which, if it does not encourage her readers to write their own Borgesian-inspired Order of Things, should at least shatter their intimately familiar linguistic and conceptual landmarks, opening their eyes and ears to the intricacies of other languages, writing systems and cultures and, who knows, perhaps even to the invisible but not hidden aspects of their own, all of which ?have been, and are being, evolved.? These are the grammatically precise final words of Origin of Species, which Howe quotes implicitly comparing language change to species evolution. The difference, however, is that natural selection is blind, or at least purposeless, and without conscience; whereas cultures and languages change in part because of the unpredictable creativity of writers like Howe (see ?Third Proposition?).

REFERENCES


Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (London: Tavistock, 1970). Notoriously the publisher did not make the translator?s name public.


Meg Jing Zeng, ?From #MeToo to #RiceBunny: how social media users are campaigning in China [33]?; The Conversation, 6 February 2018.

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