

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 the 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'. Throughout he also mocks the pretensions of those, including the academic guardians of Spanish, who think their own language uniquely expressive or transparent.

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? (xv). 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

悔

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, 悔 and 梅

梅

respectively, which make the one a 'sidelong stroke/of gum-suspended soot away' from the

other. The poem has an epigraph from the Zen master Wumen Huikai's [30] The Gateless Gate [31] (1228) describing another relevant language-related koan: 'Baizhang picked up a water pitcher, set it on a rock, and posed this question: "If you cannot call it a water pitcher, what do you call it?"' This is a reworked version of Huikai's koan 40 which is usually entitled 'Tipping over a Water Vase' [32]. Updating this emancipatory Buddhist tradition of creative doubt, Howe links it to the many coded forms of word-play Chinese bloggers use to evade censorship (see also '(j) Innumerable?'). The practice continues. In 2018 campaigners in the Chinese #metoo movement [33] inventively crossed languages and sign-systems to get around the surveillance systems, combining the emojis for 'rice' and 'bunny', the related Chinese characters (米 and 兔) and their pronunciation ('mi' and 'tu').



4. Yet Howe's heritage is not 'dual' in any straightforward sense and certainly not hermetically bound by 'time, race and language'. It is an inheritance of numerous intercultural moments, many ambiguous, redundant and deficient, or at least freighted with their own questionable history, which date from the first major European encounters with Chinese culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and extend to the present. With an implicit nod to Umberto Eco's [34] The Search for the Perfect Language [35] (1995), '(k) Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush' recalls the arrival of 'the first Jesuits' in 'Canton' [36] who 'believed/they'd stumbled on the lost language of Eden'—Adam's perfect tongue—which, like Wilkins's wishfully universal language, 'named the animals one by one'. On this occasion, however, their eyes beguile rather than re-educate them as they claim 'to see/in that strangely branching pagan script/the fletched fir of tree' in the character 悔 and 'the strung crescent of moon' in 梅, forgetting 'words' tenuous moorings. Focusing on another fraught moment in this long history, '(g) Stray dogs' describes Ezra Pound [37] locked in his 'traitor's cage' like a 'lost dog' in Pisa, following the anti-Semitic, pro-Fascist speeches [38] he broadcast on Italian radio in the early 1940s, but still carrying a 'dog-eared' copy of Confucius's [39] Analects [40] in his pocket, testimony to his own sustained interest in (a garbled version of) Chinese culture. Less ambiguously, '(d) Sucking pigs' references the contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing's [41] A Case Study of [42] Transference [42] (1993/4, see below), an absurdist Zen-inspired live-art installation that shatters the pretensions of literacy itself: gallery goers watch bemusedly as real pigs stamped with pseudo-Chinese characters and pseudo-English words get on with their animal lives in a pen strewn with discarded books. The poem itself is an understated riposte to Pound. It is about the comic awkwardness of a cross-cultural marriage between a Chinese woman ('I') and a Jewish man ('you'), given the Chinese tradition of gifting roast suckling pigs on such occasions, but, as the Xu Bing reference intimates, the

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: Wikipedia [43] says it comes down from Leviticus,/how your God labelled creatures unclean to ingest?.



Xu Bing ?A Case Study of Transference? Performance with two live pigs inked with fake English and Chinese characters, discarded books, cage 1993-1994 Enclosure: 500 x 500 cm Performance at Han Mo Arts Center, Beijing, 22 January 1994 ?? ?????????????? ?????????????????? © Xu Bing Studio

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], *Française 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

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Jorge Luis Borges, *Otras inquisiciones, 1937-1952* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1952).

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

???. 'La philosophie analytique de la politique' [51], in D. Defert and F. Ewald, eds., *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). I have cited Ann Orford's translation: see 'In Praise of Description' [52], *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 25 (2012), 617. In the original French, which dates from 1978, Foucault says: 'Il y a longtemps qu'on sait que le rôle de la philosophie n'est pas de découvrir ce qui est caché, mais de rendre visible ce qui précisément est visible, c'est-à-dire de faire apparaître ce qui est si proche, ce qui est si immédiat, ce qui est si intimement lié à nous-mêmes qu'à cause de cela nous ne le percevons pas.'

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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- [3] <http://www.alamut.com/subj/artiface/language/johnWilkins.html>
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