

Art and Daoism in “How Wang Fo Was Saved”

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Abstract—In “How Wang Fo Was Saved”, the essay distinguishes three kinds of people in terms of their relationship to the world of art: the outsiders, the insiders, and the in-between. Wang Fo and Ling are the only insiders who really follow Dao (the way of all things). The essay argues that, Daoism is not only seen in Wang Fo’s paintings, it’s also lived by Wang Fo and Ling.

Index Terms—How Wang Fo Was Saved, art, Daoism

I. INTRODUCTION

Yu Hua, a Chinese contemporary writer and one of many admirers of Yourcenar (1903-1987) in China, once observed that “How Wang Fo was saved” is a Chinese tale pervaded with French aroma (Yu Hua, 1999). The overlapping of seemingly Chinese scenes with western tastes creates something that is neither totally Chinese nor particularly western. Thus, in Yourcenar’s hand, the Imperial Palace is made into an exotic place: the shapes of the square and rooms were such that they “symbolized the seasons, the cardinal points, the male and the female, longevity, and the prerogatives of power;” while “the doors swung on their hinges with a musical note, and were placed in such a manner that one followed the entire scale when crossing the palace from east to west.” (Yourcenar, p.9) Not only is the story set in an ambiguous space where east mingles with west, it is also set at a questionable time. The first sentence sets the time at the Kingdom of Han (202 B.C to 220 A.D.), and it is repeated three times later on. (Yourcenar, p.1, 7, 12, 13) Yet Yourcenar wrote about the pigtailed of the courtiers, and man having pigtailed was only popular when China was under the rule of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Obviously, this is an anachronism.

However, it would be missing the point if we were to find fault with Yourcenar and accuse her of not being accurate and of not rendering a truthful picture of ancient China. The argument here is, what Yourcenar means to convey is a poetic representation of Chinese philosophical ideas rather than a faithful depiction. As Konrad Czyski (1987) has argued, it is a journey “set forth within the realm of literary imagination”, to exemplify “a unique meeting of East and West” (p.302), so it does not matter much whether the painter is a Chinese Wang Fo or a Dutch Rembrandt. Ambiguous as it is, it is like a prism, disseminating multiple meanings. Here I will focus on two of them: the way people are related to Wang Fo’s paintings, or more generally, to the world of art, and how Daoism is represented in the story.

II. ART AND PEOPLE

Of all the people portrayed in “How Wang Fo was saved”, I distinguish three groups in terms of how close they can get to the world of art: the insiders, the outsiders, and the in-betweens. The three groups of people constitute a pyramid structure, and the outsiders of the realm of art are at the bottom, and they are in majority. They come from all walks of life.

The Outsiders

First there are the ordinary people, the folks. When “it was murmured that Wang Fo had the power to bring his painting to life by adding a last touch of color to their eye,” people come to him, with different purposes: “Farmer would come and beg him to paint a watchdog, and the lords would ask him for portraits of their best warriors. The priests honored Wang Fo as a sage; the people feared him as a sorcerer. Wang enjoyed these differences of opinion which gave him the chance to study expressions of gratitude, fear, and veneration.” (Yourcenar, p.7) Apparently, these people who come to Wang Fo are blind to the beauty of his artwork; what they are concerned is not the art itself but practical uses. They are also superstitiously in awe of the artist’s almost magic power.

Then there are the soldiers that arrest Wang Fo and Ling. When they come to arrest Wang Fo and Ling, they treat the two artists harshly. But Wang Fo seems not worried about his fate, rather, he notices that the soldiers violate artistic beauty because their sleeves “did not match the color of their coats.” (Yourcenar, p.8) They lack human compassion as well as a sense of beauty. They are unable to appreciate Wang Fo’s work and the door to the world of art is forever shut to them.

Finally, there are the courtiers, among whom are the minister of Perfect Pleasure and Counselor of Just Torments. They witness the birth of Wang Fo’s last masterpiece in the Imperial Palace, but without any awe. And when the water came up to their shoulders, they stood “motionless as *etiquette* required” (my italicizing), only “trying to lift themselves onto the tips of their toes”. (Yourcenar, p.17) How right Ling is when he observed that “they will soon be dry again and will not even remember that their sleeves were ever wet. . . . These people are not the kind to lose themselves inside a painting.” (Yourcenar, p.18) To lose oneself inside a painting indicates the capability to get totally immersed in art. So

they are kept forever out of the world of art.

The In-betweens

Besides Wang Fo, the ones who are close at the door of the artistic world, who can understand and appreciate art, are the Emperor and Ling. The Emperor loves Wang Fo's paintings, so much so that he is totally immersed in them. Before sixteen, he lived a life of enclosure, in the world of Wang Fo's paintings. He imagined the world as Wang Fo painted it: "with the Kingdom of Han at the center, to be like the flat palm of my hand crossed by fatal lines of the Five Rivers. Around it lay the sea in which monsters are born, and farther away the mountains that hold up the heavens." (Yourcenar, p.12) Wang Fo's paintings make him believe that "the sea looked like the vast sheet of water.....so blue that if a stone were to fall into it, it would become a sapphire". (Yourcenar, p.12) Thus we may say that Wang Fo's paintings usher him into the world of beauty.

The Emperor is also able to understand the artist Wang Fo. He pictures how Wang Fo used to paint his unfinished masterpiece: "no doubt, when you began your work, sitting in a solitary valley, you noticed a passing bird, or a child running after the bird. And the bird's beak or the child's cheeks made you forget the blue eyelids of the sea." (Yourcenar, p.15) His sensitivity to color is another proof that he is one of the few people who understands the old painter. That's why, at the end of the story, Ling said that the courtiers "will soon be dry again and will not even remember that their sleeves were ever wet," but the Emperor will "keep in his heart a little of the bitterness of the sea." (Yourcenar, p.18)

All this does not make him an insider, however. He remains an outsider in that he isolates the objects from the world, confuses art with real life, mistaking the world in the paintings as the real world. So when he finds out that the real world is not as beautiful as he perceives in the paintings, he becomes outraged and condemns Wang Fo for being a liar, "an old imposter" (Yourcenar, p.13).

In Ling's case, things are different. Unlike the emperor, he approaches art the other way round, that is, he steps out of the physical into the metaphysical. Ling understands the paintings not because he is immersed in them for a long time. His understanding comes as a sudden insight through Wang Fo's instruction: Wang Fo presents him with "the gift of a new soul and a new vision of the world". (Yourcenar, p.5) When he was able to admire "the livid zebra stripes of lightning" and "stopped being afraid of storms", when he discovered "with surprise that the walls of his house were not red, as he had always thought, but the color of an almost rotten orange", when he followed with delight the hesitant trail of an ant along the cracks in the wall", (Yourcenar, p.5) Ling is able to leap from the physical world of real life to the metaphysical world of art. All the horrors, all the indifferences, are now transformed into aesthetic experiences. More importantly, the artwork and the object it represents, together with the artistic world it creates, constitute an integrate system for him. They are not isolated as in the Emperor's world.

Another thing that is remarkable about Ling is his piety towards art and the artist. He is so humble before art that he "bent beneath the weight of a sack full of sketches, bowed his back with respect as if he were carrying the heaven's vault, because for Ling the sack was full of snow-covered mountains, torrents in spring, and the face of the summer moon." (Yourcenar, p.3) In order to buy his master pots of purple ink that came from the West, he "sold his slaves, his jades, and the fish in his pond" "one after the other". He "begged for food, watched over his master's rest, and took advantage of the old man's raptures to massage his feet." (Yourcenar, p.6) For him, aesthetic pleasure is no longer confined to the frame of the painting itself, but expands to include everyday life. Thus Ling's appreciation of beauty transcends the artworks themselves into a much broader space, where the measure for beauty is in the hands of the one who perceives, not the one that is perceived. This is exactly what the emperor lacks: he perceives the forms of beauty, not beauty itself.

The Insiders

Ling's transcendence further makes him an insider. His mind and the artistic world of the painting are in harmony, and ultimately becomes one. It indicates an existence beyond the commonplace, or what we call "*Chu Shi*" (transcendence). Indeed Ling transcends ordinary life in many ways. He used to be wealthy, but later sold everything to buy pots of purple ink that came from the West paints for his master. And when he had emptied his house, he closed "the door of his past behind him," (Yourcenar, p.6) began to roam with Wang Fo, and enjoyed it. He is unmoved by the loss of the wealthy and comfortable life he used to lead. He begged food, took care of everything, and when Wang Fo became disheartened by his old age, he cheered him up by "showing him the solid trunk of an old oak." (Yourcenar, p.7) Following Wang Fo, he is free from worldly concerns whatsoever, and steps into the world of art with disinterestedness and detachment.

There is also his indifference to death. Ling experiences two deaths in the story, one being his wife's and the other his own. He used to be "afraid of insects, of thunder, and the face of the dead," (Yourcenar, p.3) but when his wife died, because his master Wang Fo loved "the green hue that suffuses the face of the dead," and set out to paint it, he began to "mix the colors and the task needed such concentration that he forgot to shed tears." (Yourcenar, p.6) At such a time, Ling seems infected by Wang Fo's obsession with color and forgets the cruel fact that his wife just died, thus forgets the pain. When it's time for him to face his own death, he is able to take it calmly, with no fear. This is because once he transcends the ordinary and perceives another world beyond it, he connects the significance of his life only with his master Wang Fo and art, nothing else ever matters. When he is arrested, what worries him is not that he would be put into prison, but that "who would help Wang Fo ford the next river on the following day." (Yourcenar, p.8) The moment he is about to be killed for protecting his master, what he cares is not his own life, but that his blood would "stain his

master's robe." (Yourcenar, p.14) This is what an insider is like: neither the worldly power nor fear can affect him, he breaks free from this physical world and enters the transcendental world of art. His resurrection at the end thus can be seen as a kind of sublimation of his spiritual world.

As Ling's master, Wang Fo is of course another insider. More than that, he sits at the top of the pyramid, giving forms and life to the paintings and art. Ling's transcendence is a result of Wang Fo's teaching: he does not care about wealth, "no object seemed to him worth buying, except brushes, pots of lacquer and China ink, and rolls of silk and rice paper." (Yourcenar, p.3) They are poor, "because Wang Fo would exchange his paintings for a ration of boiled millet, and paid no attention to pieces of silver." (Yourcenar, p.3) The court does not interest him as the tavern where peasants and craftsmen drink and fight. For him, this is where the secrets of beauty or ugliness hide. He is sad when Ling dies, but at the same time he "in despair, admired the beautiful scarlet stain that his disciple's blood made on the green stone floor." (Yourcenar, p.15) Such a Wang Fo as Yourcenar represents him, is an incarnation of Taoist ideals. And it is no coincident at all that we can read the whole story in light of Daoism, for as Lu Jiande (2009) has pointed out, arguably Yourcenar's favorite writer was Zhuang Zi (Lu, p.83), one of the Daoist sages.

III. DAOIST IDEAS IN "HOW WANG FO WAS SAVED"

For Wang Fo, "no object in the world seemed to him worth buying, except brushes, pots of lacquer and China ink, and rolls of silk and rice paper." (Yourcenar, p.3) He loves "the image of the things and not the things themselves." (Yourcenar, p.3) Such an attitude towards worldly possession is very typical of Daoism. Zhuangzi famously claims, that human beings can possess things, but should not be possessed by things. Wealth and fame are obtained only through loss, because once you are in possession of them, you will live in eternal worry about losing them. Thus when it seems that you possess them, you are actually possessed by them. All wealth and fame are vanities. (Outer Chapters, "Perfect Enjoyment") For vanities, a wise man and a Daoist like Wang Fo can't care less. And this kind of attitude, I will argue, comes from one of Daoist core beliefs: the unity of opposites and the reciprocal transformation of the opposites. It is manifested both in Wang Fo's paintings and their way of living.

Male and Female in Wang Fo's Painting

Let's read the following quote first: "For many years, Wang Fo has dreamed of painting the portrait of a princess of olden days playing the lute under a willow. No woman was sufficiently unreal to be his model, but Ling would do because he was not a woman. Then Wang Fo spoke of painting a young prince shooting an arrow at the foot of a large cedar tree. No young man of the present was sufficiently unreal to serve as his model, but Ling got his wife to pose under the plum tree in the garden." (Yourcenar, p.5-6) When we read this, one question that will immediately come to our mind is: why only a man can pose as a model for a painting of a woman and a woman for a man? This is because for Wang Fo and Daoists, individuality conceals universality—a man's or a woman's body conceals "manness" or "womanness". Reality is too real to reveal the essence of things. But a man can pose for a woman, and vice versa. The radical differences between men and women exclude anything that is individual, so we may be more able to approach the essence of men and women.

This may seem ridiculous, yet, as Zhuangzi has made it clear thousands of years ago, male and female are not independent of each other. Rather, they are interdependent of each other. The unity of opposites is not an isolation of each other but a mutual transformation of each other. Once this is made clear, the notion that the opposites are irrelevant or are sharply contrasted to other will be subverted. As Zhuangzi argues, useless is useful. The tree is able to remain intact and live its years because it is useless. (Inner Chapters, "enjoyment in Untroubled Ease") By the same token, because male body is radically different from female body, no particular part will overshadow the essence, so it becomes the best model for a female portrait.

Life and Death for Wang Fo

Besides his unique painting skill, Wang Fo's experience with death also suggests that things can turn into its opposites. At the Imperial Palace, he sees Ling dying before him, and he knows that his own death is awaiting him, but once he looks at his own unfinished painting, he forgets all. Instead of trembling with horror before death, as the Emperor expects, he is immediately absorbed into the world of his painting. "A eunuch crouched by his feet, mixing the colors; he carried out his task with little skill, and more than ever Wang Fo lamented the loss of his disciple Ling." (Yourcenar, p.17) This scene reminds me of the painter in one of Zhuangzi's stories. Like Wang Fo, the painter is also ordered by an emperor to paint, and like Wang Fo, when he paints, he forgets about both the world and himself. (Outer Chapters, "Tian Zi-fang")

Taoists hold that whether there is a difference between life and death depends on whether the perceiving subject realizes the unity of the two opposites, and whether he can transcend life and death. Wang Fo and Zhuangzi's painter are able to be totally absorbed into the world of their paintings, because they understand that "all things belong to the one treasury, and death and life should be viewed in the same way." (Outer Chapters, "Knowledge Rambling North") Life and death are like the eclipses of the moon, or the change of the seasons: they are the course of nature. "When life comes, it cannot be declined; when it goes, it cannot be detained." (Outer Chapters, "The Full Understanding of Life") Once there is life, there will inevitably be death. Death is part of life. No one can avoid death. Only when we take it naturally can we overcome the fear for death. Thus, Wang Fo is saved because he transcends the concerns of life and

death and is absorbed instead in his painting, so that he is able to finish his last masterpiece and saved by it in turn. This is also what Laozi believes: “the sage treats his person as if it were foreign to him, and yet that person is preserved.” (Daodejing, chapter 7)

Life and Death for Ling

As a faithful follower of Wang Fo, Ling perceives life and death the same way as his master does. When Ling’s wife hangs herself and dies, because she looks “even more delicate than usual, and as pure as the beauties celebrated by the poets of days gone by”, Wang Fo wants to paint her one last time, because he loves “the green hue that suffuses the face of the dead.” (Yourcenar, p.6) As the husband, Ling is supposed to cry over her death or mourn for her death, yet he does nothing of that kind. Quite the contrary, he joins Wang Fo and is busy mixing the colors, and the task needs “such concentration” that he forgets to shed tears for her diseased wife at all. (Yourcenar, p.6)

This is much the same way Zhuangzi responds to his own wife’s death. When Zhuangzi’s wife dies, Huizi goes to condole with him. To his surprise, he finds him squatting on the ground, drumming on the basin, and singing, instead of lamenting. Huizi thinks it an excessive (and strange) demonstration, but Zhuangzi replies, “It is not so,” he is affected, and sad, but when he reflects on her death and death in general, he realizes that

She had not yet been born to life; not only had she no life, but she had no bodily form; not only had she no bodily form, but she had no breath. During the intermingling of the waste and dark chaos, there ensued a change, and there was breath; another change, and there was the bodily form; another change, and there came birth and life. There is now a change again, and she is dead. The relation between these things is like the procession of the four seasons from spring to autumn, from winter to summer. There now she lies with her face up, sleeping in the Great Chamber; and if I were to fall sobbing and going on to wall for her, I should think that I did not understand what was appointed (for all). I therefore restrained myself! (Outer Chapters, “Perfect Enjoyment”)

Like Zhuangzi, when faced with the death of his wife, Ling also finds the way out of sorrow by absorbing himself in art, by helping Wang Fo paint her dead body. And through this, Ling actually brings his wife back to life again—of course not a life in this physical world, but a life in the metaphysical world, the world of art. He gives his wife a new life, a new form, through Wang Fo’s lines and colors. In this sense, nothing is transformed into something, formless is transformed into form again. This is what Zhuangzi emphasizes above: the reciprocal transformation of opposites, the cycle of life. After his wife’s death, Ling experiences this transformation of “now life and now death; now death and now life”(Zhuangzi, Inner Chapters, “the adjustment of controversies”) himself. We see that when Ling comes to life in the painting, there is a red scarf on his neck where the cut and blood should have been. Here again through Yourcenar’s amazing skill, we achieve the insight that one form of death is another form of life. Everything has its opposite, but they are not opposed. They are, rather, connected and integrated into a whole.

IV. DAO AS A WAY OF LIFE

One interesting thing about “How Wang Fo Was Saved” is that, though it is about Wang Fo, Ling the disciple, is also a central figure. The first line of the story tells us that “The old painter Wang Fo and his disciple were wandering along the roads of the Kingdom of Han.” (Yourcenar, p.3) As a disciple, Ling is supposed to learn from Wang. But in the story, we see how Wang Fo works miracles with his talents, yet never for once do we see him teach Ling how to paint. What Ling is busy with all the time, is to mix the colors, prepare all the stuff Wang needs to paint, or to take care of Wang’s everyday life. There is no mention whatsoever about Ling’s own painting. Ling is an assistant, and an admirer of his master’s works. Ling himself also seems to be contented with this role. Obviously, what is between the master and the disciple is beyond painting itself, and the story is not simply about art. Ling wanders with Wang Fo not to learn how to paint, but to pursue Dao. As the master, Wang Fo does not teach Ling how to paint, he reveals to Ling where Dao is and what Dao does.

The emperor is obsessed with the world in Wang Fo’s painting, and is disappointed by real life. This is not only because he does not have an adequate understanding of beauty, it is also because he has not discovered Dao. When Dongguozhi asks Zhuangzi, “Where is what you call the Dao to be found?” Zhuangzi replies, “Everywhere.” “It is here in this ant.” “It is in this panic grass.” “It is in this earthenware tile.” “It is in that excrement.” (Zhuangzi, Outer Chapters, “Knowledge Rambling in the North”) Therefore, contrary to the emperor’s assumption, Dao is not only in things that please our senses, it is also in things that are perceived as low, gross, and ugly.

Again, here we come back to the belief of unity of the opposites: beauty and ugliness are opposites that can transform into each other. Wang Fo knows this. That’s why he likes to observe the drunken men in taverns, the ants, the face of dead men, and the blood. He knows that though they are named differently, they are actually the same. That is the way of Dao. The emperor lives in an isolated world, and all he can see are Wang Fo’s paintings. He can only understand Dao from one perspective, from one thing. This is far from the way of Dao. But for Wang Fo, he wanders in the world to observe the morning and the evening, he lingers among ordinary people, to study their facial expressions, he is interested in the rich as well as the poor—because it is where Dao is.

Chinese philosophers, especially the Daoists, advocate a unity of art and Dao. To them, they are one and inseparable. The best artworks, like those of Wang Fo, follow the way of all things (Dao), and the best artists, like Wang Fo, are the ones who show us Dao not only through their works, but also through their own way of living. Once we discard all the worldly concerns, we will be able to step into a whole new world, the world of art, the world of Dao, and be truly free.

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