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GOING HOME SINGING: THE ANALECTS OF SIMON LEYS

from HEAT 9, first series (Giramondo, 1998)

Confucius is a character. He sings and he weeps, but never on the same day. He is responsive and penetrating, discerning and intuitive. He holds forth and he withdraws himself. Each time he speaks is an action arising from a moment. Each time he speaks, he defines himself, as a man in the world, drawing on a lifetime's thought and experience. Each time he speaks is like a wave's cresting.

The *Analects*, put together by others, is the book in which Confucius appears. It lets us appreciate him as a person of facets, concerns and moods, open-minded to the point of contradiction, sharpening his thought on what the world presents, strengthening his core concepts as each wave passes. He is entertaining, attractive, terrifying. If you do not grasp his concentrated distinctions, you will find nothing else there. He is that sort of uncompromising teacher. “The Master said: ‘Find out why a man acts, observe how he acts, and examine where he finds his peace. Is there anything he could still hide?’”

Analects are gleanings, crumbs under the table, fragments of old text that, in the case of Confucius, have coalesced into a classic. Simon Leys, his latest translator and annotator, seldom misses an opportunity to remind us just how ragged and loopy this little book is—a mere one hundred pages in this edition (requiring another hundred pages of irresistible notes).¹ The

¹ *The Analects of Confucius*, Translation and Notes by Simon Leys (Norton, 1997)

Analects consists of brief passages of partially recorded or remembered conversations between the Master and a set of often unidentified interlocutors, compressed scenes compiled into a sequence of chapters and verses that fluidly creates a shape of its own. Bits of earlier texts are interpolated, where Confucius quotes a riddling snippet of old poetry, or when the compilers have added something edifying, or because passages have simply been lifted and moved by accident—in the way it happens on a modern computer. It's not always clear who is speaking. Even when we do hear the Master's voice, his meaning can still remain hidden. The text may be garbled. Philological and grammatical questions get in the way, centuries of exegesis and ideology encrust the sense. As Confucius shaped a culture, so that culture has shaped Confucius. Then, since he was a real person who lived in and spoke to a particular society and time, we have also to consider the problem of what exactly he may have meant there and then, and how that should be understood here and now. There are two sides to that too, since we want to appreciate the faraway difference of Confucius's world in 5th century BCE China, and yet, since what he promises is no less than wisdom itself, to discover his essential closeness and applicability.

Encasing all of these complications in reaching what Confucius says is the fact that in the present edition of the *Analects* we are reading a translation by one of our contemporaries. If Confucius is to speak to us in any way at all, it will only be because our translator has understood what is there to be communicated and has found a way to pass it on. There is a process of transmission of which we, the readers, are, for the time being, the end point and beneficiaries. Our test in receiving this transmission is to take the words back into the world, some twenty-five centuries on, in another country and culture, and, to our astonishment, find them intelligent. That is at the heart of the peculiarly demanding Confucian relationship between language and the world, and what makes the reading of this book an engagement like no other. “The Master said: ‘I transmit, I invent nothing.’” I am tempted to use an image from

cyberspace in which a key information file is encoded one way for transmission but needs to be converted into a completely different code for downloading at the other end. Somehow the information gets through, and that is the sole measure of the success of the exercise.

It is ironic that a book of shreds and snatches should have given rise to a highly systematized and often authoritarian orthodoxy. Perhaps that is what happens when gaps are left to be filled. Words can be interpreted this way or that. Far greater subtlety of mind is required to keep meanings open than to close them down. Rulers and administrators are usually more interested in keeping their dictates simple and unambiguous. The identity or otherwise between Confucius's words and a real, or realisable, world is never quite fixed. A realistic experience of the world lies behind his formulations, which are then directed towards making the world closer to an ideal. Dream and disappointment balance as two sides of one perception in much of what the Master says. The attempt, then, to apply his words, to live up to what he exhorts, becomes both a strenuous worldliness and also a kind of unworldliness. "Rapt in thought, the Master sighed: 'One cannot associate with birds and beasts. With whom should I keep company, if not with my own kind? If the world were following the Way, I would not have to reform it.'" It is easy to see what a selective, simplified and static reading might produce—a reading that did not understand Confucius's utterances as literature.

The mind of Confucius challenges the relationship between the language in which humanity must understand itself and what humanity might ultimately, actually, *be*. Hence the preoccupation with rectifying the names. If we can only discern and describe adequately, then we will be able to know something truly, in itself and in its larger relations, in its purpose and value, and where it fits in. The focus on language makes the *Analects* a literary work, to be read as poetry, fiction, drama.

The conversion of what Confucius famously *says* into written form was the most crucial of the many transmissions

this thought-material has undergone. Fixing it as text has allowed generations of readers to look round and into these words, to enter them, take them in, embody them in changing and personal ways.

In the little dialogues that stud the book, Confucius is the protagonist in his own drama. Every saw he utters arises from a situation, from the pressure of experience, from other people's questions, from the necessity of responding, of deciding what to do. In having to act in speech wisely and well, Confucius becomes Everyman, enacting in himself the contentious possibilities of different ways of being—a comically sage Polonius one moment, a tragically doubting Hamlet the next. He inhabits a dense social world, of classes and occupations, competing human relationships, interests and dispositions, yet a world that is also pressed upon by apprehensions of a less visible world, within or outside this one, alluded to only with the utmost discretion. It's not unlike the world of a Tolstoy novel, in which experience, however ordinary or however extreme, is interrogated for ethical meanings that reveal its human truth: "Yan Hui died. The Master wailed wildly. His followers said: 'Master, such grief is not proper.' The Master said: 'In mourning such a man, what sort of grief would be proper?'... Zilu said: 'May I ask you about death?' The Master said: 'You do not yet know life, how could you know death?'"

Confucius has advice to offer on most things, from what colours to wear, to not talking in bed, to more high-minded aspirations: "The Master said: 'Firmness, resolution, simplicity, silence—these bring us closer to humanity.'" His own humanity, given voice, discovers language as poetry does. What Confucius says is pithy, imagistic and eloquent in awakening the mind. The body speaking, the figure in action, complex sequences of argument and observation compacted into arresting one-liners, all this emotion and engagement, are integrated in expression. "He who does not understand words is incapable of understanding men." That is where the *Analects* ends. The understanding of his words gives us Confucius's understanding of human beings.

Always sensitive to the incompleteness of the *Analects*, Simon Leys highlights those areas where Confucius will not go. His introduction concludes with a fascinating discussion of “The silences of Confucius”. Elias Canetti observed that the *Analects* “is important not only for what it says, but also for what it does *not say*”, to which Leys adds: “the *Analects* makes a most significant use of the unsaid—which is also a characteristic resource of the Chinese mind.” The supernatural, life after death, the ultimate nature of things: whereof Confucius could not speak, thereof he remained silent. “The Master said: ‘I wish to speak no more.’ Zigong [his disciple] said: ‘Master, if you do not speak, how would little ones like us still be able to hand down any teachings?’ The Master said: ‘Does Heaven speak? Yet the four seasons follow their course and the hundred creatures continue to be born. Does Heaven speak?’” Wonderfully, as Leys points out, a fifth column enters the *Analects* at moments like this, where Confucius acknowledges and even incorporates alternative realities to his own, opposing ultimates that flow in the direction of Daoism and Zen. He does not rule out the many different ways to the Way. “The Master said: ‘The wise find joy on the water, the good find joy in the mountains.’” Which Leys annotates with a reference to C.G.Jung, who “much admired Chinese thought for its capacity always ‘to grasp simultaneously the two opposite poles of every reality’”: Jung considered that “the unilateral character of (Western) thought gives it extra energy, but also condemns it to remain barbarian”.

Yet the unConfucian is also Confucian. Even while distinguishing between East and West, Leys finds points of contact between Confucius and non-Chinese thinkers everywhere, lifting the idea of transmission into a realm where, like Indra’s net, every jewel shares its light with every other jewel. Citations from Socrates, Shakespeare, Pascal, Spinoza, Dr Johnson, Proust, C.S.Lewis, Borges, Simone Weil, Raymond Carver and many others are woven into the Confucian mesh. Uncluttered translation and notes full of embellishments together become a commonplace book, to be read with fingers in two places at once, so that the reader, flipping backwards and forwards, enacts in his

or her own movements the transmission that is at the heart of this enterprise. Simon Leys, a literary name, a character himself, has Gallic affinities, and through him the prose-poetry of thinkers in French becomes a special key for unlocking the doors between Confucius and ourselves. One of the translator's most important glosses is on the key Confucian notion of "rites", which he explains as "very much the equivalent of what we simply mean today by 'civilisation' . . . Rites play in civilized society the role that is devolved to *laws* in a social environment where morality has broken down. . . In this same sense, when Montesquieu observed that 'in Europe, most nations are still ruled by social usages (*les moeurs*)', which preserve them from the dangers of anarchy or the brutalities of despotism. . . he was unwittingly expressing a typically Confucian view."

I speak all the time of Confucius. Do I really mean Simon Leys? Part of the translator's pleasure lies in reviewing the work of his predecessors, both Chinese interpreters and foreign translators, incorporating it and revising it. In hearing Leys, we hear other voices too. His main English rival is Arthur Waley, with whom the notes run several arguments. But there are times when Waley is absorbed verbatim, our translator magnanimously demonstrating the process of transmission at work: "*Nothing pretends to be Something, Emptiness pretends to be Fullness, and penury pretends to be Affluence*: this is Waley's rendition—which seems perfect." Generally Leys is undaunted by uncertainties and gaps, seeing them as unavoidable occasions for a certain Confucian improvisation. "This entire passage is quite obscure," he admits at one point; therefore his rendition becomes "tentative and rather free". In the notes he gives himself even more rein, offering his own digressive moralizing on our life and times—all of which is to be taken as in character and welcomed. A sly humour attaches to the whole business of transmitting meaning, which surfaces in an anecdote from Borges: "As I was reading with credulous enthusiasm the English translation of a certain Chinese philosopher, I came across this memorable passage: 'It matters little to a convict under a death sentence if he has to walk on the edge of a precipice; he has already given up living.' To that phrase,

the translator had appended an asterisk, and indicated that his interpretation was to be preferred to that of a rival sinologist who had translated ‘The servants destroy the works of art so as not to have to adjudicate on their merits and defects’. At that point. . . I did not read any further. A mysterious scepticism had crept into my soul”.

Simon Leys tends towards terseness and enigma, echoing the Master’s penchant for leaving a wide interpretative space around the words. “Lord Ji Wen thought thrice before acting. Hearing this, the Master said: ‘Twice is enough.’” That appeals, partly because it seems to reflect the abstraction-within-concreteness of the original Chinese ideograms. One of the analects that has stuck in my mind is quite an unConfucian one. It follows a moment of Heraclitean insight, when “the Master stood by a river and said: ‘Everything flows like this, without ceasing, day and night’”. That thought seems to flow to the next one, as Confucius turns from nature to the currents of energy within people. “The Master said: ‘I have never seen anyone who loved virtue as much as sex.’” Is the Master surprised, disappointed, or accepting? The observation would seem to undermine all his efforts. Perhaps it stuck in his mind too, because he repeats it more insistently a few chapters later; laconic, intractable, realistic, its truth illustrated by my own sticking on this remark. Freud would have known what Confucius meant. But back to the translator. The Chinese baldly contrasts two concepts: *de* (virtue) and *se* (literally: colour, form, the world of the senses, hence sex). The opposition is between incommensurables: Confucius, with implacable truthfulness, places them in a relationship which reveals the heart of our human nature. Leys’s stripped-down version gets this where earlier translators become coy or trivialising. Compare James Legge’s rendition, published in 1892: “The Master said, ‘It is all over! I have not seen one who loves virtue as he loves beauty’”; or Waley in 1938: “The Master said, In vain have I looked for one whose desire to build up his moral power was as strong as sexual desire”; or D.C.Lau in 1979: “The

Master said, ‘I suppose I should give up hope. I have yet to meet the man who is as fond of virtue as he is of beauty in women.’” And Leys, the second time around: “The fact remains that I have never seen a man who loved virtue as much as sex.”

We are told that this is “primarily a *writer’s* translation”, for “nonspecialists”. So what language is it in? English, clearly, and an English that is able to take in Arthur Waley without much of a ripple. A Bloomsburyian, Waley wrote in a clean style that Virginia Woolf, finding a lineage for informal non-literary prose, would have approved. It descends from the flexible spoken eloquence of the Book of Common Prayer and proves compatible, in Leys, with an English that comes, via classic French prose, with a sharp lucidity and concision. References to diaries, letters and occasional writings by all sorts of non-Chinese writers dot the notes, as if responding to Confucius in conversation. Yet all of these influences disappear behind the directness of this new text. It doesn’t sound American, nor British. It’s not Chinglish nor translatorese. At times it is childlike, at other times epic. A comment in the introduction sheds light on this. “The only advantage that can be derived from our condition of ignorant foreigners,” the translator writes, “is precisely the possibility to look with a kind of unbiased innocence at this book—as if it were all fresh and new. Such innocence is denied to native readers.” In finding a new language for Confucius, the translator is rescuing him. He assumes almost nothing, but wants to hit home. The absence of context and tradition of even the most rudimentary kind forces the translator to subsume everything into words that startle with their radical simplicity: “A gentleman is not a pot.” It’s a kind of universal language.

Is it a version of Australian? Sometimes I am reminded of Lewis Carroll as the paradoxes and contradictions of things are rendered in phrases that would captivate a child. The achievement is democratic as well as Confucian. I don’t know that it would have been possible anywhere but here. In Europe high culture is still credible enough for a book like this not to have to bother with quite this degree of accessibility. In the

United States, the split between high and low culture is unbridgeable except when high stoops to low for the sake of the market, where user-friendliness replaces universality. In Australia there are people who may indeed be “ignorant foreigners” from a Confucian point of view but who have the capacity to enlarge their horizons. Their conditions and their need, as familiar ideal readers, have created this language. This book is for them. “The Master said: ‘When dealing with a man who is capable of understanding your teaching, if you do not teach him, you waste the man.’” Simon Leys—and, behind him, Pierre Ryckmans, who has lived in Australia for many years—has taken that to heart. He has produced a classic in Australia, as David Malouf did in *An Imaginary Life* when he created his fictional meditation on Ovid’s exile, without ever mentioning the place. As literature, in the subtlest way possible, *The Analects of Confucius: Translation and Notes by Simon Leys* is an Australian classic. A couple of times I felt called on to respond as an Australian. When advised that “one should worship only the gods of one’s own land”, I wondered which gods are ours. When reminded of “issues that matter: people; food; mourning; sacrifice”, I singled out mourning and feared for a country disinclined to acknowledge the devastation in its past.

One day Confucius asked a group of his followers to tell him what they would wish to do if they could do anything in the world. Three of them reveal rather grand, public-spirited aspirations. Then Confucius turns to the one who has remained silent. “Zeng Dian, who had been softly playing his zither, plucked one last chord and pushed his instrument aside. He replied: ‘I am afraid my wish is not up to those of my three companions.’ The Master said: ‘There is no harm in that! After all, each is simply confiding his personal aspirations.’

“In late spring, after the making of the spring clothes has been completed, together with five or six companions and six or seven boys, I would like to bathe in the River Yi, and then enjoy the breeze on the Rain Dance terrace, and go home singing.’ The Master heaved a deep sigh and said: ‘I am with Dian!’”

Where in the world is that possible? Where is it not?