

The Tao of Appalachia

An Interview With P.J. Laska

by Jeff Biggers

Thirty years ago, visiting Antioch College-Appalachia in the coal fields of Beckley, West Virginia, renowned poet Donald Hall stumbled onto a burgeoning poetry renaissance in the Appalachian South, led by the self-proclaimed Soupbean Poets. Fun, freewheeling poets with an attitude, undauntingly polemic, wonderfully provocative, and informed about their history and conflicts in the mountain region, the Soupbean Poets had emerged on the heels of the Appalachian Identity movement and a reawakening of the area's longtime tradition of verse. Hall didn't leave unimpressed; in a subsequent *American Poetry Review*, he would praise one of the Soupbeans' main players, P.J. Laska, and his first collection of poems, *D.C. Images and Other Poems*, published by the Appalachian Press. The praise didn't go unnoticed; Laska's volume became a remarkable National Book Award finalist, losing out to John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

A lot has happened to Appalachia, the world of poetry, and P.J. Laska in those three decades. Now back in Beckley, having retired after traveling and working around the world, Laska finds himself one of the last practitioners of an ancient tradition: the poet-philosopher. He is currently at work on a new collection of verse, *Turning Words: New and Selected Poems*, that draws not only from his early experiences in the Soupbean collective but also from his world travels and most recent interest in Eastern philosophy.

Raised in the brewing coal camps around Farmington, West Virginia, by coal miners of eastern European ancestry, Laska foretold his outmigration, like that of many Appalachian writers and workers in his generation, in his title poem, "D.C. Images":

B&O train runs
all night from W. Va.
alumni dance into
Union Station
at 6 a.m.
for the last time
that whole graduating
class has gone
to cities

Author of eight collections of poetry, former editor of *The Unrealist*, a poetry journal in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Laska has written works that have been alternately described as "bold" and "memorable" and with a "hair-raising comic vitality." Given the complexity of his occasionally dark, unabashedly political, philosophical, and underground writings, he has been described as an Appalachian Fyodor

Dostoyevsky. In fact, he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy, focusing on the works of Kant. Over the past several years, having taught at various universities around the country, he has taught himself Chinese in order to translate Taoist writings. *The Bloomsbury Review* caught up with Laska at his home in Beckley, West Virginia.

The Bloomsbury Review: *The first part of your new collection, The Abbot and Sativa, often unfolds in a series of fascinating musings that conjure an otherworldly image of someone like Thomas Merton sitting at a roadside diner with a modern hipster goddess. Can you talk a little about the art of conversational poetry, and how you decided to incorporate such a form into your latest work?*

P.J. Laska: Well, I didn't know at the outset it would take the form of conversations. I started out working with epigrammatic speech as a way of bringing philosophy into poetry without putting readers to sleep. I had a vague idea of some sort of outrageous *e pluribus unum* assemblage. I think I was driven to the epigram out of fatigue and dissatisfaction with the lyric monologue. Poems of the poetic self, about the self, were beginning to oppress me—my own as much as the poems of others. It was dissatisfaction with what wasn't being said, with what I wasn't able to get into poems. For a while I thought I had some success with the antilyric, but it was limited to satire, and satire has its own limitations. Anyway, my frustrations came to a

head at the close of the nineties, and I had to do something different or give up poetry altogether. So I started trying to suture diverse fragments of inner speech, the personal shorthand or idiolect we all use in thinking. That and some found phrases, things I heard people say and things you pick up from print media. Paying close attention to inner speech, you begin to see that a lot of it is brief dialogue that takes up one side and then the other. I noticed that the same thing was happening in my dreams, only there it appeared as a dialogue with

another person. So I began writing down what I recalled of these brief dream conversations. And it occurred to me that philosophical dialogue had a literary history and might work for philosophical poetry. Without the voices of dialogue, philosophy tends to be dry and abstract. Sometimes even dialogue can't make it interesting. In my case, I had a man's and a woman's voice and the interest factor of the significant other.

It was a matter of fleshing out the identities and letting the dialectic play out on the verbal stage. Conversational poetry is closer to theater, more so when you begin to connect the conversations in the design of a larger narrative. That also pushes it in the direction of "novel poetry."

TBR: *Over the past several decades, you've been involved in leftist poetry circles, such as the Left Curve, and more recently,*

BOOKS BY P.J. LASKA

*The Abbot and Sativa:
Dialogues of Return*
(in preparation)

*D.C. Images and Other
Poems* (Appalachian Press, 1975)

The Day the Eighties Began (Igneus Press, 1991)

*Hillbilly Baroque:
An Illuminated Poem*
(Illuminated Books, 1995)

The Mason-Dixon Sutra
(Igneus Press, 2000)

Taoist philosophy. The Tao admonishes the reader to accept the natural ways of all natural things. In some ways, a leftist like Pablo Neruda echoed this concept, as a poet and lover, in his Love Sonnets: "and the slow habit of natural things/they compose my rustic heart." How do you see the various strains of politics and Eastern philosophy affecting (conjoining) your work?

PJL: Taoist philosophy is an ancient wisdom tradition that tilts the poetics of any creative effort toward spontaneity and away from design and engineering.

It doesn't dismiss design and engineering. It puts it in its cosmic place by giving it a subordinate role—in philosophy, politics, economics, poetry and every other human endeavor. Neruda does this beautifully in his poetry. I don't know that he's echoing the Taoist concept, though. I think cultural relativism leaves open the possibility of separate local or regional transmissions of some common prehistoric naturalism. There's a passage in Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* in which a Native chief of one of the southwestern tribes explains how this is possible. He said, referring to the many different tribal ways of life, "We drank from the same stream, but our cups were different." He meant there's a commonality even in difference. There's a diversity of cultural cups, but they all draw their sustenance from a common source. There's diversity, but there's also this common unnamed stream. The various cultures name it differently, but in truth it precedes them all and is without a name. This is chapter 1 of the Tao Te Ching. Yet here is the identical thought in the words of a nonliterate Indian sage unfamiliar with that text. So what I would say is that most likely, Taoist wisdom is only one of the lineages transmitting some unnamed prehistoric understanding about nature. Neruda was in touch with the ancient heritage of the people of the Andes, and the naturalism in the line you quoted may have come down from prehistoric cultures of that region.

I bought my first translation of the Tao Te Ching in 1962, when I was an undergrad. Now I have more than 20. It's one of the books I would take to a desert island. Its thought transmits a wisdom that's both holistic and dynamic. It has impermanence and change as its basic intuition. And this is the same insight we see carried forward in the Ch'an and Zen traditions—impermanence at the heart of everything. Uncle Lao's response in the Tao Te Ching is that magnifying the importance of technology and control is not the best way to handle change. Change belongs to the nature of things and has in the end to be adapted to. But standardizing our global response through a monoculture of means that makes us all drink out of the same type of cup makes us less flexible and more vulnerable, not to mention more stressed out. Monoculture runs counter to the natural diversity of the greater global context that we are only a small part of. We humans have been enhancing our position on the planet and making ourselves more comfortable ever since the rise of vertical civilizations founded on power cults. Now our sophisticated technology is about to take enhancement to an entirely new level. You even hear talk of children becoming the product of genetic design and therefore more refined instruments of their parents' ambitions. The achievements of design cause the older streams of prehistoric wisdom

to be dismissed as "primitivist," and also, in the case of the Tao Te Ching, as "quietistic." The former objection is ahistorical and therefore meritless, and the latter is a conclusion you can draw only if you completely miss the point of what is being said. With regard to change, the ancient Taoist wisdom doesn't have a pat response. The response is tailored to the situation. It's quietist only in relation to a situation of excessive activity that disrupts or threatens to disrupt global alignment, the very thing that ensures a people's overall well-being. Faced with the loss of well-being—take for example the current enhancement addictions involving designer pharmaceuticals—the Taoist response is sensible and pragmatic.

Reverse course by elevating the values of spontaneity and natural diversity over exclusionary values that monoculture finds easy to manipulate. Our market society runs on exclusionary values, and capitalism is the quintessence of the market strategy of bait and switch, so you can see the revolutionary potential of what the ancient wisdom is saying.

As for poetry that has the value priorities of the Taoist response, I would mention Charles Olson as one of the first American poets to bring forward the importance of global alignment in his poetics. He talked about proceeding without intervention or artifice, so that the poem is not a designer artifact functioning as a well-oiled machine. Form, the designer element, is a secondary consideration, or as Olson said, an extension of content. Another thing Olson saw is that our writing and thinking are weighed down by meaning structures that are in effect the theoretical baggage of civilizations directed by power elites pressing their advantage through monoculture. The implication is that genuine creative writing will be inevitably dialectical. It has to contest what it receives and be prepared to toss out the freight that needlessly burdens the poet's or artist's native sensibility and insight.

TBR: *The second part of your collection offers several poems in senryu form; short, three lines of "human nature." The Beats are often credited with bringing the haiku and senryu forms into the contemporary American experience. Have you been influenced by fellow poets like Gary Snyder, and can you discuss your experience in Japan and its impact on your work?*

PJL: Let me start with your last question. I spent two formative years in Japan and then came back and got immersed in the ferment of the sixties. It was only later that I understood some of the impact Japanese culture had on my thinking and writing. Shortly after I arrived, I encountered the work of Basho in a Japanese bookstore in a Donald Keene anthology. His translations of "The Narrow Road of Oku" and the "Prose Poem on the Unreal Dwelling" still hold up well. With Basho's travel poems as a guide I began to see the way poetry and nature are linked in Japanese culture. It's not just that haiku and the *haikai* tradition have this fund of *kigo* words and phrases that mark or suggest seasonal change. There's also a spatial aspect having to do with *utamakura*, places recognized as poetic either because they are landmarks of cultural memory or because they occasion an experience of the sublime. Many of the places Basho visits in his travel poems are famous

utamakura. Growing up in rural West Virginia, I was familiar with such places—waterfalls, cliff formations, mountain vistas, coal mine explosions, Civil War battlefields—but in Japan they were drawn into a rich cultural tradition that made having certain aesthetic feelings of depth in relation to nature and history emotionally and psychologically rewarding, and worthy of poetic effort. This tradition is beneficial to the individual. To cultivate the experience of awe for the natural environment, for example, you have to slow down, turn off the ignition, and get into a tranquil state of mind. The Taoists say to know what's natural you have to cultivate tranquillity. This attitude carried over from Taoism into Zen, and the influence of Zen Buddhism on Japanese aesthetics is profound.

I was immediately attracted to the way of Zen, and it had a profound effect on me, not so much zazen, which is the practice of sitting meditation, but later on in my encounter with the koan. The koan is the Zen equivalent of a deprogramming task. It comes across as an "exercise" only if you fail to complete the task. The object of Zen deprogramming is to correct the identity disorder called self-importance, or ego. To realize that all rankings of the self are cultural distractions from your real identity is a life-altering revelation. This shows up in the arts. Zen feeds the poetic sensibility. Things you overlooked before or tended to ignore take on intensity and can become the subject of haiku. Similarly, things you previously thought were important or imperative take on a comic aspect and may become the subject of senryu.

The haiku form had some popularity in the U.S. before the Beats gave it a boost. But the senryu, which is a brief, haiku-like satire and therefore belongs in the tradition of the antilyric, is still, I believe, mostly unknown. Even in modern Japan it doesn't have anywhere near the popularity it had in the 18th century. The antilyric is what I liked best about the Beats. The antilyric doesn't fit easily into the "song of the self." It generates resistance because it sits at the opposite end of the spectrum from "good taste." That's where you find the iconoclasm and satire and the poetry that exposes what's hidden beneath the sanctimony. The Beats did that. Of course they did a lot more. I admire Gary Snyder's poetry. It helped raise my ecological consciousness. And it was his translations that turned me on to the poems of the great Chinese poet-recluse Han Shan.

TBR: *Raised in a West Virginia coal camp, the son of eastern European immigrants, you have often placed your work within the Appalachian context, and took part in several regional and folk poetry revivals in the 1970s. Nearly 25 years ago, you wrote in a paper, "Poetry at the Periphery," about the possibility of poetry being a bellwether of regionalism and cultural pluralism. Looking back now, do you still see "regionalism offering new possibilities for the renewal of the genuine people's culture of Appalachia"?*

PJL: Well, yes and no. A lot has changed since I wrote that speculative essay. The American economy is more integrated. It is closer to being the "megamachine" that Lewis Mumford railed against in his last books. Regional differences appear less important. Corporations are more powerful. Governments

behave like chambers of commerce. With the completion of the interstate highway system, all regions of the country, even mountainous Appalachia, are open to franchises marketing the products of corporate monoculture. So the core-periphery model has to be rethought. Electronic and print media are everywhere, and except on the Internet they are almost entirely controlled by interests whose goal it is to augment and automate the megamachine.

On the other hand, the country's natural regional variations continue to assert themselves, whether mountain, desert, plains, scrub pine, bayou, or coastal regions. So the potential for bioregionalism is still there, and so is the potential for a renewal of cultural diversity. Culture is not an abstract thing. It resides in individuals who have varying degrees of culture-consciousness. Charles Olson said culture is confidence. And he was right on target. Culture is what you are confident about, what you don't have to seek outside confirmation for. The potential for a renewal of people's culture arising out of autonomy and real diversity is still there, but it's repressed by marketing tools that make us feel inadequate in some way and shake our confidence. It's no secret that the main reasons for ad campaigns are to manufacture needs and weaken independent judgment. Then people are more susceptible to commercial and political manipulation. This is how the system works. But it's shocking when you stop to think how much commercial media time is given over to the artful destruction of people's self-confidence and self-image, not to mention their attention span. Is it a coincidence that America consumes over 60 percent of the world's supply of pharmaceuticals, has 11 million teens on Prozac and millions of younger children on Ritalin? I don't think so.

"Mind-forged manacles," Blake said. And now they're reinforced by a technology beyond anything he imagined. It's not an easy situation to reverse, but it can be reversed if people assert their cultural autonomy. Poetry, music, theater, and now independent film are ways artists and musicians can work for that end, regionally or locally. The true image of Appalachia, for example, is not the hillbilly incest innuendo silkscreened onto an Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirt. It's the symbol of struggle on the T-shirt bearing the name Don West. It's in the music and in the writing and in the history of the region's struggle to preserve its strong core values opposed to outside domination and exploitation. Appalachia is a region where people opposed slavery and fought the mine guard system of coal camp peonage. Out of the latter struggle in West Virginia, the UMWA forged the first integrated industrial union and set the example for the larger union struggles. Today, the land is under assault by a megamachine-enhanced form of strip-mining called mountaintop removal, which brings destruction on a scale you have to actually see in order to believe. Where the mountains are threatened, Appalachia itself is under assault. The word means "endless mountains." So now renewal of the people's culture is bound up with the need to protect what makes it possible to have a regional identity. That's potentially a powerful force for change.

TBR: *In one of your last poems in the third part, "Recollection," you write of a vision in the lonesome woods of a gatekeeper, declaring, "I have no inkling/what is to come." Having returned to the hollows of West Virginia, do you find your poetic vision has become more reflective, less conflicted, even more accepting of our times?*

PJL: "Recollection" is about starting out, where there is always a question of doubt about access, symbolized in that poem by a gatekeeper. It contrasts with a poem of return in the same collection in which there is no gatekeeper and no gate. Or, as the Mumonkan says, it's a gateless gate, meaning access is not in doubt, unless our attachment addictions throw up roadblocks and we are complicit in our own disability. Then access requires that we break away from the programmed spectacle, desert the machine-dream, and recover our confidence for independent judgment and action.

And it's not necessary to go underground and dwell in nihilism in order to do that. Once you step away from blind conformity and sedation, you find there's a long countertradition that offers plenty of mutual support and solidarity. That countertradition is alive in the mountains of Appalachia, as it is elsewhere in the country. And having returned to live here, I would say that my poetic vision is less conflicted. But just for that reason I'm less accepting of our current fix, which seems to me to be a dead end. The countertradition is marginalized, in poetry and politics and across the intellectual spectrum, but the pull of a more egalitarian, more diverse, more eco-conscious, planetary, and cooperative vision is strong and growing. When you come to a dead end, the only sensible way out is to reverse course.

This is what we find in the most ancient wisdom text of the countertradition: "Reversal is the movement of the Tao." Nonacceptance, therefore, is incipient change. In my view that's the right way to go. ■

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