SCULPTING WORDS IN ICE: HOW BUDDHIST AND CHRISTIAN *STYLISTIQUES* EN-ACT MUNDANE FAILURE AND ULTIMATE HOPE*

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หนังสือคำสอนทั้งของพุทธศาสนาและคริสต์ศาสนา มักจะทำการรื้อ-สร้างสิ่งที่ "เป็นเพียง" โลกียวิสัย เพื่อผู้ศึกษาจะได้สามารถพัฒนาตนเองให้บรรลุถึงความสุขที่แท้จริงได้ หนังสือที่ทรงคุณค่าเหล่านี้บางเล่มจะสอนด้วยวิธีการแบบรื้อ-สร้างโดยใช้เทคนิคทางวรรณกรรมเป็นแนวทาง ขนบต่าง ๆ ของหนังสือเหล่านี้จะแสดงให้เห็นลักษณะปรากฏแบบซื่อ ๆ และความหมายที่ซ่อนอยู่ภายใต้ขนบต่าง ๆ เหล่านั้นจะแสดงให้เห็นว่าความเชื่อมั่น (ในคำสอนของพระพุทธเจ้าสำหรับชาวพุทธ และในคำสัญญาของพระคริสต์สำหรับชาวคริสต์) จะเกิดขึ้นได้อย่างไร ในบทกวีที่ยิ่งใหญ่เรื่อง "แท่นบูชา" (ของ จอร์จ เฮอร์เบิร์ต 1593-1633) ลักษณะปรากฏแบบองค์รวมของ "แท่นบูชา" นั้นได้แฝงสัญญาณของการแตกสลายที่แท้จริงของมันไว้ด้วย และสัญญาณเหล่านี้ชี้ไปที่ความหมายที่ซ่อนอยู่ ซึ่งเป็นความหวังของคริสตชน จากผลงานอันยิ่งใหญ่ Shōbō-genzō ของ Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253) เทคนิคต่าง ๆ ที่เป็นแบบแผนได้ขยี้ขยำองค์รวมเชิงขนบและอัตลักษณ์ที่ตายตัว เพื่อแสดงให้เห็นถึง "ธรรมชาติที่แท้จริง" ของความเป็นจริง สำหรับท่าน Dōgen แล้ว ความเป็นจริงคือ "การเปลี่ยนแปลงอย่างต่อเนื่อง"

Abstract

Both Buddhist and Christian teaching-texts often deconstruct the "merely" mundane so that the learner can advance towards beatitude. A precious few of these texts teach by miming such a deconstruction via subtle

Prajñā Viharā, Volume 12, Number 2 July-December 2011, 1-10

literary techniques: the textual surfaces or conventions act-out the role of naïve appearance, and the subtexts that subvert them act-out how confident trust (in the Buddha's Teachings, for the Buddhists; in Christ's Divine Promises, for the Christians) can find fulfillment. In the great poem "The Altar" (by George Herbert, 1593-1633), the holistic appearance of the altar bears hidden signals of its own real brokenness, and these signals point to the sub-text that is the Christian's hope. In the great *Shōbō-genzō* of Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253), formal techniques scramble conventional holisms and fixed identities in order to act-out the "true nature" of reality-reality, for Dogen, is at once "continuous flux" (and "absolute density").

Both Buddhism and Christianity affirm "hope" in the sense of confident trust: Buddhists trust in the reliability of the Dharma (Teaching) and Christians trust in Christ and the Divine Promises. Through most of their histories, both religions have stressed the impermanence of the merely-mundane world, and encouraged detachment therefrom. In short, the Buddhists and the Christians, for most of their history, have set their sights more or less squarely on the supra-mundane. The conventional world is continuously melting, like ice. The ongoing "now" of our sculpting, the intention and action constituting our "now", are what liberate or obstruct us (this is not to gainsay, of course, that Buddhists and Christians attune their "now-moments" according to very different scales).

During the last decades of the 20th century, the public spiritualities of the so-called "technologically-advanced" nations underwent a very perceptible shift. Mahayana Buddhists, for example, tended, more and more, to interpret the Buddha-nature, etc., in such wise as to celebrate the plenitude of worldly life; and Christians tended more and more to interpret the "reign of grace", etc., so as to celebrate the fruits of a consumerist society.

Now, in the first years of the 21st century, years shaken by new wars and imminent economic collapse, the timbre of spirituality in these same countries is changing again, and–it is to be hoped–changing back to the ultimacies that public religious discourse never should have thus marginalized. A key teaching of Buddhism, after all, is that one must deconstruct the merely mundane in order to access ultimate truth–be that truth the *nibbāna* of the Theravadist or the wisdom/compassion of the Mahayanist. And a key teach-

ing of Christianity, after all, is that one must take up the cross, forsake the world of "flesh" (sensualism, etc.) and deny all selfishness, in order to gain supernatural life. Moreover, I am very convinced that even in "prosperous" times, every human being–at least in private life–is sooner or later brought up short by some devastating heartbreak, some radical impasse. At this moment of personal *aporia*, religious ultimacy turns out to be the only *hope*-ful solution.

For academics in the pertaining specialties, the themes of Buddhist *anicca/anitya* ("impermanence", "transience") and Christian *memento mori* and *sic transit* are long over-saturated. Instead, I treat here a much less studied topic, namely, stylistic language-uses whereby Buddhist and Christian texts have traditionally acted-out (in the sense of performed or "en-acted") the impermanence of that-which-appears. Most interesting are those texts that deconstruct themselves–simultaneously laying bare their impermanence and exposing enough of their ultimacy so that *hope*, so that *confident trust*, can shine. My own published work for many years has involved the intersection of French post-structuralist thought, especially Derridean thought, and traditional religious thought (be it Buddhist or Christian).[1] The postmodern recognition that texts are bodies and that the textual body *performs* by way of its more *formal* components, is very serviceable for my argument in this paper: Buddhism and Christianity both have several textual traditions which inscribe bodies that somehow are in-the-process-of-melting, indeed, that ingeniously *self-deconstruct*.[2]

Given the constraints of time/space, I limit myself to two examples: the well-known poem "The Altar" by the great English poet-ecclesiastic George Herbert (1593-1633), and passages from the *Shōbō-genzō*, the master-work of the great Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253), founder of Soto Zen. Examining the format of Herbert's poem in the original edition, I point out the disguised subtext, the "holes" which puncture the surface-text and lead to the revelation hidden in the non-intact body. In passages from the *Shōbō-genzō*, I indicate formal techniques that cut-up and scramble the intact body in order to open up truth. [Please forgive that, though competent in several languages, I am unable to read Dogen's original Japanese: I make confident assertions about the *Shōbō-genzō* only because I reference, herein, very respected secondary sources.]

George Herbert's poem "The Altar" is what is called in the British tradition a "shaped-poem"–that is, the poem's formatting is carefully designed to resemble its subject-matter. In a very visual way, the altar as a tangible "body" is placed on display in front of us. The very first edition of *The Temple*, the posthumous collection of Herbert's poetry in which his "The Altar" appears, formats the poem specifically as Herbert had intended. (It is ironic that subsequent editions frequently ignored the original formatting by "regularizing" the spaces between words, and centering the title.) The poem is shaped like an altar, with flat altar stone resting upon a table-cap supported by a narrower column and the latter's wide two-leveled base, as herewith:

The Altar.

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant reares,
Made of a heart, and cemented with teares:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workmans tool hath touch'd the same.
A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name;
That, if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease,
O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine.[3]

Here my connection to the early-phase Derrida can come into play, because Derridean thought maintains that the holistic "surface" or "face" of a "body" functions to conceal the real cause of the body. Deconstruction uncovers this hidden cause, and the "trail" to it is marked by some defect, some *faille* ("fault") that the (apparently) intact surface disguises or "cosmeticizes" so the body appears "whole". In short, bodies–no matter what the kind--are not really wholes: they are broken, and the disguised break in the surface

marks the trail. What is more (less), the real cause of the body is itself somehow "there" but "not there", what Derrida calls a *trace*, "trace". (Isn't "there/not-there" also like ice at the very moment/point of sculpting?)

The shape of Herbert's original poem achieves its intact altar-like form by a ruse–sometimes the spaces between words are necessarily irregular,--many are too wide, and some of even these are irregularly wider than others. The spatial irregularities (the *failles*, here) are right before our eyes, yawning like holes or gaps in the text, but most readers don't note them (or, noting them, take them for granted). The conventional altar-shape is the disguise: it is designed to make the altar-body "appear" intact. Herbert, of course, has carefully contrived his poetic text so the discerning eye can detect the clues and uncover mere appearances. The poem identifies the "broken ALTAR" [fully capitalized thus in the text] with the speaker's "heart", which is "cemented with teares" [note the spelling of "teares" generates two homographs–"teares" (eye-droplets), "teares" (rips, ruptures)]. The altar of the heart is "cut" (by God, circumcision of the heart) so it can properly "praise" His Name. The last couplet identifies Christ's "SACRIFICE" [the slaying of the Lamb of God] and the heart-altar of the speaker. The gaps in the text are the cuts, wounds, in the speaker's heart-altar leading to the sacrificed Christ whose salvific cuts and wounds are the cause,--the real cause whereby the Christian body-system works. And the Christ in and on the "altar" is there/not there, that is, revealed in the Eucharistic act but concealed by the appearances of bread and wine. Finally, upon a re-reading of the poem, one realizes that even the de-centering, at the top, of the poem's title, "**The Altar.**",–as in the text's original printed form-signals Herbert's agenda. "Centering" is a characteristic of holism, as is "symmetry", a traditional virtue of the "perfect appearance" of a body. This poem's is, instead, from the very outset, *skewed*.

Dogen Zenji's *Shōbō-genzō*[4] *(The True Dharma-Eye Treasury)* brings to Japanese Buddhism a version of Zen emphasizing the radical equivalency of all things: Reality is an emptiness that is *absolutely* dense and empty at the same time. For Dōgen, detachment does *not* mean a turning away from "objects" but rather, a passing through the "Great Death" so that the very distinctions between subject and object, self and other, spirit and body, are "cast off". His famous *shikantaza* or "single-minded sitting" involves not the "bracketing-off" of experiential chunks of life: instead, "single-minded sitting" is the full engagement of "body-mind" (*konshin*). What "melt away" are the

false constructions of merely mundane knowing. In terms of language, what is relevant is that Dōgen navigates textual bodies as an equivalent of how he navigates *all* things. All things are in continuous flux so he momentarily alights where the ad hoc interests of enlightenment are best served.[5] Likewise, the textual body (of Buddhist convention, the canon, the tradition), rightly understood, is in continuous flux, so the *Shōbō-genzō* text incorporates and then scrambles these conventions, re-assembling semantic and formal units according to what may best serve the needs of the disciple(s) at the time. Indeed, Dōgen often insists on the reliability of these situational teachings, and the very wording "*True* Dharma-Eye Treasury" proclaims them utterly worthy of confident trust.

What Dogen aims to show is that any single dharma (understood to mean a "particularity" transcending "all forms of dualism"[6]) is a "total exertion" that is at once every other dharma and also unique. Kim maintains that what distinguishes Dōgen's teaching from the "mutual identity and mutual penetration" of the Huayan school is that Dōgen's is far more dynamic, so a dharma is said to leap out of itself, leap into itself, crash and smash into other dharmas, etc.[7] The Wisdom-eye sees everything continually melting and reconstituting in a kaleidoscopic play. Dōgen's version of "the ongoing now" is perhaps best explained in the *Shōbō-genzo*'s treatment of "Existence Being" (u*ji*): "Because continuity is a characteristic of time, time past and present cannot pile up". And because time cannot pile up, everything is "coming and going" and everything is "eternal now".[8]

One of Dōgen's favorite deconstructive devices is the dismantling of a canonical "fixed phrase" by scrambling, repeatedly, its traditional word-order, and thus its semantic emphases. A good example is his re-orderings of the famous phrase *soku-shin-ze-butsu*, "Mind Itself [or "Mind here/now"] Is Buddha" (in Vol. I, Chapter 6, of the *Shōbō-genzō*[9]). Chodo Cross, the translator, in his introduction to Chapter 6, explains:

> "Mind here and now is Buddha" must be understood not from the standpoint of the intellect but from the standard of practice. In other words, the principle does not mean belief in something spiritual called "mind" but it affirms the time "now" and the place "here" as reality itself. This time and place must also be absolute and right, and so we call this the "truth" or "Buddha".[10]

The four words "Mind Itself Is Buddha" can be arranged in twenty four combinations, from which Dōgen selects five:

> "Mind Itself Is Buddha" emphasizes "Buddha", the particularity of Buddha-Awareness.
>
> "*Itself* Mind Buddha Is" emphasizes Itself, the particularity of hereness/nowness.
>
> "Itself Buddha Is *Mind*" emphasizes mental particularity.
>
> "Mind Itself Buddha *Is*" emphasizes existential particularity.
>
> "Is Buddha Itself *Mind*" emphasizes that each particularity is at once in all the others.[11]

Among Dōgen's many deconstructive devices, the other one I shall treat here is the subtextual subversion of traditional surface meaning. Hee-jin Kim supplies us with three good examples,[12] *kuge* ("sky flowers"),[13] mitsugo ("secret talk"),[14] and *nyo* ("likeness/thusness").[15] *Ku* means "sky" and ge means "flowers", so *kuge* in traditional usage is taken to represent "[mere] flowers in the sky", that is, illusory experiences. However, *ku* can also mean "emptiness" (or "space", as in the rendering of Nishijima/Cross), and it is this positive meaning of *ku* that Dōgen raises to the surface. In Dōgen's deconstructive reading, every particularity–whether said to be "real" or "illusory"-- is a unique "flower of emptiness", a Reality.

Mitsu means "secret, hidden" and "go" means "talk", so the phrase *mitsugo* is traditionally taken to mean mystical communication, a kind of "talk" that is intuitive, like "two things touching" without the use of intellect or the senses. Dōgen reconfigures these meanings so as to eliminate all hiatus whatsoever "between self and other, between thought and reality, between the symbol and the symbolized".[16]

Nyo is ordinarily taken to represent similarity, but Dōgen explains "'Being like' does not express resemblance; being like is concrete existence".[17] When D gen writes Nyo nyo, he is declaring that likeness is really thusness (see Fn. 6 of Nishijima/Cross, Vol. III, Chapter 42, p. 9). Again, Dōgen is teaching the absolute density of each particularity, so each particularity is *absolutely unique and absolutely the same as all other particularities*.

Keeping in mind that lines at the point of crossing do not share com-

mon ground (since lines have no width), we can celebrate how the texts of Herbert and Dōgen intersect. For Herbert's, Resurrection is hatched[18] in dying: in moment-to-moment "dissolution" of selfishness, and final "dissolution of the body" as we know it. For Dōgen's, the Realization of "True Nature" is hatched in dying: in dying to the essentialist ego and to its fabrications--phantasms of "fixed views" and essentialist "self and other".

> "What is hope? What can we hope for? Is there any hope for hope at all? These are the questions we struggle with today. For Dōgen's part, he quietly calls for authentic practice."[19]
>
> --Hee-Jin Kim

> "... for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope."
>
> --The New Testament, Romans 8:20

> "Turn [your] afflictions into Buddhist Bodhi, just as ice melts into water."
>
> --Master Hsuan Hua,
> City of 10,000 Buddhas,
> Talmage, California

Endnotes

*This paper was given as an oral presentation at the bi-annual Conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, U.K., July 1, 2011. The Conference's theme in 2011 was "Hope: A Form of Delusion? Buddhist and Christian Perspectives".

[1]For example, *Derrida on the Mend* (Purdue UP, 1984; 1986; 2000); *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture* (Scholars P. of American Academy of Religion, 1997; Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 133-202; "Differential Theology and Womankind: On Isaiah 66:13", in P. Berry and A. Wernick, eds., *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion* (Routledge, 1992), pp. 211-225; "Two Models of Trinity–French Post–Structuralist versus the Historical-Critical: Argued in the Form of a Dialogue", in O. Blanchette et al., eds., *Philosophical Challenges and Opportunities of Globalization*, Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change: Series 1, Vol. 19.2 (Wash-

ington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy[CRVP], 2001), pp. 401-425; "After-word" [my book-chapter at end, commenting on the collected papers], in Jin Y. Park, ed., Buddhisms and Deconstructions (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 235-270; "Hongzhou Chan Buddhism, and Derrida Late and Early: Justice, Ethics, and Karma", in Youru Wang, ed., *Deconstruction and the Ethical in Asian Thought* (Routledge, 2007), pp. 175-191; and many articles in journals, both in the West and, in Chinese translation, in Asia.

[2]Jacques Derrida's thought-motifs are widely known, but his *stylistique*, how he manipulates language-use (especially in his native French) so his texts deconstruct themselves, is largely ignored though he insisted–given the assumptions of deconstruction itself--on its primary importance. For a long description of his stylistique, with many examples and their intriguing if fortuitous (or inevitable?) intersections with Buddhist themes, especially "impermanence", see my "Derridean Gaming and Buddhist *Utpādā /Bha?ga* (Rising/Falling): How a Philosophical Style Can Devoid Substantive Field", in the online *International Journal for Field-Being*, Vol. 1, part 2, article 1 (August 2001); accessible online at the International Institute for Field-Being website: http://www.iifb.org/site > journal > Vol. 1, No. 1 (2001) > Part II > V1P2-No1 Magliola 1179608191360.

[3]The original version of "The Altar", as it appears in the 1633 edition of *The Temple*. See it online at http://www.ccel/org/h/herbert/temple/Altar.html, via the Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

[4]The English version of the *Shōbō-genzō* used here is: *Master Dōgen's 'Shōbō-genzō'*, Gudo Wafu Nishijima and Chodo Cross, trans., Vols. I-IV (Windbell Pubs., 1996-1999): citations are to the on-line digitalized text of the same, http://www.numatacenter.com (BDK English Tripitaka Series reprint edition), accessed via https://www.bdkamerica.org.

[5]Dōgen's Buddhist Way is here very much like the "non-abiding" (*wu-chu*) of the great Chinese scholar Chi-tsang/Jizang (549-643 C.E.); see R. Magliola, "Nāgārjuna and Chi-Tsang on the Value of 'This World'", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (U. of Hawaii; Blackwell, U.K.), Vol. 31, No. 4 (Dec. 2004), pp. 505-516.

[6]See Hee-Jin Kim, "'The Reason of Words and Letters': Dōgen and Koan Language", in William R. LaFleur, ed., *Dōgen Studies* (Honolulu: U. of Hawaii P., 1985), p.59.

[7]Ibid.

[8]From Dōgen's *Shōbō-genzō*, Vol. I, Chapter 11, "Existence Time" (Uji). Here I am using the online translation at http://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Dogen_Teachings/Uji.htm. Compare *Master Dōgen's 'Shōbō-genzō'*, Nishijima and Cross, Vol. I, Chapter 11.

[9]*Shōbō-genzō*, BDK English Tripitaka Series rpt. ed., Vol. I-dBET PDF version (2009), Chapter 6, pp. 65-73.

[10]Chapter 6, p. 65.

[11]See Chapter 6, p. 68, and associated editorial Endnotes 14, 16, 19, 22-27, p. 72.

[12]In Kim, "'The Reason of Words and Letters'", pp. 66, 67.

[13]In the Chapter of the same name, *Shōbō-genzō*, BDK English Tripitaka Series, Vol. III, Chapter 43, "*Kuge*", pp. 13-28.

[14]In the Chapter of the same name, *Shōbō-genzō*, BDK English Tripitaka Series, Vol. III, Chapter 51, "*Mitsugo*", pp. 129-137.

[15]In the Chapter entitled Tsuki ("Moon"), *Shōbō-genzō*, BDK English Tripitaka Series, Vol. III, Chapter 42, pp. 3-11.

[16]See Kim, "'The Reason of Words and Letters'", p. 66.

[17]*Shōbō-genzō*, BDK English Tripitaka Series, Vol. III, Chapter 42, p. 4.

[18]In this context, the primary lexical meaning of "to hatch" is of course "to produce from an egg", that is–taken figuratively–"to produce new life" (the egg is a symbol of fertility and progeny in Chinese and Japanese culture, for example, and of "resurrection" in Christianity). We should keep in mind, however, that one of the operative subtexts here is the meaning of "to hatch" as "to crisscross with lines" (from F. *hacher*, "to chop up", "to cross-hatch"). *Hache* and *hacher* are two of the often used words in Derrida's off/Talmudic word-play, since in French they can imply both duress and erasure. Derrida's "to mark with the X", to put "under erasure" (*sous rature*), reminds his readers that the word or idea at hand is "marked" by the difference between what it declares and what it cannot say. For us at the end of this paper the crisscross can remind us that in both Buddhism and Christianity, not words but only experience can truly know real liberation.

[19]See website: http://www.worldtrade.com/religion/buddhism/buddogenR.htm.

[20]From the website: http://www.cttbusa.org/founder2/teaching_west.htm.