

REVIEWS

James H. SANFORD, William R. LAFLEUR, and Masatoshi NAGATOMI, editors. *Flowing Traces: Buddhism in the Literary and Visual Arts of Japan*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992. xiii + 275 pp. Cloth. ISBN 0-691-07365-1.

This collection of essays exhibits the high standards attained by American scholars of Japanese culture. It also carries forward an effort to bring literary studies into a mutually challenging dialogue with art history and with the history of Buddhism (though as the essays seem to have been written several years ago, the book may not quite represent the “cutting edge”). William R. LAFLEUR’s book, *The Karma of Words* (1983) is the path-breaking work in this interdisciplinary venture. The extract from it published here presents the theoretical basis for his claim that Japanese art and literature, far from being mere ornaments of Buddhism, constitute a primary source for the study of the religion. LaFleur draws not only on the *Lotus Sūtra* as understood in T’ien-t’ai speculation and its extensions in the aesthetics of Fujiwara Shunzei (1114–1204), but also on present-day philosophy and its extensions in literary criticism. His essay is centered on the following passage from Shunzei, who was concerned to counter a puritanical dismissal of poetry as irrelevant to the religious quest:

Someone might charge that, whereas in the case of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* [the fundamental Tendai work] it is a matter of transmitting the deep truth by holy men known as the “golden-mouthed ones,” what I have brought up for consideration is nothing more than those verbal games known as “floating phrases and fictive utterances.” However, quite to the contrary, it is exactly here that the profundity of things is demonstrated. This is because there exists a reciprocal flow of meaning between such things as poetry and the way of Buddhism, a way that maintains the interdependence of all things. This is found in the teaching that: “Enlightenment is nowhere other than in the worldly passions.” (p. 29)

Thus “a clear, rigorous distinction between sacred and secular is itself problematic according to Mahāyāna doctrine” (p. 30).

“The parables of the Lotus function in a far different, and in some ways more sophisticated, fashion than parables do in the allegorical literature of the West....They are simultaneously the vehicle and the tenor of that vehicle....They are characterized by ‘the absolute identity [or equality] of their beginning and end’” (p. 24). LaFleur contrasts this non-duality between skillful means (*upāya*) and the truth they communicate, with the subordination of the letter to the spirit in the Platonizing hermeneutics of medieval Christianity. He could have found a Western analogy for the non-duality of

tenor and vehicle in the incarnational principle, which served as a corrective to Platonizing habits of thought in Christian exegesis. Christ was understood to be present in the letter of Scripture in a hidden way, and to speak directly to the reader or hearer of the sacred text. The text was not a disposable instrument, but had a sacramental status comparable to that of the humanity of Christ. The spiritual sense of the text was incarnate in its literal sense. The text caught the reader up in a dynamic, spiritual movement, and the effort to extract a dead letter from this vital context would be seen as hermeneutical obtuseness or perversity (see TORJESEN 1986, pp. 124–47). Thus it would not be true to say of Origen or Augustine that they regarded the concrete mode of expression of Scripture as “chaff” to be dispensed with in order to attain a more abstract, rational, or spiritual truth” (p. 25). Interestingly, the leading authority on medieval exegesis of the Bible, commenting on the *Lotus Sūtra*, focuses on a different aspect of the non-duality between truth and skillful means, namely, the idea that “the supreme, unique *upāya* consisted in having people believe that there is a whole series of *upāya*; but in ultimate reality, there are no *upāya*.... The Buddha’s preaching is always the same.... In the mind of each hearer ‘the discourse is developed in accord with worldly imagination’ (Samghabhadra). But nothing of that diversity exists or is propagated within the original and ultimate uniformity” (DE LUBAC, 1973, pp. 63–64).

LaFleur’s own writing is an enactment of the philosophy he advocates, combining depth with lucidity and lightness. He passes gracefully from incisive summary of Chih-i’s doctrine of the threefold truth to sensitive commentary on poems such as this one by Shunzei (which alludes to the Medicinal Herb chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*):

<i>Harusame wa</i>	Spring’s fine rain
<i>konomo kanomo no</i>	both in the distance and right here
<i>kusa mo ki mo</i>	both on grasses and trees
<i>wakezu midori ni</i>	is evenly dying everything
<i>somuru nariken.</i>	everywhere in its new green. (p. 33)

The poem is not merely an allegory of “the indiscriminating and undifferentiating beneficence of the Buddhist Dharma.” Rather, “because the theme of both the *sūtra* and the poem is the fundamental absence of discrimination (*wakezu*) or hierarchy in the Dharma, any sense of the poem as derivative or subordinate is itself subverted and disallowed” (p. 34). Poetic depth “is not as much a move away from surfaces to seek inner essences and meanings as a move away from such inner ‘meanings’ to reaffirm the reality of the so-called surface” (pp. 35–36). The dynamic movement between depth and surface in the poem invites comparison with Chih-i’s movement from emptiness (depth), to the provisional (surface), to the middle— “the holding of both in a state of dynamic and equalized tension” (p. 31). When LaFleur ascribes to Shunzei a “rich undecidability” (p. 33) and a “poetic collapse of the signifier and signified” (p. 8), one recalls Mallarmé’s “hymen” between signifier and signified which, as Derrida argued, subverts Platonic hierarchies (DERRIDA

1972). In his apparently simple verse, Shunzei is conveying a critical philosophical and religious message, with a self-consciousness worthy of Mallarmé. His verse enacts the Tendai philosophy which had “entertained something like Platonism as a philosophical option but emphatically *rejected* it” (p. 28). It is refreshing to discover that Japanese poetry invites not just historical annotations, but probing philosophical commentary, and that aesthetic qualities such as *yūgen* are not merely a matter of taste and mood, but harbor a “dimension of depth” and are steeped in “awe” at the “boundlessness of the interpenetration of phenomena with one another” (p. 46). Doubtless a lot of philosophy is being read into these short poems, in a manner that sometimes recalls Heidegger on Hölderlin; but the result is so generally enlightening that one dare not complain.

The pictorial biography of Ippen Shōnin (1239–1289) illustrates another way in which Buddhist paradigms infiltrated Japanese culture. In an age in which Buddhism and literature were identified with one another, claims *Laura S. Kaufman*, “Ippen’s poetic sensibility would have been seen...as a natural concomitant of his spiritual attainment” (p. 60). In the scroll one can trace the influence of paradigms such as the life of Śākyamuni, while its forty-eight sections are based on Amida’s vows. Yet the work teems with observed life, pathos, and a sense of nature, and Ippen’s individual personality comes through in realistic details. *James H. Foard* finds in it an echo of the way Ippen himself held together in dynamic tension the “prefigurations” that shaped his life: Śākyamuni’s retreat from the world and Amida’s working for its salvation.

Barbara Ruch criticizes LaFleur’s view that the introduction of the Buddhist six realms of transmigration (*rokudō*) brought about a “revolutionary paradigm switch” in Japan. Her thesis is less strong than it seems, as she confirms the massive impact of the imagery of heaven, hell, and hungry ghosts, and merely points out that it co-existed with other, often livelier, indigenous representations:

The facts simply do not support the statement that in “all the great literature of medieval Japan...the taxonomy of *rokudō* and the operations of karma are simply presumed to be true, universally applicable, and intelligible” (LAFLEUR 1983, pp. 30–31), unless one admits that other taxonomies and operations are also presumed to be true, equally intelligible, and just as applicable. (p. 100)

The tension between the first half and the second half of this sentence suggests that the topic—a vast one—has not come into definitive focus. Ruch’s attempt to show a tension between Japanese hell and Buddhist orthodoxy is thinly substantiated: she says that *jigoku* exists not as “one cog in an inexorable system, as with karma, but...to help us despise the human world and all its illusory charms” (p. 109). She claims that “in Japanese fiction reincarnation has always retained an aura of foreign exoticism” (p. 102), which is why Mishima Yukio “felt compelled to place part of his final tetralogy” in India. But Mishima is a poor example, for what makes his use of reincarna-

tion so foreign is that it occurs in realistic fiction, in a modern, secular setting, and with a flamboyantly literal staging of the rebirths. Transmigration, like purgatory, is evidently a theme unsuited for fiction. But the frequency of expressions such as *en* (karmic connections) and *zenshō* (previous lives) in common Japanese conversation suggests that these aspects of Buddhism have been absorbed rather thoroughly.

Ruch's comparisons between Japan and Europe are unconvincing. We hear of "deathbed scenes in the West, with Satan and Christ fighting over the departing soul like jealous lovers" (p. 109); no example is cited. The claim that the Last Judgment mosaic in Torcello is "enormously similar" (p. 114) to a scroll depicting Jizō, and poses an "astonishing" enigma (p. 111), collapses when one looks at the pictures: the mosaic presents Christ as a majestic judge, not "a compassionate intercessor between the dead and a fearsome deity" (p. 114)—a description she unaccountably extends to Jizō as well. She says that that Jesus, like Jizō in another picture, "reaches down and lifts a man from the fires of hell" (p. 114), when in fact the figure, one of the resurrected just, is not set in any relation to the hell scenes in the lower part of the mosaic.

Frank Hoff's essay, previously published in German (HOFF 1988) has little to do with Buddhism, except for the suggestion that Zeami's dialectical mentality has something in common with Dōgen's, and that the "subtle analysis of the symbiosis of spectator and performer and an unparalleled account of process of judgment in evaluating the arts...would not have been possible without the author's personal experience of Buddhism" (pp. 147–48). A commonality of atmosphere between the dedicated artist and dedicated Buddhists of his day surely exists (whatever the depth of his own Zen commitment); but how can one draw it out in an illuminating way? *Royall Tyler's* rich survey of Buddhist elements in Noh begins with a striking rejection of Arthur Waley's claim that Amidism is the prevalent religion of the Noh plays. The content of Noh plays was too conservative to admit the influence of the new sects of Hōnen and Shinran. But, as Tyler looks instead to the Tendai, Shingon, Kegon, and Hossō schools, and Shugendō, it turns out that the worship of Amida was a staple element in the religious life of these groups, so that his rejection of Waley's view may be little more than a quibble. He suggests an alternative candidate to Waley's as "the common, average Buddhism of medieval Japan," namely "a Buddhism that admits stones, plants, trees, humans, spirits, gods, and Buddhas into an open brotherhood of the numinous" (p. 170). Tyler's essay was first published in this journal; the only change is the omission of some remarks about Noh's "syncretism" (TYLER 1987, p. 46); "common denominator Buddhism" might be a better summary of his findings. But that this leaves ample space for ardent Amidism is shown by *Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis's* account of Zeami's play *Taema*, in which the climax is centered on adoration of the Pure Land scriptures (p. 190).

The paradigm of the Buddha's entry into nirvāṇa underwent a remarkable transformation in the *Vegetable Nehan* of Itō Jakuchū (1716–1800), in which a radish takes the place of the Tathāgata. The artist came of a family of

greengrocers. *Yoshiaki Shimizu* expatiates at length on the Tendai view that all things had the Buddha-nature, and about the traditions of vegetable depiction, but he does not advert to the possibility that the painting is nothing more than a light-hearted piece of humor. I find it hard to believe it was “prompted by an urgent need to commemorate a major event that was at once significant in Jakuchū’s personal life and crucial to him as an artist,” and that “two deaths beyond that of Śākyamuni were commemorated, the death of Jakuchū’s brother and that of the family occupational tradition” (p. 231). According to the entry in the Japanese version of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Itō from his youth had no interest in anything but painting, and was indifferent to the family business; moreover, Shimizu’s argument requires a problematic redating of the painting by twenty years. The artist showed no interest in the family business. *Susan Matisoff*, writing on a form of puppet theater known as Sekkyō-bushi, “sermon-ballads,” takes us back to hell. Quaint plots involving “disfiguration, starvation, torture, slavery, and death” (pp. 234–45) weave in some doses of jumbled Buddhist lore. The itinerant pseudo-priestly performers came from the lowest levels of society and were credited with mediumistic powers. “Awesome strangers” (p. 260) in Japanese society, their morose and meandering tales repeat a pattern of “estrangement, death, rebirth, and reunion” (255).

At a time when many Western thinkers are interrogating the subtle relationships between art, literature, philosophy, and religion, we can appreciate all the better the vibrant blending of religion and culture in medieval Japan, sensitively explored in these essays.

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