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**Translations under the trees:  
Australian poets' integration of  
Buddhist ideas and images**

**Greg McLaren**

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## Abstract

My aim in writing this thesis is to investigate the ways in which several Australian poets have made attempts to integrate their interest in Buddhist ideas, images and practices into their work. In doing this I provide a critical re-appraisal of the work of Harold Stewart, a re-examination of Robert Gray's work, and a substantial study of the poetry of Judith Beveridge.

I interrogate the work of these three poets primarily through a filter of key Buddhist concepts, and apply these ideas to the formal, conceptual and rhetorical planks of these poets' work. I am interested in how these poets' engagements with Buddhism affect their deployment of form, image and perceptual matters, and how much of the Buddhism in their work is implicit, at the level of sensibility, aesthetic and ethics, rather than directly discussed. I am particularly interested in demonstrating a correspondence between the writers' various engagements with Buddhism and their handling of formal considerations, an area that otherwise seems to have little to do with "Buddhist" ideas. It is my argument that while Buddhist terminology and ideas clearly denote an "interest" in those ideas, far more useful conclusions can be drawn from examining a poet's integration of those ideas at the level of form and image, where they cannot be used so overtly. I am concerned with how these Buddhist interests become literary engagements, rather than simply fill poems with subject matter. The use of key Buddhist notions like no-self, interdependence, emptiness and impermanence, coupled with a cultivation of non-attachment in tone and perspective, is evidence of a genuinely integrated sensibility, where the religious interests and practices clearly feed into the practice of writing. It is this integration of aesthetic practice and religious practice that is the fundamental concern of this thesis.

If Gray and Beveridge both embody Buddhist ideas in their choice and deployment of imagery, only Beveridge seems to consistently use these Buddhist doctrinal notions as formal, structuring devices. In fact her writing at times seems an *extension* rather than a reflection of a Buddhist practice.

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## Abbreviations for texts used:

### Judith Beveridge:

*The Domesticity of Giraffes*: DG  
*Accidental Grace*: AG  
*Wolf Notes*: WN

### Max Dunn:

*Leaves of Jade: Poems from the Dragon Land*: LJ  
*No Asterisks*: NA  
*Random Elements*: RE  
*Time of Arrival*: TA

### Robert Gray:

*Introspect, Retrospect*: IR  
*Creekwater Journal*: CJ  
*The Skylight*: TS  
*Piano*: P  
*Certain Things*: CT  
*Lineations*: L  
*Afterimages*: A  
*Selected Poems 1963-1983*: SP  
*Selected Poems*: SP  
*New and Selected Poems*: NASP  
*New Selected Poems*: NSP

### Harold Stewart:

*A Chime of Windbells*: CW  
*The Exiled Immortal*: EI  
*A Net of Fireflies*: NF  
*Orpheus and Other Poems*: OOP  
*Phoenix Wings*: PW  
*By the Old Walls of Kyoto*: BOWK  
"Autumn Landscape-Roll": ALR

## Glossary of Buddhist terms:

For this brief glossary I have relied largely on Charles S. Prebish's excellent work, *Historical Dictionary of Buddhism*<sup>1</sup>. Where I do use other definitions, it is because they add a nuance or variation on the term's use or meaning significant in the contexts I use, and that Prebish does not emphasise.

**Compassion/loving kindness/( *Metta*):** Christmas Humphreys defines metta as "Love, active good will"<sup>2</sup>, and is close to *karunā*, compassion<sup>3</sup>. The metta bhavana is a meditation practice "in which the force of love is radiated to all beings"<sup>4</sup>.

**Conditionality/Dependent co-origination/( *Pratitya-samutpada*):** Prebish argues that conditionality "establishes that nothing in the world happens by accident, as it were, but rather that all occurrences are causally conditioned"<sup>5</sup>. He argues that this doctrine "undermines the potential substantial nature of any compounded identity"<sup>6</sup> and that it "underscores precisely what it means by the notion of emptiness (*sūnyatā*), that no composite entity can have any ontological status of its own, that all entities lack own-being (*svabhāva*)"<sup>7</sup>. In his translation of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*, Robert Thurman provides this definition: "that nothing exists independent of relation with something else; therefore there is no absolute, permanent, independent self-substantial thing – only things that exist conditionally, dependent on their verbal and intellectual designations"<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Charles S. Prebish, *Historical Dictionary of Buddhism*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen (New Jersey), 1993

<sup>2</sup> Christmas Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism*, NTC Publishing, Chicago, 1984, p.127

<sup>3</sup> Humphreys, p.127

<sup>4</sup> Humphreys, p.127

<sup>5</sup> Prebish, p.217

<sup>6</sup> Prebish, p.217

<sup>7</sup> Prebish, p.217

<sup>8</sup> Robert A. F. Thurman, transl., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahayana Scripture*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1991, p.163



This is a very useful expansion on Prebish's explication in that it shows clearly the close relation – in fact, inter-relation – between conditionality, *sūnyatā*, and no-self and impermanence. These notions all relate to the same phenomenon of existence that Buddhism observes, merely from different perspectives. These terms simply describe apparently different aspects of the same quality of existence.

***Dharma/ Dhamma***: This term, with its respective Sanskrit and Pali spellings, has a broad range of connotations. In this thesis, I almost invariably use *Dharma* to refer to the Buddha's teachings and the vast commentary that has developed in response to it. Humphreys defines *Dharma* as "Any teaching set forth as a formulated system . . . the Teachings of the Buddha"<sup>9</sup>. Prebish provides a more specific definition, regarding *Dharma* as "refer[ring] to the totality of the Buddha's teaching"<sup>10</sup>. Robert Gray uses the term *dharma* (note the lower case) in "Dharma Vehicle" to refer to what Humphreys calls "phenomena"<sup>11</sup>. Robert Aitken expands this necessarily loose definition very slightly to incorporate either "a phenomenon or a thing"<sup>12</sup>, while Prebish writes that the term is "utilized in Buddhist philosophy to indicate the so-called building blocks of experiential reality, the elements of existence"<sup>13</sup>. This definition provides a sharper understanding of Gray's use of the term.

**Emptiness/ (*Sūnyatā*)**: "Emptiness", "nothingness" or "voidness" are the standard English translations for *sūnyatā*, but their connotations of absence, negativity or nihilism are inappropriate in a fuller definition of the term<sup>14</sup>. The "emptiness" refers to the quality

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<sup>9</sup> Humphreys, p.65

<sup>10</sup> Prebish, p.109

<sup>11</sup> Humphreys, p.65

<sup>12</sup> Robert Aitken, *Original Dwelling Place: Zen Buddhist Essays*, Counterpoint, Washington, D.C., 1997, p228

<sup>13</sup> Prebish, p.109

<sup>14</sup> Prebish notes that "it would be incorrect to surmise that the negative terminology associated with this concept is indicative of a subtle nihilism in Mahayana" (p.249).

of things being empty *of*: empty of an independent, unchanging self. For this reason I prefer the Sanskrit term, *sūnyatā*, to the English. Again, *sūnyatā* is a property of existence identical to that of conditionality, of no-self, and impermanence: these terms all point to the same quality or phenomenon. As Prebish writes, *sūnyatā* “emphasizes the relational aspect of existence ... In this way, emptiness becomes an epistemological tool used to “unfreeze” the fixed notions of our minds. It is important to understand that *sūnyatā*, utilized in this fashion, *is not* an ontological state, and that *even emptiness* is empty [of its own existence]”<sup>15</sup>. Thurman further states that *sūnyatā* refers to ““emptiness with respect to personal and phenomenal selves,” or “with respect to identity,” or “with respect to intrinsic nature,” or “with respect to essential substance””<sup>16</sup>.

**Impermanence (*Anitya*):** “In its simplest sense”, Prebish writes, “it suggests that everything is in a continual process of change”<sup>17</sup>. As a result, “there is nothing really substantial in the entire phenomenological world to be grasped”<sup>18</sup>.

**Interdependence:** this is a quality of things and phenomena that carries from no-self, *sūnyatā*, impermanence and conditionality. Not only are all these ideas interdependent, but so are all things, as a result of the processes and properties ascribed to them. This term is especially useful when discussing the range of these phenomena, bypassing the need to refer to each of them. It is a term of some convenience, but seems appropriate to use in a consideration of the view Gray, and more notably, Beveridge, put forward across their bodies of work.

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<sup>15</sup> Prebish, p.249

<sup>16</sup> Thurman, p.160

<sup>17</sup> Prebish, p.49

<sup>18</sup> Prebish, p.49

**No-self/ (*Anātta/ Anātman*):** Prebish contends that “the ‘Self’ in Buddhism can be considered to be nothing more than an impermanent, changing personality”<sup>19</sup>. Such a self does not possess any stable, unchanging properties that can be held separate from any other things. Sangharakshita writes that “Conditioned things are anātma because they are no more than the totality of their constituent parts or functions and because, when they change, there is nothing which changes apart from the process of change itself”<sup>20</sup>. Such a definition aligns itself very closely with conditionality, and impermanence also. The self is *sunya*, or empty of a stable identity.

This is not to suggest that there is not a relative self that we experience as real. Thurman makes a clear distinction between ultimate and relative conceptions of self, or of things generally. He writes that “mistaking denial of ultimate self as denial of conventional self leads to nihilism, and mistaking affirmation of conventional self as affirmation of ultimate self leads to absolutism. Nihilism and absolutism prevent us from realizing our enlightenment, hence are to be avoided”<sup>21</sup>.

**Non-attachment:** Buddhist non-attachment derives from the Buddha’s formulation of the Four Noble Truths. The first of these truths is the fact of inescapable *duhkha*<sup>22</sup> or suffering. The Buddha argues, in the second truth, that the cause of this *duhkha* is craving (*trsnā*), or attachment. In the third, he proposes that there is a possible end to this *duhkha*, which is “*nirodha*, ...the elimination of craving”<sup>23</sup>. The Buddha holds that the means to eliminating such craving is the Eightfold Path. Buddhist non-attachment has more often

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<sup>19</sup> Prebish, p.47

<sup>20</sup> Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels: An introduction to Buddhism*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1991, p.92

<sup>21</sup> Thurman, p.164

<sup>22</sup> The translation of *duhkha* is one source of many misapprehensions in the West about Buddhism. It has been generally translated as “suffering”, or “pain”, as Charles S. Prebish notes (in his *Historical Dictionary of Buddhism*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, New Jersey, 1993, p.54). He suggests a more appropriate term might be “unsatisfactoriness” (p.54), with which other writers like Sangharakshita agree.

<sup>23</sup> Prebish, p.55

been translated in English as *detachment*, with its negative connotations of indifference. Just as *sunyata* refers to the quality of emptiness *of* self rather than positing a negative voidness, non-attachment in Buddhism is a detachment *from*, or a non-attachment *to*.

Non-attachment is, needless to say, the opposite of attachment. As Sangharakshita writes, “In dependence on craving arises attachment”<sup>24</sup>. Craving (*trsnā*) as it is usually referred to in Buddhism, “is the root cause ... of suffering (*duhkha*) ... it is clear that only by completely *uprooting the cause of suffering* can nirvāna be attained”<sup>25</sup>. Gray and Beveridge in particular are concerned to uproot their attachment to things, and hence to cultivate an attitude of non-attachment, which Gray refers to as “detachment”.

**Suffering/ unsatisfactoriness/ (*Duhkha*):** Although “suffering” is the term most often used in English translations of *duhkha*, I prefer “unsatisfactoriness”, for reasons Prebish touches on: “To translate the first of the Noble Truths, *duhkha*, simply as suffering is perhaps to miss the point of Buddha’s message. More appropriately, Buddha is stating that all life’s experiences are transient, that they yield an unsatisfactoriness, either through purely physical pain, change, or conditioned phenomena”<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Sangharakshita, *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1990, p.90

<sup>25</sup> Prebish, pp.264-265

<sup>26</sup> Prebish, p.117

both aspects of their aesthetic heritages: the western poetic tradition, which they inherit culturally; and the range of Buddhist spiritual and aesthetic traditions, which they adopt and develop within both their Australian cultural, and sometimes physical, settings.

I hope to achieve a number of goals. Firstly, I recognise the need to provide critical re-examinations of these significant poets. It seems timely for a study of Stewart and Gray that can take into account their abiding, if sometimes uneven interest in Buddhism. This has not been an outstanding feature of Australian criticism of poetry generally, and has been generally lacking in the few studies of Gray and Stewart. With the recent publication of Beveridge's third collection, *Wolf Notes*, and its central sequence centred on Siddhattha Gotama, a larger study of her body of work is similarly timely.

Secondly, I hope to show the attempts at integration of Buddhist interests into these poets' work. In the terms of this thesis, when I use the term "integration" I am referring to the processes by which these writers' interests in Buddhism come to be represented in their work in a variety of ways. While the *workings* of this process of integration into the writers' creative processes are not visible in the text, the trace of integration is present and often clearly discernable. I use the terms "embodiment" and "enactment" to refer to these traces. As I use it, "embodiment" points to the way in which Buddhist ideas, images and practices are represented not overtly as subject matter, but at a textual level: through imagery, rhythm and a variety of formal means. "Enactment" is largely interchangeable with "embodiment". Where ideas, practices and images from Buddhism are "embodied", "enactment" provides a small but not insignificant distinction: where these ideas and practices are represented as processes in

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<sup>27</sup> Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years*, Vintage, London, 1998, p.228

## Introduction: Blueprints

Blueprints may be kept secret, or they may be unreadable to someone not already steeped in the technology. Word may trickle through about an invention made somewhere far away, but the details may not get transmitted. Perhaps only the basic idea is known; someone has succeeded, somehow, in achieving a certain final result. That knowledge may nevertheless inspire others, by idea diffusion, to devise their own routes to such a result.<sup>27</sup>

Jared Diamond

Historically, there has been a long tradition of Australian interest in Buddhism, with numerous conduits feeding Asian aesthetics and ethics into the Australian cultural sphere: literary, artistic, religious, inter-cultural exchanges beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Since the Second World War, this series of exchanges has continued in intensified form. This thesis has arisen through two broad concerns: contemporary Australian poetry and Buddhism. My interest in the ways in which the West has explored Buddhism, and in the patterns of Buddhism's acclimatisation to Western cultural settings, intersects here with my own attempts to find a way of writing poetry that is recognisably of a Western tradition while also exploring ways of being "Buddhist" in poetry. The major figures in an Australian poetry tradition who have demonstrated an interest in Buddhism as a central concern of (at least) important periods of their work are Harold Stewart, Robert Gray, and Judith Beveridge.

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the variety of ways in which these three significant Australian poets have handled their engagement with Buddhism on a literary level. I do not intend to delineate Harold Stewart, Robert Gray or Judith Beveridge's broad interest in Buddhism, but to describe the manifestation of this interest within their poetry. I am interested in their attempts at integrating into their sensibility

action, again, on the textual level I have described, I generally suggest that they are being “enacted”.

Buddhist notions will be present in the work, but the creativity in the practice of writing tends to transform the work itself as well: through formal means, tone, and the sorts of perceptions embodied. In integrating Buddhist ideas and practices into one’s aesthetic, as Gray and even more notably Beveridge do, there is less need to overtly write “about” Buddhism: rather, the Buddhist ideas inflect the attitudes and perceptions that structure the poetry. The joins do not show. The integration of Buddhism and poetics evidences a wider cultural and/or religious integration which may not be evident in the poetry other than through this trace. Gray and Beveridge show a much more astute undertaking than does Stewart, who clings to the western tradition even as he moves to embrace the Japanese Shin Buddhism. A result of this integration is that the play of integration usually works on doctrinal, practical and cultural levels. These levels correspond, respectively, to ideas, practices and images derived in some way from Buddhism that are integrated into the work, where they are either (or both) embodied and acted out. If Buddhism consists of a set of ideas, mythical and practical imagery, and a very broad range of practical methods, then creative work responding to the breadth and depth of Buddhism will incorporate these elements. This incorporation would tend to include both subject matter and an implicit, aesthetic scaffolding for those ideas, images and practices.

Third, I suggest that poetry, because of its interrelation between form, subject matter, tone and other attributes, is perhaps most predisposed of all literary forms to this sort of integration. This integration, then, is not merely in terms of subject matter or tone, but also occurs in the handling of both imagery and form. Such an incorporation of

Buddhism into a sensibility is also an intersection of ethics and aesthetics. Here I am interested in the integration of Buddhist ethical concerns into the aesthetic approach, as well as the incorporation of images associated with Buddhism into these poets' own body of imagery.

Fourth, this integrative effect might be used as a qualitative measure, as a means of discerning the level of interest in Buddhism of certain writers. Writers with a mere passing or academic interest in Buddhism will not demonstrate in their writing the deeper reflection, integration and/or transformation that is notable in the work of Gray or Beveridge, for example. One prime comparison is how Buddhism works in George Johnston and Charmian Cliff's novel, *High Valley*, as an object of cultural interest, and how Beveridge, conversely, uses key Buddhist ideas in her poetry as a major ethical and formal structure. It seems to be apparent that the greater the degree of integration of Buddhism into the poetry, the more firmly concealed within the poetry the Buddhism is. The closer the meshing of Buddhist ideas, practices and imagery, and poetic practice, the more difficult it can become to discern the distinction between them. If we are unable, ultimately, to directly investigate the workings of Buddhist influences, it nonetheless remains possible to see how it manifests or conceals itself.

Fifth, while certainly drawing on, and hopefully expanding the body of literary criticism on the work of Stewart, Gray and Beveridge, my primary critical tools are an array of key Buddhist notions: impermanence, no-self, emptiness or *śūnyatā*, and interdependence. I provide a glossary of these and other important Buddhist terms where their implications are drawn out. I use Buddhist terms and concepts to investigate the work of these poets. I hope to incorporate this way of reading the poems, and patterns in the poets' work as a whole, into a more conventional critical analysis of their work. In



using these Buddhist terms my intention is to flesh out the way Buddhist ideas, images and practice play out in the work of Stewart, Gray and Beveridge in a manner that a “straightforward” literary critical approach would be unable. In assessing the poets’ qualitative incorporation of Buddhism into their writing practice, I pay particular attention to how they embody these notions. While concerned with their direct statement or discussion of these ideas, the degree to which these poets enact those ideas, integrating them at the level of tone, image and form, seems the surest marker of their incorporation of Buddhism into their aesthetic. In meshing literary criticism with a “Buddhist” reading of these poets’ work, my intention is to apply a critical method which assesses them on the terms of their own apparent intentions.

Finally, this integration of Buddhism and poetic practice can be held itself to be an aspect of Buddhist practice. That the deeper and broader the formal embodiment of Buddhist ideas, the more the work reflects a Buddhist outlook rather than simply an “interest” in Buddhism or Buddhist practices and ideas. This is especially the case in Beveridge’s work, where the mark of Buddhist ideas and practices can be seen in her handling of form (especially in “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree”), her approach to imagery, to other beings (people, animals), but relatively less so in the apparent subject matter of her poems. Although Robert Gray has a number of poems which have Buddhist ideas as subject matter, his work less consistently displays a Buddhist influence at its basic levels. This is not to diminish his finely-wrought imagery which has much to do with an attempt to view things with Buddhist non-attachment, but his later work does not display these qualities with anything like the same frequency as his early work. Harold Stewart barely embodies or integrates his interest in Buddhism at the level of imagery at all, let alone taking on the possibility of formal implications. His motif of the briefly-glimpsed image does owe much to Shin Buddhism’s light imagery, but elsewhere his

work lacks any embodiment or enactment of Buddhist ideas. That is, integration of Buddhist ideas into a poet's worldview is trumped by embodiment of those ideas and practices at the basic levels of the poetry: image, perception, tone and form.

It does need to be said that not all images or ideas that appear at first glance to be "Buddhist" are, in fact, *necessarily* Buddhist in their orientation or derivation. If left unqualified, this comment might foster an impossible ambiguity and hopelessly complicate some of the arguments I propose. Some of the images Beveridge, for example, uses in some of her earlier poems, seem vaguely "Buddhist", but clearly precede her development of Buddhist interests in later work, from *Accidental Grace* onward. The motifs of connection and inter-relation that Beveridge explores in her work from the outset are not initially aligned with Buddhist ideas, but by her second book, these images are clearly associated with a series of contexts that are recognisably Buddhist. In light of this, I have regarded ideas or images as Buddhist or Buddhist-related where the broader context of their use is noticeably Buddhist. Elsewhere, while avoiding a teleological reading, I tend to describe such images and ideas as "proto-Buddhist", in that they suggest an receptivity or susceptibility in the writer's work to Buddhist ideas, and indeed seem to set a platform for the development in their writing of that interest.

### **A critical overview:**

In the case of Stewart, much of the criticism is in the form of short reviews, which are perhaps ephemeral, if at times informative. Michael Ackland is the weightiest of Stewart's critics, and is Stewart's main champion. His literary judgement, on balance, seems not nearly as astute as his biographical judgements. He gives substantial weight to A. D. Hope's comment that *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* may be the long poem of the twentieth century. It seems to be well short even of the major Australian long poems of

the century, not that this is a huge field of contenders. While Stewart's ability to organise the breadth of material for *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* may be admirable, the work is limited at best. In fact the narrow focus might be a strategy from Stewart to limit himself, so as not to risk a monumental failure. This general complacency, and unwillingness or inability to embody the subject matter formally or at the level of imagery places severe limits on the poem. The book might succeed as a spiritual autobiography, or as a spiritual map of Kyoto, but even these claims are not so convincing.

Gray is the writer here with the most critical material on his work. Generally, Gray's Buddhist influences are not discussed in great detail. Gray himself speaks of them in interviews, but the interviewers seem to have insufficient understanding of Buddhism to be able to ask Gray useful questions about his practice and how it affects his poetic beyond that which he is prepared to tell. Of his critics, Alan Urquhart and Dennis Haskell are the only two to really consider the way Gray's interest in Buddhism works as an energy within his poetry. Still, neither appears well-enough informed, once again, to make something of Gray's Buddhism other than to assert that it is an important presence in his work. While Haskell and Urquhart fail to consider the right questions, John Stephens makes the critical *faux pas* of asserting that "the One" is a major element of Buddhism<sup>28</sup>. This is a factual error of the worst sort, and this assertion colours his consideration of Gray's work. As such, Nicholls' work on Gray is seriously compromised.

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<sup>28</sup> John Stephens, "Evoking Empathy: Structures of Language and Feeling in Robert Gray's Poetry", *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4, October, 1990, p.457

The only major piece on Judith Beveridge is Martin Duwell's 2000 article in *Australian Literary Studies*<sup>29</sup>. The rest of the critical material consists of short reviews of her three books, although interesting assumptions and considerations are raised by Lyn McCredden and Alison Croggon in their reviews of *Accidental Grace*. Several interviews with Beveridge have been published, by myself and Jenny Digby. I have drawn on this material a little, but the critical work on Beveridge I give the most attention to is Duwell's piece, while giving McCredden and Croggon a secondary but still significant place.

### Overview:

The first chapter is a brief and preliminary historical overview that I undertake in order to assert a series of significant antecedents for the work of each of the poets I discuss at length. A tradition, albeit a marginal tradition, of writers and artists inspired or influenced by Buddhist ideas and aesthetics set up much of the cultural groundwork for the later work of Beveridge, Gray and Stewart. Prominent among these antecedents were writers such as the poet Max Dunn, whose work, if of dubious quality, did receive some critical attention at the time, and provides a parallel to Harold Stewart; war-time journalist turned novelist George Johnston and novelist Charmian Clift; the painters Margaret Preston and Ian Fairweather, who demands attention for his translation, *The Drunken Buddha*, as much as for his art; and Marie Byles, author of several books on Buddhism from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. I elected to work only on those whose work is relatively significant, in literary or aesthetic terms (Johnston, Clift, Fairweather, Preston, Dunn), and those who provide a degree of insight into mid-twentieth century Australian views of Buddhism (Byles), and who demonstrate clear signs of engagement, not necessarily aesthetic in nature, with Buddhism. There were numerous other public or

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<sup>29</sup> Martin Duwell, "Intricate Knots and Vast Cosmologies: The Poetry of Judith Beveridge", *Australian Literary Studies*, 2000, 3, pp.243-253

literary figures prior to Harold Stewart who declared or evinced some interest in Buddhism, such as Bernard O'Dowd in his poetry, the father of Federation and future Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, and a number of visitors to Australian shores. Paul Croucher's *Buddhism in Australia*<sup>30</sup> proved an excellent source for preliminary work on much of this material.

The practice and poetics of the haiku translations of Harold Stewart and the haiku-poems of Robert Gray are the major concerns of chapter two. Stewart's haiku translations appear as a literary annexation of Japan. His decision to translate the haiku into a foreign verse form, the rhyming iambic pentameter couplet, robs the haiku of many of the qualities that make it such an attractive proposition for translation in the first place. As if uncertain of the results of his endeavours, Stewart constructs a vast scaffolding of secondary material to demonstrate to his readers not only his array of erudition in Japanese culture and Buddhism, but also to argue his aesthetic choices. Little of this rhetorical positioning is seen with regard to Gray's haiku. These brief poems owe as much to Imagism as they do to the traditional attributes of the haiku, though Gray very clearly draws on those conventions. Where Stewart resists the Buddhist-inflected form even as he leans to embrace it, Gray picks the qualities he wishes from both the Japanese and western poetic traditions, and creates a body of work that resembles both but clears a new, if not innovative, place for itself.

In chapter three I explore the world of Stewart's "epic" poems, *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and the unpublished "Autumn Landscape-Roll". As with his loose translations of haiku, Stewart again appropriates Japanese and Chinese culture in order to forward his own, almost unwitting programme of an alchemical Buddhism. Of all the writers looked

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Croucher, *Buddhism in Australia*, NSW University Press, Kensington, 1989

at in this thesis, Stewart's work puts forward perhaps the least convincing case for the integration of his Buddhist interests into poetic practice. Stewart's reactionary aesthetic demands that even while immersed in Japanese culture and religion in his large work, *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*, he is repelled by modern, industrialised Japan, and drawn to a distant idealised past. A similar retreat from the world is seen in "Autumn Landscape-Roll", where the protagonist, an ancient Chinese artist, steps into a large landscape scroll he has painted. It is also in this manuscript that a large portion of Stewart's older work is revised and worked into the "new" epic, thus stepping back into a landscape roll of his own.

Chapters four, five and six all deal with the work of Robert Gray. The first two of these chapters looks at a major set of tensions within Gray's work: his attempt to cultivate Buddhist "detachment" on the one hand, while at the same time retaining a strong attachment to the natural world, and an often strong aversion for some aspects of human society, on the other. Gray seems largely unaware of this split in his work and outlook. While it seems, then, an irrevocable tension, it is a productive one nonetheless. Certainly there is much in Gray's work that critics have yet to address.

As I show in chapter six, in Gray's work there are increasingly frequent instances where his materialist philosophical convictions clearly begin to outweigh his interest in Buddhism. This shift in tone is accompanied and indeed amplified by Gray's long-standing revisionist stance. He often revises his work well after publication, and his various editions of selected poems feature frequent, if often minor alterations to poems. Still, some of these revisions invoke major changes to a poem's stance: this is certainly the case in later versions of "Within the Traveller's Eye", "To the Master, Dogen Zenji" and "Dharma Vehicle". In later poems this revisionist aspect privileges the expository,

discursive, didactic and abstract over the embodied image as vehicle for ideas.

Nonetheless, Buddhist ideas, if not images, still abound in a poem as recent as “The Drift of Things”, from *Afterimages*, although offered in support of positivism, as a *fait accompli* in Gray’s exposition of his argument. These moves illustrate in Gray’s work a long drift from things: from his Buddhist-inflected, Imagist work of his first three books, to the discursive, often heavily abstracted poetry of his later work. The shift in sensibility works in tandem with Gray’s drift away from Buddhism as a major force, demonstrating in a perverse way his prior integration of Buddhism into his aesthetics.

Judith Beveridge’s aesthetic is one that works through a network of interdependence. In chapter seven, I examine the workings of this interdependence and assess its significance in looking again at the criticism on Beveridge by McCredden and Croggon. I show how Beveridge creates networks of imagery that imply a web of interconnection, and how her manipulation of form reinforces and amplifies this sense of interdependence. This interdependence is Buddhist in nature. Such is the deep inextricability of form, subject matter, tone, imagery and her Buddhist allusions, I argue, that Beveridge’s poetry is not actively involved in an integration of Buddhist ideas, images and practices, but that it is a literary equivalent of a Buddhist practice. Her writing practice is part of (in fact, indivisible *from*) her practice of “Buddhism”.

In chapter seven I am preoccupied with Beveridge’s two overtly Buddhist sequences, “The Buddha Cycle” and “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree”, with the focus predominantly on the latter, later sequence. “The Buddha Cycle” is a biography of absence, relating speakers’ experience of the Buddha without directly representing him. Like the major portion of Beveridge’s work, “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree” uses a system of interdependence to seek out connection between apparently disparate

things and experiences. Concerned with Siddhattha Gotama's ascetic wandering prior to his enlightenment, such connections link his ascetic practice with what we now know as Buddhism. Writing in Siddhattha's voice, Beveridge enacts or embodies elements of Buddhist doctrine as he wanders. In this way, Buddhist doctrine and practices shadow Siddhattha through a narrative of wandering, spiritual crisis and determination. In declining to represent Siddhattha's enlightenment experience directly, Beveridge astutely avoids the difficulty in expressing what Buddhism contends is inexpressible.

Burton Watson, in his *Chinese Lyricism: Shih Poetry from the Second to the Twelfth Century*<sup>31</sup>, underlines the two poetic approaches I identify in a series of Australian poets whose work is inflected or more directly influenced by their Buddhist engagement. There is a contemporary relevance also to his argument in this long passage that follows:

In T'ang poetry one frequently encounters terms taken from Buddhist philosophy, but this is no assurance that the poet who used them was a believer, or even understood the real meaning of the words. More often such terms were thrown in merely to lend an air of exoticism or modernity, as we find in the words bodhisattva, satori, etc. at times bandied about in American letters today.

There were, however, a certain number of responsible poets such as Wang Wei, Li Tsung-yuan, or Po Chu-I who were not only serious students of Buddhist thought, but who tried to some extent to give expression to their religious views and ideals in their poetry. This true Buddhist poetry, as distinguished from that which merely dabbles in Buddhist terminology, may be divided into two types. First is that which is overtly doctrinal. Most often it is cast in the chi or gatha form, hymns of praise or devotional verses patterned after those found in the Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures ... These verses may deal directly with philosophical or religious concepts, as in Po Chu-I's eight gatha on the subjects of contemplation, enlightenment, samadhi, etc.; or they may employ conventional Buddhist images ... But when such images are used, they function solely on the symbolic level ... The purpose of the poems in which they occur is to express ideas and concepts, not to describe scenes; in spite of any incidental interest that may attach to the imagery, their principal aim is doctrinal rather than literary.

The second type of Buddhist poetry is that in which the philosophical meaning lies much farther below the surface. The imagery functions on both the

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<sup>31</sup> Burton Watson, *Chinese Lyricism: Shih poetry from the second to the twelfth century*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1971



descriptive and the symbolic levels at once, and it is not often possible to pin down the exact symbolic content of an image. These poems make no doctrinal point or deliver no sermon; they are Buddhist only in their general tone or outlook, and in fact if one were unaware of the author's identity, or did not know that he was a believer, one might never think of them as Buddhist at all – which, of course, from the Buddhist point of view, would mark them as the highest type.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Burton Watson, *Chinese Lyricism: Shih poetry from the second to the twelfth century*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1971, pp.170-171

## Chapter One:

### **These things can make a man less mean: Buddhism and aesthetics in Australian writing and art**

#### **Introduction:**

In Ian Fairweather's translation of *The Drunken Buddha*, an old Chinese Ch'an Buddhist "novel", the Prefect, Chao, says of Chi-tien's verse that "It is good poetry; certainly it moves a man. The hills around us changing in the mist, the sound of wind in the trees. These things can make a man less mean"<sup>33</sup>. Just as Chi-tien's poetry "can make a man less mean", its aesthetic qualities influencing outlook and behaviour, so too an interest in, or engagement with, religious or ethical matters exerts an influence on a writer's sensibility, or a painter's aesthetic. This relationship that Chao discerns between the aesthetic sensibility and the religious, spiritual or ethical dimension is a central feature of the various uses of Buddhist images and ideas in Australian writing, certainly so with the mid-twentieth century figures discussed here. The painters Ian Fairweather and Margaret Preston are vitally significant because of their roles in bringing a Buddhist-influenced sensibility to Australia. Three major areas form the focus of this chapter. Firstly, the Buddhist influence on Australian writers derives predominantly from the Buddhist influence on Chinese and Japanese art and writing and vice-versa. Secondly, the subjects of this chapter frequently represent their Buddhist influence through overt discussion of Buddhist doctrine. In George Johnston and Charmian Clift, and to a lesser extent Marie Byles, this includes a conversation between Buddhist ideas and Christianity. Byles, like Max Dunn, often declines to embody or enact Buddhism in her work, and like

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<sup>33</sup> Ian Fairweather, *The Drunken Buddha*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1965, p.84

Robert Gray much later, she can tend to privilege modern, Western science as a validation of some Buddhist insight. Thirdly, and most importantly, most of these figures attempt, with varying success, an embodiment in their work of Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist-influenced aesthetics. This embodiment is allowed by the interpenetration of the religious and aesthetic modes of Buddhist ideas in both the structure and the underlying ideas in the text. By embodying these concerns, the writers escape the need to overtly discuss such ideas. Furthermore, in doing so, the work mimics the working of Buddhist ideas of interdependence, impermanence and emptiness: they are present in traces, rather than visibly present. Fairweather and Preston, working in largely non-verbal fields, are perhaps the best examples of this tendency. There are also abundant instances of this sort of embodiment of Buddhist practice and doctrine in the writing of Dunn, Byles, Johnston and Clift. This inclusion of Buddhist doctrinal matters in the structure and texture, rather than merely the content, of the writing is most significant as an influence on later Buddhist-oriented Australian writers like Harold Stewart, Robert Gray and Judith Beveridge.

### **A landscape must have sublimity: Margaret Preston**

Paul Croucher claims for Margaret Preston a place as the “most enthusiastic champion of Oriental art”<sup>34</sup> in Australia, and as “a central figure in Australian modernism”<sup>35</sup>. While Croucher does not argue that the latter is a direct result of the former, these two assertions nonetheless form a significant intersection of artistic influence and intent. Preston is a conduit for both modernism and the transmission of a Buddhist-influenced Chinese and Japanese aesthetic. Her Buddhist and Asian interests

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Croucher, *Buddhism in Australia 1848-1988*, NSW University Press, Sydney, 1989, p.28

<sup>35</sup> Croucher, p.28

and influences, then, fed into her advocacy of modernism without necessarily playing the central role in that advocacy. Croucher writes that Preston:

was greatly impressed with [Chinese] Buddhist temple art and architecture. She wrote glowingly of the Chinese painters who believed that 'a landscape must have Sublimity', that it must be an expression of ideas rather than just a 'spot' or 'view'. She produced her own hybrid, borrowing from Cubism, Aboriginal and Oriental art in the belief that if Australians were 'to be guided but no longer controlled' by influences from overseas, they should 'lean to the East'.<sup>36</sup>

Margaret Preston's Buddhist influences arrive largely via an interest in Japanese and Chinese art. Roger Butler traces Preston's interest in Japanese art back to the beginning of her study of art, in the 1890s. He notes that by this time "English and French magazine articles and books on Japanese art were readily available in Australia"<sup>37</sup>. Still, Butler argues, showing the inherent difficulty of drawing clear lines of influence, that "The changes Japanese art wrought on the visual arts in Australia were, however, not always easily defined, as Japanese design had already been incorporated into the fashionable Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts movements"<sup>38</sup>. This indirect influence obscures a clear view of a direct Japanese influence on Preston's work, but it does show how an artist or writer might also be predisposed, via earlier, broad influences such as

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<sup>36</sup> Croucher, pp.28-29

<sup>37</sup> Roger Butler, *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Melbourne Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987, p.40. Butler cites Lois George's Fine Arts Honours thesis, 'Oriental Influences in Australian Printmakers from the 1900s to the 1930s', at the University of Sydney, 1982 (pp.9-10)

<sup>38</sup> Butler, p.40. This movement, driven in part by William Morris, "was almost exactly paralleled by Western interest in Japanese art" (p.38). Butler also notes that Morris' first major exhibition, at the Industrial Arts Exhibition in London in 1862, was "the same exhibition that introduced Japanese art and crafts to the general public" (p.38). He also adds that the "influence of Japanese art on European art and printmaking has been recognized since the late nineteenth century" (p.38). Also, "Fabrics, ceramics, furniture, studio pottery, theatre design, photography and typography came under the influence of Japanese, and to a lesser extent Chinese art, which was caught up in the Western enthusiasm for all things

that remarked on here, to more direct influences from the original source of that earlier influence.

The Chinese and Japanese sources working on Preston provide a notable stylistic difference between her work and that of many of her contemporaries. Radcliff Brown writes of Preston's later work:

At first glance these look as if they were painted in black and white... Only a longer scrutiny reveals that they are full of subdued colour which by its very restraint, makes a more lasting appeal... It is, of course, a well-known method in Chinese and Japanese art, but Mrs Preston has used it in her own original way.<sup>39</sup>

Humphrey McQueen discusses the similarity of effect between the work of Preston and Matisse. Although McQueen agrees that "some of [Preston's] colour-period works recall Matisse, whose canvases Preston almost certainly saw in Europe, it should be remembered that she arrived at a parallel position through her own independent study of colour and Japanese patterning"<sup>40</sup>. The diffuse nature of cultural encounter, influence and transmission is a necessarily complicating factor. While such influences themselves are often clear, their means of transmission and dissemination often lack such clarity. This does raise problems in tracing the source of the influence and how, specifically, it was propagated, but what is primary is the identification of that influence. The mechanisms of influence are illuminating but the presence alone of sometimes obscure or diffuse cultural transmission remains the central interest here.

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'oriental'" (p.38). This demonstrates an awareness of and exposure to Japanese aesthetics at, significantly, the imperial centre at this time.

<sup>39</sup> A. Radcliff Brown, cited in Elizabeth Butel, *Margaret Preston: The Art of Constant Rearrangement*, Viking/Penguin, Melbourne, 1986, p.41

<sup>40</sup> Humphrey McQueen, *The Black Swan of Trespass: The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944*, Alternative Publishing, Sydney, 1979, p.147

Elizabeth Butel considers that, technically and formally speaking, Preston's "increasing use of native Australian fauna and flora as subject matter was very self-conscious. Her treatment of these motifs displayed a Japanese-derived interest in particularizing nature, through the celebration of its individual units"<sup>41</sup>. Butel is in broad agreement here with Croucher, and more importantly, Roger Butler, in terms of Preston's Asian influences. Butler, however, at times glosses over Preston's training with Hiroshige's son<sup>42</sup>, writing that "She returned to Sydney via Japan (where in July, she studied woodblock printing) and Korea"<sup>43</sup>. The fleeting mention gives the impression that Preston's study was a mere stopover on her journey home rather than a substantial step in embracing the Japanese aesthetic influence. When Butler does acknowledge Preston's Chinese and Japanese interests directly, he argues that Preston's work displays an integration of her diverse interests and concerns. He writes that her painting,

*Flying over the Shoalhaven River*, is in the southern Chinese mode. The Shoalhaven River lazily meanders between soft hills. As with the Chinese and Aboriginal art that Preston admired, it was a timeless depiction of space. Ephemeral, everchanging clouds pass between the viewer and the eternal landscape.<sup>44</sup>

While this "ephemeral" and "eternal" landscape is a feature of the Chinese artistic tradition, the transience is also central to Buddhist notions of impermanence. It is not essential to elucidate Preston's awareness of Buddhist doctrine in order to argue that her absorption and integration of various Chinese and Japanese influences led her to embody that doctrine that informs that work as it influences her. Unwittingly or not, there is a

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<sup>41</sup> Butel, p.31

<sup>42</sup> McQueen notes that while Preston did study with Hiroshige's son, "her visit to Japan in 1934 [was] to study Hiroshige's woodcut techniques" (p.158). It is the son with *whom* she studies, but *what* she studies is the father's technique. This goes to the issue of influence, transmission and diffusion. Like my later argument concerning the alignments and interests of Preston and Matisse, the influence here is not quite as direct as it might be, although still very close to the original source. This gap is reminiscent of the paucity of information about Ian Fairweather's study of Buddhism, despite the well-documented influence in his work of Chinese aesthetics stemming from a Buddhist influence.

<sup>43</sup> Butler, p.19

<sup>44</sup> Butler, p.47

recognisable Buddhist influence in Preston's work that arrives through her aesthetic interests rather than any religious motivation.

## Take chisels and break everything up: Ian Fairweather

While Ian Fairweather did not arrive in Australia until 1934, his place in and influence on Australian painting from the late 1950s and beyond is significant. The reception of his work acknowledges the clear influence in his work from both Japanese and Chinese traditions. Numerous critics have outlined the nature of Fairweather's integration of Chinese aesthetics and philosophy in his work. Nourma Abbott-Smith writes that *Monastery* (1961) was "the first of Fairweather's tours de force to receive nationwide [Australian] acclaim"<sup>45</sup>. She claims the painting "had been conceived on the mountaintop at Tai-shan when Fairweather was on his way to his first visit to Peking"<sup>46</sup>. An exhibition of Fairweather's paintings from his book, *The Drunken Buddha*, and related pieces was held at the Macquarie Galleries in Sydney in May 1965<sup>47</sup>. The art critic Wallace Thornton wrote: "Fairweather's mastery in fusing Western and Eastern art is given a new logical emphasis by the subject matter of the tale and his most personal and distinguished concept sums up much of the artistic heritage of the two worlds"<sup>48</sup>. Robert Hughes' observation that "Fairweather is not concerned to produce permanent objects, but to articulate visual experiences in all their transience"<sup>49</sup> bears out Fairweather's interest and effort in translating Buddhist doctrinal concerns, namely impermanence, from the page, into the material of both his painting and writing.

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<sup>45</sup> Nourma Abbott-Smith, *Ian Fairweather: Profile of painter*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1978, p.132

<sup>46</sup> Abbott-Smith, p.132

<sup>47</sup> Abbott-Smith, p.141

John Henshaw touches on the manner in which Fairweather's Chinese influences operate:

The serenity that informs his art is no mere escape. It is something that the great Chinese artists could do with staggering ease – re-enact the cosmic drama of life in this limited microcosm of art, *because their understanding could touch it*. [My emphasis]<sup>50</sup>

Henshaw takes the resemblance of Fairweather's work to the Chinese tradition to mean that Fairweather's work in some way corresponds to aspects of that tradition. While Fairweather is, with Margaret Preston, a significant proponent of the Chinese tradition in Australia, it seems untenable to suggest that "the serenity that informs his art" places him in or near the league of "great Chinese artists" as Henshaw implies. This seems a critical favouring of Western achievement over Asian tradition. Fairweather's significance as a Westerner integrating his work with Sino-Buddhist aesthetics is secure enough without Henshaw needing to grant him a place in the Chinese canon.

Fairweather's reputation as a Buddhism-inspired or -influenced artist is founded on his use of Japanese and Chinese techniques and images. Written material dealing directly with his attitude toward Buddhism, however, is scarce, even though he clearly had an accomplished understanding of Chinese Buddhism and the Chinese artistic tradition, evident in his translation of *The Drunken Buddha*. Croucher assesses the problem of outlining Fairweather's evident interest in Buddhism:

neither of Fairweather's two biographers to date, nor any prominent critics, have made any real attempt to delineate his approach to Buddhism. One would have thought this a fundamental task, given his standing in Australian art and the critics' agreement that his 'images are projected through a philosophy of experience' ...<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Abbott-Smith, p.142

<sup>49</sup> Abbott-Smith, p.144

<sup>50</sup> John Henshaw, cited in Abbott-Smith, p.144

<sup>51</sup> Croucher, p.68



The gap in this knowledge is evidenced by Nourma Abbott-Smith's and Tim Fisher's evasion of a qualitative study of Fairweather's Buddhist interests. Abbott-Smith provides instances where Fairweather's interest in Buddhism is apparent, but provides little or no information regarding how this interest has developed. While in Peking, she writes, Fairweather "managed to find time to continue his study of Buddhism and Taoism and to further his knowledge of the mandarin idiom"<sup>52</sup>. Although it is apparent that by this point Fairweather had developed some interest in Buddhism, there is nothing earlier in Abbott-Smith's narrative to suggest the advance of his study, let alone a starting-point. Abbott-Smith refers merely to the continuation of Fairweather's Buddhist and Taoist study<sup>53</sup>. Given the apparent significance of Buddhist and Taoist study as an influence upon Fairweather's work, Abbott-Smith's unwillingness to explore this interest more fully does compromise the integrity of her narrative.

Fairweather's book, *The Drunken Buddha*, is the major text through which Fairweather's Buddhist influences and interests can most clearly be seen. *The Drunken Buddha* includes some direct instruction, via the narrative, in Buddhist practices. Tao-chi's first instruction in meditation comes from the monastery's janitor:

I will tell you and listen carefully. Do not stand, and do not sleep. Keep the back straight and the knees bent. Join the hands in front with the fingers curled. Look neither to the right nor left. Droop the eyelids, lower the eyes. Keep the mind pure and the heart alert. Breathe quietly, hold the breath, not letting it escape through the nose. Entertain no thought of the world. Think of death, of overcoming idleness, of correcting errors.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Abbott-Smith, p.61. Croucher asserts that Fairweather's interest in Japan and China, from which his interest in Buddhism sprang, comes from Fairweather's reading of Lafcadio Hearn and Ernest Fenollosa while a POW in World War One (p.130). While Abbott-Smith writes that Fairweather was "captivated" by Hearn's "enthusiasm for Asian philosophy", she fails to locate the beginnings of Fairweather's overt interest in Buddhism as opposed to that generic "Asian philosophy".

<sup>53</sup> Croucher notes that while in India during World War Two, Fairweather "at one time had plans to enter a Tibetan Buddhist monastery" (p.67). Gary Catalano, as cited by Croucher, suggests that Fairweather was inclined toward Zen (p.68), while Bernard Smith also argues for "Fairweather's indebtedness to Zen" (p.68, Croucher).

<sup>54</sup> Fairweather, p.26

Instead of the sometimes patronising tone that Marie Byles assumed at much the same time, Fairweather is intent simply on presenting the teaching. Tao-chi is dismissive of some aspects of Buddhist meditation practice, arguing that “praying should not be painful” and that “To sit until one aches is stupid! Stupid!”<sup>55</sup>. Fairweather’s own experience sits alongside this. Abbott-Smith writes of Fairweather’s learning of mandarin and Chinese calligraphy:

The intensity with which he entered into this new field was evidenced by his insisting upon kneeling on a cushion until it began to affect his knee joints, whilst he tried to memorize the lesson.<sup>56</sup>

This immersion by Fairweather in the culture of China promotes a shifting of artistic allegiance and orientation:

I am not ashamed to say that I stood for hours before the great calligraphies of old China. There was about them a great severity, a chaste beauty that made me dissatisfied with everything I had done, everything I had aspired to.<sup>57</sup>

This sort of dissatisfaction resembles that of Yasa in Byles’ *Footprints of Gautama the Buddha*<sup>58</sup>. It leads instead, in this instance, to a measured renunciation of aspects of the Western art tradition. It also sets up an intersection between the religious and aesthetic impulses.

Chi-tien encourages the monks’ materialism in order to point out and hopefully subvert the intensity of their attachment:

Chi-tien said, “I want only what he used himself, the bowl; the rest had better be distributed. One of you had better divide it up into shares, and be quick, lest someone should steal it.”

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<sup>55</sup> Fairweather, p.32

<sup>56</sup> Abbott-Smith, pp.28-29

<sup>57</sup> Abbott-Smith, pp.63-64

<sup>58</sup> Marie Beuzeville Byles, *Footprints of Gautama the Buddha: Being the story of portions of his ministerial life*, Rider & Co., London, 1957

When they heard the word “steal” they all began to point out what they would take – you the gold, I the silver, another the robes, regardless of which was priest or novice – and all began to squabble. Chi-tien watched them, laughing, and encouraged them to take chisels and break everything up. Then he went out.<sup>59</sup>

Chi-tien’s teaching here of non-attachment to things drives this passage. The monks would destroy the old Chang-lao’s authority in order to take what they desire. In encouraging the destruction of the objects the monks crave, Chi-tien merely suggests a logical extension of their own attitudes: the things they squabble over are attached to the Chang-lao’s spiritual authority, to which they each aspire. It is their very attachment that impels their craving, and Chi-tien implies that to take those objects is to destroy what the Chang-lao stood for. Chi-tien’s attitude of non-attachment is no abstraction. It extends to his own body: despite the cold, Chi-tien remarks that “this skin bag is of no consequence”<sup>60</sup>. It also applies to the Buddha and the machinery of Buddhism. After fire destroys the monastery, Chi-tien comments that “What is gone is but dust of this world, and the Buddha is no more than dust of your incense sticks”<sup>61</sup>. Chi-tien’s apparent non-attachment is not a sign of alienation or nihilism, but rather represents his deep respect for and understanding of Buddhist teachings and signifies his capacity to embody those teachings. Fairweather’s ability to effect this scene suggests a keen awareness of the power of attachments and aversions that Buddhism describes.

Just as Chi-tien is a guru-like figure in *The Drunken Buddha*, Fairweather claims that the English painter William Turner “became my guru, and today I try to equate him with our present times”<sup>62</sup>. This equation of the religious figure with the artistic mentor suggests that Fairweather is making similar connections in his own work, and his

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<sup>59</sup> Fairweather, p.42

<sup>60</sup> Fairweather, p.60. Elsewhere Chi-tien makes reference to this same imagery, which derives from the Buddha. He says that “A man’s life is mostly getting food to fill this stinking skin bag” (p.88).

<sup>61</sup> Fairweather, p.93

<sup>62</sup> Abbott-Smith, p.27

thinking about it. There is a connection between Fairweather's pursuit of art and his religious interests, and a point at which they become fused. This connection is intimately tied to Preston's simultaneous pursuit of modernism and development of a hybrid, Buddhist-inflected sensibility. It also echoes that passage in *The Drunken Buddha* where the prefect Chao is moved against violence by Chi-tien's poetry. There is an important movement in this and other instances toward an embodiment of the religious impulse or experience and the creative, aesthetic drive. Each becomes sublimated to the other, with neither assuming or given primacy.

This capacity for the religious to colour the aesthetic and vice-versa is seen also in the passage that Abbott-Smith relates about Fairweather's experience in the monastery at Soochow. At Soochow Fairweather spent the night at the Buddhist temple<sup>63</sup>. Abbott-Smith mediates Fairweather's experience there, describing the temple as "thick with gold leaf decoration"<sup>64</sup>. Her writing of Fairweather's experience is notable for her attention to a painterly awareness of light, movement and colour. She remarks on "the moving figures whose robes glowed in the muted light"<sup>65</sup>, and

the snow outside that fell steadily and covered the monastery while the inside was illuminated by hundreds of wicks floating in golden bowls. These threw off flickering shadows that fell across the tessellated floor of the temple and softened the stony aspect of the statues.<sup>66</sup>

In an interview with Abbott-Smith, Fairweather comments that he had "by now discovered that in China the art of writing and that of painting were closely interlocked by history and aesthetic values and I knew I could not begin to understand one without

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<sup>63</sup> Abbott-Smith, pp.45-47

<sup>64</sup> Abbott-Smith, p.47

<sup>65</sup> Abbott-Smith, p.47

<sup>66</sup> Abbott-Smith, p.47

the other”<sup>67</sup>. This is an artistic practice reliant on the integration of experience into the aesthetic dimension. This interlocking of “history and aesthetic values” encompasses China’s encounter and engagement with Buddhism, an integration Fairweather encountered and experienced through his interest in Chinese art and culture. Fairweather has taken on this model of integration himself, joining his apparent religious interests with his cultural alignments. He combines them in his artistic life, painting Chinese motifs and scenes, and translating Chinese Ch’an Buddhist texts, and bringing these diverse engagements into Australian cultural life.

### **“Mr. Dunn often speaks of “the one””: Max Dunn**

Max Dunn was an Irish-born writer (born in 1895) best known for his later poetry. He was associated with his fellow Communist party member David Maurice in the self-named “Little Circle of Dharma”, a small group with a common interest in Buddhism in Melbourne in the 1920s. When the Melbourne Olympics were held in 1956, Dunn was appointed as Buddhist “chaplain” to care for the spiritual needs of the Games’ Buddhist competitors. In the mid to late 1940s Dunn published three collections of poetry in relatively quick time: *Random Elements*<sup>68</sup>, *No Asterisks*<sup>69</sup>, and *Time of Arrival*<sup>70</sup>. These books demonstrate Dunn’s modest development as a poet, but are more significant, perhaps, for plotting Dunn’s integration of his Buddhist beliefs and practice into the body of his work. Dunn states that not one of the poems in his first collection of poetry, *Random Elements*, “reflects a permanent belief or mood”<sup>71</sup>. From this we might infer Dunn’s awareness of the Buddhist teaching of impermanence. It also demonstrates that Dunn recognises that such teachings were not mere abstractions, but could be

<sup>67</sup> Fairweather interview, cited in Abbott-Smith, p.47

<sup>68</sup> Max Dunn, *Random Elements*, self-published, Melbourne, 1943

<sup>69</sup> Max Dunn, *No Asterisks*, Anvil Press, Melbourne, 1944

<sup>70</sup> Max Dunn, *Time of Arrival*, Anvil Press, Melbourne, 1947

applied concretely to his life and practice of writing. At this stage of his poetic career, though, an active integration of religious belief and writing practice is far from readily apparent. R. A. Simpson, poet and acquaintance of Dunn, cautions against an overestimation of Dunn's interest in Buddhism:

It is also important not to give too much value to the Buddhism. And yet it must be mentioned for a number of reasons – which are mainly negative. It often made him torture a poem to death with philosophical abstractions and sermonizing, and his embarrassingly overt Buddhist poems tell other people, as well as himself, how to treat existence.<sup>72</sup>

Dunn, in fact, is more than capable of torturing a poem to death without resorting to any allusion or reference to Buddhism<sup>73</sup>. A. R. Chisholm, in his introduction to *Time of Arrival*, writes

It is true that Mr. Dunn often speaks of 'the one,' and that would seem to point towards the 'divine unity' of occultists, neo-Platonists, Swedenborgians, and others of that ilk. But his totality is a principle of continuity rather than of a oneness without content.<sup>74</sup>

Chisholm makes no reference to the Buddhist imagery in Dunn's poems or else readily assumes that Buddhism belongs in his category of "occultists... and others of that ilk". At this point, Australian armed forces had recently fought in and were stationed in several predominantly Buddhist countries in South-East Asia. George Johnston's war memoir, *Journey Through Tomorrow*<sup>75</sup>, covering his wartime experiences in China, Burma, and perhaps most notably in Tibet, had just been published. Chisholm's lack of awareness of Buddhism is not enormously surprising, but given the historical circumstances it certainly remains noteworthy.

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<sup>71</sup> Max Dunn, *Random Elements*, self-published, Melbourne, 1943, unpaginated

<sup>72</sup> R. A. Simpson, 'Max Dunn – A Man and His Poetry', *Quadrant*, Vol. 8, No.4, 1964, pp.49-50

<sup>73</sup> In fact, Dunn's criticism of Australian writers rings true of his own work. C. O. Leigh Cook writes that Dunn "charges that most of our writers, due to the directness of Australian speech, lack subtlety and sensitivity and tend to be over-explicit" (C. O. Leigh Cook, 'The Masks of Max Dunn', *Westerly*, 3 and 4, May, 1965, pp.61-62).

<sup>74</sup> Dunn, *Time of Arrival*, p.7.

<sup>75</sup> George Johnston, *Journey Through Tomorrow*, F. W. Cheshire, Melbourne and London, 1947

Many of the Chinese-derived images in poems in Dunn's 1944 collection, *No Asterisks*, seem forced, lacking any suggestion of a real integration of those images into Dunn's sensibility. The translations of Chinese poetry by Ezra Pound (and Pound's Chinese *Cantos*) and Arthur Waley were major precedents for Dunn's borrowing of imagery from the Chinese poetic tradition. Waley was relatively popular, and several of his books of translations, *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*, *More Translations from the Chinese*, *The Temple and Other Poems* and *The Book of Songs*<sup>76</sup>, had been readily available over a substantial period. Included in these collections are versions of poems by Han Shan, Po Chu-I, Li Po and Wang Wei, poets who have been central to the transmission of the Chinese Buddhist- Taoist and Confucian-oriented poetic to the West. Pound attributes the source of his *Cathay*<sup>77</sup> translations largely to Li T'ai Po (better known simply as Li Po). Even though Zhaoming Qian suggests Pound's Cathay poems owe more to Taoism than Buddhism<sup>78</sup>, the West's exposure to the Chinese sensibility, by no means simply Taoist in orientation, still remains. Pound's Vorticist incorporation of Chinese and Western aesthetics likewise remains a vital precedent and model for later poets such as Dunn, Stewart and Gray. In Dunn's poems numerous "oriental" or "exotic" images and phrases appear: a "lake of jade", a "white peach" and a "bamboo flower". In "The Image in the Garden"<sup>79</sup> Dunn touches on something resembling the tone of the Chinese tradition. The poem contains images of contemplation and, as noted of Preston's work, the transience of nature:

<sup>76</sup> Arthur Waley, *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*, Knopf, New York, 1919; Arthur Waley, *More Translations from the Chinese*, Knopf, New York, 1919; Arthur Waley, *The Temple and Other Poems*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1923; Arthur Waley, *The Book of Songs*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1937

<sup>77</sup> Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems 1908-1959*, Faber and Faber, London, 1975, pp.64-78. Pound refers to Li T'ai Po as Rihaku (p.66). He also takes some of the source material from the manuscripts of Ernest Fenollosa (p.64), who, along with Lafcadio Hearn, also exerted influence on Ian Fairweather's initial interest in Chinese philosophy and art.

<sup>78</sup> Zhaoming Qian, *Orientalism and Modernism: The legacy of China in Pound and Williams*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1995. Qian's fifth chapter (pp.65-87) is subtitled "Taoism versus Vorticism in *Cathay*".

And do you weep now,  
 like the Chinese sage  
 when he sat beside a river,  
 for the passing, passing, passing  
 of all things?

(NA, 18)

“Self-Montage”, on the other hand, is a further attempt to wrestle Buddhist ideas into the poetry. Dunn fails because of his defiantly abstract imagery, even as his speaker renounces “monasteries of defeat, / inward to the nodal self, / matrix of eternity” (NA, 19). It might be that “Eternal Cycle” (RE, unpaginated) is the ground from which Dunn’s poetry begins to leave behind a mere parroting of Buddhist doctrine and to take up an investigation of the specific, concrete effects of the teachings. The first stanza of the poem works in generalisations and platitudes:

If lovely things must pass away so soon,  
 sigh not their loss.  
 All beauty rises again,  
 all growth is nurtured by decay.

(RA, unpaginated)

Much of the remainder of the poem takes up a somewhat ponderous reiteration of these themes through a series of corresponding image-processes: “Out of the rotting leaves/ springs loveliness” (RE, unpaginated); “Out of the mould of old beliefs/ grows wisdom or new faith” (RE, unpaginated); and “out of death blossoms life” (RE, unpaginated). Although these are partly concrete images, Dunn still gives them little particularity that might reflect a Buddhist influence that is both doctrinal *and* aesthetic in quality.

In the slightly later poem “The Upper Room” (TA, 20), Dunn represents the Mahāyāna Buddhist contention that *Samsara* is identical to *Nirvana*, that the conditioned

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<sup>79</sup> Dunn, *No Asterisks*, p.18



is no different from the unconditioned, that such distinctions are false. The realm of suffering is nearly identical to that of what had hitherto been considered its absence and “opposite”: “So near to pain, so terse, was the bliss,/ One breath cooled desire” (*TA*, 20). This contiguous existence of *Samsaric* suffering and *Nirvanic* bliss finds its mirror image in the “haggard temple and painted porch” (*TA*, 20), past which the speaker notes that the “faces in the street divulged/ New aspects of the one” (*TA*, 20). This suggests quite strongly that Dunn had read Nāgārjuna, or else commentaries on his *Mahamadhyamikarika*<sup>80</sup>, or was at least aware of the ideas contained therein. In his *Karika*, Nāgārjuna argues:

*Samsāra*... is nothing essentially different from *nirvāna*. *Nirvāna* is nothing essentially different from *samsāra*.

The limits of *nirvāna* are the limits of *samsāra*. Between the two, also, there is not the slightest difference whatsoever.<sup>81</sup>

There is a trace of intellectual sophistication implied by Dunn here<sup>82</sup> that is absent from some notable later work, such as Marie Byles’ books and much of the less convincing exotically “Buddhist” writing of the 1960s and 1970s that borrowed “Buddhist” or “Eastern” images and terminology.

Even though the influence of a Chinese aesthetic is evident across Dunn’s poetry, it does not exercise the transformative effect it has on the work of Fairweather and Preston. Dunn’s translations of Chinese poetry are represented in *Leaves of Jade: Poems*

<sup>80</sup> There are at least two good relatively recent translations of this text: David J. Kalupahana, *Mulamadhyamakakarika of Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1991; and Kenneth K. Inada’s *Nagarjuna: A Translation of his Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1993.

<sup>81</sup> Kenneth K. Inada, *Nagarjuna: A Translation of his Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1993, XXIV.19-20, p.158

<sup>82</sup> Though it ought to be said that this conflation of nirvana and samsara is to be considered “in the ultimate sense” (Inada, p.24). As Inada makes clear, “the reader must be able to distinguish between the realms of empirical “relative” truth (*samvrti-satya*) and of non-empirical “supreme” truth (*paramartha-satya*)” (p.23). As such, Dunn exercises his apparent awareness of Nagarjuna’s teaching without making the distinction that Inada (and Nagarjuna) consider vital: Dunn’s understanding, then, is only partial.

from the *Dragon Land*<sup>83</sup>. A substantial proportion of the poems are versions of poems by Li Po (some under the Japanese name, Rihaku<sup>84</sup>) and Tu Fu. Dunn's translation of Tu Fu reads poorly alongside Kenneth Rexroth's version:

'In Absence', Tu Fu

Across the dark tide glitter gulls;  
On the far hills red flowers burn.  
Alas, another Spring has died –  
When will come my day of return?

(*IJ*, 10)

In his *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese*, Kenneth Rexroth translates the same poem, entitling it "Another Spring":

White birds over the grey river.  
Scarlet flowers on the green hills.  
I watch the Spring go by and wonder  
If I shall ever return home.<sup>85</sup>

Like much of Dunn's earlier poetry, this translation lacks specificity. The concrete detail and movement of Rexroth's work highlights this shortcoming. By the same token, Dunn weighs down his translation with rhetoric, unwilling to allow the poem's imagery to speak for itself. Dunn frequently employs directness of tone to the exclusion of depth and ambiguity, lessening the tonal variety. He badly mishandles the metaphysical melodrama, leaving the poems overly transparent and one-dimensional. At times, though, Dunn is able to convey through his poems aspects of his understanding of Buddhist doctrine, as in "The Upper Room". Despite this limited success, he consistently misjudges the tone of the Chinese material, failing to bring together his religious and aesthetic interests and

<sup>83</sup> Max Dunn, *Leaves of Jade: Poems from the Dragon Land*, self-published, 1952

<sup>84</sup> Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems 1908-1959*, Faber and Faber, London, 1975, p.66. These poems (pp.64-78) are, in Pound's words, "For the most part from the Chinese of Rihaku, from the notes of the late Ernest Fenollosa" (p.64). The writing of Fenollosa, along with that of Lafcadio Hearn, was influential on Fairweather in terms of his developing interest in Chinese and Japanese philosophy and art.

<sup>85</sup> Kenneth Rexroth, *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese*, New Directions, New York, 197, p.24. This poem would be one of Tu Fu's lesser-known poems, it would seem. It is not present in Arthur Cooper's *Li Po*

influences. Dunn is consistently unable to embody his Buddhist interests within his poems. This is an aesthetic failure, in that Dunn cannot satisfactorily integrate his poetic stance, such as it is, with his Buddhist interests. As a result, Dunn's Buddhist rhetoric displaces the few aesthetic qualities the poems possess. Those Buddhist interests fall short of becoming an actual influence on his writing practice. They supply Dunn with a body of images and terminology, but he demonstrably fails to shape that body into material that provides anything more than a superficial display of his knowledge about Buddhism. Unlike other, significant figures, Dunn never seems to perceive or develop in his work an underlying structure based on his Buddhist beliefs and practices.

### **That day, on the trail, a curious thing happened: George Johnston and Charmian Clift**

In both *High Valley* and *Journey Through Tomorrow* Charmian Clift and George Johnston demonstrate their preparedness to present to their Australian readership Buddhist ideas and imagery in a relatively direct form. There are few attempts in these instances to interpret those ideas and images. Instead, they are allowed to stand on their own, with no Western discourse deemed necessary to prop them up as is often the case with the work of Marie Byles and Max Dunn. There is a notable passage in *High Valley* where Clift and Johnston include, without narratorial intervention, a brief exposition of the Buddhist doctrine of the Four Noble Truths. It also signals a modulation in the narrative treatment of the Tibetan-raised, ethnic Chinese young man, Salom. Salom finds himself being spoken *to* by a visiting Tulku. Ordinarily Clift and Johnston speak through Salom. The Tulku explains to Salom that the Buddha

formulated the four Noble Truths. Now, boy, listen to them: Existence is sorrow; sorrow is caused by desire; to conquer sorrow a man must annihilate the thirst of

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*and Tu Fu* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965), nor in A. C. Graham's *Poems of the Late T'ang* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965).

desire and that attachment of life; to attain this cessation he must follow the path... It is the way that leads us beyond the limits which we assign to the Self, before we realize that the Self is compound and impermanent and does not exist.<sup>86</sup>

While this does not represent a moment in the text where a religious experience is integrated into Johnston and Clift's writing practices, it does stand as a set piece that presents an experience *of* the religious. The suspension here, in Peter Bishop's terms, of the "personal narrative"<sup>87</sup> actually brings the personal narrative to its own apparent elimination. Nadia Wheatley writes that "Salom's moral development is dependent on his learning to respect the belief that he personally cannot endorse"<sup>88</sup>. This development is precisely what occurs in this passage. Johnston and Clift, like Salom, learn "to respect the belief [they] personally cannot endorse". Although Johnston did, as Wheatley writes, "develop a deep respect for the general principles of Buddhism"<sup>89</sup>, neither he nor Clift took on the practice of Buddhism. They do, nonetheless, provide narrative space for elements of Buddhist doctrine in an unfettered manner, preceding many other Australian writers working with Buddhist material.

In *Journey Through Tomorrow* and later *High Valley*, an East-West conversation enables the East to reciprocally address the West. The Tibetan lama speaks back to the West's exoticising, colonialist constructions of the East, and critiques those who place Western scientific knowledge above other ways of knowing. In Johnston's book, Kama Cheun-ji-sing-kai, the "Living Buddha", when asked his opinion of Christianity, says that

Christianity has a childish logic that appeals to large groups of simple people, but to an intelligent man it is unsatisfying... I respect some of the basic truths of

<sup>86</sup> George Johnston and Charmian Clift, *High Valley*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1990, p.164

<sup>87</sup> Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989, p.6. Bishop writes that in travel writing about Tibet, the "personal narrative may appear to be eliminated whilst, for example, certain social, archaeological or botanical observations are made... I would suggest that in the travel account such narrative is never nullified, only temporarily subdued".

<sup>88</sup> Nadia Wheatley, Afterword to *High Valley*, p.277

<sup>89</sup> Nadia Wheatley, Afterword to *High Valley*, p.268

Christianity, its ethical laws, and I admire its vitality. But it is a religion that can be absorbed so easily and swiftly – even by a child – like a bowl of *tsamba*.<sup>90</sup>

*High Valley's* lama is even more forthright than *Journey Through Tomorrow's* "Living Buddha". In an inversion of both Western anti-Asian prejudice and the Western discourse by which science has primacy over Buddhism, the Tulku argues that Westerners

follow a strange religion. A meaningless pap with easy rewards and childish punishments and most convenient repentances. A thing that can be swallowed and digested at a sitting, like *tsamba* by a child just weaned. To a thinking man it has no challenge.<sup>91</sup>

The lama, representing "the East", infantilises the West, neatly inverting the discourse followed variously by Byles and Dunn in using science to validate and justify, from a privileged standpoint, Buddhist philosophical findings. While not an especially sophisticated inversion of roles, Johnston and Clift nonetheless voice an alternative set of assumptions to those of the rational West.

In this situation, the West is found wanting in terms of validation, unable to support its own findings. Further, the Tulku is well aware of the West's web of fantasy about "Asia" and Tibet's supposed mythic qualities. He recalls Westerners who

came with gifts and pleasant words, and with requests for me to inform them of my faith. It is a subject which cannot be encompassed in a mere afternoon of talk, but I spoke to them, although I knew that they had really come for some vulgar display of magic.<sup>92</sup>

While undermining exotic Western views about Tibet, he also undercuts the Western preoccupation with technical and scientific advances. He describes "Western buffoons" who

<sup>90</sup> George Johnston, *Journey Through Tomorrow*, F. W. Cheshire, Melbourne and London, 1947, p.296

<sup>91</sup> *High Valley*, pp.160-161

<sup>92</sup> *High Valley*, p.161

could only scoff [at Tibetan religion]. They expected me to believe their accomplishments, even though they were beyond my understanding. And they derided my accomplishments only because they were beyond *their* understanding!<sup>93</sup>

The deft manner in which Clift and Johnston, through the medium of the Tulku, dismantle Western chauvinism marks a realisation of the problematic relationship between Australia and an “East” characterised as a mysterious other complement to Western rationality.

*High Valley*<sup>94</sup> is certainly the first novel by an Australian writer, and among the first anywhere, to strive to avoid the Shangri-la mysticism that typically occludes Western knowledge of Tibet<sup>95</sup>. Johnston begins his moves away from the predominant Orientalist discourse in *High Valley*'s companion work, *Journey Through Tomorrow*, written from Johnston's wartime travels. It is not that attention to the mythical attributes of Tibet is absent, but Johnston is aware of the limitations such a view imposes. Johnston writes

I am not prepared to believe that hidden somewhere in the wilderness of the eastern Tibetan plateau is Hilton's Shangri-la ... but I am not prepared to disbelieve that behind its mountain barriers are strange secrets about which the world of to-day knows nothing.<sup>96</sup>

Johnston is also “anxious to find out what exactly was a Living Buddha, what he thought about things, what he could tell me of this mysterious religion of Tibet”<sup>97</sup>. Johnston again complicates his approach to Tibet when he attributes the Lama with a mystic Asian

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<sup>93</sup> *High Valley*, p.162

<sup>94</sup> The cover of the 1990 edition of the novel features Ian Fairweather's *Landscape near Peking* (1935). This is an exceedingly odd choice, given the novel is set in Tibet and features one Han Chinese character, raised in Tibet. This conflates a novel based in Tibet with a painting of a Chinese scene (conferring a distant legitimacy on Chinese control of contemporary Tibet). This ties, in a strange but compelling way, the Chinese occupation of Tibet with the Sino-Buddhist influence on the work of an Australian-based, British-raised, Indian-born artist and translator. There is a chain of displacement and exile in these connections that is truly cross-cultural.

<sup>95</sup> In her afterword to the 1990 edition of *High Valley*, Nadia Wheatley writes that “this [is] the first Australian (the first international?) novel to be set in Tibet” (p.276). Also, it includes what she suggests is “one of the first dignified, three-dimensional and supportive portrayals of a Chinese person to appear in our literature” (p.276).

<sup>96</sup> Johnston, *Journey Through Tomorrow*, pp.220-221

<sup>97</sup> Johnston, *Journey Through Tomorrow*, p.291

otherness, his “eyes half closed and an expression of great Oriental wisdom on his face”<sup>98</sup>. It is apparent that Johnston attempts to wrest himself free from an Orientalist view of Asia and Asians. Clearly, his experience of Tibet assists him in this, equipping him with concrete imagery. Nonetheless, not all of Johnston’s Tibetan experience is entirely explicable, and his attribution of “a mystic Asian otherness” seems an attempt, clumsy as it is, to account for that inexplicability.

In her afterword to *High Valley*, Nadia Wheatley argues that Johnston sees significant correlations between the Australian and the Tibetan experience. She writes of Johnston’s “belief in the common experience of humanity, and particularly his observation of the similarity between Tibetan nomads and Australian country folk”<sup>99</sup>. The “deep respect for the general principles of Buddhism” that Wheatley attributes to Johnston is embodied in his capacity for seeing aspects of the other (Tibetans) in the self (Australians). This conviction, aligned with an experience Johnston finds perturbing, gives a sharp edge to the passages overtly about Buddhism in both books. Each of these texts includes a version of an odd experience of Johnston’s in Tibet. Near the very end of the section on Tibet in *Journey Through Tomorrow* is a revealing passage worth quoting at length:

That day, on the trail, a curious thing happened, which I cannot explain. We had stopped to rest by a huge cairn of prayer-stones, and I idly examined the carved rocks[.] I saw one large, water-rounded pebble, almost a perfect circle, carved on one side with a beautiful figure of a lotus-borne Buddha, on the reverse side with the inevitable script of *O mani padme hum*. It was the only prayer-stone I had seen carved with a figure, and the carving had a beautiful rhythm and simplicity. When we rode on I was carrying the stone on the saddle-horn ahead of me. We had not been riding for more than ten minutes before I had an urgent overwhelming impulse to get rid of the thing. I was about to cast it into the undergrowth when I stopped. Some unknown man had laboured for

<sup>98</sup> Johnston, *Journey Through Tomorrow*, p.292

<sup>99</sup> *High Valley*, p.273. Johnston writes of life in Tibet that “So much of it was as familiar as the everyday scenes on an Australian farm” (p.269).

long on that stone, laboured with deep piety – even if it was a piety utterly alien to me – and I could not toss away this surviving evidence of his reverence as if it were an empty ration box. But the wish to be rid of the thing rapidly became an obsession. I am not, I think, particularly superstitious, but as I carried that carved stone I had strange feelings which I still cannot explain. At length we came to another prayer-cairn. I reined in my horses and deposited the carved Buddha back on the heap of jagged rocks... and I rode on whistling and without a care in the world!<sup>100</sup>

In attempting to fit this incident into a work of fiction like *High Valley*, Johnston and Clift must integrate it into the normative bounds of experience. The solution that Clift and Johnston reach is to translate it into a sublime aesthetic experience, displacing the transgressive, inexplicable, even mystical elements of the “original”. In *High Valley*, Salom is roused, not to a religious awakening, but a sort of aesthetic appreciation of Buddhist-derived art:

Such monuments to spiritual belief had never aroused in Salom any emotion other than a faintly scornful amusement, except when a line of script beautifully carved or the flowing formalism of a graven Buddha appealed to some inherent aesthetic sense within him.<sup>101</sup>

The more or less nervous displacement of this quasi-religious experience by an aesthetic one is no accidental irony. Johnston and Clift need to integrate this episode into the novel’s fictional parameters, but in so drawing it into a set of aesthetic attributes, permit Johnston’s experience only a limited accommodation. Still, it does bring Johnston’s “mystical” occurrence into a Western body of (aesthetic) knowledge, but mediates this through a Chinese-Tibetan character. Clift and Johnston cannot sufficiently integrate this episode into the fictional mode and also retain all its original, unsettling power. It remains simply too strange an experience to fit with the novel’s exchange between the imported realism and the still-flexible old ways.

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<sup>100</sup> Johnston, *Journey Through Tomorrow*, pp.359-360

<sup>101</sup> *High Valley*, p.107



## “There is no need to become a Zennist”<sup>102</sup>: Marie Byles

Marie Byles’ characterisation is a strength of her writing, grounding the narrative, creating a more realistic, concrete sense of the Buddha as a person, and countering the dangers of presenting a largely abstracted figure at the tradition’s centre. Also, Byles persuasively presents elements of the *Dharma* to her Western readership. Like Johnston and Cliff’s use of the Lama, in *Footprints of Gautama the Buddha*, Byles uses the character Yasa, a monk, to impart Buddhist teaching. Yasa, grounded in his experience, observation and contemplation, says that he has

found that this life is a ceaseless becoming, a ceaseless passing on to something else. And that if we are to live it in happiness we cannot stand still and clutch at that which passes, but like all else we must go always onward – always onward through time till we find Nirvana and Deathlessness<sup>103</sup>.

This passage recalls the tone and drift of the final words attributed to the Buddha.

Edward Conze’s translation from the *Paranirvana* reads: “Be energetic, persevere, and try to control your minds! Do good deeds, and try to win mindfulness! For life is constantly shaken by many kinds of suffering, as the flame of a lamp in the wind”<sup>104</sup>. The similarity between what Yasa says and the Buddha’s final exhortation to his followers is a claim for Yasa’s authority. It confirms his personal closeness to the Buddha, the similarity of their views. This has the rhetorical effect of linking Byles’ prose to the Buddha. By conferring authority on Yasa, Byles also seeks legitimacy for her narrative, and suggests a desire to integrate herself into the Buddhist tradition as a proponent of Buddhism in the West.

Although *Journey Through Tomorrow* and the high-profile, prize-winning *High Valley* precede Marie Byles’ work by a clear decade, her approach to Buddhism and Buddhist

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<sup>102</sup> Marie Beuzeville Byles, *Paths to Inner Calm*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1965, p.197

cultures does not consistently reflect the reorientation apparent from Clift and Johnston's perspective. The pro-West chauvinism in Byles' writing is pronounced, if not uniform. She confers validity upon elements of traditional Buddhist teaching by showing that Western science agrees with its findings. The effect of this is to steadily valorise the West's attainments over those of the East, even though the insights of the Buddhist Dharma invariably precede the modern West's insights. While in India researching her first book, *Footprints of Gautama the Buddha*, Byles met Earl Brewster, a prominent Buddhist from the United States<sup>105</sup>. Croucher notes that Byles felt that in Brewster, "rather than the numerous monks and sadhus she had sought out, lay 'the nearest approach to enlightenment'"<sup>106</sup>. Byles planned to "master" meditation in Burma rather than elsewhere as she "was sceptical as to the value of a 'guru' upon whom India insisted, and was inclined more toward Burmese Buddhist meditation, which appeared more scientific in its approach than that of India"<sup>107</sup>. So, although Byles does use an Asian model, Burma, she does so on the basis of perceiving that model to be more similar to the West than its Indian counterpart.

Byles' writing on suffering is an impressive if not defining feature, resonating across her books. She draws on her own experience in these passages, bringing her knowledge of Buddhist teaching on suffering into writing about her own life. Byles renders the moment of Yasa's decision to leave his family life as an excellent evocation of the unsatisfactoriness of samsaric, or conditioned, existence:

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<sup>105</sup> Marie Beuzeville Byles, *Footprints of Gautama the Buddha: Being the story of portions of his ministerial life*, Rider & Co., London, 1957, p.171

<sup>104</sup> Edward Conze, transl., *Buddhist Scriptures*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1959, p.62

<sup>105</sup> D. H. Lawrence also met Brewster and visited him in Sri Lanka. Gerald Doherty discusses Lawrence's correspondence and meeting with Brewster in his article "The Nirvana Dimension: D. H. Lawrence's Quarrel with Buddhism", *The D. H. Lawrence Review*, Vol.15, No.2, Spring-Summer 1982, pp.51-67.

<sup>106</sup> Croucher, p.71

<sup>107</sup> Marie Beuzeville Byles, *Journey into Burmese Silence*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1965, p.18

I went forth into the outer rooms where I beheld the maidservants of the household lying in sleep. They who were flowers of beauty in the daytime now lay in disorder upon the couches snoring and with dress dishevelled and soiled. A sense of great misery overwhelmed me that what had seemed so lovely should be so repellent. I could rest no longer.<sup>108</sup>

The suffering and unsatisfactoriness here is not physical, but is based on Yasa's desires.

It is telling that Byles has Yasa phrase his going forth as a determination to "rest no longer". That decision to "rest no longer" is a determination to no longer be bound by the gap between desire and expectation, between craving and attachment. The implicit suggestion is that to dwell in the *samsara* is a form of rest: it is a static existence, as opposed to the dynamic, creative (as opposed to reactive) practices that the Buddha's teaching entails. Unsatisfactoriness, though unceasing, can still be turned to good narrative use. Byles visits a Burmese forest monk. She tells: "when I dropped down to pay respect I had landed half on and half off the concrete platform on which stood the orange tent. The precepts seemed to be unusually long and the references to *dukkha* became uncomfortably realistic"<sup>109</sup>. This discomfort is directly related to Byles' attempt to integrate her interest in Buddhism into her life on a practical level. *Dukkha* is transformed, through Byles' Buddhist practice, from a distant and intellectualised abstraction into a concrete reality. This difficulty in bringing Buddhism into her life is, perhaps, the major source of Byles' resistance to that integration, which we see in her sporadic attempts to sublimate Buddhist insight to modern Western scientific bases of knowledge. Despite her flourishes of Western and scientific chauvinism, Byles sits through the pain in order to pay proper respect to the monk. This is a greater insight into the strength of Byles' own Buddhist practice than the many passages that are "about" that practice, simply because it demonstrates the strength of Byles' integration of Buddhist practice, experience and writing.

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<sup>108</sup> Byles, *Footprints*, p.17

<sup>109</sup> Marie Beuzeville Byles, *Paths to Inner Calm*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1965, p.48

A significant feature of Byles' writing is her willingness to question her own assumptions, a preparedness suggesting a level of non-attachment to her own views. She finds her preoccupation with the disrespect shown to Burmese women in and by the Buddhist community difficult to dislodge, despite her best efforts in meditation practice. The "ceaseless meditation on merger in the waves of creation and destruction did not seem to be making any headway on the problem of becoming reconciled to monkish superiority over nuns and lay people"<sup>110</sup>. She acts out her difficulty in practising Buddhist meditation in the writing itself. It is as if these difficulties drive Byles into intermittent moments of clarity where Byles' Western framework momentarily falls away. It also allows her sufficient distance from traditional Eastern views of her material. Lalita Rajapakse considers Byles a conduit between East and West:

If at times one does not agree with some of the views of the authoress on her interpretation of the Dhamma, it does help one to focus attention on certain matters of the Doctrine as it is understood by a disciple who has been nurtured in a theistic environment<sup>111</sup>.

Put this way, it becomes clear that Byles is of interest to Buddhists from traditionally Buddhist societies concerned with relations with, and developments in, Buddhism in the West. Byles tells the East about the West just as much as her narrative informs the West about the East. Thinking of her Australian readers, she writes that "We can learn from Zen poetry and art, as we can learn from the Catholic mystics. To do this there is no need to become a Zennist or a Roman Catholic, nor to undertake practices alien to our thought and temperament"<sup>112</sup>. Similarly, Byles' erstwhile mentor David Maurice, in his *What the Buddha REALLY Taught*, hoped "to deter those trying to use Buddhism as a

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<sup>110</sup> Byles, *Burmese Silence*, p.115

<sup>111</sup> Sir Lalita Rajapakse, in Byles, *Footprints*, p.12

<sup>112</sup> Byles, *Paths to Inner Calm*, p.197

crutch. It would be better for them to become Christians”<sup>113</sup>. This sentiment against attachment to one or the other tradition is a viable reading of no-self across apparent cultural and religious divides. This is one move that continues to be propounded in cross-religious dialogue<sup>114</sup>.

In *Journey into Burmese Silence*, Byles describes a meditation practice in which she has been instructed. She writes:

We were to start by applying this conception of ceaseless creation and destruction at the tip of the nose, extending it to the top of the head and thence all through the body until we became conscious of the body and mind as consisting entirely of particles in creation and destruction, *which is precisely as modern science by other means has shown to be the constitution, not merely of our own bodies, but of the whole universe.*<sup>115</sup> [My emphasis]

Byles elsewhere claims that the “Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Way... can just as well be grafted on to our modern cosmology with its scientific and psychological terminology relating to a super-sensual world of atoms and subconscious forces”<sup>116</sup>. Note that she conflates “modern” and “our”. However, in identifying herself so readily with modernity, and Buddhism with outdated, if still relevant, modes of knowledge, Byles puts distance between herself and the Buddhism she arguably follows. This difficulty in coming to terms with the place of Buddhism in her own life stalls that very integration she proposes and embodies in her writing.

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<sup>113</sup> David Maurice, *What the Buddha REALLY Taught*, Elizabethan Press, Sydney, 1980, p.36. Maurice bases this argument in the teachings of the respective traditions. He writes:

Jesus Christ said ‘Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you a rest.’  
The Buddha said: ‘You yourself must make the effort: even a Buddha can only point out the way’.  
He said further: ‘By your own striving, gain the highest goal’. (p.36)

<sup>114</sup> I agree with Byles here. The recent *The Ground We Share: Everyday Practice, Buddhist and Christian* (Robert Aitken and David Steindl-Rast, ed., Nelson Foster, Shambhala, Boston, 1996) is an excellent example of the ongoing dialogue that Byles argues for. As the title suggests, it is very much focussed on the actual set of practices of the two traditions, with particular emphasis on their encounter in the West. Both Steindl-Rast and Aitken envisage Christian practice incorporating elements of Buddhism, and *vice-versa*.

<sup>115</sup> Byles, *Burmese Silence*, p.47

<sup>116</sup> Byles, *Footprints*, p.15

**Conclusion:**

These writers and artists from the early to mid-twentieth century attempt, variously, to integrate their practical and intellectual Buddhist interests with the aesthetic impulse. They prefigure, and set important precedents for, later substantial figures like Harold Stewart, Robert Gray and Judith Beveridge. The combined effect of the endeavours of the work of Dunn, Preston, Fairweather, Johnston and Clift, and Byles was to establish in the Australian cultural environment both an awareness of and a susceptibility to the Buddhist influence. This presence, both doctrinal and aesthetic in nature, is especially significant in its ability to cross the apparent boundaries between those categories, and to suggest wider forms of integration, embodiment of the other and connection.

## Chapter Two:

### Some presence inevitably shows through<sup>117</sup>: Harold Stewart, Robert Gray and haiku translation

#### Introduction

In the West, easily the most widely known Japanese literary form is the haiku. The background of this poetic form is by no means solely Buddhist. In the development and orientation of the haiku, several traditions can be seen to have cross-fertilised each other: Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, not to mention diverse literary lineages. Harold Stewart acknowledges the haiku's mixed parentage at the outset in his essay in *A Net of Fireflies*. "Shinto, Taoism and Confucianism, and Buddhism in all its various branches, have for so many centuries permeated every aspect of Japanese life and art"<sup>118</sup>. Among the most prominent Japanese practitioners of the form have been Buddhists, or those with at least some form of Buddhist interest: writers such as Bashō, Issa, Shiki, and Buson. Even those haiku poets who are not themselves Buddhist nonetheless perpetuate the trace of Buddhist thinking and practice in the poetic form in which they work. Stewart emphasises the Buddhist elements in the work of some major haijin: "Basho and Issa were devoted followers of Zen and Shin Buddhism, sincerely trying to live the precepts in their daily lives"<sup>119</sup>. Part of Stewart's overall project in his

<sup>117</sup> Makoto Ueda, *Basho and His Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1991, p.11

<sup>118</sup> Harold Stewart, *A Chime of Windbells: A Year of Japanese Haiku in English Verse*, Tuttle, Rutland, Vermont, 1969, pp.131-132. Stewart spends a considerable amount of space tracing the influences of these traditions on the haiku. It is outside the brief of this chapter to attend in any detail to the various contributions to the development of the haiku, but Stewart provides a better than adequate overview of this topic. He covers Shinto (pp.136-150), Taoism and Confucianism (pp.150-159), Hinayana Buddhism (pp.159-16), and various strands of Mahayana Buddhism (pp.170-219). He pays great attention to the influence of his own tradition, Jodo Shu and Shin Shu, the Pure Land Buddhist schools (pp.195-219).

<sup>119</sup> Harold Stewart, *A Net of Fireflies: A Year of Japanese Haiku in English Verse*, Tuttle, Rutland, Vermont, 1960, p.134

haiku and his epic poems, *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and “Autumn Landscape-Roll”, is “to restore some of the balance lost by this overemphasis on Zen”<sup>120</sup>.

Since the early twentieth century, Western practitioners and advocates of the haiku, like their Japanese counterparts, have not been exclusively Buddhist or even Buddhist-influenced. The cultural influence, just the same, acts as a conduit for ideas and practices that owe something to the Buddhist tradition. Harold Stewart and Robert Gray are by far the two most prominent Australian exponents of haiku. Stewart imposes his reactionary, anti-modernist poetics on the Japanese form, and sets in place a questionable body of rhetoric to maintain this literary occupation of Japan. In doing so, Stewart continues on the path he previously set himself in the 1940s with the Ern Malley hoax that defrauded early Australian modernism, and that he continues down with his later work, the epics *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and “Autumn Landscape-Roll”.

Robert Gray is among the most accomplished contemporary writers of haiku in the “West”. While problems of cultural mistranslation, appropriation and imposition are central to Stewart’s translations of haiku, Gray not only writes his own English-language haiku, but his poetic technique, range, and ambition unquestionably exceed Stewart’s. Gray’s haiku exemplify the complexities involved in mapping the movement of cultural transmission. His haiku neatly sidestep issues to do with autobiography, Orientalism, discomfort and revisionism that are notable features of much of his work. In his haiku Gray does blend various cultural traditions together, the Sino-Japanese with the Australian-English verse tradition, as well as elements of modernism via his major model, William Carlos Williams. In taking significant elements from each tradition, without imposing the structures of one on the others, Gray avoids suggestions of outright

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<sup>120</sup> Stewart, *Fireflies*, p.134



appropriation. He actually builds a new body of work that takes from and resembles each of its progenitors while looking both familiar and new.

## Haiku conventions and qualities

The haiku has been widely, if not entirely accurately, characterised as a seventeen syllable form, remarkable for its surprising insight. In his essay on haiku in *A Net of Fireflies*, his first book of haiku translations, Harold Stewart acknowledges that this quality of insight in part shapes the form's concentrated nature. He writes of

Samveggha, the poetic shock, [that] has been spoken of as the outward sign of Satori in a haiku; and it is this moment of heightened awareness which also endows the haiku with its inner form as distinct from its verse pattern.

(NF, 128)

Makoto Ueda clarifies this interdependent relationship between form and content, contending that the haiku's brevity is the formal equivalent by which it "presents an observation or sentiment in all its immediacy, before it is intellectually conceptualized"<sup>121</sup>. R.H. Blyth notes that "Another aspect of brevity, the omission of the personal pronoun, is a point of great importance. In itself, by itself, it unconsciously teaches the ego-lesseness of things. The subjective and objective are fused without a word being uttered"<sup>122</sup> in its direction. The quality of *samveggha* that Stewart points out is in turn enabled and condensed by formal brevity, which both resists and disables the drive to intellectualise.

Harold G. Henderson notes the form's "technical conventions", most notably the *kireji*, or cutting words, and the season-words, or *kigo*<sup>123</sup>. The cutting words add

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<sup>121</sup> Ueda, p.11

<sup>122</sup> R. H. Blyth, *Essentially Oriental: R. H. Blyth Selection*, Kuniyoshi Munakata and Michael Guest, eds., Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, 1994, p.234

<sup>123</sup> Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku*, Doubleday, New York, 1958, p.8. Blyth (R. H. Blyth, *Essentially Oriental: R. H. Blyth Selection*, Kuniyoshi Munakata and Michael Guest, eds., Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, 1994) also notes the significance of *kigo* (256-28) and *kireji* (251-254).

emphasis, acting a little like line-break and grammatical pauses in English poetry. Like Ueda, Lucien Stryk notably draws a link between the haiku's technical and conventional elements on the one hand and, on the other, their aesthetic correspondences. He notes Bashō's advocacy of particular qualities in the haiku:

Basho cautioned fellow haiku poets to rid their minds of superficiality by means of what he called *karumi* (lightness). This quality... is the artistic expression of non-attachment.<sup>124</sup>

There are other, non-literary properties of the haiku, seen as Stryk notes that Bashō's

mature haiku style... is known not only for *karumi*, but also for two other Zen-inspired aesthetic ideals: *sabi* and *wabi*. *Sabi* implies contented solitariness, and in Zen is associated with early monastic experience, when a high degree of detachment is cultivated. *Wabi* can be described as the spirit of poverty, an appreciation of the commonplace.<sup>125</sup>

This places Bashō within a Zen Buddhist-*inflected* tradition, without claiming him or the haiku generally as exclusively "Buddhist":

Basho's discussion of poetry was always tinged by Zen thought, and what in his maturity he advocated above all was the realization of *muga*, so close an identification with the things one writes of that self is forgotten. As Zen's Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng, put it, one should not look at, but as the object.<sup>126</sup>

This "realization of *muga*" is a modulation and transference of Buddhist no-self into a literary context. While Bashō's orientation is not exclusively Buddhist, central elements of Buddhist thought nonetheless drive his poetry. These attitudes toward objects and images propel the transmission, then, of such ideas across cultural and language barriers via, for example, the translation of the haiku into English.

<sup>124</sup> Lucien Stryk, transl., Basho, *On Love and Barley: Haiku of Basho*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985, p.10

<sup>125</sup> Stryk, *On Love and Barley*, p.10

<sup>126</sup> Stryk, *On Love and Barley*, p.10

## Convention from dissent

While there is a definite consensus as to the haiku's formal and technical conventions, there has been somewhat more debate over the process of translation of haiku into English. These questions circle around two major issues: the degree to which the haiku and its qualities can be translated into English; and the most appropriate form in English to fit the haiku's particular sensibility. Haruo Shirane, in his *Traces of Dreams*, asserts that the "haikai is both a specific poetic genre... *and* a particular mode of discourse"<sup>127</sup>, accentuating the inseparable link in the haiku between its form and the poetic shock that form involves. This poses difficulties for the translator, most notably that of how to derive a form that delivers enough of the haiku's genre and its "mode of discourse" to function as both haiku and as English-language poetry. Further, it raises the complex nature of cultural transmission. Is the haiku discourse accessible only in the context of Japanese language and culture, or is it an expression of a more universal religio-aesthetic experience that can be assimilated into an English form while remaining faithful in form and sensibility to the original?

It is necessary to take into account the tension between qualities of Japanese language, and the problem of translation into English. R. H. Blyth notes of the nature of Japanese grammar that

Subject, predicate and object, [are] to some extent indistinguishable, and punctuation non-existent, but the edges of the words themselves were blurred... there is simply endless becoming.<sup>128</sup>

Hiag Akmakjian attempts to resolve this difficulty, claiming that

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<sup>127</sup> Haruo Shirane, *Traces of dreams: Landscape, cultural memory, and the poetry of Basho*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, p.2

<sup>128</sup> R. H. Blyth, *Essentially Oriental: R. H Blyth Selection*, Kuniyoshi Munakata and Michael Guest, eds., Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, 1994, p.235

In translations ... the reader's sensibility is what is appealed to. But the sensibility is peculiar to *the reader's own tongue*, not the sensibility of the original language ... the translator must respect not just the genius of the Japanese language, but much more so the genius of the English language.<sup>129</sup>

To work, then, as Akmakjian asserts, as a text in English, the translation necessarily reflects the sensibility of the translator: "the genius of the English language" will always leave a trace. Makoto Ueda is firm in his insistence that "translation is a form of literary criticism as well as artistic creation, and no matter how hard the translator may try to become transparent, *some presence inevitably shows through*" [my emphasis]<sup>130</sup>. Ueda shows this trace or presence within its historical-literary context. He contends that in the West,

as more people tried their hands at translating hokku, stylistic variations proliferated still further. On the whole, each translator's style seems to have been determined by two main factors; his conception of the basic nature of hokku and his choice of English poetic models.<sup>131</sup>

Among prominent English-language translators of haiku, such as Stewart, Yuasa, Yasuda, Ueda, Henderson, and Blyth, lineation is a vital issue. Ueda writes that:

to insist that a hokku should be a one-line poem in English because the original Japanese poet had no sense of lineation is tantamount to insisting that no English grammatical article, such as "a" or "the," should be used in translating Japanese sentences because the Japanese language includes no concept of articles. Translation means a transference of thought and feeling from one linguistic convention to another; since each convention is different, there is necessarily a limit on the number of conventional devices that can be carried over. Where to draw the line is up to individual translators, who will make a decision based on their idea of hokku on the one hand and their sense of English style on the other.<sup>132</sup>

Ueda's contention, well-supported by the evidence of the great majority of English-language haiku translation, is in line with the argument that "the seventeen-syllable poem presents an observation or sentiment in all its immediacy, before it is intellectually

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<sup>129</sup> Hiag Akmakjian, *Snow Falling from a Bamboo Leaf: The Art of Haiku*, Capra Press, Santa Barbara, 1979, pp.28-29

<sup>130</sup> Ueda, p.11

<sup>131</sup> Ueda, p.10

<sup>132</sup> Ueda, p.12

conceptualized”<sup>133</sup>. Ueda’s translation practice is itself informed by the writing practice of “contemporary American haiku poets, the majority of whom seem to favor a terse style that makes a minimum use of punctuation marks”<sup>134</sup>. This reflects an assimilation into the English version of haiku of some characteristics of the grammatical and syntactic structure of Japanese haiku conventions.

Nobuyuki Yuasa, the translator of Bashō’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, suggests an alternative method of translation into English for the haiku: a four-line stanza form. His reasoning is threefold. He maintains, first, that the tone of the haiku is largely colloquial<sup>135</sup>, and that “the closest approximation of natural conversation rhythm can be achieved in English by a four-line stanza rather than a constrained three-line stanza”<sup>136</sup>. Second, Yuasa argues that “a three-line stanza does not carry adequate dignity and weight to compare with *hokku*”<sup>137</sup>, and thirdly he admits he “found it impossible to use [a] three-line form consistently”<sup>138</sup>. Yuasa’s analysis suggests that it is difficult in the extreme to consistently translate a traditional Japanese haiku into an English form that corresponds precisely to the traditional components of the original. This would very nearly entail direct transposition. Yuasa, however, suggests that the best we can hope for is a transmission that remains relatively authentic in both cultures. As Hiroaki Sato writes,

much of the subject matter of this genre seems culturally too limited to be transferred to another language without explication, although, here, the problem may be less cross-cultural than literary... [though] I think both the intrinsic and cultural difficulties are more imagined than real.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Ueda, p.11

<sup>134</sup> Ueda, p.11

<sup>135</sup> Nobuyuki Yuasa, transl., Matsuo Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966, p.48. Yuasa writes “the language of *haiku* ... is based on colloquialism.”

<sup>136</sup> Yuasa, p.48

<sup>137</sup> Yuasa, pp.48-49

<sup>138</sup> Yuasa, pp.48-49

<sup>139</sup> Hiroaki Sato, *One Hundred Frogs: From Renga to Haiku to English*, Weatherhill, New York, 1983, p.135

It is not merely Japanese words or language being translated into English, but rather the haiku and its traditional cultural, religious and aesthetic implications. Blyth argues that verbatim translations, “to put nothing in the English version which is not in the original ... leads to dryness or incomprehensibility”<sup>140</sup>. There cannot then be a single definitive way to translate haiku. Nor can the critical or methodological underpinnings alone validate the work: as Yuasa suggests, “I shall not attempt to defend my stanza, for it is an experiment, and just as any experiment in literature, the result alone can justify or disqualify it”<sup>141</sup>.

Like Yuasa, Hiag Akmakjian embraces the contentiousness of haiku translation in the structure of his own anthology, acknowledging the provisional nature of his work. Akmakjian asserts that the “reader must judge whether the technique stands or falls in the attempts that follow. Many familiar haiku were chosen precisely so as to make comparison possible, as a test”<sup>142</sup>. Masaoka Shiki, the late-nineteenth century Japanese *haijin* “urged them [other haiku writers] first of all not to be bound by the conventions of the past but to be open and natural in their approach and to endeavour to create works that conformed first of all to their own tastes”<sup>143</sup>. Shiki saw that formal and technical flexibility are inherent in haiku-writing practice. The awareness, then, of impermanence, insubstantiality, emptiness and the need to cultivate non-attachment remain an onus on haiku poets, and, by inference, their translators. This detachment and acceptance is a quality lacking not in the haiku Harold Stewart translates, but in the rhetoric he attaches to those translations. Most haiku writer-translators demonstrate some flexibility in these areas, but Harold Stewart’s reactionary insistence upon his own method as *the* method of translation provides a marked exception in these and other circumstances.

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<sup>140</sup> R. H. Blyth. *Essentially Oriental*, p.258

<sup>141</sup> Yuasa, p.48

<sup>142</sup> Akmakjian, p.31

## Drawing the line somewhere: arguing for the couplet

Ouyang Yu, in his novel, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*,<sup>144</sup> broaches the complex field of translation. His central character Zhuang Dao (a.k.a. Zane Dole, Za Na Dou) writes that

what bothers me is that a literal translation is as impossible as turning a Chinese man into an Englishman or an Australian man so that eventually what you have to do is to find equivalents or approximations.<sup>145</sup>

Harold Stewart's primary claim to innovation in the field of haiku translation is his own uncovering of "equivalents or approximations" for the haiku in the form of the English rhyming couplet. Stewart's rhetoric of haiku translation decries what he sees as a shortcoming in Western translations. He claims that

Few translations from Far Eastern languages make any attempt to find English parallels to the individual styles of Oriental poets. All tend to be turned into the same flat, tuneless, prosaic uniformity, so that Li Po and Tu Fu [for example]... become almost indistinguishable in a translation devoid of rhythm and rhyme.

(NF, 161)

Stewart, then, desires a "definitive" version of haiku in English. The first of many ironies to do with Stewart's work is that his own translations lack variety quite profoundly due to his strict adherence to self-imposed formal requirements.

To counter this lack of a standard English form for the haiku, Stewart claims that for translators (read, *himself*) the "problem consists in discovering among existing verse-forms a stanza which occupies a place corresponding to that of the haiku in Japanese versification, or one which might be adapted for this purpose" (NF, 163). This argument

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<sup>143</sup> Burton Watson, transl., Masaoka Shiki, *Selected Poems*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p.6

<sup>144</sup> Ouyang Yu, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, Brandl and Schlesinger, Sydney, 2002

is reliant on an approximately parallel relationship between Japanese and English poetry, a connection that Stewart argues against when he writes that

...each language should conserve its own metrical forms and not seek to annex those of foreign tongues, which it cannot assimilate. It is not necessarily, then, a question of attempting to reproduce in English the seventeen-syllable, three-line form of the haiku. As has been shown, this happens to be quite easy to do; but the result of being thus satisfied with a line-by-line rendering into prose almost invariably sounds devoid of time and tune. This is because the foundation of English verse is not a syllabic count, but a pattern of stress accents conflicting and collaborating with a pattern of quantities.

(NF, 162)

To render a Japanese poetry form in an English verse form as Stewart does is to radically alter the actual nature of the poem. It no longer retains its own qualities *as* that particular form, becoming instead a different entity, in part a transposition into a quite alien structure. In this sense, Stewart does not simply annex and occupy the Japanese form, but rather renders it obsolete in order to promote his own version of it. Forty years after the initial publication of Stewart's translations, his idea that the haiku in its conventional, translated form has very little to offer in English is yet to be vindicated. Stewart claims that the couplet provides a sufficient, even appropriate, parallel to the haiku:

The smallest stanza of similar length capable of standing alone in English is the single rhymed couplet. Like the haiku, the couplet, with only eighteen to twenty syllables, is the most that can be comfortably spoken in a single breath, and so is best suited to short lyrical exclamations.

(NF, 163)

Without reaching the same conclusions as Stewart, Kenneth Yasuda asserts in a similar vein that the "Haiku ... is a vehicle for rendering a clearly realized image just as the image appears at the moment of aesthetic realization"<sup>146</sup>. This leads onto his suggestion

<sup>145</sup> Ouyang, p.228

<sup>146</sup> Kenneth Yasuda, *Japanese Haiku: Its Essential Nature and History*, Tuttle, Boston, 1957, new edition, 2001, p.39



that “When such an experience does occur, the duration of the state of ‘ah-ness’ is by physical necessity, a breath’s length”<sup>147</sup>. Yasuda continues: “Consequently, to form the experience, the length of the line for a haiku thought must have the same length as the duration of the single event of ‘ah-ness’”<sup>148</sup>. Again, like Stewart, Yasuda argues that “we find that the longest lines in English to be read at one breath contain between sixteen and eighteen syllables”<sup>149</sup>. Stewart’s formal translation of the haiku into rhyming couplets seems an exceptionally false move. The couplet parallels the haiku only so far as its relative brevity and its handling of short lyric exclamations, as Stewart claims. The rhyming couplet’s other properties, however, count against it. The sureness and predictability of iambic pacing, and the end-rhyme of each line detract crucially from the haiku’s capacity to surprise, suddenly illumine, and confound rationality. Stewart’s imposition of the rhyming couplet acts out a reverse colonisation and appropriation, where he fits a consistent, almost ritualised form that does not derive, and in fact detracts, from the haiku’s traditional Japanese characteristics.

Stewart writes in *A Chime of Windbells* that the “form of three lines of variable length, using rhyme in the first and third lines, all too often induces distortions and dislocations of syntax, so that the resulting translation reads like a translation”<sup>150</sup>. But Stewart’s own insistence on standard line length, rhythm and rhyme very frequently ensures the same “distortions and dislocations of syntax” that Stewart himself disavows. These rigid structures also seriously disrupt the sense of *samvegha*. In his work on Issa, Sam Hamill proposes a method somewhat more flexible than Stewart’s. Hamill states that his “primary concern is to say what the poet says without rearranging the original

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<sup>147</sup> Yasuda, p.39

<sup>148</sup> Yasuda, p.40

<sup>149</sup> Yasuda, p.44

order of perception”<sup>151</sup>. He also is concerned with the “distortions and dislocations of syntax” that Stewart complains about.

Stewart explicates the similarities he sees between three-lined unrhymed haiku and the rhyming couplet. He opines:

Lest it be objected that the haiku is in three lines and employs no rhyme, while the couplet has but two which do rhyme, it should be remarked that in chanting a haiku aloud twice, as is the Japanese custom, a pause is made after the kireji, which is usually placed at the end of the first line and announces the subject; then the second and third lines, which contain the counter-subject and their conjuncture, are read continuously as though one. [T]his threefold division of the theme will be found to be preserved inside the couplet form by means of punctuation and enjambment, thus giving it an effect of asymmetry. Without rhyme, moreover, the couplet would seem wanting to our ears in any sense of a lyrical utterance, which the haiku certainly has when recited by a Japanese... These are the reasons why, contrary to the currently-accepted practice of rendering rhymed and metrical poetry in the foreign tongue into unrhymed and unmetrical English prose, the very reverse will be found here.

(*NF*, 163-164)

In asserting that “the couplet is an English verse-form, while the haiku is not” (*CW*, 11), Stewart denies the Japanese form’s qualities while cynically exploiting it as raw material for his own publishing career. Stewart’s “aim at being creative and interpretative, an attempt to transpose into English verse the poetry rather than the words of the originals”<sup>152</sup> seems not to be borne out by comparison with other English-translation versions of haiku. This looks to clinch the argument that Stewart appropriates Japanese cultural texts for his own uses, alleviating his anxiety while simultaneously exacerbating it because of the restricted, flat qualities of his translations.

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<sup>150</sup> Stewart, *Windbells*, p.11

<sup>151</sup> Sam Hamill, transl., Kobayashi Issa, *The Spring of My Life and Selected Haiku*, Shambhala, Boston, 1997, pp.xxii-xxiii

<sup>152</sup> Stewart, *Windbells*, p.10

At the time of the publication of his first book of translations, Stewart lacked any real background in Japanese language and culture. Recall that his first book of haiku translations, *A Net of Fireflies*, was published in 1960. In his interview with Richard Kelly Tipping, Stewart states that upon his return to Australia from Japan in 1961 he decided to begin learning Japanese<sup>153</sup>. This strongly implies that Stewart “translated” the first of his books, and formulated his ideology of translation of Japanese haiku into English without any training in Japanese whatsoever. How this provides a sufficient basis for his argument or his translations is not apparent. He bases a great deal of his translation work on the work already done by Henderson, Blyth and the like, and whom he proceeds to criticise. That his work is uniformly a secondary translation explains the weaknesses in Stewart’s thinking in this regard, as well as the at best inconsistent quality of the results of his work. What is not readily accounted for is why his views do not change after acquiring some knowledge and experience of Japanese language and culture. This appears to suggest that Stewart’s poetic ideology is characterised by an anxiety about modernity in poetry, culture and society generally, as much as it is by his knowledge in any given area. It seems Stewart was in some way aware of his translations’ weaknesses, hence his construction of a sizeable rhetorical scaffolding to support and articulate his translation method. Again, Yuasa’s argument comes to the fore: the poems must be judged on their own terms, not on, in this case, Stewart’s arguments for them. On such terms, Stewart’s haiku translations are evidently and manifestly insufficient.

### **“His practice belies his theory”<sup>154</sup>: Stewart and Yasuda**

In *A Net of Fireflies*, Stewart launches an attack on Kenneth Yasuda’s book, *Japanese Haiku: its essential nature and history*, first published in 1957. This acerbic criticism

<sup>153</sup> Richard Kelly Tipping, “Harold Stewart Interviewed”, *Westerly*, 4, December 1987, p.28

<sup>154</sup> Stewart, *A Net of Fireflies*, p.163

typifies his reactionary stance. The irony of Stewart's staunchly-held position is that Yasuda is actually in broad agreement with Stewart. Yasuda asserts that "as the Imagists discovered, poets who would abandon the mechanical beat of meter for some other kind of rhythm will run the risk of producing only 'pieces of disguised prose'"<sup>155</sup>. Stewart's willingness to see in Yasuda's work an alignment with Imagism reveals his deep conservatism. He attempts to sideline Yasuda's argument on the grounds that English-language poetry had moved away from Imagism: as if this in itself renders Imagism and its lessons void. Contrary to Stewart's claim that Yasuda "bases his argument" on the work of Imagists<sup>156</sup>, Yasuda is actually critical of the Imagists' use of elements of the haiku. He argues that the Imagists, "with their concern for 'what could be pictorially and vividly stated,' had forgotten that the naming of objects alone does not constitute an image"<sup>157</sup> and that they at best "understood only the most obvious characteristics of haiku"<sup>158</sup>. Stewart's real concern, it seems, is with the cultural and social change brought about in the twentieth century, not simply with Modernist poetry. Stewart unwittingly presents himself as a Buddhist disturbed by change and impermanence.

Stewart somehow manages to see in this a close alignment between Yasuda and the Imagists. He uses this perceived link as an opportunity to sharply criticise Yasuda's poetics. Again, like Stewart, Yasuda acknowledges the efficacy of rhyme as "the most obvious way to emphasize the pulsation of feeling as well as of meaning"<sup>159</sup>. This sort of assertion, when generally put as it is here, is difficult to argue with. Undaunted, Stewart attacks Yasuda's translations at length, arguing that in

*The Japanese Haiku* [he] has made yet another attempt to import Japanese

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<sup>155</sup> Yasuda, p.116

<sup>156</sup> Stewart, *Fireflies*, p.162

<sup>157</sup> Yasuda, p. xxi

<sup>158</sup> Yasuda, p. xxii

<sup>159</sup> Yasuda, p.118

syllabic versification into English. But since the time of the Imagists, on whose work he bases his argument, the general trend of English poetry has been a steady reversion from the amorphous licence of their “free verse” to the older metrical forms... His practice belies his theory, since he cannot maintain the strict metronomic count of seventeen syllables, even with the aid of the most ungainly distortions of English word-order; and... he has frequent recourse to rhyme. Nothing could demonstrate more clearly the need for the prosody of each language to respect its own boundaries.

(*NF*, 162-163)

Stewart’s argument against Yasuda works on the assumption that Yasuda favours Imagist techniques in his translation. He does not. His approach obscures the very real cultural transmission that takes place in and through Yasuda’s work: a Japanese poetic tradition taking approximate shape in the West. Most startling is Stewart’s hypocritical criticism of Yasuda’s “frequent recourse to rhyme”: Stewart’s own translations themselves are utterly dependent upon rhyme, despite its predictability and flatness of effect. Stewart takes any deliberate deviation from set rules, like Yasuda’s, as evidence of uncontrollable inconsistency. Necessarily, then, Stewart disallows Shiki’s iconoclastic dictum to fellow *haijin*: “Break rules if necessary”<sup>160</sup>. Stewart sees it the other way: that the formal rules he sets himself may not under any circumstances be broken.

### **“The result alone can justify or disqualify it”: Stewart’s haiku couplets**

Stewart imposes upon the haiku a standardised, perhaps even ritualised, formal structure, shaping this body of work around a series of compulsions and anxieties. Rather than the formal and stylistic framework driving creative tensions in Stewart’s work, his

deployment of the rhyming, iambic couplet instead deploys *him*, inscribing a nearly invariable predictability of tone, movement and closure across these translations. That Stewart displays no real vigour within these apparent constraints suggests two things. First, it reveals Stewart's poetic complacency, which works in parallel, even in interdependence with his anti-Modernist (and, most vehemently, anti-Imagist) reactionary poetics. Stewart does not attempt to work creatively against the couplet's formal constraints, perhaps because he sees the form as (always) already perfected. Hence it is the formal material of the haiku that must be made to surrender ground to this new formal pattern Stewart imposes. Stewart, then, precludes any creative tension between the two poetic forms. This also betrays a colonialist element to Stewart's thinking and writing: he appears, at the formal and material level, to see no need to account for any real resistance to the couplet form by the conventions, traditions and qualities of the haiku. Second, Stewart's failure to enact any tension between the forms, or even within them suggests that this lack might be accounted for in no small part by limitations in Stewart's abilities as a poet.

These limitations and complacencies can be seen in abundance throughout Stewart's haiku translations. In "In a Temple Garden", as with nearly all Stewart's haiku translations, the movement within the haiku toward *samvegaha* (which Stewart himself claims is a central plank of the haiku) is disrupted by the couplet's formal constraints:

The old green pond is silent; here the hop  
Of a frog plumbs the evening stillness: plop!

(*NF*, 20)

Stewart's handling of rhyme is very predictable. Any sense of *samvegaha* ("poetic shock" as Stewart has it) is already fatally undermined by the first line's end-rhyme. The "hop" noisily prefigures the supposedly surprising "plop!" with which the poem closes. It also clearly disturbs the "silent" quality of the pond in the first line and the "evening stillness" of the second. Rather than "plop!" providing the *samvegahic* quality, it is instead preceded by and already contained within the "hop". Certainly, the short, hard "o" sounds of "pond", "hop", "of", "frog" and "plop" reinforce each other. Their staccato quality also overrides the "evening stillness" (evoked by longer vowels and soft consonants) upon which the "plop" would otherwise depend for its element of surprise. The second line, again, through rhyme, merely reiterates in a forced way, the first. The only poetic shock the reader registers is from the sheer repetition of this formal device, continually deadening the imagery, music and attention to subject matter across these translations. Rhyme lends these poems an overbearing sense of a teleological impulse, disabling any sense of shock or surprise that *samvegaha* might otherwise entail. The formal principle Stewart most depends upon is, ironically, also responsible for driving from the haiku its most potent quality.

The formal imperative to rhyme in "From my Autumn Window at Twilight" results in a superfluous last sentence, entirely rhetorical in purpose. Stewart's version reads:

A cloud of flowers. A booming temple bell.  
Ueno's or Asakusa's? Who can tell?

(NF, 25)

Other translations of Bashō's poem:

Beyond cherry brumes,

Is the bell at Asakusa  
Or Ueno that booms?<sup>161</sup>

Temple bell,  
a cloud of cherry flowers –  
Ueno? Asakusa?<sup>162</sup>

Clouds of cherry blossoms!  
Is that temple bell in Ueno  
or Asakusa?<sup>163</sup>

Stewart's framing the question twice adds bulk necessary to his poem only if it is to fulfill *his* requirements. Hamill, Yasuda and Stryk all retain a common sentence structure in the final question. The couplet as Stewart uses it dictates a formal extension that this poem cannot sustain, simply to achieve a rhyme.

Stewart's translation of Issa's haiku, "Clinging", sits quite comfortably with a number of other translations, which almost invariably end with a repetition of "and yet" (see Hamill and Akmakjian):

The world is but a single dewdrop, set  
Trembling upon a stem; and yet... and yet...

(NF, 66)

The necessity of rhyme contributes to this poem, the short staccato "e" sounds in "yet", "set", "trembling" and "stem" each evoking the recurrent uncertainty that haiku is concerned with. The half-rhyme "but" provides a key to this poem. It not only signals the ambivalence central to the poem, but modulates that ambivalence through the similarity of sound between "but" and "yet", while "set" stabilises this drift of meaning,

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<sup>161</sup> Yasuda, p.242

<sup>162</sup> Stryk, *On Love and Barley*, p.50

<sup>163</sup> Hamill, *The Essential Basho*, p.104



with its suggestion of stasis. Moreover, the “but” is placed within an apparently certain assertion: “This world is but a single dewdrop”. This poetics of doubt is atypical of Stewart’s work, particularly his rhetoric, which usually rings with certitude. Although this doubt is a feature of the original, Stewart emphasises it further, placing it at the heart of the poem’s structure of sound. Here, Stewart *must* deal with an uncertainty and ambivalence that appears at odds with his generally reactionary or conservative poetic bent. This tension irrupts into and strengthens the poem, undercutting the certainty that Stewart’s rhyming reflex depends upon. Stewart has no choice, in translating this particular haiku, but to negotiate with the original material and its ambivalences and doubts: he is quite unable to suppress these qualities despite his formal rigour.

The Bashō haiku Stewart titles “The End of Autumn” is one of the more famous haiku. Stewart’s version reads:

Autumn evening: on a withered bough,  
A solitary crow is sitting now.

(*NF*, 88)

The rhyme, as is usual in Stewart’s work, sets up through the similarity of sound, a relation or tension not always present in the original. The “now” of the second line acts against the “withered” nature of the “bough”. The “now” and its connotation of stasis upset the sense of ongoing decay, of impermanence, that is a central focus of this haiku; that change has been stopped, if momentarily. Ironically, given Stewart’s criticism of Yasuda, the latter’s translation is the only other of note to feature the “now”/“bough” rhyme:

“A Crow on a Bare Branch”

On a withered bough  
A crow alone is perching;  
Autumn evening now.<sup>164</sup>

It is a vivid irony that the translations that Stewart’s work most closely resembles are those by Kenneth Yasuda. Little wonder Stewart’s dismissal of Yasuda’s method is so vehement, if not vitriolic. It is significant to note that Yasuda’s *The Japanese Haiku* was published in 1957, a good three years before Stewart’s *A Net of Fireflies* in 1960. It is possible that Stewart criticises Yasuda precisely because he is a Japanese authority on haiku. To lessen Yasuda’s reputation is to enhance his own. It is deeply ironic that Stewart’s version much more closely resembles Yasuda’s than it resembles Henderson’s, given Stewart’s acknowledgment of Henderson as a source for his own material. Stewart undertakes a process by which he translates prior translations into his idiosyncratic system of formal requirements. This mode of secondary translation must account for at least some degree of his poetic failures: if the “original” translations he works from<sup>165</sup> are in any way questionable, then his own work can only amplify previous translators’ misjudgments. This amplified erring further displaces elements of the original work that are not valued or prioritised by the initial translators. This is one of the key issues of the problematic nature of cultural transmission: how influence is not necessarily an “accurate” version of the “original” cultural artefact.

Stewart’s second book of haiku translations, *A Chime of Windbells*, suggests little had changed in his approach to or execution of haiku translations. The same awkward conjunctions of rhyme and sentence structure continue through this book as well. It is as if *A Net of Fireflies* and *A Chime of Windbells* constitute a single work. In his translation of

Bashō's haiku, Stewart again telegraphs his intent too early, diminishing the effect of rhyme, *samvegha*, and ultimately, the poem itself.

"Double Glory"

Suddenly, with the scent of flowering plums,  
Sunrise along the mountain roadway comes.

(*CWB*, 21)

Stewart's use of "Suddenly" at the poem's outset acts against its very meaning. It takes an entire two lines and twenty (or twenty-one, depending on your pronunciation of "flowering") syllables for the sun's suddenness to transpire. Once more, Stewart's use of rhyme, demanded by his self-imposed formal constraints, hobbles the poem.

Stewart's use of rhyme does not invariably, though, distort or destabilise his translations' drive. In "Transformed Land" a version of an Issa haiku, the rhyme actually situates the speaker in a moment of contemplation:

In these degenerate latter days, I stare  
Astounded: cherry-blossoms everywhere!

(*CWB*, 41)

Putting aside the sing-song rhythm of Stewart's translation, the "stare/everywhere" rhyme sustains the haiku's mood of contemplation and stasis, and compounds the element of *samvegha*. The vision ("stare") of cherry-blossoms is indeed ubiquitous ("everywhere"). The emphasis on the "*degenerate* latter days" [my emphasis] denotes Stewart's belief in cultural and religious decay, via nostalgia for his speaker's past. The past for which Stewart is so nostalgic in this haiku is not even his own. This dislocated

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<sup>164</sup> Yasuda, p.242

<sup>165</sup> Stewart, *Fireflies*, p. 9, where Stewart cites Blyth, Henderson, Miyamori, Suzuki, Waley and Watts.

attachment to the past easily transforms into its apparent opposite, aversion. Buddhism, though, teaches that these two seeming poles are profoundly interdependent on each other: attachment is simply a “positive” response to a thing or feeling whereas aversion is “negative”. Attachment to one thing necessarily implies aversion to its opposite and *vice-versa*.

There is a misanthropic tendency in Stewart’s work that is present also in his Shiki translation “The Last Spectator”:

The crowd departs. Now the fireworks flower no more,  
The autumn dark looks richer than before.

(*CWB*, 80)

Once “The crowd departs”, “the autumn dark looks richer than before”. This tendency is especially pronounced if read in comparison with Henderson and Watson’s translations of the same haiku:

“After the Fireworks”

The others go home,  
With the fireworks over,  
How dark it’s become!<sup>166</sup>

Watson’s:

People going home –  
after the fireworks  
it’s so dark!<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Basho to Shiki*, Doubleday, New York, 1958, p.167

<sup>167</sup> Watson, *Selected Poems*, p.40

In these versions, the darkness is a mere observation, whereas in Stewart's "the autumn dark looks richer than before". The positive connotation of "richer" grants the absence of people a positive quality not present in other translations, and which clinches the difference in attitude between Stewart and the other translators of this haiku.

Stewart's dispute with Yasuda's haiku translations is comically ironic in his Shiki translation, "The Way to Nowhere". Stewart's version reads:

Standing in ruins on the desolate plain,  
The monastery gates alone remain.

(*CWB*, 107)

Yasuda's translation, published a good twelve years prior to Stewart's, possesses the same rhyme scheme, even if the rhythm and sequence of perception differ:

"On the Withered Plain"

The gates alone remain  
Of some great Buddhist temple  
On this withered plain.<sup>168</sup>

This accentuates a motivation behind Stewart's argument against Yasuda's translations: Stewart *must* distance his work from Yasuda's because of their similarity in so many other regards. Nonetheless, this remains a strong example of Stewart's rhyming working to enhance the poem rather than to diffuse its effect. There is a complication, though: Yasuda's version was the first published. Stewart is clearly aware of Yasuda's work, *viz a viz* his vitriolic critique of it. It is an almost inescapable thought that Stewart has pirated

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<sup>168</sup> Yasuda, p.253

Yasuda's rhyme schemes while reconditioning other structures within the poems, such as the installation of iambic patterns, and reversal of perceptual sequences.

Stewart at times incorporates typically Western rhetorical or philosophical structures into his haiku translations. In his translation of Bashō's haiku, Stewart turns *mala*/prayer beads into "rosaries", imposing a Christian-Catholic connotation. Stewart's "click of rosaries" becomes, in Hamill's translation, "the prayer beads' sound"<sup>169</sup>. Rather than expose his Western readership to a Buddhist practice on its own terms, Stewart evidently deems it necessary to reinforce their comfort-zone. This would be untroubling if it were atypical of Stewart's modus operandi. His effort to integrate Buddhist notions, practices and images in their own right into Western discourses and traditions is limited in comparison to his layering of Western cultural templates onto (his) Japanese experiences. As evidenced by his imposition onto the haiku of the rhyming couplet form, Stewart's work continues to be a site of resistance to cultural integration, despite his own avowal of Buddhist Pure Land (*Jodo Shin*) teaching and practice.

That Stewart attempts to force or drive meaning into a number of these sometimes approximate translations is confirmed in his drafts of haiku in his unpublished manuscript of haiku and senryu, "Over the Vermilion Bridge"<sup>170</sup>. Despite noting in his handwriting that this haiku is "too didactic"<sup>171</sup>, there is no apparent escalation of Stewart's didactic tendencies, only their continuation:

Outside my window, shuffling down the street,

<sup>169</sup> Hamill, *The Essential Basho*, p.127

<sup>170</sup> Harold Stewart, "Over the Vermilion Bridge", NLA, MS 8973/7B/1, unpaginated

<sup>171</sup> "Over the Vermilion Bridge", unpaginated

The Nembutsu is recalled by shuffling feet.

(OVB)

The rhyme is clumsy, but the sensory image is, if not striking, at least effective in drawing together physicality and religious practice. In “Over the Vermilion Bridge”, there are numerous other haiku and senryu not attributed to any writer. Largely, these are unremarkable, bearing the same sort of formal and structural deficiencies of many other of Stewart’s haiku translations. There is, though, a section in this manuscript Stewart has titled “Senryu: Laughing River-Willows”. He demonstrates a surprisingly deft hand with several of these. Once relieved of the need to enact or evoke the *samveghic* insight, Stewart’s tone and form matches the pithiness of some of these observations. Particularly notable is a glimpse of Stewart’s self-deprecating wit in “In the Noodle Shop”:

A foreign guest with knowledgeable frown  
Consults the noodle-menu – upside-down!

(OVB)

Stewart’s evocation of such cross-cultural confusion is free of the often turgid, mannered tone of his haiku translations. Stewart’s distant relation to the haikai canon is the subject of “Literary Pilgrim”:

Honoured by these mosquito-bites am I:  
Their forebears feasted on the great Kyorai!

(OVB)

His self-deprecatory acknowledgement of his position in this body of work suggests a humour and humility not obvious in either Stewart’s explication of the formal elements of his method of translation. The sparse evidence offered by Stewart’s late senryu stakes a strong claim for the proposition that in choosing haiku as his initial stopover in Japanese literature, Stewart badly misjudged. His aesthetic temperament and his choice of

formal correlation to the haiku seems vastly better suited to the lighter mode of the senryu than it is to the haiku. This seems as much a failure of poetic capability and imagination as it is a questionable judgement. Stewart, in choosing haiku over senryu, displays a flaw in his knowledge of his own abilities and inclinations, and of his chosen cultural milieu. His inability to best judge the Japanese form for his own limited talents echoes throughout Stewart's work from the 1960s through to his death in 1995.

### **“The reach of voices in the wind”<sup>172</sup>: Gray’s haiku and the poetic of integration**

As already noted, Harold Stewart and Makoto Ueda briefly outline two aspects of the traditional haiku that are critical to an analysis and assessment of Gray’s haiku *as* haiku. Stewart refers to *samvegha*, while Ueda contends that the haiku, through its brevity “presents an observation or sentiment in all its immediacy, before it is intellectually conceptualized”<sup>173</sup>. While traditional Japanese haiku do contain implicit metaphors, images that may be juxtaposed in a manner that may illuminate and magnify their respective qualities or connectedness, direct metaphor or simile is almost unknown. While Gray, in his interview with Andrew Sant, places great emphasis on privileging simile over metaphor<sup>174</sup>, a number of his haiku depend substantially on metaphor. This dislocation is less troubling than it initially appears, given that Gray deploys these tropes as a means of integrating the Japanese and English verse traditions.

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<sup>172</sup> Gray, *New Selected Poems*, p.71

<sup>173</sup> Ueda, p.11



While Robert Gray's "haiku" do not universally fulfill all the traditional criteria of haiku, they nonetheless comprise some of his most effective work. Because of, or perhaps despite, some degree of conventional discrepancy, these poems embody and negotiate an ongoing integration of Japanese and Western cultural forms, and also provide strong examples of a simultaneously embodied and detached Buddhist aesthetic at work. Gray melds a number of traditions and sensibilities. He combines Buddhism via the Japanese artistic sensibility with Imagism and the Australian landscape/pastoral tradition. Gray calls his haiku-like writing "poems" rather than "haiku". This in itself contains an argument that haiku are, for Gray's purposes, regarded no differently to any other poem. This implies that they represent an aesthetic that may be transmitted, with a degree of difficulty nonetheless, across cultural boundaries with an approximate if not precise fidelity. In this way Gray incorporates the haiku into the English verse tradition he increasingly engages with. More telling is his incorporation of passages that are in many ways haiku-like in longer poems like "Dharma Vehicle" (NSP, 71-86).

In Gray's haiku, and among the rest of his poems, metaphor, and to a slightly lesser extent simile, proliferates. The evidence of Gray's work does not directly contradict his position on simile as "the honest way to write", but it does certainly introduce a level of ambiguity between intent and execution. Akmakjian, though, notes that "To Westerners haiku is a curious form of poetry in that it shuns metaphor, simile, personification, and all the devices that we think of as almost synonymous with poetry"<sup>174</sup>. This quality of the haiku is accounted for by the aesthetic behind it and its Buddhist roots in non-attachment. This non-attachment is a marked feature of Gray's

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<sup>174</sup> Andrew Sant, "An Interview with Robert Gray", *Island*, 7, June 1981, p.16. Gray states his "belief in simile as being the honest way to write. It avoids the visual confusion or ambiguity that symbolism (which is metaphor) represents".

work, especially in his first three books. Akmakjian also asserts that “What counts as most important in writing a haiku is the device of internal comparison, the juxtaposed detail that communicates insight, expressed through a ‘slenderness of language’”<sup>176</sup>.

Gray’s use in his haiku of analogical tropes most closely follows this pattern of “juxtaposed detail”. In his haiku Gray frequently expresses his perceptions about the relationships between things. Gray’s haiku possess many of what Stryk regards as the key traditional elements of haiku. To briefly reiterate, these include *karumi*, or non-attachment in Stryk’s definition; *sabi* or “contented solitariness”<sup>177</sup>, and *wabi*, which in Gray’s case manifests as an “appreciation of the commonplace”<sup>178</sup> or the “ordinary things” (*NSP*, 30). At the margins of Gray’s haiku is *muga*, “so close an identification with the things one writes of that self is forgotten”<sup>179</sup>. Gray frequently discards *muga* as he asserts his presence in many of these poems as the source of sometimes striking metaphors and similes.

Gray’s major claim to significance as an English-language *haijin* lies with two major facets of his haiku work: his construction of a body of images that link the haiku tradition with Australian settings; his integration of images from the natural and manufactured or cultural worlds. A large portion of Gray’s haiku combine recognisably Australian natural or landscape imagery with the haiku form and sensibility. Recurrent images can be traced through a number of these poems. One major strand of imagery in Gray’s haiku is of gum trees. If read across his early collections *Creekwater Journal* and *Grass Script*, this image reaches toward an incorporation of Buddhist practice with a

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<sup>175</sup> Akmakjian, p.18

<sup>176</sup> Akmakjian, p.35

<sup>177</sup> Stryk, *On Love and Barley*, p.10

<sup>178</sup> Stryk, *On Love and Barley*, p.10

<sup>179</sup> Stryk, *On Love and Barley*, p.16

specifically Australian sense of place. What initially appear as vivid evocations of eucalypt forests begin to take on Buddhist qualities:

Eucalyptus ridge  
in wintry sun; the dense blue forest  
undulant, quiet.

(*GS*, 33)

And:

Across the level  
eucalypt forest, the sunlit  
afternoon sea.

(*NSP*, 92)

These two haiku feature a stillness and evenness that recalls something of the calm that Buddhist meditation practices work to instill. The forest in the first poem, while “undulant”, is also “quiet”: in fact these two adjectives work off each other to create a new, active but still contemplative sensation. In the second, the image of the bush surrounded by the ocean hints at the expansiveness of mind that, again, Buddhist meditation practices can cultivate. Gray clears a space in the Australian poetic canon for Buddhist ideas and practices, siting a series of Buddhist images alongside and within this distinctly Australian iconic image. In setting up camp, both literally and figuratively, Gray Australianises Buddhism and vice-versa, giving to each a new group of associations. Gray contests the Australian bush tradition of explorers, settlers and labourers, placing his practice of Buddhism in that same setting. By unsettling traditional literary expectations of “the bush”, Gray not only draws Buddhism into a conventional Australian literary setting, but also proposes a new significance for the bush as a site of religious practice and contemplation.

Several passages from Gray's long and explicitly Buddhist poem, "Dharma Vehicle" very closely resemble haiku. With their visually sharp, concrete imagery, these passages help to ground the at-times heavily discursive poem. These sections demonstrate Gray's integration of Australian and Buddhist culture on the level of both image and form. The imagery of gums in the second haiku above is very close indeed to a haiku-like passage from "Dharma Vehicle":

From this hillside  
I can see, around a solid, wind-levelled, slant mass of trees,  
the ocean, like silver foil

(*NSP*, 78).

Elsewhere, gum trees are like Buddhist prayer flags:

Like banners raised,  
all these eucalyptus saplings –  
the straight trees.

(*NSP*, 71)

Gray transforms the landscape itself into a site of Buddhist practice. This image, related to a haiku that is also in *Grass Script*, sacralises the ordinary, everyday physical world just as many of Gray's other haiku do. This poem was not retained by Gray in his *New Selected Poems*<sup>180</sup>:

Stopping by the highway  
to piss. Against the dawn, the foliage  
of eucalypts, like rags.

(*GS*, 34)

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<sup>180</sup> This haiku does, though, feature in Gray's first and second selected volumes (*Selected Poems, 1963-1983*, Angus and Robertson, 1984, p.71; *Selected Poems*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1990, p.76). It is not

This image of gums and clothing emerges once more from the eucalypt forest of Gray's poems in "Description of a Walk", from *Piano*:

Rag and bone bushland. White arms lifted, dangling  
cloth.

(NSP, 187)

The continual modulation of this image of trees and "cloth", "rags" and "banners" across Gray's early career<sup>181</sup> aligns on the one hand the land and the bush, and on the other, Gray's speakers, and, by implication, the human condition more generally. Gray achieves this by linking living place, embodied by the gums, with the image of cloth and clothing, so associating this natural, Australian landscape with the human, religious and cultural environment. Thus place and landscape become active participants in the processes and rituals of Gray's poems. In Gray's hands, the gums do not simply make ritual offerings to the Buddha, but actually embody that offering themselves:

The paperbarks climb  
slowly,  
and are spreading out, like incense-smoke.

(NSP, 72)

Amongst Gray's many other haiku are those that similarly trade in Australian iconography, both natural and cultural:

Homesick for Australia,  
a dream of rusty Holdens  
in sunlit forests by the highway.

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included in any of the editions that follow in 1995 and 1998, or his British edition, *Grass Script: Selected Earlier Poems*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2001.

<sup>181</sup> In defining Gray's "early" career, I follow Gray's own lead. His UK selection, *Grass Script: Selected Early Poems* (Carcanet, Manchester, 2001) includes his first four full-length collections, up to *Piano*. I regard *Piano* as a turning-point in Gray's developing sensibility. The discursive tendency apparent to a slight degree in *Creekwater Journal*, *Grass Script* and *The Skylight* becomes increasingly didactic in *Piano*. *Piano* also includes a long poem, "Under the Summer Leaves", in which Gray marks his disillusion with Japanese culture and religion.

(NSP, 125)

There is a nostalgic, displaced desire for Australia and its images that recurs across Gray's work. More notable, perhaps, is this haiku:

Two magpies stepping  
on the verandah. A ploughed hillside,  
smoke, and cumulus.

(NSP, 125)

It continually expands its focus and scale, again resembling the cultivation of detachment in Buddhist meditation and ethical practices. The haiku's focus is magnified by the (inter)relation between each consecutive image. This expansion of attention, from the specific (the "Two magpies") through the local, domesticated and geological scale (the "ploughed hillside") to the most expansive (the "cumulus") is reminiscent of the shifting focus in the *metta bhavana* meditation practice<sup>182</sup>. Moreover, each image contains the seed its own impermanence. The magpies are not stationary, they are "stepping on the verandah". The hillside has been ploughed, domesticated: crops are growing there and will be harvested and re-sown. The images of "smoke" and "cumulus" cloud are traditional, deeply established images of change, no-self and insubstantiality. This haiku, then, contains, without referring to it in any explicit way, a representation of Buddhist impermanence. That the images constituting it are recognisably, even distinctly Australian, is a further manifestation of Gray's introduction of Buddhist ideas into Australian literary and natural settings.

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<sup>182</sup> In this practice, the meditator attempts to develop "friendliness" towards a variety of figures: oneself, a friend, a "neutral figure", a "difficult person". Then one focuses this feeling towards all four figures at once, and eventually expands this "friendliness" to all beings. Kamalashila's *Meditation: the Buddhist way of tranquillity and insight* (Windhorse, Glasgow, 1992, pp.23-36) provides a solid, if brief, guide to the stages of this meditation practise.

At times Gray's haiku recall well-known Japanese haiku images or motifs. For example Bashō's frog haiku is recalled:

Huge, glittering stars.  
Looking up, among the frogs,  
croaking, croaking.

(*NSP*, 28)

This aligns itself with Bashō's poem, and focuses on the frogs dropping the need for any meaning-making tropes. The speaker is present "among the frogs", but through this observation he confirms a speaking position, rather than acting as a direct structuring identity. Other poems feature clear seasonal references.

So hot, the sparrow looks ill –  
sitting on the tap handle.

(*NSP*, 35)

Gray aligns the sparrow, a natural image, with the man-made tap. This combination of imagery from different realms is a feature of Gray's tendency toward the integration of experience. This is, in a vague way, another manifestation of his move to incorporate Buddhist ideas and Buddhist-influenced cultural forms into the English-Australian tradition. This tendency towards integration acts in a ripple-like fashion in Gray's work, bringing elements of the Buddhist and English traditions together in a way that makes a new whole.

In keeping with Buddhism's position as a major generative force in both the haiku tradition and in Gray's earlier work, numerous haiku are broadly Buddhist in orientation.

Chopping wood,

I strike about at mosquitoes  
with the axe.

(NSP, 14)

Frustrated by mosquitoes, the violent action Gray's speaker takes seems quite comically out of proportion to the objects of his aversion. This physical response to aversion and its shadow, attachment, is atypical of Gray's early work. Gray's aversions and attachments become more central to his oeuvre in later collections: this prefigures the later tendency by a good ten years. Just as Gray's speaker responds physically and energetically to what annoys him, so Gray also energetically tackles the problems, as Buddhism sees them, of aversion and attachment. The consequences of the speaker reacting to his annoyance are shown to be different to the problem themselves. To respond, as in the haiku, to mosquitoes with an axe is an exaggerated, even histrionic response. Gray suggests then, via the comic edge in this image, an attitude of non-attachment, the cultivation of which is both a strong theme in his early work, and a primary aim of Buddhist meditation practice.

As a major plank of Buddhist thought, it is perhaps surprising that *sūnyatā* receives relatively little attention in Gray's work. It is treated here, in the form of lack:

This chair, made of frayed light –  
it speaks of absence  
like half a carpenter's join.

(CJ, 17)

Speaking of concepts as much as a physical object, this observation indicates a muted direction Gray's work did not, eventually, take, and is not dissimilar to elements of the work of Kevin Hart. It looks at the question of absence and negativity in light of presence. Buddhist notions such as *sūnyatā* and impermanence lend themselves to this



sort of discourse from Western philosophy. This haiku is in Gray's first two editions of *Selected Poems*, but is absent from subsequent editions of Gray's work. The three editions from which it has been excluded were published in the period after the arrival of *Certain Things*, at which point Gray's poetic has clearly altered course to a more abstract, less Buddhist-oriented dynamic. This theme of absence and the search for presence is apparent elsewhere:

The crows go over  
all day, back and forth, anxious  
to lace night with night.

(NSP, 270)

Darkness, roadlights.  
Walking down, around the valley –  
joining-up what shape?

(A, 31)

The abstractedness of some images in these haiku does not detract from their power or their striking connections. Indeed, the images give physical body to the abstract qualities of these ideas touching on absence and negativity. The relative lack of representation of images to do with *śūnyatā* in Gray's haiku extends to the rest of his work. Given his strong attention to impermanence and questions of self and no-self, this relative absence is a little surprising. While impermanence is abundantly visible in the processes of the natural world that Gray's work embraces, and while no-self also places an emphasis on the self, a wider consideration of the effects of *śūnyatā* might have the effect on Gray's work of undercutting altogether his attachment and aversion, both of which compete for a central place in his later work.

## Ideas, but not only in things

Gray's use of metaphor and simile, both in his haiku and longer poems, often has a striking effect, akin perhaps to Stewart's definition of *samvegaha*. Gray does, though, strive, sometimes very obviously, for a strikingly vivid, surprising image in his attempt to slip an element of *samvegaha* into Western poetic forms and structures. One such indirect metaphor is reworked across several editions of his *Selected Poems*:

Sultry night. The moon  
is small and fuzzy, an aspirin  
in a glass of water.

(*NSP*, 14)

This image is striking partly because of the apparent disparity between the images of moon and aspirin. Nonetheless, the analogy works, not least because the dissolving aspirin mirrors, rapidly and in miniature, the recurrent dissolution of the moon. There is an alternative version in Gray's most recent selected edition, the British-published *Grass Script: Selected Earlier Poems*. It reads:

Sultry night, fast clouds.  
The moon's an aspirin  
dropped in water.

(*GS:SEP*, 12)

The alteration of the second line to "The moon's an aspirin" enhances the directness of the metaphor: instead of alluding to a similarity, Gray explicitly states their perceived identity. The problem here is that the metaphor is now dependent on Gray's commentary rather than anything inherent in the visual image Gray gives in the previous version. Gray's alteration drives the poem away from the concrete visual image that sustains a haiku, and the poem becomes didactic: the moon in this new version is like an aspirin only because Gray says so.

At times, Gray's sensibility becomes so studied and discursive it consistently fails to approach the qualities conventionally attributed to haiku. The imagery becomes quite abstracted, or the speaker is so clearly and sensually involved in the image so as to make the haiku more mannered than immediate and lose any resemblance of *muga*. Although formally identical to his other haiku, these poems more typically represent an image that has been, in Ueda's terms, "intellectually conceptualized"<sup>183</sup>, dislocating these poems' otherwise haiku-like properties. This shift in focus and drift from a non-attached attentiveness typifies a bulk of Gray's later books. We see images that are handled in a manner that is aestheticised to the point of detracting from their immediacy:

A definition  
of art deco: in black and cream  
the butterfly.

(*NSP*, 124)

Gray's response to the butterfly is to liken it to an artistic movement or genre rather than a concrete or natural object or image. This sort of abstractedness forms a disruptive pattern in some of his later haiku. More and more, Gray's haiku tend to resemble his more rhetorical and discursive poems in their patterns of meaning and concerns, some clearly more abstract than others:

Long wet verandah,  
leaves blown in. Our souls could live  
nowhere but the Earth.

(*NSP*, 27)<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Ueda, p.11

<sup>184</sup> This haiku also turns up in *Lineations*, p.33. In Gray's British edition, *Grass Script: Selected Earlier Poems*, it is placed with the *Creekwater Journal* material (p.18). This raises several questions. Is this an editorial error? Or an example of Gray's revisionist outlook (which I investigate more thoroughly in chapter six)? *Grass*

This haiku also recalls “A Testimony”: “Do not believe those who have promised, in any of their ways, that something can be better than the earth” (*NSP*, 221). Some haiku also begin to resemble parts of “Impromptus” (*NSP*, 274-275) and even appear only a step or two from the very didactic, discursive and rhetoric-driven poems from *Lineations*, “Epigrams” (*NSP*, 294-296). Is Gray searching for a Japanese meditative medium for his natural and sensual attachments, and later on, his aesthetic and political preoccupations? Gray’s integrative poetic then, might be seen as a move toward something of a postcolonial aesthetic, as opposed to an imperialist move, as is clearly the case with Stewart. In mixing his Australian imagery with Japanese religious imagery, Gray is drawing together poles of cultural influence. Gray’s later haiku, though, share with Stewart’s haiku a frustrating quality. Just as Stewart’s dogmatic adherence to the couplet as the ideal form for the haiku in English tarnishes whatever other qualities his work offers, Gray’s similar adherence to philosophical or aesthetic positions transforms his haiku into flat, didactic short poems nearly unrecognisable as the same form that he so invigorated during the 1970s and 1980s.

### **Conclusion: Bashō cautioned fellow haiku poets to rid their minds of superficiality**

Harold Stewart and Robert Gray find radically different means by which to write or translate haiku into English. Both necessarily borrow substantially from the Japanese haiku tradition. While Gray’s haiku and haiku-like poems display a far greater degree of both tonal and technical flexibility than Stewart, Gray’s most notable achievement in his haiku is his integration of the Japanese tradition of haiku, and the Buddhist tradition more generally, into an Australian cultural and environmental setting. Gray’s later, more

didactic haiku, though, reflect the increasing interest in divulging details of Gray's ideological and aesthetic stances. Such intellectualised haiku, while making for an interesting formal experiment, detract from the form's traditional attributes. These haiku close down Gray's earlier embrace of difference through integration, and demonstrate a temperamental affinity with Stewart's work. Stewart, on the other hand, strives to radically re-engineer haiku translation. He imposes his own traditional form, the rhyming iambic couplet, upon the Japanese haiku, in order to achieve in its new English form a normalcy that the Japanese haiku tradition itself never possessed. In the process, he unwittingly discards the poetic embodiment of poetic shock, *samvegha*, despite his own argument that it is central to the form and tradition. Stewart's poor judgement in this can be discerned by a cursory reading of various other translators' versions of haiku Stewart has also translated. In his strong attachment to a specific form, and his deep aversion to Modernist-influenced translation methods, Stewart hobbles the presence of the Buddhist tradition of which he is a practitioner within the haiku he translates.

## Chapter Three:

### Golden days: Harold Stewart's poetics of self, aversion and attachment

Cool and clear sounds the lute,  
Strumming "The Wind Blows Cold in the Pines."  
I love the old songs, but so few  
People play them nowadays.

"The Old Songs", Liu Chang Chin, translated by Max Dunn<sup>185</sup>

Even in Kyoto,  
how I long for old Kyoto,  
where the cuckoo sings

Sam Hamill, *The Essential Bashō*, 155

## Introduction

Throughout Harold Stewart's two major works, *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and "Autumn Landscape-Roll", there is a tendency to reify the self and an insistent desire to resist change. This is deeply ironic in the context of the Buddhist subject matter of these texts and their emphasis on notions of no-self and Other Power. While announcing his adherence to Pure Land Buddhism in these epic poems, and through them claiming legitimacy as a Buddhist, Stewart also involves himself in a refusal of basic tenets of Buddhism. Rather than deliberate subterfuge or concealment, this movement appears to be a compulsive reaction against the insight that the self is impermanent, insubstantial, and its apparent existence conditional. Stewart exercises his selfhood through a network of self-reification that undercuts his stated intention for the texts. Having said this, the

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<sup>185</sup> Dunn, *Leaves of Jade*, p.23

recurrent motif of a briefly glimpsed object or image in Stewart's later work succeeds in enacting Amida's presence on a perceptual level. This motif provides perhaps the one effective embodiment of Buddhism in these works, and is focussed outward rather than seeking to enhance or affirm the self. Stewart attempts to stabilise his self through his continual reiteration of the spiritual qualities of Amida, the central figure of Pure Land Buddhism. In doing this, he assigns certain alchemical qualities to Amida as well, qualities Stewart finds elsewhere in "Buddhist" ideas and figures. This alchemical material is also a strong presence in Stewart's first two books from the 1940s, *Orpheus and Other Poems* and *Phoenix Wings*. Stewart's return to these motifs in his last two books demonstrates his inability to relinquish his old patterns of thought and writing; the infiltration of alchemical imagery and language makes of Stewart's Buddhism something other than Buddhism. Self, in this alchemical conception, is an actually existing thing to be transformed rather than a delusion to be surmounted. Stewart, then, attaches himself to Buddhism, but imports his alchemical imagery into his representation of Buddhism, altering Buddhism in the process. As with his haiku translations, Stewart alters the fabric of the thing he attaches himself to, in a movement of both attachment and displacement. As it is a tendency that pervades Stewart's work that engages with the Buddhist other (which is also, paradoxically, the self), this movement looks very much like a literary appropriation and exoticism.

A similar process of simultaneous colonisation and attachment occurs in Stewart's treatment of Japan, and the "East" more generally, where in confirming otherness he confirms himself. This dualistic view permits Stewart to retain both his deep attachments and equally powerfully aversions. In fact he does not merely retain them but strengthens them in and through these poems, particularly as he attempts to

subdue the present with the past. Industrial, modern Kyoto displaces the Old Kyoto (where “Old” is always spelt with a capital) for which Stewart is nostalgic. This textualised desire to subdue the processes of impermanence comes to a head in “Autumn Landscape-Roll” where Stewart returns to a number of poems from his first two books, dating back in some instances more than forty years. Stewart does more than return to his old poems as a basis for this long work: “Autumn Landscape-Roll” is predicated not on a return to an old self, but a continuing presence of that unchanging self. As in his collections of haiku translation, Stewart compulsively presses to restrict readings of his poems to his own assertions of meaning through his seemingly erudite introductions and prose commentaries. In doing so, Stewart reduces his poems to mere extensions of himself, quasi-texts that do not and cannot, in his terms, exist without him. Stewart’s desire to control meaning is related to and fed by, a powerful need to similarly control space that Noel Rowe notes in his review of Michael Ackland’s *Damaged Men*<sup>186</sup>. Such a compulsive desire, to control, to maintain attachments and aversions, merely substantiates the self that Stewart ostensibly and so noisily renounces in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and “Autumn Landscape-Roll”. The difficulty in seeing past the self, which Stewart so desperately grapples with, is one of the major issues faced by Australians (and Westerners generally) in their engagements with Buddhist ideas and practices. Stewart’s un-Buddhist Buddhist poetry, his split aesthetic, is a result of, in Louis Nowra’s phrase, “tense interrogation and the intolerable pressure of disguise”<sup>187</sup>.

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<sup>186</sup> Noel Rowe, “Lives in Ernest”, *Southerly*, 3, 2001, pp.183-188

<sup>187</sup> Louis Nowra, *The Twelfth of Never: A Memoir*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1999, p.102



## The Buddha in the image

### Things glimmer momentarily

Despite Stewart's difficulty in managing a smooth integration of Buddhist ideas and structure into his work, in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* he creates from a series of images a perceptual mode that embodies his Buddhist interests and knowledge rather than merely demonstrating his seeming erudition. The speaker repeatedly catches a brief glimpse of light or of an object, and this motif coalesces into one of the book's central motifs. At the level of this particular image, at least, Stewart clearly and unobtrusively embodies Buddhist thinking and practice. His deft and understated handling of this imagery and its Buddhist associations is perhaps the strongest evidence of his integration of Buddhism into his practice of writing across his entire oeuvre. These images are typically spied briefly between things:

And passing country restaurants and inns,  
I glimpse their leafy inner gardens through  
Inviting gates: the rest is hedged from view

(*BOWK*, 1, ll.69-71)

Similarly, there is a loft "glimpsed between/ Secluding maple-trees that intervene"

(*BOWK*, 4, ll.154-155), and a

... garden, glimpsed between their trunks of shade,  
Gleams like the hints of gilding through the green  
Encrusted on an antique bronze tureen.

(*BOWK*, 10, ll.474-476)

He also glimpses,

... through two rustic window-frames...

...

... a glimmering light

(BOWK, 8, ll.407-4409)

And:

Once more, between the trees, Wu catches sight  
Of that pagoda's finial, like a star  
Still radiating promise from afar

(ALR, X, ll.1253-1255)

The brevity of these visions enacts the Buddhist idea of impermanence: these are moments briefly glimpsed and which are then obscured again, or fade into the background from which they issue. These images, glimmering momentarily, build up a texture in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* that is predicated on the impermanence and conditionality they embody:

... microcosmic stardust, briefly swirled  
...  
Scintillates for an instant in the light,  
Then, sinking into darkness, fades from sight

(ALR, ll.4370-4373)

It is quite clear that the structure of these images appeals to Stewart as it proliferates throughout *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and “Autumn Landscape-Roll”, but they also “scintillate” and intrigue. Stewart both clarifies this perceptual pattern and complicates it, seeing “single glistening instants everywhere” (AIR, l.692). This motif is also a feature of some poems in Stewart’s last book of shorter, lyric verse, *The Exiled Immortal*<sup>188</sup>. In “Northward from Shirakawa” (EI, 11), his brief sighting contains an ongoing structure of transience as he sees “otherworldly gleams, dispelling shade – / No sooner do I reach them than they fade”. While this evokes the flux implied in Buddhist impermanence, it also equally enacts the structure implied by *śūnyatā* and no-self: these apparently separate

pinpoints and gleamings are actually the structure of the world Stewart appears to see, and, moreover, the world he writes.

The network of these glimpsed and glimmering things is a textual analogue not only of impermanence, but also of Stewart's process of composition of "Autumn Landscape-Roll". Stewart figures Wu's painted landscape in terms of his own glimpsed visions as seen in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*, and his prevision of "Autumn Landscape-Roll":

Since Wu had once depicted by his art  
This countryside, it strangely haunts the heart  
With reminiscent hints of seen-before.  
For Cosmic Memory's scroll retains in store  
All that the mind forgets.

(ALR, 608-607)

These vague "reminiscent hints of seen-before" speak of Wu's recollection of what he has both seen and created, and is now encountering physically. But this "seen-before" also records the reader's experience of *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*, whereby the glimpses acquire a cumulative effect, rendering us susceptible to Stewart's way of seeing and, more significantly, *showing* things. Stewart makes similar claims about the genesis of "Autumn Landscape-Roll", associating his creative process with this Buddhist-inflected perception of things:

The first intense prevision of this epic struck like a lightning-flash half a century ago. It was recorded in a brief prose synopsis and from time to time during the following decades three cantos and a few scattered passages were composed. These parts now find their predestined places in the complicated whole.

(ALR, 5)

Stewart's method of working, and of divining inspiration, is fragmentary and glimmering as his visions, or "intense prevision[s]" of Amida are in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*. Stewart argues that the poet must "dedicate what poetic talent he may enjoy to communicating those rare gleams" (*BOWK*, xvi) of insight.

These "rare gleams" with which he works and upon which he creatively depends, Stewart implies, come from Amida: "Whatever is true in this work was dictated to me by *Namu Amida Butsu*" (*BOWK*, xxv). Amida is present within these "rare gleams". While they also enact the working of impermanence at the level of the image, the association of the structure of this image with light, and also the association of light in Stewart's work with Amida, is irrefutable. This link between glimmering light, and hence other glimpsed images, and Amida is hardly clearer than here:

...to my surprise,  
I turn around, at once with dazzled eyes  
I am embraced by Amida, the Sun

(*BOWK*, 3, ll.494-496).

This does not simply link Amida to the image of glimmering light. If images of glimpsed or flickering light act as a stand-in for Amida, so other objects thus glimpsed must similarly be viewed as manifestations of Amida. In "Under Yoshidayama", he captures a glimpse of the Pure Land paradise in the "golden havens, gleaming in the West" (*EI*, 20). Stewart alludes through this continually recurrent imagery to Amida's omnipresence: he can be seen anywhere and everywhere in the right circumstances, and it is in the openness of this way of looking that Stewart suggests Amida can be discovered:

Now I am granted by the Buddha's grace  
A Vision that entrances time in space,

So that while in this world I prepossess  
 A golden glimpse of everlastingness:  
 Where through the side veranda's open door  
 I now behold the black-bronze lotus-bud  
 That crowns the corner-post, a narrow flood  
 Of revelation slants across the floor

(*BOWK*, 3, ll.500-507)

This is both a very mundane sight and a spiritual insight direct from Amida. The twinned nature of this image is precisely Stewart's intention. This "revelation" is tied intimately to Stewart's vision of Amida's presence, his "boundless sunburst, blinding sight/ But waking Vision, [that] liberates with Light" (*BOWK*, 3, ll.447-448).

As these briefly glimpsed objects are incorporated into the poetry's mode of perception and description, Stewart melds image with form and concern in a manner radically different to his treatment of haiku. This incorporation illustrates Stewart's own integration of his Buddhist interests and engagements into his aesthetic outlook. For once he has no need to explain the point he makes, because the image makes the point for him without ever needing to mount an argument. At this level Stewart has achieved a degree of practical insight into Buddhist no-self within his sensibility. The image is not different from what Stewart intends to "say" with it, and in fact carries more significance than Stewart in his more didactic moments is capable of expressing. These glimpsed images show that Stewart actually *sees* this manifestation of no-self rather than simply *knowing* it. It is an intuitive vision rather than one dependent on his flawed erudition and his abiding attachment to that erudition.

## The didact's *nembutsu*: representations of Buddhist practice

If Stewart embodies key Buddhist notions in these glimpsed images, he handles its twin motif, Amida and his *nembutsu*, far less surely, and this is a major flaw of *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*. As already noted, Stewart claims the essence of the book emanates from Amida, but the passages in which he praises Amida are among the clumsiest in his entire oeuvre. The always didactic, often dogmatic tone is a distraction, and the way it derails Stewart's epic is perversely compelling. Stewart's repetition of his praise for Amida and his qualities is at first irritating, and, finally, quite banal. Where he tries explicitly to integrate his Shin Buddhist practice of the *nembutsu* into his poetry, a stodgy drive to the didactic succeeds instead. In his attempt to textually summon Amida, Stewart succeeds only in reifying his own desire for Amida's presence. Stewart's passages on Amida recur with considerable frequency throughout *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*, but with minimal variation. This reiteration of the qualities and nature of Amida parallels Stewart's excessive use of prose commentary in this book, as if confirming his compulsion to tell rather than to evoke, embody or enact.

The lengthy passage that follows plots the subliminal working of the *nembutsu*, and the arising of Stewart's gratitude to Amida. Moreover, it works as a template for other passages concerned with Amida's *nembutsu* and other qualities:

I wake at once out of a lifelong sleep:  
 My being's inmost solitude receives  
 A summons that dissolves its sombre spell.  
 The Heart's reverberations rise and swell  
 Till lips and tongue spontaneously exclaim:  
 "Amida Bustsu!" – Buddha's Sacred Name.  
 At once I utter my submissive cry:  
 "Namu Amida Butsu!" in reply.

For while his call commands, I am not here  
 To doubt or disobey; my thoughts in blind  
 Confusion can no longer interfere:  
 Only his Name resounds within the mind,  
 And he alone is present in his Name.  
 So, as the Nembutsu is pronounced, I hear  
 The ineffable Will of Amida behind  
 The spoken words that momentarily appear  
 Out of the soundless Void within, and then  
 Into its Ground of Silence fade again.  
 During this call our voices sound the same,  
 And yet I do not call on him, but he  
 By my response recalls himself through me.  
 All his Compassion and Wisdom are enshrined  
 Within this one Nembutsu. It now bestows  
 Initiation from the Buddha's Mind  
 Upon my own, until it overflows  
 With calm inherent Light. Its sounds endow  
 My heart with pure and boundless Life that knows  
 The power of Amida's perfected Vow  
 To save all beings who but once proclaim  
 With single-minded Faith his holy Name.  
 Amida's mercy need not summon twice:  
 After his first definitive recall,  
 No one falls back, no doubts remain at all  
 Of ultimate Rebirth in Paradise;  
 For which with many callings I express  
 My heart's devotion, praise, and thankfulness.

(BOWK, 4, ll.76-111)

Elements from this passage recur almost endlessly throughout the rest of *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* wherever Stewart praises Amida. There are repeated references to no-self ("I am not here", "our voices sound the same"); Amida's salvific power ("Amida's perfected Vow/ To save all beings", "Amida's mercy need not summon twice"); and "Rebirth in Paradise". The sheer weight of repetition that drags down Stewart's work on Amida might best be evoked by replicating Stewart's own repetition. Here are a number of passages chosen almost at random. The only pattern demonstrated here is Stewart's making banality of Amida's qualities, qualities of which Stewart is evidently in awe:

Oh, Amida, have pity! Bring to rest  
 My karma's molten vortex, I implore,  
 So that its round of torment turns no more!  
 Caught in this turbulent abyss of flame

...

...

I call upon your Other Power. Reclaim  
 My downcast spirit, whose abandoned quest  
 Failed to withstand the Triple Poison's test!  
 Merciful Amida, do not forsake  
 This abject supplicant who cries your Name

...

...

How long must my incarnate darkness wait  
 Before your boundless sunburst, blinding sight  
 But waking Vision, liberates with Light?  
 How often must my being transmigrate  
 Before you turn the hellish cock of vice  
 Into a brilliant bird of paradise?

(*BOWK*, 3, ll.433-451)

My lips, unprompted by my will, repeat  
 This natural and yet miraculous phrase,  
 The Name, whose calling can revive and raise  
 My dampened faith, my overshadowed hope.  
 The road ahead is flickeringly strewn  
 With imminent brightness. Now before my gaze  
 It opens out upon a sunlit mood

(*BOWK*, 9, ll.11-17)

I hear my voice spontaneously invoke  
 Amida, for since glowing Faith awoke,  
 The Name's mysterious presence can perfume  
 And consecrate the heart, his altar-room,  
 So that Nirvana's fragrance will suffuse  
 Samsāra, whose pollution it subdues.

My life is Amida's and must resign  
 That secular self which is no longer mine.

(*BOWK*, 6, ll.298-305)

Now only Faith can make defilements pure:  
 Amida's Vow and Name alone are sure.

(*BOWK*, 10, ll.401-402).



This constant repetition does enact the practice of the *nembutsu*: the aim is to utter the *nembutsu* without conscious effort. Seen in this way, the banality that Stewart's poetic *nembutsu* acquires is, arguably, an effective integration of Buddhist practice into his formal structure. The flaw in this argument is that unlike uttering a mantra under the breath, writing poetry involves a series of conscious, aesthetic decisions: the *nembutsu* cannot be uttered without thought in poetry, particularly poetry as tightly rehearsed and controlled as Stewart's. The placement of these passages is a deliberate structuring ploy by Stewart, not a spontaneous arising of praise to Amida. In trying to enact his practice of the *nembutsu* within the poetry's structure, Stewart instead succeeds in foregrounding his attachment to the *nembutsu*. We are left once more only with Stewart's intention.

An exception to Stewart's inability to make sense of Amida in his poetry without merely repeating himself *ad infinitum* is the acrostic *nembutsu* sonnet (BOWK, 10, ll.724-737), where he fits Amida into a familiar formal device. Despite this momentary renovation, Stewart even appears to tire of this repetition: "I call on Amida, again, again..." (BOWK, 11, l.411). The ellipsis is Stewart's own. Stewart does at times preface or qualify this yearning with remarks about no-self, but this is unconvincing, especially because of his repeated references and allusions to self-transformation. He describes a cuckoo "As a messenger to herald my return/ To that Enlightened Land for which I yearn" (BOWK, 10, ll.161-162). He also nurtures his "longings for release" (BOWK, 10, l.796), wondering "shall I soon return/ To that high happiness for which I yearn?" (BOWK, 11, ll.465-466). In one of his later short poems, "Two Miracles at Eikandō", Stewart unquestioningly accepts the myth about the *nembutsu* surrounding the temple and wishes to find his own place within the structure of that myth:

While Eikan called the Name, he heard a low  
 Unearthly voice recall his own, and found  
 This numinous statue's head now turned around,  
 Looking over its shoulder! How I yearn  
 To catch some lingering echo from his call  
 To paradise, confirming my return!

(*EI*, 18)

This self-conscious wishing for enlightenment through Amida complicates his avowal of

Other Power and no-self:

... that cloudless joy for which I yearn  
 Beckons with promise, though at every turn  
 The momentary gleam, the glimpse, has fled:  
 Always around some corner just ahead.

(*BOWK*, 9, ll.35-38).

Transparently, Stewart even displaces his desire onto others:

The monks are reassured to hear Shan Tao,  
 Third of the Pure Land Patriarchs, repeat  
 The Name with faith in Amitabha's Vow  
 To save all beings

(“*ALR*”, ll.3574-3577)

Having done this, he draws Amida's power to himself:

... Those devotees  
 Whom Amitabha's Name alone has blest  
 With perfect Faith, awoken in the West  
 And listen while his emanations teach  
 By silent presence or poetic speech  
 With ritual gestures.

(“*ALR*”, ll.3730-3734)

In this context, Stewart is Amida's tool. Stewart's “poetic speech” becomes one of the  
 “ritual gestures” by which Amida's “emanations teach”. This shift from being awe-struck

by Amida to assuming for himself a set of awesome poetic powers is made clearer when Stewart recalls that Amida's

... silent admonition thus reminds me  
That I must yet fulfil the Vow that binds me.  
For moved by his compassionate Heart I swore  
To journey back into this world once more  
So that his Other Power might still proclaim,  
Through my poetic mask of words, the Name.

(*BOWK*, 12, ll.53-58)

Stewart does appear to consciously conflate his poetry with the qualities of the *nembutsu*.

He strives to alleviate this ego-stroking shortly afterwards through this play at humility:

A tombstone similarly plain, I trust,  
Will mark this poet's undistinguished dust,  
Till no one can decipher down its face  
Six characters upon a lotus-base  
To read my only epitaph: the Name.

(*BOWK*, 12, ll.259-263).

Stewart attempts to erase or efface his earlier ego-driven attachment to his own Amida-like nature. He clearly enunciates the link between the brief image and his spiritual yearning and desire, continuing:

How can my yearning for Rebirth break through  
Those vague impenetrable golden veils  
Into that Western Realm, for still it fails,  
Defeated by a dazzling haze of light?  
For all the vain endeavours I devote,  
The visionary Sun that I pursue  
Grows, in my self-exclusion, more remote:  
Almost attained, almost, but never quite.  
To reach that Land of Purity and Peace,  
Even my craving for the Vow's release,  
My last desire to call the Name, must cease.

(*BOWK*, 9, ll.77-87)

Stewart recognises his attachments “must cease”, but there is no sign of their abating, given the network of aversion at play in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*. There is, finally, a tension between Stewart’s desire to actualise himself and to lose that self in Amida’s Pure Land: the sun retreats, darkening the scene, “Leaving [Stewart’s] golden longings for the West/ As ever unresolved” (BOWK, 1, ll.136-137).

This repetition of a poetic *nembutsu* is a textual poetics of space: it is a lexical site where Stewart restrains Stewart. The unwillingness to explore the meaning of Amida in the images, passages and phrases referring to him holds the book back. Stewart develops a set of stock, uninspired images and phrases about Amida and his power and sticks with them in a decidedly unexpansive, confined manner that bears little formal or imaginative resemblance to the breadth and depth of flux, change and ineffability that Stewart claims Amida represents. As with his translation of haiku, Stewart seems unable to incorporate his Buddhist cultural erudition into his work in a way that does not result in formal imbalance.

## **Golden days: Golden days: aversion, attachment and alchemy**

### **Aversion and modernity**

In a moment of considerable irony, Harold Stewart writes that “Buddhism avoids dogma and stresses method, so as not to prejudice realization” (NF, 158). Few statements could be more atypical of the attitudes often espoused in or betrayed by Stewart’s work. Stewart is an avowed Buddhist gripped and driven by a strong aversion

to modernity. Although he tries to find a way to belong within the Buddhist tradition, he necessarily drags his Western heritage with him in a quite unexamined way, setting up a series of misalignments, metaphysical misadventures and ruptures. These tensions, rather than Stewart's technical abilities as a poet, are what situate *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and "Autumn Landscape-Roll" as significant texts in the Australian literary engagement with Buddhism.

Stewart finds a basis for his attachments and aversions in the historical record of Hōnen's own dogmatism. Soho Machida speaks of Hōnen's temperament, referring to Hōnen's "dogmatic and obsessive faith in *nembutsu*"<sup>189</sup>, and to a dualistic tendency in his insistence that *nembutsu* "necessitated a fundamental denial of the value of all other traditional pursuits of salvation"<sup>190</sup>. Stewart and Hōnen's attitude to dissenting voices is one of outright dismissal, even deliberate misrepresentation, as we see with Stewart's critique of Yasuda in *A Net of Fireflies*. Stewart finds in Pure Land Buddhism a position that not only validates his marginalisation, but actually inverts that marginalisation by virtue of its own unrelentingly correctness. Stewart can justify his un-Buddhist aversions with Hōnen's Buddhism. Something of Stewart's implacable dogmatism and certitude is seen in his interpretation of Buddhist scriptural sources:

... Hell's derisive gaolers... shout:  
 "Even a Lohan, or enlightened monk,  
 "Forfeits Nirvana's bliss, if he should flout  
 "His sacred vows, and plunges into doubt.

("ALR", ll.3082-3085).

The cultivation of an attitude either of deep attachment or aversion is incompatible with those "sacred vows", making it difficult to account for Stewart's outburst: "How I hate

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<sup>189</sup> Soho Machida, *Renegade Monk: Honen and Japanese Pure Land Buddhism*, transl., Ioannis Mentzas, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999, p.4

them all,/ 'Those sternly droll and quizzical ascetics!' (*BOWK*, 6, l.215-216). This is not only aversion, but spiritual resentment and envy.

Disregarding this avowal of hatred, Stewart lectures others, taking on a preaching tone when he warns that

"This gulf of liquid fire has expurgated"  
One keeper warns his charges, "those deceived  
"By bigotry and dogma ...

("ALR", ll.3164-3166)

This "bigotry and dogma" have the effect of solidifying and stabilising one's preconceptions and therefore one's sense of self. It is not that Stewart is unaware of his own "bigotry and dogma", but just the same, he cannot help himself, as if his desires for reification compel him to act contrary to his stated "belief":

...I must face  
Hell as my just reward, the hard-earned place  
Of suffering for my sloth and lust and hate.

(*BOWK*, 3, ll.71-73)

He certainly questions his self-reifying tendencies:

Is my didactic malice exempt  
From censure? Does it not deserve contempt  
Like others whom its poison-fangs have stung  
Because their vulgar greed exasperates?  
So, when I let reptilian hatred hiss  
With critically forked and flickering tongue,  
I risk a scaly metamorphosis.

(*BOWK*, 3, ll.127-134)<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Machida, p.4

<sup>191</sup> This is somewhat reminiscent of Gray's self-questioning in "Dharma Vehicle" where he writes:

How shall one continue

Despite this self-admonition, Stewart continues to impose his judgement upon others, criticising “Mendacious gossips” (“ALR”, 1.3097), “Sycophants who kowtowed at court to flatter” (“ALR”, 1.3099), “false alarmists” (“ALR”, 1.3101), “scandal mongers” (“ALR”, 1.3107), “crafty fabricators” (“ALR”, 1.3116), and “Plebian louts” (“ALR”, 1.3119).

The final fifty or so lines of *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* brim with such aversion and disgust, predicated on a deep attachment to an imagined past. This attachment is introduced through an image of the sunlight and sunset:

The sun goes down through vague diffusive veils  
 In which its glow of rosy copper fails,  
 While smoky lilac hazes dim and hide  
 The scars where blind and backward progress gnaws  
 The range, despoiled by mechanistic jaws;  
 Till impious steel pagodas that bestride  
 The ridge and stalk the ruined countryside  
 And callous factories that spread abroad  
 Their insolent chimneys, now can be ignored.  
 My body, too, declines: its aging sun,  
 The heart's creative fire, grows moribund;  
 But I can call upon the solar fund  
 Of Amida for strength, when I have none.

(*BOWK*, 12, ll.509-521)

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to confront every morning  
 the same face in the mirror?

Anxiously peering,  
 demanding –  
 such intolerable self-pity;

hysterical, and without decency.

(Robert Gray, *New Selected Poems*, Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney, 1998, p.74)

This is not to suggest too great a temperamental connection between Gray and Stewart, but rather to show that this conundrum is a recurrent theme in Australian literary engagements with Buddhism. The question of self in a predominantly individual-based society as the contemporary West is given much more focus when one considers taking on a belief system, like Buddhism, that questions the validity of many of the West's underlying assumptions about the nature of self.

Stewart is, to the very end of *BOWK*, concerned to conceal, deny and subdue the present with his images of the past: the modern, industrial present for which he expresses obvious distaste, and regrets “now can be ignored”:

I look to where the ugly city lies  
 Choking below in smog and smothered light.  
 As more incongruous modern blocks arise,  
 A grey malignant growth of concrete mars  
 The ancient capital: for Kyoto dies,  
 Poisoned by noisome farts from trucks and cars,  
 Whose arrogant uproar blares, screeches, jars.  
 Mara's conspirators, who devastate  
 Quiet and privacy, will soon destroy  
 All havens where the mind could meditate;  
 And so I bring with this reblossoming year  
 The unwelcome news of hope for peace and joy  
 That desperate sceptics will refuse to hear,  
 For deafened by that world of doubt and fear,  
 Their wilful loss of faith will slight and spurn  
 The proof of spring, my posthumous return.

(*BOWK*, 12, ll.523-538)

Stewart's aversion to Japanese industrialisation and urbanisation stems in part from its disruption of his own sensibility: these processes “devastate/ Quiet and privacy”, which are central preoccupations, even compulsions, in Stewart's work and life. His aversion borders on paranoia, where each noise emanates from one of “Mara's conspirators” against him. What is most remarkable here, though, is Stewart's conviction of his own significance. His own rebirth, his “posthumous return” is the promised solution to the “noisome farts” of modernity. Where earlier Amida is associated with the sun's renewal (“So every sunrise, radiant in rebirth,/ Confirms my Faith”, *BOWK*, 11, ll.485-486), here Stewart places himself squarely in that position as the bringer of renewal, as “proof of spring” that, he fears, will be “spurn[ed]”, thus perpetuating his sense of marginalisation. Even at this point of spiritual grandiosity, or especially at this moment, Stewart most



tightly clings to the evidence of his self, his feelings of continual marginalisation that even his seemingly incipient Bodhisattvahood cannot allay.

Stewart is as concerned with apparent decay as he is with renewal, even if it is evidence in fact only of change, not of the irreversible damage Stewart fears. As he returns across the bridge,

Whose stone back curves as steeply as a drum  
 To span the temple pond, stagnant, forsaken,  
 Littered with refuse, I am overtaken  
 By cherry-petals that already blow  
 To waste, and stray upon the evening air  
 Until their shower of faintly blushing snow  
 Scatters the mantled water's jade-green scum.

(*BOWK*, 12, ll.541-547)

The depth and vehemence of Stewart's attachment to his aversions is telling. Stewart keeps this vitriol largely under control throughout *BOWK*, until the very close of the book, where he can conceal it no longer. In reading back through the book with this in mind, it is easy to see numerous moments where Stewart's aversions nearly break through. That he keeps them so largely under control is testament to the thorough regimentation of the verse, but also to the simultaneous denial and reification of the self that is at work.

### **Attachment: dragging the present into the past**

The Three Boats Festival in Kyoto that the first poem in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* describes was, Stewart writes, "revived in 1928 to recreate something of the atmosphere of the Heian court" (*BOWK*, 142). This detail has something to do with Stewart's own

nostalgic desire and his compulsion to exert or attempt control over present perceptions of the past. Not only was the festival's revival a reification of a national nostalgic drive, as Stewart suggests, but it seems also a nationalist drive instigated by an authoritarian government in an attempt to control readings of both history and the present. To choose such a motif as the opening gambit of his long poetic sequence typifies Stewart: it concurs with the image of the world he desires, and points to the authoritarian nature of much of his work.

At the heart of "Autumn Landscape-Roll" is a return to the past, both historically in that it returns to T'ang dynasty China, and also textually, as Stewart incorporates thirty and forty year old poems into this "new" manuscript. This returning to the past, like Stewart's banalised repetition of Amida's qualities in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*, serves only to confirm, in a circular manner, Stewart's desire for a return to a lost era, despite his avowal of Buddhist no-attachment, impermanence and no-self. Stewart's poetic militates quite energetically against the stated objectives of the work his poetic sensibility creates. It is as if nothing works the way Stewart intends, his intention constantly disrupting itself, resulting in the opposite of the often clearly stated intended meaning. Just as Stewart's criteria for translation hobbles his own haiku translations, so too his attachments and aversions disable, to a very large extent, the exploration and attempted incorporation of Buddhism into his work.

This nostalgia for a lost time forms a recurrent pattern in both Stewart's "epic" book-length poems. Both Stewart's "epic" poems retreat into this past, and attempt, or hope, to subdue the present by doing so. Substantial parts of "Autumn Landscape-Roll"

are poems re-situated from his early books *Phoenix Wings* and *Orpheus and other poems*. These poems are occasionally re-worked to a small extent, but are more typically transposed in a fairly direct way from the earlier collections. From *Phoenix Wings*, “The Leaf-Maker” (*PW*, 36, ALR, ll.233-262), “Lament in Autumn” (*PW*, 39-40, ALR, ll.564-604), and “A Flight of Wild Geese” (*PW*, 41-49, ALR, ll.901-1165) are re-deployed with minimal alterations. In “Autumn Landscape-Roll” Stewart represents Orpheus with “Chuang-Tzu’s Dream” (*OOP*, 71, ALR, ll.655-682), “The Sage in Unison” (*OOP*, 72, ALR, ll.485-510), and “The Evocation of Kuan Yin” (*OOP*, 77-80). Unlike the other poems, the one hundred and forty lines of “The Evocation of Kuan Yin” are fragmented in “Autumn Landscape-Roll” into numerous disconnected passages taking up one hundred and eighty-eight lines (ALR, l.1808-2096). Many lines and images from “The Evocation of Kuan Yin” are altered, sometimes substantially so, in their re-worked form. Kuan Yin herself is transformed from “matronly” (*OOP*, 77) to “virginal” (ALR, l.1809). Her cheeks lose their “salmon undertone” (*OOP*, 77) and become “suffused [with] a coral undertone” (ALR, l.1813). The poem as originally published is fragmented in “Autumn Landscape-Roll” to accommodate Stewart’s narrative, allowing Wu to welcome Kuan Yin. This welcome marries Kuan Yin to Amida, foregrounding once more Stewart’s Pure Land Buddhist focus:

Welcome, immortal Visitant of Light,

... who reveal your face  
 Mirrored in our benighted minds, reflect  
 The Western Buddha’s solar intellect

(ALR, 1904-1910)

In this particular instance Stewart does in fact reverse his usual procedure, driving his contemporary interest in Pure Land Buddhism into his past body of work. More

generally, though, Stewart doesn't merely *re-work* the past into his last, long poem: he models his "new" work on work that is in parts fifty years old.

This retrospective quality is intertwined with Stewart's formal strictures. For Stewart, poetry's form "brings release from the tyrannic licence of your feelings"<sup>192</sup>. "Traditional verse forms, [Stewart] noted in 1942, set up a contest 'between stimulus and inhibition', whereas free-verse does not offer me enough resistance; it gives me too little to revolt against"<sup>193</sup>. Stewart's strict formal approach is a controlling imperative through which he strives to achieve balance. This is rarely a sustained success: as Edgar Holt writes in his review of *Phoenix Wings*, "Harold Stewart is remote from his own time ... He returns to the Augustan mode. He writes in a periwig"<sup>194</sup>. Holt continues, writing that the "total effect of the style, form and diction is curious, giving one the feeling that Harold Stewart is writing not about another time, but *in* another time"<sup>195</sup>. These self-imposed formal constraints are noted also by Robert D. FitzGerald who, reviewing *Orpheus and Other Poems*, suggests that, with regard to formal constraints, Stewart "is mastered: the skill is that of the compelled servant"<sup>196</sup>. This is the compulsive influence that the force of Stewart's attachment to the past insists upon. He cannot escape it, but can hope only to *relinquish* it through acceptance of no-self, which he firmly denies, despite his ostensible avowal of this notion in his Amida passages.

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<sup>192</sup> Michael Ackland, *Damaged Men: the precarious lives of James McAuley and Harold Stewart*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2001, p.105

<sup>193</sup> Ackland, p.105

<sup>194</sup> Edgar Holt, "The Hellenists", *Southerly*, 3, 1956, p.171

## Stewart's alchemical Buddhism: self-transformation versus no-self

Michael Ackland draws attention to Stewart's abiding interest in the phoenix myth<sup>197</sup>. The continual self-transformation that underpins the structure of this myth is also at work in the proliferation of alchemical imagery in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and "Autumn Landscape-Roll". In Stewart's apparent renunciation of nation, he in fact undertakes a covert, alchemical and transformative reification of self. This takes the form of reinvention rather than a drive to realise Buddhist no-self. Ackland argues convincingly that Stewart never loses the idea of skin-shedding avatars<sup>198</sup>: "This unflagging drive to reinvention, which makes genuine self-transformation difficult to distinguish from studied effects and self-imaging, culminated in his epic poem, *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*, where the distinction between writer and idealised persona is blurred"<sup>199</sup>. Although Stewart clearly aspires to Buddhahood, he nonetheless consistently associates himself with both phoenix and alchemical self-transformation rather than with Buddhist no-self or impermanence.

Stewart sees his poetry as an utterance of the *nembutsu*. Given the compulsion to control interpretation of his poetry, a connection between Stewart's poetry and the *nembutsu* merely further reinforces Stewart's sense of a separate, significant self. It

<sup>195</sup> Holt, p.170

<sup>196</sup> Robert D. Fitzgerald, "Form and Matter in Poetry", *Meanjin*, 2, 1956, p.197

<sup>197</sup> Michael Ackland notes Stewart's keen interest in the myth of the phoenix (pp.88-89). Stewart's papers include two notebooks, making up what he calls "The Phoenix Book". He identifies with the phoenix, and its rebirth through fire. This periodic transformation of the self clearly appeals to Stewart. Ackland writes on this at some length, and it is also evident in Stewart's transformation of events, ambitions and status in his autobiographical long poem, *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*. That book is itself a transformation, as is his unpublished manuscript, "Autumn Landscape-Roll". They both, as Ackland suggests, incorporate and re-shape the events of Stewart's "spiritual" life. Ackland refers to "a retrospective order ... imposed to create an exemplary paradigm which glosses over his actual, zig-zagging course" (p.247).

<sup>198</sup> See Ackland's discussion of this motif, p.245.

<sup>199</sup> Ackland, p.246

suggests the potential to turn the *nembutsu*, and Amida, into something else altogether through Stewart's assertion of this control. This transformation of Amida via Stewart's own *nembutsu* is seen as Stewart's narrative oscillations between the manuscript's Hell cantos and the scroll Wu, the landscape painter, has created:

For while Shan Tao recites the sacred Name,  
The wooden Buddha that has been aflame  
No longer burns upon the temple floor,  
But sits enthroned by Paradise's shore.  
Wholly transfigured through ascetic fire  
To Amitabha...

("ALR", ll.3771-3776)

Stewart presents the Buddha as an alchemised phoenix. If this is part of Stewart's drive to incorporate his Buddhist interests and engagements into a Western context within his poetry, he once more undercuts his intention, writing an alchemical Buddhism that denies its own nature, that of no-nature, no-self.

Stewart associates the golden motif in Pure Land Buddhism with the transmutation of the base metal into gold that is the central, and metaphorical, pursuit of alchemy. There is a striking frequency of references to alchemy in Stewart's texts, both poetic and prose commentary. This admixture of the two challenges the authenticity of Stewart's engagement with Buddhism, upon which the legitimacy of these texts rest. Where alchemy desires to transform the self, Buddhism provides a set of practices by which the reader is shown that the self is impermanent, empty of any unchanging selfhood. That is, alchemy posits a self where Buddhism denies its existence: two clearly contradictory positions that cannot be simply smoothed over. That Stewart clearly writes the Buddhism in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and "Autumn Landscape-Roll" through a filter

of alchemical imagery becomes deeply ironic when we consider his claim that this book is the “spiritual autobiography” of his Buddhist engagement in Kyoto. This spiritual path is hindered, if not detoured, by Stewart’s seeming determination to write an alchemical Buddhism.

In the prose commentary on the first poem in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*, Stewart asserts that

Readers acquainted with alchemical symbolism will already have noticed that this series of poems begins in the later spring, the time considered most propitious for commencing the magnum opus.

(BOWK, 144)

By thus acknowledging the obscure status of alchemy in order to draw attention to it, Stewart sets up a hierarchy within his readership: the more arcane and obscure one’s knowledge, the more worthy the reader. In this concealed (but, strangely, also revealed) strand of the book’s narrative, Stewart remains deeply attached to the self that Buddhism asserts does not in fact exist. It is critical to note that in connecting Amida’s *nembutsu* and the secret underpinning structure of the alchemical tradition, Stewart directly links two of the major narrative strands of *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*:

it is only craving and attachment to desires that are to be extinguished in Nirvana, which literally means blown out like a flame. It is not the desires themselves that are to be censured or suppressed, leaving behind some cold dead shell emptied of all humanity; for their energies are to be *refined and sublimated through the alchemy of the Nembutsu*.

(BOWK, 220: my emphasis)

Here, Stewart redefines Amida’s qualities in order to confirm his own interests and desires. I argue that that the belief exposed here in attachment’s “refine[ment] and

sublimat[ion] through the alchemy of the Nembutsu” mirrors Stewart’s view of self. The self *does* exist, he implies, and is to be transformed, “refined and sublimated”, into a different sort of self through the *nembutsu*’s alchemical properties. Nowhere here does Stewart posit the basic Buddhist proposition that the nature of self is no-self, that there *is* no self to be “refined and sublimated” as Stewart suggests.

Stewart speaks through the *bodhisattva* Vajrabodhi, hoping to validate his own conflation of Buddhism and alchemy:

May his compassionate alchemic fire  
 Refining basely sensual desire  
 Within our ardent hearts transmute the cold  
 Leaden indifference of men to gold.  
 The all imprisoned in Samsara need  
 But call his holy Name and so be freed.

(“ALR”, ll.4694-4699)

Amida’s light does not extinguish the self, but reifies it through its “alchemic fire”.

Stewart again confirms this link between Amida and alchemy at the level of the image:

Slanting across the lawn there lies  
 A timeless golden light that glorifies  
 All that it falls on. In those numinous rays  
 During this one immortal moment floats  
 A minute universe of sunlit motes,  
 The thousand million cosmic sparks that daze  
 The air but halo it with amber haze,  
 And every speck is precious: I behold  
 Those worlds of dust transmuted into gold.

(*BOWK*, 10, ll.492-500).

In the eleventh poem, Stewart prefigures the vitriol of the end of the book. “Into a void of whiteness” (*BOWK*, 11, l.36), he writes,



I saw this impure land, which men have marred  
 With their industrial crimes of waste and mess  
 That creep and claw till nature's face is scarred  
 And ravaged by aggressive ugliness,  
 Redeemed by Heaven, whose fresh descent of grace  
 Had purified each foul polluted place.  
 A black cat slunk across a vacant yard  
 Where rubbish had been dumped and weeds let grow,  
 Transmuted by the alchemic art of snow.

(*BOWK*, 11, ll.44-52)<sup>200</sup>

Stewart hopes that his poem might transform what he represents as a distasteful modernity into an idealised pastoral version of the distant, Japanese past, of which he has no experience, only attachment. This last line, like many others, shows that beneath the Buddhist-inflected narrative, there is another book in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*, one concerned with an alchemic reification of the self, struggling against the Buddhist dissolution of attachment to self. This second book remains in the shadows, but like Stewart's image of glimpsed light and vision, this alchemic narrative appears sporadically in Stewart's diction, choice of imagery, and is enhanced by Stewart's return to the past self.

## Note to self

### Stewart's notable exception

The prose commentaries Stewart attaches to *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and "Autumn Landscape-Roll" continue his unwitting project of contradictory self-assertion. The promotion of a perversely un-Buddhist alchemical Buddhism in these texts is not the only reconfiguration of Chinese and Japanese culture in Stewart's work. Stewart notes

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<sup>200</sup> This passage anticipates Gray's "The Pines" (*NSP*, 210-212). In his later work, Gray's temperament, while never approaching the extremity of Stewart, does show frequent signs of a reactive nature. Like Stewart, Gray expresses resentment at the despoliation of a place to which he is attached, although in Gray's case, his attachment comes through long, first-hand experience of place, whereas Stewart projects desires upon an idealised past.

the absence of epic poetry in both the Chinese and Japanese literary traditions. The Chinese, he writes, “never developed the verse epic, either in heroic or religious mode ... There is a similar lack in Japanese literature” (“ALR”, 1). In an awesome but not unexpected display of self-reification, Stewart argues that his own work remedies this perceived cultural shortcoming:

But with the publication of the narrative sequence of poems entitled “By the Old Walls of Kyoto” in 1981 and the present poem in thirty-two cantos, these lacunae have been filled by two epic-length works in English verse, devoted to the Japanese and Chinese Traditions.

(“ALR”, 1)

Not only does he claim to fill this gap in Japanese and Chinese literature, but Stewart also rescues English poetry from its modernist fate, writing that his “epic, [in] bypassing the backwater of long-stagnant modernism, rejoins the mainstream of English poetry from Chaucer to the Victorians” (“ALR”, 2). In a reaction to poetic modernity, Stewart complains that the reader of modernist poetry “must grope through impenetrable obscurity in search of some glimmer of meaning, which differs with each interpreter” (*BOWK*, xxii). This remark coincides with Stewart’s desire, even compulsion, to control meaning throughout his career. He writes in the introduction to *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* that:

Nature never reveals herself in colourless rational abstractions, but always dressed in the many-coloured imagery of the senses. She presents a coherent, though not systematic, nexus of similitudes that are both polysemantic and integral.

(*BOWK*, xxi)

His own poems are denied this quality, presented instead as profoundly monosemantic, limited by his rigid determination of meaning. Stewart’s poems are, in this sense, merely extensions of his ego and self as it imposes its own views upon what it sees. While clearly

limiting Stewart's aesthetic options, this reflex helps to account for his vehement attachment to questionable formal approaches, such as his haiku translations, once he has established his practice of them.

### Stewart's perfect reader

Stewart realises he needs to justify the copiousness and compulsion of the notes he provides. "Although unfamiliar in the West", he writes, "it has long been a Buddhist tradition for a scholar to write an extended self-commentary in prose on his own more concentrated text in verse, a precedent that has been followed here" (*BOWK*, xvii). This also provides a crutch for Western readers, for Stewart claims it would be "discourteous to put him [the reader] to the troublesome task of hunting out the remoter references" (*BOWK*, xvii). These are notes to justify the notes. Ackland likewise notes Stewart's "need to parade his erudition"<sup>201</sup>. Like his insistence on narrow, specific meaning, Stewart's displays of erudition seem to offer another avenue for self-reification. It could be suggested that Stewart's prose commentaries form the argument he would pursue in his poetry but for his serious limitations. That is, the argument embedded in the prose is Stewart's primary concern, his poetry reduced to a secondary concern. Stewart's prose commentaries become, in this reading of his work, a self-explanation, another level of validation and self-reification in and through a textual existence. Noel Rowe similarly questions the quality of Stewart's work, focusing on Stewart's intended audience: "Whether it holds its force as poetry remains to be seen; it is possible that his is poetry written in and for a small, highly ordered, and intimately informed audience"<sup>202</sup>. Stewart not only tries to assert himself as actually existing in the face of the Buddhist no-self he avows and then disavows in a strange, denying oscillation. He also strives through his

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<sup>201</sup> Ackland, p.19

<sup>202</sup> Rowe, "Lives in Ernest", p.188

notes to create an extension of himself and his poems, a Frankensteinian ideal reader.

This idealised reader is none other than Stewart himself. Stewart reifies himself to himself and *through* himself.

In lieu of readers capable of a correct interpretation of his book, Stewart explains how one ought to read *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*:

Since these poems were designed as a continuous series, the lover of poetry is requested to read them in chronological order, preferably aloud, but omitting the commentaries, which can be included in a second reading of the whole work. Then, should he feel drawn to a third reading, the poetry can again be enjoyed alone, without consultation of the commentaries.

For the reader who suffers from a typographical allergy to separate lines printed with initial capitals, the prose commentaries may be read independently, as essays in their own right. But it is hoped that these may arouse sufficient interest for him to feel impelled to attempt the poems, for then he may be pleasantly surprised to find that the verse is easier than the prose!

(*BOWK*, xvii)

Stewart explains imperiously that “Autumn Landscape-Roll” also

can be enjoyed as a fascinating tale, designed to be understood when read aloud without the printed text in front of the listeners. But for those seeking further elucidation of exotic and recondite Oriental terms and ideas, copious notes have been provided.

(“ALR”, 2)

Dorothy Green’s comment on the *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* prose commentaries are revealing indeed. She contends:

It would be impertinent for one who is not a professional Orientalist, to express an opinion about the content of the prose commentaries. All I am able to say is, *not* that they throw light on the poem, because that is clarity itself, but that they throw light on the immense effort of scholarship and meditation that contributed to making the poem; that they are immensely informative, as well as enriching to

mind and spirit ... The commentaries occupy three-quarters of the book, and for those who prefer prose to poetry, they will provide the *raison d'être* of the book equally well.<sup>203</sup>

This last sentence particularly is an astonishing thing for a critic of Green's calibre and reputation to say. The only inference that can be drawn from it is that despite the praise she heaps on the poetry, and Stewart's work in compiling and writing it, the poetry achieves nothing that the prose does not. Some critics are glowing in their praise for Stewart, most particularly Green and A. D. Hope. In his *Meanjin* review Hope makes the claim that *Phoenix Wings* contains "some of the best poems that have appeared in this country"<sup>204</sup>. Many years later Hope makes a similar claim for *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*. Michael Ackland states his own position in this regard when he writes that "Alec Hope, although an old friend [of Stewart], was scarcely exaggerating when he said Stewart had written the greatest poem in English this century"<sup>205</sup>. It is perhaps not coincidental that those critics whose praise for Stewart is most effusive also enjoyed long-standing friendships with him.

As already suggested, Stewart at times barely pays even lip-service to Buddhism in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*, his "spiritual autobiography". This gap between rhetoric and substance is particularly acute when he writes that

it should be mentioned that when the word *Metaphysic* is capitalized in this work, it refers not to metaphysics, the branch of profane philosophy, but to the *Metaphysica et Perennis*. This is the sacred science of the transcendent unity of all the world Traditions, which in its immanent diversity is adapted to their differing climes and cultures, periods and temperaments, whether manifested in *Metaphysical* or in religious mode.

(*BOWK*, xxii-xxiii)

<sup>203</sup> Dorothy Green, "A Candle in the Sunrise", *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol.XIV, No.2, Autumn 1981, p.152

<sup>204</sup> A. D. Hope, Review of *Phoenix Wings: Poems 1940-6*, *Meanjin*, 4, 1948, p.269

<sup>205</sup> Ackland, pp.247-248

Stewart clearly situates Buddhism within his own conception of religious tradition, through which he evidently seeks to annex and occupy traditions other than his own perspective. Stewart's apparent ignorance here of the complex historical and cultural contexts within which religions arise allows him to conveniently confirm the unitary nature of his own ideals.

In even a small pamphlet like *The Exiled Immortal*, Stewart's explanatory reflex asserts itself. The collection's first poem, "The Immortal Exile" is fifty-five lines long, but is accompanied by an explanatory note of sixty-eight lines of prose. Indeed, the notes for only three poems, "Northward from Shirakawa", "Autumn Nocturne" and "Under Yoshidayama" could be characterised as "short". In all, for a little over fifteen pages of poetry, Stewart has written eight pages of notes. According to Ackland, the publication of *The Exiled Immortal* was "intended to show that [Stewart] could write short as well as epic-length verse"<sup>206</sup>. The unfortunate coincidence is that although *The Exiled Immortal* does contain relatively short poems, Stewart remains unable to escape his other epic predilection: copious notes that weigh heavily upon his poems.

The distance between Stewart's poems and his expectations for them is established early. Ackland notes that Stewart

remark[s] that "annotation is not so much a proof of weakness in the poet as *a proof of lack of intelligence on the part of the reader*". The ensuing notes rarely descend from this giddy height.<sup>207</sup> [My emphasis]

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<sup>206</sup> Ackland, p.260

<sup>207</sup> Ackland, p.18

The admonishing tone of this comment prefigures much of Stewart's adult poetic output and the enormous rhetorical and explicatory scaffolding he erects around it. It also betrays a concern that there might indeed be considerable "proof of weakness" in his poetry after all. Countering this, Edgar Holt writes in *Southerly* that "If some readers find [Stewart] a little remote, the fault will not necessarily lie with the reader"<sup>208</sup>. The tensions in Stewart's work are never reconciled: although moves toward integration might be made, he is by no means successful in creating a distinct new whole out of them. This unrelieved splitting gives the book its peculiar quality, which is, in part, one of being split between its actual content and Stewart's uncontrolled and perhaps uncontrollable intention.

## Text and space

Noel Rowe writes that "Stewart prefers the small life and its work of secret composition. Stewart abandons the quest for an enduring self"<sup>209</sup>. He notes also that Stewart's letters are

texts that are more intimate, unguarded, warm, and hospitable; texts that create a more private space. This is a Stewart whose choices in country, love, and faith are choices that cause him to withdraw. Ackland is inclined to see these choices as effects of cultural and sexual alienation... Yet his own study shows that Stewart was one of those people who belong by not belonging... [his] poetry shows a predisposition to disengagement.<sup>210</sup>

There is, then, a spatial element to this in Stewart's preoccupations with space. Stewart recalls that he was "dragged over every square inch of NSW outback till I acquired a

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<sup>208</sup> Holt, p.171

<sup>209</sup> Rowe, "Lives in Ernest", p.184

<sup>210</sup> Rowe, "Lives in Ernest", p.185

positive dislike for it”<sup>211</sup>. This seems to begin to account for Stewart’s desire for small physical, social and creative spaces. There is a poetic or aesthetic agoraphobia at play throughout his work that may have its roots in this “dislike”. Driven through country NSW and across the Nullarbor, “Stewart was overwhelmed by the emptiness and tedium of life, roads leading nowhere”<sup>212</sup>. Rowe argues that “Stewart’s withdrawals, whether to the Robbery in Melbourne or to his apartment in Kyoto, were a method of control, a means of exercising power through the small spaces in which he preferred to live”<sup>213</sup>. Stewart’s work betrays a literary and cultural agoraphobia. This helps to account for his continual retreat to what he knows: the English verse tradition, places in which he can assert dominance in his chosen field and in intellectual territories largely unexplored in Australia in the 1940s: Japanese aesthetics, Asian philosophy.

Stewart’s rejection of the twentieth century’s poetic models corresponds with his own perceived marginalisation from mainstream Australian society. In retaining a sense of himself despite his marginalisation, Stewart demands increasing control over an ever-decreasing (poetic) dominion. The literary marginalisation Stewart feels enforces a spatial effect that is doubled in its nature. The imperative to continually assert control over his work, as Stewart strives to do in his copious prose notes, is transposed onto Stewart’s dealings with people, particularly in a pedagogical, didactic sense. There is such a social-pedagogical strand in Stewart’s preference for confined places. At the “Robbery” bookshop where he worked<sup>214</sup>, Stewart

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<sup>211</sup> Ackland, p.10

<sup>212</sup> Ackland, p.10. Ackland cites, p.21, the “disheartening country nothingness” in “Country Vacation Suite”. The country Stewart writes of is not only “the country”, but also Australia and the series of negative connotations it has for Stewart.

<sup>213</sup> Rowe, “Lives in Ernest”, p.185



conducted a regular Friday evening discussion group, with the door locked to prevent interruption. This pattern would be repeated in Kyoto: a cell-like abode plus a contingent sphere at the Hotel Shirakuso in which he was a leading spirit with distinctive role.<sup>215</sup>

The locked door is a reminder of both Stewart's (and the group's) marginalisation and his dominance over the "Robbery" group, insecurity about which necessitates the locked door. Stewart retains control of the group, as he does of readings of his poems, in order to reify and disseminate himself and his views. This group, partly social, but with an intellectual focus, was held under Stewart's authority and tutelage. Once again, we find Stewart in a small and now forcibly secluded but still public space.

"Ackland", Rowe writes, "shades his portrait [of Stewart] with accounts of Stewart's deceptions and dogmatisms, but the accounts, and so the failings, are benign"<sup>216</sup>. This might well be so in the country of Stewart's letters, but is much less so in his poetry. In his literary endeavours, Stewart's "deceptions and dogmatisms" have very real effects, compromising the quality and evenness of his work, and perhaps more importantly, his judgement of his own work. Given that the work is the small space Stewart worked and lived in, and magnified to the large space of his life, the effects are somewhat greater than Rowe initially supposes. These compromising, contradictory structures that Stewart sets up are defences against too-great attachment to any one system of thought, but it is exactly this attitude that allows him to refute at a textual level the Buddhism he so plainly seeks refuge in. Ackland writes:

This instinct for self-defence is mirrored in his writings... he went to considerable lengths to control his audience's response and in his Japan-inspired

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<sup>214</sup> Ackland, pp.160-161

<sup>215</sup> Ackland, p.161

<sup>216</sup> Rowe, "Lives in Ernest", p.187

writings the quest for self-effacement is pushed to new extremes... Extended commentaries, too, became the autodidact's self-vindication.<sup>217</sup>

This situation seems irresolvable.

## Snapshots from old Kyoto: Stewart's tourist Buddhism

While claiming that *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* is his "spiritual autobiography in verse" (*BOWK*, xvi), Harold Stewart also describes the narrative as a "personally conducted tour in words" (*BOWK*, xv) around Kyoto. We are shown around chosen sites of Stewart's pilgrim's progress, but see very little indeed of Stewart's spiritual practice beside the repetition of his poetic *nembutsu*. Even though the *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and "Autumn Landscape-Roll" depend to a considerable degree on his cultural and spiritual integration into the traditions of his "native land of exile" (*BOWK*, 9, l.156), Stewart remains, for once, uncertain. He questions his place in Japanese contexts:

I hear the priests and congregation call  
 Amida's Sacred Name inside the Hall;  
 But can a foreign guest participate  
 In their communal rite? Dare I intrude  
 Whom language, race, and customs alienate,  
 And my own doubts and diffidence exclude?  
 While my self-conscious questionings debate,  
 The invocation ends...

(*BOWK*, 3, ll.331-338)

Part of this insecurity belongs to Stewart's willingness to define himself along racial rather than religious lines. The distance he places between Kyoto and himself is problematic.

As one of the *European race* and education encountering for the first time

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<sup>217</sup> Ackland, p.192

the Buddhist Tradition as actually practised in Japan, I find that it is rather different from the edited version presented in books for Western consumption. Inevitably I bring with me the tacit presuppositions and latent prejudices of my background; and despite previous study I try, like most foreign visitors, to fit and confine this strange new culture within the familiar old categories, and then censure its attitudes and activities, judging them unjustly by inappropriate criteria. I must of necessity pass through a period of unlearning and re-education before the Japanese outlook can be *correctly appreciated* and its cultural qualities assimilated.

(BOWK, 219, my emphasis)

Unfortunately for Stewart, his possession of only rudimentary Japanese posed numerous difficulties. Without sufficient Japanese language skills, there was no possibility that “the Japanese outlook [could] be correctly appreciated and its cultural qualities assimilated”. He could do no meaningful translation work, given his Japanese “never advanced beyond an elementary level”<sup>218</sup>. Meanwhile, Ackland reiterates the earlier suggestion that “Stewart’s formal translations depended upon the work of others ... on native cunning and on [his] Japanese-English Dictionary’s rough magic”<sup>219</sup>. From this it can be inferred that to a considerable extent, Stewart’s historical and scriptural knowledge of Japan and Buddhism was barely more substantial than second-hand information. Thus, even *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* with its broad historical, spiritual and autobiographical sweep and ambition, is again a deeply mediated, compromised and, in a real sense, translated work. Stewart’s “great” work, as Hope and Ackland would have it, then, is riddled with second-hand experience. Stewart may have known, or at least suspected that this was the case, hence his occasional acknowledgement of his own uneasy position as “this old presumptuous fool, this foreign clown/ Who apes the Buddha” (BOWK, 6, ll.206-207). Stewart more typically makes Kyoto the site of foreignness as the city is transformed beyond the bounds of Stewart’s wishes, as if his seeming erudition makes him more Japanese than the Japanese.

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<sup>218</sup> Ackland, p.184

<sup>219</sup> Ackland, p.185. I argue this point much more fully in the previous chapter on Stewart’s haiku “translations”.

In the introduction to “Autumn Landscape-Roll” Stewart patronisingly writes that

Although the Orientals of this story may at first seem alien and archaic, remote in period and place from the Westernised world of the present, they may still have a rare Wisdom to impart, of which we are in desperate need.

(“ALR”, 2)

He might see this as not unlike his own situation, “alien and archaic, remote in period and place from the Westernised world” of modern Australia while also possessing “a rare Wisdom to impart”. This “rare Wisdom” is the impetus behind a text like *By the Old Walks of Kyoto*. Barry Leckenby writes that Stewart “does not try to repackage the East with the values of Christian supernaturalism, but instead presents Eastern religion in accordance with his long acceptance of it: that is as its own entity”<sup>220</sup>. The evidence of his texts suggest, in the strongest terms, that Stewart does *not* demonstrate “long acceptance” of Buddhism, but rather actively hybridises an alchemical version of Buddhism. Despite his apparent erudition and his long experience in Japan, Stewart proves himself incapable of resisting the temptation to draw attention to the otherness he discerns around himself. He reduces modern Kyoto to, as Michael Ackland puts it, “a set of shifting woodblock scenes”<sup>221</sup>. In his aversion to modernity, his attachment to the past, and his limited poetic ability, Stewart can create only static images of Kyoto.

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<sup>220</sup> Barry Leckenby, “Keeping Faith: The Narrative Metaphysical Poems of Harold Stewart”, <http://www.nembutsu.info/keeping.htm>, p.8

<sup>221</sup> Ackland, p.185

Ackland suggests that Stewart's "restless pilgrimage ... confirmed that the East afforded a new realm awaiting conquest by an English-language poet, as well as a means of self-fulfilment"<sup>222</sup>. Stewart claims to perceive no difference between himself and the terrain he literarily (and literally) occupies for over thirty years: "the philosophy and art of the East coincide exactly with my way of life"<sup>223</sup>. Even this, though, seems a misapprehension. The connection that Stewart makes is a self-affirming reification. This does not account for the convergence of Buddhism and alchemy that is such a marked feature of Stewart's work, nor for his refusal elsewhere to self-administer the Buddhism he willingly prescribes for others. Stewart instead constantly commits a literary orientalism, allowing him, as in his haiku translations, to colonise the Japanese tradition with his own set of literary preoccupations.

Galen Amstutz allows critics to place Stewart's practice and writing of Shin Buddhism in a broader context:

One of the greatest ironies of the ignorance of Shin in the West is that it is precisely this kind of Buddhism which has had the longest and largest physical representation on Western soil via immigration from Japan and the emergence of large and visible Japanese-American communities.<sup>224</sup>

There is a similar irony that Shin's literary representation in the West, *by* Westerners, came from a self-marginalised poet from a relatively insignificant Western nation, Australia: Harold Stewart. While this makes Stewart important in historical and cross-cultural terms, significance in this area can have no influence on an assessment of the quality of his work. While Shin is the major Buddhist school in Japan, in Western

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<sup>222</sup> Ackland, p.150

<sup>223</sup> Ackland, p.150

<sup>224</sup> Galen Amstutz, *Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism*, State University of New York Press, 1997, p.80

thought about Buddhism, Shin is marginal at best. It is easy to suggest that Stewart in part chose Shin Buddhism precisely because of the lack of Western interest in it: it is a space he could have, as a Westerner, to himself, and so exercise some degree of control over its representation.

## Conclusion

The network of attachment and aversion at play in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and “Autumn Landscape-Roll” is at odds with Buddhist teaching. It debilitates and hinders Stewart’s apparently genuine interest in Buddhism, on the level of both intellect and practice. It severely curtails his moves to integrate Buddhist ideas, images and practices into his aesthetic. For all his display of Buddhist erudition, Stewart never really consistently approaches in his writing an actual *embodiment* of Buddhism. This lack is most apparent at the level of the image. At this level it is less easy to form a discursive or didactic argument, and so poets must rely more on their capacity to form a distinct image rather than to construct a rhetorical scaffolding. The image is dependent on a sensibility inflected or integrated with a point of view rather than a mere statement of that point of view. The handling of imagery tells more about the extent of Stewart’s integration of or influence by Buddhism than the mere repetition of arguments or ideas. Stewart’s knowledge of Kyoto is based in no small part on English-language sources<sup>225</sup>. He certainly tries to incorporate or integrate the Buddhist ideas into his aesthetic *and* intellectual sensibility, but this move stalls almost without exception at the level of the image. So, the presence of these images, and in particular Stewart’s handling of them, points to Stewart’s intellectual knowledge and awareness of them, but not, at this late point in his career, to an outright aesthetic integration of them as images that he could

then elaborate on, adapt or modulate. The formal and epic nature of these books is shaped as an appeal to the English verse tradition in order to make sense of Stewart's experience of the Japanese tradition and experience. Stewart's formal methods in *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* speak *from* his Japanese spiritual experience, but not *of* it. This seems to be because of Stewart's controlling, colonising reflex: his poetic, formal appeal is to the Other Power of the English verse tradition, just as Pure Land Buddhism is a verbal-spiritual appeal to Shin Buddhism's Other Power.

Stewart was an exile of sorts long before 1965, when he left Australia for Japan the final time. The "life-long pattern of concealment and affirmative self-imaging"<sup>226</sup> is a constant presence in Stewart's work. In his haiku translation, Stewart is free to explore his preoccupations with traditional English verse form and a static structure within the context of others' work. The prose essays accompanying his two collections of haiku translations uncover this apparent concealment. While Stewart struggles to impose his own poetic interests upon the Japanese haiku tradition, he openly admits his desire to impose those interests. This open secret is the ultimate disguise of Stewart's poetic life: we readily see the rhetoric behind his translations, and so we fail to see as clearly that he also hopes to hide his literary occupation of Japan from us. The erudite Buddhist scholar *is* Stewart, but is also Stewart's creation, and the guise behind which he both hides and writes. In a very real sense, essential elements of the Ern Malley hoax survived until 1995, in Kyoto, Japan, as Harold Stewart. Harold Stewart, poet, translator and Buddhist scholar, was and is an authentic hoax.

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<sup>225</sup> Ackland, p.185

## Chapter four

### He showed them empty hands: Robert Gray's embodiment of non-attachment

#### Introduction

A central strand of Robert Gray's engagement with Buddhist ideas and practices lies in his interest in Buddhist non-attachment. This is most clear in major poems like "To the Master, Dōgen Zenji" and "Dharma Vehicle". While he explores non-attachment discursively in these and other poems, perhaps more significantly, Gray strives to embody these ideas at the level of image and perception, and enacts Buddhist non-attachment through the quality of attention he gives to things, most notably in poems like "Journey: the North Coast" and "Within the Traveller's Eye". In this way, poems which do not overtly discuss "Buddhist" concerns can nonetheless work through significant elements of Buddhist doctrine. At several points in these poems, the Buddhist religious interests Gray explores through his aesthetic and that aesthetic meld: this identity between aesthetic interest and ethical concern is a version of what Gray addresses in his paper, "Poetry and living"<sup>227</sup>.

In "To the Master, Dōgen Zenji", the Zen teacher Dōgen returns to Japan after studying Ch'an Buddhism in China:

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<sup>226</sup> Ackland, p.4



After years, home from China,  
and he had brought no scriptures; he showed them  
empty hands.

This in Kyoto,  
at someone-else's temple.

(*NSP*, 30)

Dōgen asserts, without asserting anything, the primacy of Buddhist practice and experience over their codification in “scriptures”, just as Gray asserts the practice of non-attachment without speaking of non-attachment. As Gray presents it, Dōgen’s action implies and embodies Buddhist non-attachment to the “scriptures” for their own sake. In “Dharma Vehicle”, Gray explicitly questions his own attachment to self, and enacts his aspiration toward non-attachment. His embodiment of non-attachment through deployment of imagery is evident in his train poems, particularly “Journey: the North Coast” and “Within the Traveller’s Eye”. In these poems, the speaker’s eye moves quickly and restlessly over images without either assigning obvious significance to them or resting on them. Conversely, even as Gray does enact and embody his poetic cultivation of non-attachment, he also writes poems containing large passages of quite discursive, even prosaic, material, explicitly exploring these elements of Buddhism which Gray elsewhere represents through the image.

## Non-attachment and detachment

In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha reminds his disciple Subhūti to strive to remain unattached. He defines non-attachment as

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<sup>227</sup> Robert Gray, “Poetry and Living: an evaluation of the American poetic tradition”, *The American Model*, ed. Joan Kirkby, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1982, pp.117-136

not allowing the mind to depend upon notions evoked by the sensible world – by not allowing the mind to depend upon notions evoked by sounds, odors, flavors, touch contacts, or any qualities. The mind should be kept independent of any thoughts that arise within it. If the mind depends upon anything, it has no sure haven.<sup>228</sup>

In turn, the narrator of the *Sutra of Hui-neng* refers to the *Diamond Sutra*: “One should use one’s mind in such a way that it will be free from any attachment”<sup>229</sup>. Similarly, Gray recalls Hui-neng, citing his *Sutra* in “Dharma Vehicle”. Gray describes non-attachment, which he calls here “No-Thought” (*NSP*, 73), in this way: “It is not reaching into any deep centre, / but to awaken the mind without fixing it anywhere” (*NSP*, 73). These phrases also find their equivalents in R. H. Blyth’s *Zen in English Literature and Zen Classics*,<sup>230</sup> which Gray regards as a major influence<sup>231</sup> on his own work. In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha cites the benefits of a mind residing in non-attachment:

they will be free from the idea of an ego identity, free from the idea of a personality, free from the idea of a being, and free from the idea of a separated individuality.<sup>232</sup>

While Gray certainly claims to aspire to non-attachment, his aspiration toward a detached sensibility or perception is complicated by the self’s attachment to things.

<sup>228</sup> A. F. Price, transl., *The Diamond Sutra*, in *The Diamond Sutra and The Sutra of Hui-Neng*, Shambhala, Boston, 1990, p.33

<sup>229</sup> Wong Mou-lam, transl., *The Sutra of Hui-neng*, in *The Diamond Sutra and The Sutra of Hui-neng*, Shambhala, Boston, 1990, p.73

<sup>230</sup> R. H. Blyth, *Zen in English Literature and Zen Classics*, Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, 1942. Blyth offers numerous similar descriptions of the meaning of non-attachment: “Cherish thoughts that are dwelling on nothing whatever”; “Awaken one’s thoughts where there is no abode whatever”; “We should use a mind dwelling upon Nothing”; and “Use the mental faculties spontaneously and naturally, but unconstrained by any preconceptions arising from the senses” (p.229).

<sup>231</sup> In interview with Sophie Gee, Gray refers to Blyth as “the great translator of haiku poetry”; Blyth is included by Gray in his list of “the main influences” (Sant, p.19); “R. H. Blyth ... has been a great influence on both my attitude to Zen and on my poetry. He was a brilliant man” (Williams, p.30).

<sup>232</sup> A. F. Price, p.32

Gray's desire for the cessation of *dukkha* is abundantly clear in a relatively early poem like "Dharma Vehicle", where Gray develops an argument from his desire for non-attachment, a desire which is itself a form of attachment. Gray sees through the strength of this attachment, writing this negation of the craving, attached, "hampered" self:

How shall one continue  
to confront every morning  
the same face in the mirror?

Anxiously peering,  
demanding –  
such intolerable self-pity;

hysterical, and without decency.

(*NSP*, 74)

Gray continues:

I do not want to be what I am.

I'm woken here,  
I would like simply to walk away.  
And live without saying that I live,

without me

(*NSP*, 74)

And:

When you are suffering  
and you want to be free  
of that which torments you,

it is not greed, is it?  
This is something more basic than

the calculations of thought.  
And this is why I've felt  
it's possible

to elude the mind,  
whose confusion has continued  
for too long.

The summer's almost gone.

(*NSP*, 75)

Gray identifies attachment to the idea of a stable, unchanging self as central to the causes of *dukkha*, and so notes his own neurotic craving. Moreover, the mind's identification with the self as an entity that is somehow permanent troubles Gray. He sees and despises his own attachment to form. His central question is that of how to deal with the practical issue of seeing the self as a relative phenomenon, while perceiving, or guessing at, something of the absolute. He asks: "How shall one continue/ to confront every morning/ the same face in the mirror?" The self's hunger for reification is ravenous: it "eats up other people". Intellectually, at least, Gray considers that it may be possible to "continue,/ but without this continuing"; that is, he aspires to no-self, in which non-attachment, in part, resides. Gray speculates further that "it's possible// to elude the mind" by means of cultivating non-attachment. The stanza break detaches the two clauses, enacting both the possibility of eluding the mind, and the difficulty in doing so. The space itself attempts to act out the process of eluding the mind, separating the thought ("it's possible") from the potential act (the provisional verb, "to elude"). The Buddha's living "with no excuse for the way things are" (*GS*, 8), from another early poem, "Philosophy", encapsulates non-attachment in much the same way as Gray's use of Hui-neng, Hsuan-chien, Ma-chu and Dōgen in "Dharma Vehicle". More vitally, "Philosophy" provides a direct counterpart to Gray's desire in "Dharma Vehicle" for none of his "excuses for being// to remain" (*NSP*, 74), and to "live without saying I live" (*NSP*, 74). It is, in a nearly paradoxical way, an attachment to that which is already beyond attachment. In Buddhist practice, this is a productive tension; in Gray's work it is similarly creative of apparent contradictions and dichotomies, even if those dichotomies do eventually attain a momentum of their own.

This tension provides for the sort of move that Gray tries to justify in “Dharma Vehicle” when he poses to himself the question “it is not greed,/ is it?” (NSP, 75). This aspiration, while a form of attachment, is intended as a means to attaining a non-attached state. The final, one-line stanza of the section, “The summer’s almost gone” (NSP, 75), is a reminder of the impermanence underpinning all Gray’s concerns, and is one of the forces that drives the speaker’s urgent aspiration. Non-attachment, then, as “Dharma Vehicle” suggests, is the means to that solution. The stanza break, coming before the final, seemingly throw-away “The summer’s almost gone”, splits, for discursive and rhetorical purposes, what merely *appears* to be separate aspects of non-attachment. The poem then moves from a didactic, abstract argument to an observation that embodies the speaker’s urgency. This enactment of the splitting self or mind on one hand and Gray’s integration and embodiment of non-attachment on the other is typical of the doubled workings of his poetic body. This doubling also describes the difficulties of Buddhist practice. Gray addresses his concerns to attain or cultivate non-attachment throughout “Dharma Vehicle”, most notably, perhaps, where he speaks through Hsuan-chien:

Just respond to all things  
 without getting caught –  
 Don’t even hold on to your Non-Seeking as right.  
 There is no other wisdom to attain.

(NSP, 83)

At this point, it is clear that clinging to duality in any form is not only a hindrance to Buddhist practice, but an impenetrable baffle to such a practice. Even to think of a “practice”, let alone a “Buddhist” one, is a self-defeating impediment.

Gray recognises that the mind's attachments are hindrances nonetheless, despite their temporary usefulness. This recognition shows itself in Gray's numerous references, in both "Dharma Vehicle" and "To the Master, Dogen Zenji", to the "other shore". These references allude to the long-standing Buddhist image of the *dharma* as a raft to be discarded, as a means rather than an end in itself. Gray situates sections of "Dharma Vehicle" near or by the ocean, and places himself on a "long beach" (*NSP*, 86). He also closes "To the Master, Dogen Zenji" with such an image:

this leaf shall cross over  
the stormy sea,  
among the dragon-like waves

(*NSP*, 33).

With Gray this shore is never finally reached, the practice of non-attachment is never complete. He generally remains on the near shore, walking along a beach, peering at the ocean. The "Pacific Ocean mornings" (*NSP*, 71) he sees through the window of his shack place him firmly on this near shore: he has not even begun on the figurative journey to the other shore. However, this distinction is itself placed in doubt when Hui-neng states that "There is the Other Shore, / it is here" (*NSP*, 73). This suggests that Gray recognises the need to find and cultivate non-attachment within the local and present context, rather than seeking it elsewhere.

At the end of the sixth section of "Dharma Vehicle", Gray quotes from a teaching by Hsuan-chien on the cultivation of non-attachment: "A mind that's like a

mirror,/ in which things pass and leave no stain" (*NSP*, 84). This ties in with the poem's seventh section, which opens:

I'm coming back with a haversack from the shop;  
 a beach resort  
 miles off,  
 walking all the way at the water's edge  
 along the empty sand.

(*NSP*, 84)

Into this short passage Gray fits many of his concerns about trying to find a way to engage with Buddhist practice in Australia. He returns to his hut (a temple-like site for his practice) on the margins of consumer-based society, away from the shop and the beach resort. The haversack he carries is replete with the baggage of that expedition; he is weighted down with his encounter with the town. Although Hsuan-chien's exhortation is to be mirror-like, to leave no stain, Gray returns along the beach, leaving, necessarily, his footprints. The sea, though, still returns to erase them. The water's edge Gray walks along is both the Other shore, and this particular, local New South Wales North Coast shore: they are not different.

### **"Journey: North Coast": the train as dharma vehicle**

Gray's non-attached sensibility steps forward as he ranges across diverse images. Rather than building his lyrical, imagistic poems out from a central image, metaphor or simile to construct some overall pattern, Gray very often adopts a style that darts and flits across a range of images. As he drives from image to image, nonetheless retaining a powerful impression of each, Gray enacts, at the level of his poetic, a version of Buddhist non-attachment. In embodying non-attachment at this formal and technical level, Gray

opens out a vision of the image-based lyric poem that incorporates, at a basic rather than discursive or didactic level, a keen awareness of major planks of the Buddhist world view: interdependence, *śūnyatā*, transience and conditionality. This mode is most visible, perhaps, in Gray's poems of train journeys, where, skipping from image to image, he shows the connections without the need for analogical tropes or direct statement. Moreover, in poems patterned in this way, Gray lays out the working of the mind as Buddhism sees it: as a connected complex of images and experiences, striving for stasis and reification, but ultimately lacking a stable selfhood. Gray's gaze remains with an object only while it remains in view. Once his sight passes beyond them, Gray's attention, relatively non-attached, also passes beyond them, and shifts focus onto the next series of images.

The journeys of these poems are figurative journeys in which the nature of self and perception of reality is contemplated, meditated-upon and, most vitally, embodied in the poems' form and the attention to objects and imagery. Both movement and change of perspective are constant in these poems. This somewhat cinematic approach to the images adds to the effect of the conditioning process upon both the speaker (the "I" of "Journey: North Coast", for example) and the reader, as well as the poem itself. Gray demonstrates and embodies the constitutive, conditional, insubstantial nature of self that Buddhism insists upon.

Where Gray simultaneously sights and cites image after image, and so plays out his aesthetic of non-attachment, Alan Urquhart sees a mere enumeration of things. In reference to "Journey: North Coast", Urquhart is critical of Gray, arguing that



there is a sense in which these incidental impressions are a bit arbitrary, as if the casualness with which they are enumerated is a bit studied. There is a sense in which they seem to be used to mask the actuality of those "bright crockery days/ that belong to so much I remember", which is the line that immediately precedes their enumeration. In other words, just as the reader looks forward to being treated to a bit of "remembrance of things past" one is given a descriptive passage. This suggests the concealment of the darker side of the poet's personality. The ambiguity inherent in the metaphors confirms this.<sup>233</sup>

The "descriptive passage" of which Urquhart is dismissive is, if viewed from a non-attached perspective, precisely the "remembrance of things past" that he expects. That is, the "actuality" of the things Gray lists are not limited by the speaker's, or Gray's, attachments. Rather than disabling that actuality, Gray presents these things without imposing unnecessarily subjective descriptions. In not accounting for Gray's enactment of non-attachment here, Urquhart undercuts his own readerly and critical expectations. As he observes, "the scenery outside is not sought, or willed, but *glimpsed* as the poet is occupied with something else"<sup>234</sup>. The speaker may be occupied with something else, but that other focus of attention does not detract from the detached, non-seeking<sup>235</sup> and non-willing perception and recognition by the speaker of the things he sees and lists.

Unlike Urquhart, Dennis Haskell engages more fully with Gray's Buddhist interests. Haskell regards the notion of "momentary particulars"<sup>236</sup> as constitutive of Gray's poem "Journey: the North Coast", and examines the idea of self Gray suggests in these poems. Haskell writes:

By shifting from landscape presentation to speaker, and thereby drawing attention to a relation between the two, Gray is concerned to make the poem

<sup>233</sup> Alan Urquhart, "Objectivity and other stances in the poetry of Robert Gray", *Westerly*, 3, 1988, p.48

<sup>234</sup> Urquhart, "Objectivity and other stances", p.48

<sup>235</sup> Hsuan-chien's exhortation to his students in "Dharma Vehicle" is: "Don't even hold on to your Non-Seeking as right", (*NSP*, 83).

<sup>236</sup> Dennis Haskell, "Humanism and Sensual Awareness in the Poetry of Robert Gray", *Southerly*, 1986, 3, p.264

an event (the event of the train journey) rather than a matter of statements by Robert Gray. There is – to anticipate – an element of “No-Thought” in this, inasmuch as events are more readily linked to the momentary particulars of existence as opposed to conscious reflectiveness in time.<sup>237</sup>

These momentary particulars arrive in Gray’s later poem, “Smoke”, and are identified as belonging to “the eternal process” (*NSP*, 108), as “particulars,/ that are like smoke” (*NSP*, 108). Haskell introduces into his argument the Buddhist idea of conditionality: that things are constituted of a constant flux of events, and that one thing leads necessarily to another thing, and that these can be analysed in a contemplative or meditative manner. This idea then also reflects on impermanence and non-attachment as a means of dealing with that impermanence and conditionality, and the underlying *sunya*, or “empty”, nature of things. Significantly, Haskell also enters into a discussion of the nature of self, where he posits his own sense of the meaning of “self” alongside Gray’s:

Gray tries to use language so as to embody the object – to render the object in convincing physicality. This tends to make us forget the observing self. But presentation of that self is intrinsic to the act of perceiving the object. This involves a sense of separation of the self from the objects which is momentarily overcome in the presentation of the image. Gray says that the “personality” is a “chain of memories”; consciousness involves awareness of self even if the self is composed of a “chain of memories” of previous perceptions of the external world.<sup>238</sup>

Gray actually *is* foregrounding the “observing self”, whatever Haskell’s contention. It is merely that the “observing self” that Gray foregrounds regards itself as radically impermanent.

The “sense of separation of the self from the objects” that Haskell speaks of is within Gray’s intention: that of demonstrating and enacting something of a non-attached aesthetic. Gray’s poems very often embody the act of perceiving an object, not just the

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<sup>237</sup> Haskell, “Humanism and Sensual Awareness”, p.264

object itself. This gives the self away as a constructed, provisional, conditional thing that appears to be an “entity”. Haskell’s only real shortcoming here is in not recognising the extent to which Gray *embodies* the Buddhist doctrines that Haskell himself discusses. The poem *is* actually comprised of the “chain of memories”. The poem demonstrates the constructedness of both the poem and the self by these “chains of memories”. This, then, is how Gray demonstrates some aspects of non-attachment from the self: by showing how it can arise in a specific situation. Haskell even sees that “Gray tries to use language so as to embody the object – to render the object in convincing physicality”<sup>239</sup>. He fails, though, to see the extent to which Gray’s poems enact and evoke not only the objects he describes, and the processes by which they are perceived and turned into poems, but also how they embody the Buddhist ideas that shape his perception of those objects. Haskell also notes that the poem’s rhythms “help convey, physically, the experience of the train journey”<sup>240</sup>. He does not see that the images Gray offers similarly convey, and even constitute, that same journey. This journey is also a figurative one, and the train is not merely a means of transport: it is in fact a *dharma* vehicle, providing a convenient platform of metaphor and image from which Gray can embody a set of ideas central to Buddhism.

In “Within the Traveller’s Eye” each image or group of images is accorded its own stanza. This assists in evoking the flickering, fragmented view from the train that the eye and mind of the traveller take in. The images ultimately coalesce in the form of the poem, but the way in which they acquire their cumulative effect resembles Buddhist non-self. What is thought of as the self consists only of what happens to that which observes:

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<sup>238</sup> Haskell, “Humanism and Sensual Awareness”, p.265. Haskell’s citation about the “chain of memories” is from *The American Model*, p.127.

<sup>239</sup> Haskell, “Humanism and Sensual Awareness”, p.265

And those old pine trees in a loose main street,  
where sparrows live like fleas.

We go above the mud and fallen light of an estuary;  
a few birds rise.  
The river, towards evening, is moving slowly  
under a slow sky.

...

Steep iron roofs, old wooden places;  
they face each other on gravel side streets,  
with rainwater ditches out of which the grass stands,  
a ramp across to each.

There is a utility moving  
behind tall roadside heads of grass

(*NSP*, 18-19)

The structure and movement of these seemingly episodic evocations of place formally enacts the construction of the insubstantial, detached self. The speaker glimpses scenes, but does not create a narrative from them other than what they already offer. That is, the self intervenes only so far as to write the poem. “mind that’s like a mirror,/ in which things pass but leave no trace” (*NSP*, 84). The deployment of these fractured images *suggests* a semi-rural landscape or pastoral scene, but does not present the reader with a single, stable, entire, envisioned place. The movement is *across* rather than *in* the landscape. These flickering, almost-random images that leave no apparent trace foster a non-attachment much like the non-attachment as Gray defines it in “Dharma Vehicle”: as “A mind that’s like a mirror,/ in which things pass and leave no stain” (*NSP*, 84) other than the artefact of the poem, which is itself the poem’s figurative mirror-mind.

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<sup>240</sup> Haskell, “Humanism and Sensual Awareness”, p.264

Within these poems there is a sense of motion which comes from the movement of the train across the landscape. Gray also creates a clear connotation of change and movement *within* the landscape the trains travel across, and the world that the speaker sees. The speaker seems, in "Within the Traveller's Eye", to provide a personal correlative for each image of movement external to himself. As the speaker's train moves, so an element of the landscape is also in motion or flux: "the sunlight reappears", "We are flying low"; "We go above the mud and fallen light of an estuary". Also, "The river, towards evening, is moving slowly/ under a slow sky" (*NSP*, 18); "daylight is turned low" (*NSP*, 19); and

The shadow of the tallest mountain  
in the valley wall  
is lengthening.

(*NSP*, 19)

In "Journey: the North Coast", trees appear "as a nude descends a staircase" (*NSP*, 2) in Gray's image, borrowed from Marcel Duchamp, and "the country bursts open on the sea" (*NSP*, 2). In this poem, though, the movement is focussed more often within the speaker's train compartment than outside: "there's sunlight rotating/ off the drab carpet", "the water sways/ solidly in its silver basin", "The train's shadow .../ flees on the blue and silver paddocks" (*NSP*, 2). All this movement is also the motion of the speaker's eye as he casts it about, taking into himself the events and images that make up what we learn of that speaker. This casting-about of the speaker's eye and the imagery it captures is the actual construction of the self of that speaker *as it occurs in the poems*.

The sense of motion that Gray evokes in his travelling poems is absent in haiku drawing on the same material. If this is to perhaps be expected, so too is Gray's

maintenance of his non-attached tone. His haiku, though, bear some significant similarities to the sensibility behind the flashing images viewed from trains. The brevity of these poems allow only a single glimpse at an object, the form's brevity ensuring the reader moves on, just as the train moves on in "Journey: the North Coast" and "Within the Traveller's Eye":

Passing on a train;  
 sheets borne out from a clothes-line  
 and the pasture-land.

(*NSP*, 27)

And:

The train's halted  
 nowhere. Small birds whirling up  
 from the dry grass.

(*CJ*, 70)

Like the images Gray captures in "Journey: the North Coast", "Within the Traveller's Eye", and much later in "The Drift of Things", these are barely more than fragments, but nonetheless, they retain movement even while they receive a stillness from the "traveller's eye". That Gray does not develop these images is not simply a function of form. The form seems chosen to suit both the image and the attitude of non-attachment that Gray brings to that image. In these haiku, all that "happens" is that the sheets continue to flap, that the birds are constantly "whirling up". Adding to the evident cultivation of non-attachment behind the images here is Gray's fidelity to the haiku form as most commonly received in English: the syllabic structure of these poems are 5-7-5 and 4-7-5 respectively. The impression of motion is lent formal support by that syllabic structure. As the train approaches a scene, the eye also approaches, bringing the object briefly into focus, and then trails away. The first and third lines represent this movement

toward and away from the object, and the second line acts out the moment of focus. As the train trails away from an image, so too does the speaker's non-attached attention to an object. Even though the train in this second haiku is still, the implications of the haiku's form remain applicable to the birds as they rise and whirl, and either vanish from view or settle again. Regardless, this image is a strong analogy for the transience from which Gray's Buddhism derives its non-attached view. The birds whirl in a constant flux, regardless of the mind's or train's stillness or otherwise.

## Conclusion

Gray has assimilated Buddhism into his aesthetic sufficiently well as to be able not only to speak of it discursively but more significantly, to embody and enact Buddhist ideas and practices at the basic level of his image-making. Buddhist ideas to do with interdependence, no-self and non-attachment are integral to the structure of imagery in Gray's early work. He cultivates elements of Buddhist non-attachment in much of his work. Indeed, his initial imagistic poetic is in part built from this foundation, even if the vital practice of non-attachment continually *begins* to derail throughout his work. In this context, Gray's attitude toward nature begins to look like *attachment* to nature, carrying the contra-suggestion of developing aversions to the non-natural, rather than the "*detachment*" he insists on in "To the Master, Dogen Zenji" and "Dharma Vehicle". The tension between these two apparent poles is an ongoing source of energy throughout Gray's work.

## Chapter five

### “But you do not try to turn your face away”<sup>241</sup>: care, attachment and aversion in Gray’s sensibility

All through my poems there is, subtly, I hope, a consciousness of the interdependence of opposites; and an acceptance or reconciling of these. I will leave it to the critics, however, to discover the extent and significance of this.<sup>242</sup>

Robert Gray

#### Introduction

Although in much of his early work, Gray strives to enact and embody his Buddhist interests, his attempts at integrating Buddhist non-attachment into his work do begin to lag. This opens up a space for a series of inconsistencies in his work. In his paper, “Poetry and living” in *The American Model*<sup>243</sup>, Gray outlines an aesthetic built on non-attachment. Even as Gray writes poems like “Dharma Vehicle”, which explore the possibilities of practising non-attachment, he is also writing others such as “Poem to My Father”. This poem, like the slightly later “Diptych”, sets up a series of binaries that eventually unsettle Gray’s efforts to develop an aesthetic based on Buddhist non-attachment. These poems open up a clear disjunction between his clearly stated aesthetic intent and his execution of those intentions, one that is quite extensive, and which reveals a doubled or split tendency throughout much of his work.

Gray constructs a crucial binary when he aligns the mother in his poems with care, attachment and nature, and sets against this his father, who is associated with fear,

<sup>241</sup> Robert Gray, *Creekwater Journal*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1974, p.33.

<sup>242</sup> Barbara Williams, “An interview with Robert Gray”, *Southerly*, 1, 1990, p.27



aversion and the social. Further, Gray appears to take sides in this dispute, allying himself with the mother figure even as he embodies, in his speakers, many of the father's attributes. This tension opens out into an aesthetics of aversion and revision that becomes somewhat pronounced in large parts of *Piano*, and accelerates further in *Certain Things*, *Lineations*, *Afterimages*. Gray's response to these dichotomies suggest that his cultivation of non-attachment, nearly exclusive to the realm of natural things, is in fact a deep attachment. Further, it betrays a lack of integration or reconciliation, finally, of Buddhism and the Western materialist culture Gray eventually favours. This is despite his best efforts: Gray's biographical note in *The Younger Australian Poets*, edited by himself and Geoffrey Lehmann, states that

He has been attracted to Taoist and Buddhist philosophy, and has endeavoured to locate the essentials of these within the Western tradition, and to experience them in the Australian environment.<sup>244</sup>

In a strange echo of Harold Stewart, it seems Gray's early determination to integrate his Buddhist practice with his poetics and place eventually succumbs to the strength of his attachments to his rationalist and materialist leanings.

### **His mother the Buddha, his father the bully**

The continual displacement of Gray's early pursuit of non-attachment seems to pivot on a complex of tensions that he most clearly delineates in poems about family. Much of the biographical detail Gray speaks of in interviews resurfaces in the sweep of

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<sup>243</sup> Gray, "Poetry and living", pp.117-136

<sup>244</sup> Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann, editors, *The Younger Australian Poets*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1983, p.116

relationships in the poems, where he sets up a correlation between two sets of tensions. The familial tensions between mother and father mirror, in important ways, the complication in Gray's expression of his Buddhist interests that results from his attachment to the natural on the one hand and, on the other, his aversion to the social. The clear distinctions that many of Gray's poems operate from strengthens the aversion we see at the end of the revised version of "Within the Traveller's Eye".

While he embodies an apparent attitude of detachment toward the "ordinary things" of nature, Gray conspicuously fails to maintain such an attitude towards people. This distortion issues from Gray's identification of the qualities care<sup>245</sup> and detachment with the mother figure in poems like "Diptych", "Philosophy" and "Boarding House Poems". He offers, in opposition to this focus, a maleness that is implicitly and verbally aggressive, if not physically violent. Having made this distinction, Gray then permits a displacement of Buddhist detachment, excusing not only an absence of sympathetic, non-attached representation of people, but also, at times, an active, participatory aversion to them. This ironically (or perversely) finds Gray in the camp of implicit male violence or hostility that he clearly opposes in these and earlier poems. Gray's failure to address the proliferation of such distinctions and oppositions gravely handicaps his stated project, that is "to locate the essentials of these [Buddhist and Taoist traditions] within the Western tradition, and to experience them in an Australian environment"<sup>246</sup>.

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<sup>245</sup> Gray, "Poetry and living", pp.118-120, where Gray discusses his application of Heidegger's "Care" to the ethics and aesthetics of his poetry.

<sup>246</sup> Biographical note to Gray's poems in Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann (eds.), *The Younger Australian Poets*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1983, p.116

In the first section of "Diptych", Gray aligns the mother with an ethical stance of care: "my mother never ceased from what philosophers invoke, from 'extending care',/ though she'd only ever read the *Women's Weekly*" (NSP, 132). Although the mother "never ceased" this ethical activity, Gray perceives a split which occurs not in her approach to "care", but in her relation to others. Gray writes that

This care for things, I see, was her one real companion in those years.  
It was as though there were two of her,  
a harassed person and a calm, that saw what needed to be done...

(NSP, 132)

The mother in "Diptych" is aligned with care and a Buddhist-like detachment, but also with nature, too. Such qualified praise means that his mother's choice of reading material is as relevant as her "extending care". This focus on what Gray sees as the trivial culture of women does not negate his concern with the ethical position his mother occupies, but it *does* complicate his *own* claim to an ethic of care. Gray builds on this association of the female and the natural: "Her care you could watch reappear like the edge of tidal water in salt flats, about everything" (NSP, 132). Quite similarly, in the earlier "Philosophy", the ocean nurtures a quality very much like "care" as Gray defines it:

leaves all these interwoven,  
undulant

lines. These forms which more than art  
have made me wish to live.

(GS, 8)

The association of the mother with the ocean in "Diptych", and with the ocean's traces as the source of the speaker's "wish to live" in "Philosophy", is vital. It further links the care, via imagery of water and the ocean, to Buddhist notions such as impermanence and interpenetration, as well as the detachment Gray has already associated with the mother

and the natural world. That Gray chooses water as an image to convey impermanence and interdependence is both astute and obvious. The waves are “interwoven, // undulant lines”, suggesting both the constant movement implied by impermanence and the inextricable nature of things’ interdependence. Gray relies on water’s fluidity, its reflective quality and its constant movement to convey these key Buddhist ideas, without resort to metaphor or simile, but through a natural image.

Gray associates care, already linked to his mother, with the image of the ocean in the last stanza of “Philosophy”:

A Buddha would come to the ocean  
 “to take the hook out of every fish’s jaw”;  
 he calmly sees this world without a thought,  
 with no excuse for the way things are.

(*GS*, 8)

This both conflates the mother with the Buddha and links Gray’s own aspirations to the Buddha. The mother’s calm seeing “what needed to be done” in “Diptych” can be seen as a version of the Buddha, who “calmly sees this world without a thought” and relieves the suffering even of fish. In “Diptych” Gray writes of his mother that

It was this [care] made her drive out the neighbour’s bull from our garden  
 with a broom,  
 when she saw it trample her seedlings –  
 back, step by step, she forced it ...

(*NSP*, 132-133)

As the speaker in “Diptych” says, “Her care ... / ... made her drive out the neighbour’s bull from our garden” (*NSP*, 132). More specifically, she “drove it out bellowing” (*NSP*, 133). This links her to the Buddha in “Boarding House Poems, 8”, with whom Gray aligns Orpheus:

... you have passed  
in this world:  
a voice that might dispel  
the beast in men.

(*NSP*, 25)

Watching his mother driving the bull away, the speaker is “in torment”. He is

slapping into the steps, the rail, with an ironing cord,  
... and was quelled, also,  
repelled to the bottom step, barracking.

(*NSP*, 133)

As the mother “drove it out”, the bull was “bellowing” (*NSP*, 133), which sounds similar, if softer, than the young speaker’s “barracking”. But he is, like the bull, “repelled”, even “quelled”. Gray aligns his younger self with “the beast in men”<sup>247</sup>, which must be repelled, dispelled or quelled by means of the detachment of the calm mother who is active in “extending care”.

This combination of calm, care and vigour is matched in “Boarding House Poems”. The qualities Gray ascribes here to the Buddha are transferred to Orpheus, the actions of both of whom are echoed by those of the mother in “Diptych”:

... this photograph of  
a Buddha;  
an alert face, with a detachment like

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<sup>247</sup> Alan Urquhart (“Objectivity and other stances”, pp.45-58) refers to personal darkness in his article on Gray’s poetry. He writes of Gray’s attempt to “conquer this darker side of his personality” (p.45) and of “the poet’s struggles to overcome the darker side, both of himself and his memories”(p.45). He says that “The temptation to associate the darkness [of the shadow imagery in “Journey: North Coast”] with the poet’s memories is irresistible” (p.48). I am not overly inclined to agree with Urquhart’s views elsewhere, particularly with regard to his misreading of Buddhist detachment, but he is working in the right direction, even if the context for his argument here is frail at best.

the moon's,  
with its  
relentlessness.  
'As Orpheus walked  
amongst the forest, so you have passed  
in this world:  
a voice that might dispel  
the beast in men.'

(NSP, 25)

The mother in Gray's poems possesses all these qualities. She is "calm" like the Buddha in this poem; she literally drives the bull from her garden, just as Orpheus "dispel[s]/ the beast in men"; her "relentlessness" is foremost in the first quality to which Gray attributes her: "My mother never ceased from... 'extending care'".

To some extent this is true of Gray's mother as he presents her in the biographical "The Waters Under the Earth":

With her children, though, she would always remain selfless. Her unthinking, unstinting devotion to her children seems to me to have risen directly, and as warm as blood, from out of the fathomless mammalian past.<sup>248</sup>

With this suggestion, Gray closely aligns his mother's care with his own aesthetic of care and concern for nature: her concern is "unthinking" because she is somehow part of a "fathomless" nature. An analogy such as this, though, is not entirely workable, once Gray writes:

my mother's sweetness of character shifted somehow toward vinegar. She retained her basic Christian 'metaphysics', as a background, but developed what I found a bracing touch of realism in her dealings with others.<sup>249</sup>

<sup>248</sup> Robert Gray, from "The Waters Under the Earth", *The Best Australian Essays 2003*, Peter Craven, ed., Black Inc, Melbourne, 2003, pp.240-241

<sup>249</sup> Gray, "The Waters Under the Earth", p.240

Gray's mother's reported shift of character prefigures his own shift in aesthetic allegiances. If "Robert Gray's" was substituted for "my mother's", and "Buddhist" for "Christian", this brief passage would reliably, if too generally, characterise the move from *Creekwater Journal* and *Grass Script*, through the transitional *The Skylight*, to the notably didactic and increasingly abstract poetics of *Piano* and subsequent collections.

Gray notably and consciously identifies with this "extending care" as the driving force in his poetic. In his essay "Poetry and living: an evaluation of the American poetic tradition"<sup>250</sup> Gray writes:

Martin Heidegger... has written that man's function in the world, if he is to live authentically, should be one of 'Care'; he has said that every person ought to be 'the shepherd of being'.

I think this is the most satisfying definition I have found for the adequate relationship of an artist to his subject-matter and his audience. While it is precise, it is not unnecessarily restrictive; it is only an attitude and not a formula.<sup>251</sup>

Heidegger's "Care" as Gray represents it, and his mother's "care for things" are nearly synonymous. Moreover, he works this care into both ethical and aesthetic considerations.

In an interview with Andrew Sant, Gray contends that

A natural, undogmatic ethical response is very much a part of all great poetry, but at the same time craftsmanship is just as important; they're finally the same thing – a disinterested care. I don't raise one above the other. One has to be balanced, otherwise the result is so inadequate one keeps moving to the opposite extreme, and so on ... I want to reconcile all of that, for myself.<sup>252</sup>

<sup>250</sup> Gray, "Poetry and living", in *The American Model*, Joan Kirkby, ed., pp.117-136

<sup>251</sup> Gray, "Poetry and living", pp. 118

<sup>252</sup> Sant, p.17. These last three sentences are revealing, in that they show Gray seemingly unaware of what appears to be a series of gaps or disjunctions in his work, predicated on his attachment to particular ideas. This attachment is opposed, for example, in the uninvolved sentiment "I don't raise one above the other". This is code for the attitude of detachment, of the making of no distinctions, which Gray himself repeats in his poetry and various interviews. Further, in numerous later poems, Gray's "care" asserts itself in a deeply involved way: it is, by the appearance of *Certain Things* or *Lineations*, far from "disinterested".

He speaks also in his interview with Barbara Williams of “aestheticism taken to the point of being a morality”<sup>253</sup>. In his essay, “Poetry & living” in *The American Model*, Gray also cites Wittgenstein’s assertion that “Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same”<sup>254</sup>. He suggests that

what seems to us moving aesthetically is very often basically an ethical property ... What ethical and aesthetic experience have in common is that both depend upon discrimination, vulnerability, and self-transcendence. So perhaps I should regard myself as a complete aesthete. I am talking about ethics because to me they seem an essential component of aesthetics.<sup>255</sup>

In this article he aligns this ethical/aesthetic link with the poetics of William Carlos Williams. He states that “Williams has always been my master. Every attitude I put forward here today I learned from his work”<sup>256</sup>. So Gray draws his ethical and aesthetic drives together into a specific poetic style.

In splicing these drives together in a Buddhist-inflected context, and by associating his mother in the poems with the Buddha and the calmness of Orpheus, Gray similarly connects Heidegger’s notion of care with Buddhist non-attachment. He places himself in this context, claiming a “disinterested care” for nature. As Gray states, his Buddhist interests are a prominent drive in his poetic, but remain sublimated, in his reckoning, “as an ‘objective correlative’ for the main subject of my writing: the need to remain ‘faithful to the earth’”<sup>257</sup>. “Care”, then, centred largely on the things of the natural world, is Gray’s stated intent, his aesthet(h)ic. Gray aligns himself with care, the natural

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<sup>253</sup> Williams, p.42

<sup>254</sup> Gray, “Poetry and living”, p.121

<sup>255</sup> Gray, “Poetry and living”, p.121

<sup>256</sup> Gray, “Poetry and living”, p.121

<sup>257</sup> Gee, unpaginated.



world<sup>258</sup> and detachment, through the mother in his poems and the various Buddhist figures that feature: the Buddha, Dōgen, Hsuan-chien.

Gray sets this web of associations to do with his mother against another: that represented in his family poems by his father. This dialectic between mother and father is, at base, familial in nature: Gray, in attempting to integrate his Buddhist interests into an Australian context, also attempts a reconciliation of the split he perceives in his family and memories. This split manifests itself throughout Gray's poetry, even in poems not ostensibly "about" his family or his memories. It operates in Gray's attitudes to a detached lyrical presentation of images and his didactic exposition of positivist philosophy. It colours, it seems likely, the indifference<sup>259</sup> in his poetry toward people on the one hand, and, on the other, his apparent non-attachment regarding natural objects. This detachment is *not* non-attachment as exercised in the Buddhist sense, after all. The detachment toward the natural is not projected toward the cultural. If Gray's indifference toward people is the manifestation of aversion it appears to be, his apparent attitude of detachment toward natural things is then revealed as a version of attachment or clinging to the natural world, one largely absent in his poetic dealings with people.

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<sup>258</sup> See Peter Minter's review of *Afterimages*, "When all is said and seen", *Sydney Morning Herald*, Spectrum, June 29-30, 2002, p.11: "When idealizing nature over community, he infers that only privately perceived natural things can be 'what is mystical'". This further exemplifies the split Gray posits between nature, allied with the mother and "Care" on the one hand, and "community" in Minter's terms, which Gray allies with the father, society, and emotional distance.

<sup>259</sup> This is outright aversion at times. There are abundant examples of negative portrayals of people – particularly women – in Gray's poems. "Indifference" as I use it here is not the same as non-attachment, although Gray's use of "detachment" in place of non-attachment is relatively suggestive of indifference. I suspect that his choice of English-language terminology for Buddhist ideas is, in this case, not unrelated to his simultaneous holding and denying Buddhist views, even as he appears to embody or enact them through the imagery in his poetry.

Gray is troubled by his recognition in himself of something of his father. It is this recognition, in part, that sends Gray in search of Buddhist detachment. He notes physical, familial similarities between his face and his father's:

I've found  
 such fine bones  
 in your face –  
 you have them yet.  
 What one might only wish to keep  
 of you, you keep,  
 also.  
 In you, now signifying nothing;  
 although  
 that chemistry was ineffectual,  
 always

(*NSP*, 54)

And:

I told myself, your father  
 is in the rank grass,  
 who gave you body and soul.  
 That is why I've searched  
 anxiously  
 your face  
 propped on the hospital pillows –  
 for some trait

(*NSP*, 54)

This having “searched/ anxiously/ your face” also surfaces in “Dharma Vehicle”, where he is “anxiously peering” (*NSP*, 74). This suggests a mirroring which permits these two poems, also, to recognise each other. The recognition (or suspicion) of some of his father's qualities seems a powerful if understated incentive in Gray's literary practice of Buddhism, in particular that of detachment. What drives Gray to seek out and cultivate detachment is the fear that he might continue his father's “wretchedness”. It is ironic, then, that Gray's initial awareness of Buddhism comes from his father. He tells Andrew Sant that his “interest in Buddhism arose very early, perhaps because of a very beautiful

image of the Buddha my father used to own"<sup>260</sup>. Given the tension in the dialectic Gray sets up between his mother and father, the relatively androgynous Buddha-figure plays an understated but significant role. Gray finds and follows a spiritual tradition that straddles the genders that in Gray's poems are hopelessly split<sup>261</sup>. In his discussion of "Diptych" with Barbara Williams, Gray talks about his parents' qualities in a way that aligns them precisely with their characterisation in his poems. He says:

My mother was very warm... She always acted purely from her emotional nature. I benefitted greatly because of my mother's sensibility, but I could see the inadequacies of being simply emotive in everything.<sup>262</sup>

His father, in contrast,

was a frozen man, deeply neurotic, imposing a highly mannered way of life upon himself, and us. He was tormentingly fastidious, constantly belittling, and I, as the eldest, was his main target, apart from my mother. We kids all turned against him ... and he wanted this, I realize... Yet he was never, in his worst condition, physically violent.<sup>263</sup>

It is as if his father's Buddha figure holds the solution to the problem of his father's distant manner. Although the figure belonged to his father, it is Gray's mother who most closely resembles the *qualities* of the Buddha. It is significant, then, that the Buddha is largely represented as an asexual figure. This allows Gray to associate the Buddha with both parents, despite his clear delineation of a split between them. Similarly, the father, though a drunk, is aligned with reason and knowledge, while the mother is associated with calm, detachment and care (that is, emotion). Coming between and reconciling the extremes of these two figures is the Buddha-figure, a tool Gray uses to reconcile *within himself* the split in the family unit, to heal or recover what has been lost in himself

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<sup>260</sup> Sant, p.17

<sup>261</sup> Williams, p.27

<sup>262</sup> Williams, p.27

<sup>263</sup> Williams, p.27

through that split. Indeed, the various splits and doublings in Gray's poems might be traced, ultimately, to this source.

Unlike the mother in the same poems, Gray's father is an aggressive character, if not an explicitly or physically violent one. There is plentiful evidence of implicit or threatened violence in "Poem to my Father". He is a "neurasthenic devil" (*NSP*, 55). Gray addresses him, recalling "How bad-tempered you looked" (*NSP*, 55), and that "everything you did once/ we thought against us" (*NSP*, 54). Moreover, Gray remembers his father would "walk in the house/ 'looking for trouble'" (*NSP*, 56): it is little wonder then that Gray says "I could outrun you, and I needed to,/ by the time I was eleven" (*NSP*, 55). Gray and his siblings were "small animals/ whom you ignored" (*NSP*, 56). Such inattention

Didn't worry us, for long;  
 ...  
 we were all right  
 so long as you weren't around.

(*NSP*, 56)

"Diptych" retains a vital insistence on the male-female, violence-care poles in Gray's work. It shows a clear split within the poem's family, enacted formally. The poem consists of two discrete sections, enacting the separation of mother and father. Their separation is such that Gray is unable to unite them even in a poem.

Alan Urquhart notes that in "Poem to my Father", "the poet's attempted objectivity in the beginning "Dear Father" is dissipated totally in the emotion generated

by the short, broken lines”<sup>264</sup>. This attempt at a non-attached tone breaks down into an attachment, transforming into the aversion that we see at the poem’s end:

I cannot believe  
     your wretchedness  
         on all the occasions I recall.  
 If I think of you  
     I’m horrified – I become obsessed  
         with you. It is like  
 love.

(NSP, 58)

Urquhart argues that Gray’s obsession and horror are “like/ love”. Urquhart continues, asserting that:

The “objective” descriptions of the father’s “wretchedness” modulate into a frantic obsession which is *likened* to love. It is characteristic of the early Gray poems that love should be a metaphor for the relationship, rather than constitute the relationship itself. This obsession, however, this opportunity for “human warmth”, is not something the poet desires: it is something he desires to escape.<sup>265</sup>

There is an alternative reading along the lines of Buddhist non-attachment: there is no ambition to escape, but a recognition that attachment to desire and aversion is harmful and neurotic. In this reading, Gray might suggest that these feelings share with love the quality of attachment, and attachment’s attendant slide into its binary partner, aversion. Urquhart perhaps over-reads Gray here, a tendency compounded by a patchy understanding of the Buddhist concepts in Gray’s work. While Urquhart perceives that Gray “desires to escape” the “human warmth”, he does not extend this insight to the clear connection Gray makes here and elsewhere between aversion (Gray is “horrified” by his memories of his father) and the attachment which in part constitutes the “love” that Gray’s obsession with the horror at his father’s actions is like. If Gray’s horror and

<sup>264</sup> Urquhart, “Objectivity and other stances”, p.55.

<sup>265</sup> Urquhart, “Objectivity and other stances”, p.55

obsession are both manifestations of attachment, then so too is the love that he clearly states resembles them. If Gray's admitted obsession with his father is "like/ love", then love is also like obsession.

Gray's father is mirrored in the first section of "Diptych" by the bull that strays into the family's garden. We have seen that Gray's attitude to the father and his promise of implicit non-physical violence (in "Poem to my Father") is one of aversion, a manifestation of attachment. The father is concerned with appearances, and with correcting (mis)perceptions<sup>266</sup>:

Whereas, my father only seemed to care that he would never appear a drunkard  
 ...  
 A drunkard he would define as someone who had forgotten the mannerisms  
 of a gentleman.

(*NSP*, 133)

Thus Gray associates his father with the world of culture and society, contrasting him with his mother's alignment with the natural world. His father is concerned with appearance and convention: "Whereas, my father only seemed to care that he would never appear a drunkard/ ... / A drunkard he would define as someone who had forgotten the *mannerisms* of a gentleman" (*NSP*, 133). Against the mother's emotional nature and consistency of care, Gray states that his father "was far more intellectual: well read, cuttingly witty ... a rational person, with a discriminating taste"<sup>267</sup>. In "his callousness to my mother" (*NSP*, 135), Gray indirectly aligns his father with the cultural realm, setting his father against his mother. Despite this, Gray had also "long accepted

<sup>266</sup> Like a good deal of Gray's later poems, in which there is a mannered opposition to ideas, his exposition of his apparent opinions betrays his apparent attachment to ideas (and aversion to others) that is counter to the Buddhist detachment Gray earlier attempts to exemplify.

<sup>267</sup> Williams, p.27

him" (*NSP*, 135). This hints at Gray's movement away from the disinterested care of a detached aesthetic. Where Gray identifies the directness and concreteness of imagistic poetics with the natural world, and also with his mother and her own association with Buddhist detachment and care, Gray's father enjoys none of these associations. He represents the cultural realm of deceptive appearances. Although he is less clearly associated with a poetic or aesthetic scheme than Gray's mother, it still seems apparent that the father, set against the mother in so many spheres, embodies in an approximate way those qualities that act contrary to those of the mother. That is, the cultural over the natural; the indifferent (or worse: his children were "small animals/ whom you ignored", *NSP*, 56) against "care"; the abstract and didactic over the concrete, imagistic lyric.

It is not enough to say that Gray simply sets these two bodies of imagery and association against each other. He does recognise that his family experience pervades the fundamental workings of his poems. Gray sets his speakers in a position straddling the qualities of the mother and father. The speaker in "Boarding House Poems, 8" is "reminded, once again" (*NSP*, 25) of the imbalance of the picture of the Buddha, but he has, nonetheless, repeatedly done nothing about it. This inaction is contrasted by the mother in "Diptych", who, in "extending care", also "saw what needed to be done" (*NSP*, 132). The distinctions Gray makes in his poems between his parents, and other sets of opposites, are grounded in his experience. He states that his

parents, like the panels of a diptych, were forever separated while in close proximity. I was able to see the inadequacies of both their extreme temperaments. Maybe that's the origin of the underlying attitude of my poems, which I've realized is a dialectical one.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Williams, p.27

A spirit of integration or reconciliation is an attendant feature in the interaction between these two sets. Gray himself claims that:

All through my poems there is, subtly, I hope, a consciousness of the interdependence of opposites; and an acceptance or reconciling of these. I will leave it to the critics, however, to discover the extent and significance of this<sup>269</sup>.

Still, it is insufficient to say that Gray hopes to “reconcil[e] ... these” opposites. While he does demonstrate “a consciousness of the interdependence of opposites”, Gray eventually tends to shun one set of these opposites: that with which he associates himself in his early poems. Although the poems begin to avert themselves from association with the qualities of women, they remain aligned with nature. He does drift further from the female model in subsequent volumes, away from a poetic of physical embodiment and detachment he associates with the mother and the Buddha, toward an expository, discursive style that more readily finds itself attached, both to views and things. That is, Gray increasingly acts out the male strategies he seems to oppose in his earlier work via the methods and attitudes of Buddhist non-attachment and calmness.

### **Ordinary things, natural things**

In Gray’s conception, the worlds of nature and of everyday, “ordinary” things are intermingled, in keeping with the Buddhist teaching on interdependence that much of his early work avows. In “Under the Summer Leaves”, from 1988’s *Piano*, Gray writes a renunciation of Japanese culture and a re-forging of allegiances older than those he owes Buddhism:

for all my love of things in their culture,  
and though I’d received there much formularized kindness,  
it is with *Die Natur*

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<sup>269</sup> Williams, p.27



that my loyalties lie

(*NSP*, 200-201).

This sentiment is repeated in very similar terms in an interview a few years after the publication of *Piano*: “while I admire Japanese aesthetics, my basic loyalty is always to the natural world”<sup>270</sup>. He elaborates on his renewed allegiance to the natural world a few years later, inextricably linking the ordinary and the natural as manifestations of the same reality:

My obsession has always been to continue to be moved by the natural world. I was always obsessed, from childhood, with the haecceity, the ‘this-ness’ of things: the peculiar, unspeakable reality that things have.<sup>271</sup>

Gray reiterates this point in his interview with Barbara Williams, when he speaks of “that experience of something surpassing words”<sup>272</sup>. In “At the Inlet”, Gray writes “The true nature of the world is not different to the things we see” (*NSP*, 142). In “A Garden Shed” the speaker recalls, as a child,

looking at, or listening to, those things:  
in the immense presence of that wordless  
questioning

(*NSP*, 164)

This interest in “unspeakable reality” recurs throughout Gray’s work, and surfaces repeatedly in his late poem, “The Drift of Things”. In this polemical poem, he argues that “nothing intrudes between the world and [the body],/ but wordless perception takes care of all” (*A*, 55). Similarly, Gray speaks of perception and its complications as “the burdensome mystery/ ‘of all this unintelligible world’ ” (*A*, 58).

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<sup>270</sup> Williams, p.32

<sup>271</sup> Gee, unpaginated

In a manner that resurfaces in a late poem like “The Drift of Things”, Gray explores this complex inter-relation of things to one another toward the end of “A Garden Shed”. Gray sees things as continually transforming and creating relationships among themselves:

... I first recognized the frankness  
of nature’s appropriations there:

that it’s all effectiveness, inter-response;  
all mutuality and possibilities;  
just things happening among themselves.  
Things creating each other. And we  
are only the expressions of circumstance,

of its tensions. Nothing belongs to any  
separate thing ...

(*NSP*, 165)

Here, rather than embodying Buddhist interdependence through the connotations and implications of imagery, Gray didactically runs through a statement about his belief in the ineffable, interdependent quality of things. “Very Early” closes with a similar appraisal of things’ reality and nature:

The pine trees, at a distance, seem water-stains down a plastery blue.  
If no-one saw this, its existence would go on just as well.  
And what is really here no words can tell.

(*NSP*, 159)

The imagery, while hinting at impermanence (“water-stains”) is qualified and explicated by the ensuing two lines. In “A Testimony” he writes:

There is a substance to things, which is ungraspable, unbounded; divided  
and passed on, like a secret inheritance; always present, in what is  
always passing, but never found in itself – it both is and is not.

Thus matter is profound; is *potentia*. And all that now exists is like the surface of the waters.

Things as they are are what is mystical. Those who search deepest are returned to life

(*NSP*, 220-221)

Gray contends that “Our only paradise is the ordinary; to be fed by what is really there” (*NSP*, 222). In “Plurality”, Gray writes that “There is nowhere valuation. Everything, equally, is desire to live” (*NSP*, 172), which in turn is close to “Philosophy”: “These forms ... more than art/ have made me wish to live” (*GS*, 8). This also resembles Gray’s argument in “Dharma Vehicle” that “The things of the earth/ fill men with life” (*NSP*, 81). These quotes reflect Gray’s admitted “obsession” with natural things and the role of that obsession as a primary impetus behind his work. In his description and assertion of these processes, metaphor is rarely active as elsewhere in his work. The moment Gray begins describing these “ordinary things” themselves, *as* things, simile comes to the fore as Gray’s main meaning-making trope. Gray’s obsession finds its most refined articulation in the second section of “At the Inlet”:

Thus nature maintains itself without my concurrence;  
before it all my subjectivity has no standing and is dissolved. In  
taking it to myself, I find an incomparable satisfaction.

(*NSP*, 140)

The sensual qualities of natural and ordinary things have not only long won Gray’s loyalty, but also drive his poetic process. Gray explains that, generally, his

poetry begins with some sensual image, and that image leads to others. It creates a situation, a context, and I find that as I begin to write those images and describe that setting they embody some idea already important to me, and the two join up; I find that the images become the physical realization of an idea.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Sant, p.17

This does suggest that things are not simply themselves. For Gray, things, and indeed images of things, suggest images of other things. In turn, this weakens Gray's argument that he is respectful and loyal to "the peculiar, unspeakable reality that things have", when through simile he simultaneously expands and displaces (and also, tellingly, *interprets*) this reality. Any given thing in and of itself is insufficient, Gray seems to imply, to evoke their own "unspeakable reality": Gray then gathers other things to his images of objects.

## Conclusion

Barbara Williams's interview with Gray is revealing: Gray discloses that he sees the dialectical pattern across his poetic body as coming out of his family background, the alienation of his mother from his father<sup>274</sup>. That is, another set of poles arises in his poetic consideration of family: attachment to the mother and "care", and aversion to the father, who is aligned with the world of society. Gray strives on one hand to integrate the two sides of this rift, but remains also aware that such a poetic project was a failure to begin with, even if the process itself is illuminating. The execution of his broad poetic project constantly splits and integrates in a process of flux that embodies Buddhist impermanence and conditionality. The resultant unease at *dukkha* this set of processes appears to cause ("Dimly you feel/ out of what endless dissatisfactions/ we have come", *NSP*, 41) finds, in Gray's Buddhist inclinations, its solution in the cultivation of non-attachment. Gray's work, then, does not actually move to dissolve the split, as it initially appears to do, but rather discloses and embodies the workings of that split.

The imbalance comes in part from the intensity of his family background seen in the poems, most particularly “Diptych” and “Poem to my Father”. The intensity of his intention and determination leads to the frequent exacerbation of difference. Conversely, he needs to display this difference in order to demonstrate its integration into his aesthetic: he operates in both ways simultaneously. The question remains as to how Gray can feasibly hope to integrate, or accept or reconcile these apparently disparate, opposing things, when they were never *not* integrated. Gray shows something of the workings and properties of the things he writes about, but it is not Gray that facilitates the “acceptance or reconciling of these” things. His awareness and enactment of non-attachment is itself sufficient to bring these elements into the poems. Quite crucially, Gray says in his interview with Barbara Williams: “All through my poems there is, subtly, I hope, a consciousness of the interdependence of opposites; and an acceptance and reconciliation of these”<sup>275</sup>. Gray’s poetic and perceptual ability enables him to embody these things in his work, but the movement between “interdependen[t]... opposites” and simultaneous integration and splitting, is, in the Buddhist context that his detachment and aversion arise from, *always already* present in the first instance. The tension between attachment and its twin, aversion, and non-attachment, is a vital force in Gray’s work, and comes, in time, to test his poetic commitment to Buddhism.

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<sup>274</sup> Williams, pp.27-28

## Chapter six

### After imagism: revisionism, ideology, and Gray's drift from things

The world is the mutual effacement of every separate point of view.

Robert Gray, "The Drift of Things", *Afterimages*, p.57

#### Introduction

When Robert Gray evaluates the trajectory of Gary Snyder's work in "Poetry and living", it is as if it is a moment of clairvoyance into the near future of his own work.

Gray places Snyder in the context of Imagists and Objectivists like William Carlos Williams and Charles Reznikoff, suggesting that

there are living poets who have this same general approach: I think of Gary Snyder, at least in his earlier work (although one often wishes he would come out from behind that hairy chest); of the period in his work that finishes with *Regarding Wave*, after which his moralistic interests, vital though they are, overwhelm for the most part the sensuality and care put into his writing.<sup>276</sup>

It is tempting to characterise Gray's work from *The Skylight* on in similar terms. Gray and Snyder both drift away from vital aspects of the landmark poetics of their earlier work.

The "sensuality and care" that Gray admires in Snyder's work, and which is a central force in his own poetry, remains present throughout Gray's books. By the time of *Certain Things*, though, Gray's own "moralistic interests" begin to dominate his poetic of care. Gray invests a great deal of significance in the texts of several of his overtly Buddhist

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<sup>275</sup> Williams, p.27

<sup>276</sup> Gray, "Poetry and living", p.122

poems, continually revising them. He revises them in a manner that provides an insight into his changing perspectives on Buddhist thought and practice. This indicates a less than cohesive integration into his aesthetic of the Buddhist non-attachment that he argues for so convincingly in “Dharma Vehicle”.

Gray claims in interviews that, for him, Buddhism is simply in agreement with his other long-term interests: he speaks of the relation of his poetic approach to his “materialist philosophy”<sup>277</sup>, and to “positivism, which is what I *do* believe”<sup>278</sup>. Gray sees the Buddhist ideas he explores in his poetry as psychological tools<sup>279</sup> rather than body of thought in its own right. A change, perhaps *the* key change, in Gray’s poetic stance can be tracked to “Under the Summer Leaves”, which plots his dissatisfaction with Japanese culture and the Zen tradition from which much of his aesthetic is derived. Curiously, this poem, which closes *Piano*, is included in his selected editions, including 1998’s *New Selected Poems*, but has been deleted from his British selection, *Grass Script: Selected Earlier Poems*. In moving in the direction of more traditional English poetic styles in *Piano* and subsequent collections, Gray’s drift appears as a reorientation towards a centre held prior to his Buddhist interests, although this direction in his poetry is still informed somewhat by Buddhist insights.

There is a revisionist spirit behind Gray’s alterations to some of his work . This spirit spills some light on the most notable split in Gray’s Buddhist-inflected early poetry,

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<sup>277</sup> Gee, unpaginated

<sup>278</sup> Sant, p.17

<sup>279</sup> Ramona Koval, “Interview with Robert Gray”, *Australian Book Review*, February/March 1997, 188, p.43. Gray says that he “was interested in it as a practical psychological discipline and as a system of thought that is totally this-worldly”.

that between his didactic inclination on one hand and on the other, his ability to embody or enact elements of non-attachment through the image. There is a revision not only of numerous poems, but also of his entire poetic schema. The tendency across his career is a movement from the specific, physical and concrete detail, lyrical in tone; toward a favouring of the polemic, discursive, argumentative, a position of privilege granted to the abstract over the concrete. Gray appears to award, in later collections, primacy to these didactic and discursive tendencies. Rather than drifting away from Buddhism *per se*, Gray rather drifts from representing and enacting and embodying it on its own, non-attached terms through the image. Instead, he tends now to direct his vision of Buddhism and related ideas that underpin his understanding of Buddhism, through a didactic, sometimes dogmatic, mode. Just as Gray writes overtly of his disillusion with Japanese aesthetics, the clear Sino-Japanese aesthetic influence in his work also begins to noticeably abate as a central focus. Gray currently favours the abstract and didactic over the image, without ever actually disowning the image, or “ordinary things”. In his most recent collection to date, *Afterimages*, the sharp Imagist-based, aesthetically-driven care for things, as opposed to the poet’s or speaker’s expressed ideas about them, is a less than dominant force in the poetry. Without dismissing his Buddhist and Imagist interests, Gray nonetheless sublimates them to a significant degree into a more discursive, sometimes didactic style that retains a measure of Buddhist thinking alongside materialism, positivism and philosophers like Berkeley and Hume<sup>280</sup>. Simply put, the Robert Gray of *Piano*, *Certain Things*, *Lineations* and *Afterimages* seems to give greater preference to talking about things rather than showing them.

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<sup>280</sup> Gee, unpaginated



### **“To Albert Marquet”: seeing things in a new light**

Gray’s drift from non-attachment toward aversion and attachment is illustrated by his tendency to revision of his work. “To Albert Marquet”, dedicated to the Fauvist painter, is a prime example of the effect of Gray’s revision of his corpus, and his Buddhism. “To Albert Marquet” was included in Gray’s first, short collection, *Introspect, Retrospect*<sup>281</sup>. It is absent from most of Gray’s selected editions, appearing belatedly in the 1995 edition, despite its exclusion from the previous year’s final Angus & Robertson edition. In the author’s note for the 1985 *Selected Poems*, Gray addresses this issue of deletion and inclusion in selected editions of his poems. He writes: “this book contains all my work that I find worth preserving, to this date ... Other poems ... received my attention, but resisted it, and I trust will now be left in oblivion”<sup>282</sup>. However he also notes that several poems included in this edition “were available at the time of compiling the books in which they are now situated, but were left out through oversight or misjudgement”<sup>283</sup>. “To Albert Marquet” is not one of those poems that Gray “find[s] worth preserving, to this date”. This does suggest an ongoing reconsideration of his aesthetic and the relation of that aesthetic approach to the Buddhist elements in his work.

The poem is interesting for its explication of the aesthetic response to “calmness”, already aligned with both Buddhist non-attachment and the mother figure in Gray’s poems. The figure of Marquet in some ways parallels that of the mother and her calmness in “Diptych”. Gray’s speaker addresses Marquet:

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<sup>281</sup> Robert Gray, *Introspect, Retrospect*, Lyre-Bird Writers, Sydney, 1970

<sup>282</sup> Gray, *Selected Poems 1963-1983*, no page given

Except for you, I'd never have known  
 there was such calmness, nor where it could be found  
 in ordinary things: in the street's width,  
 on the face of a building,  
 on the courtyard or the field

(NSP, 7)

This brings us to Gray's twin concerns of "calmness" or detachment, and its associate, the "ordinary things" of this poem and "To the Master, Dōgen Zenji". These concerns combine to transform Gray's apparent listing of random things into a recounting of significant things – as all things are in Gray's early aesthetic and ethical realm. Gray's purpose in compiling these lists, as in "To Albert Marquet", is to bring to those things a calm awareness like that of the Buddha, Marquet, or Gray's mother. While this is clearly Gray's intention, the poems themselves do not invariably imbue things with this non-attached care. Gray seems to rely heavily on linking these elements of care, non-attachment, and such-ness across the poems. In this Gray is insufficiently consistent in embodying those interests and intentions, rather than simply expressing them in a didactic or expository manner.

This increasing tendency to the expository rather than embodiment in many of Gray's poems opens up a gap between his stated intent and the execution of these intentions. Gray's admiration of Marquet exposes his admiration of attachment, which Gray seems to suggest is the source of Marquet's qualities as painter:

... to find somewhere your subject  
 is to feel again, on this,  
 how you would bring us to the border  
 of a shape, to its fullness,  
 in the precise place  
 where the mind has quietened, and not yet scuttled on;  
 to feel some of the gentleness

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<sup>283</sup> Gray, *Selected Poems 1963-1983*, no page given

with which you'd grasp it.

(*NSP*, 8)

This shows an approach quite different to that which Gray himself advocates and subtly embodies; that of the detached movement from one image or thing to another. This is both shown and suggested more discursively in a similarly early poem like "Journey: North Coast", where the

train's shadow, like a bird's,  
flees on the blue and silver paddocks,  
over fences that look split from stone,  
and banks of fern,  
a red clay bank

(*NSP*, 2)

The image of the train's shadow, and its comparison to the bird's shadow, signal the vehicle of detachment, while the subsequent flashing-by of images is its embodiment. This suggests Gray's train poems are vital examples of his embodiment of non-attachment. Gray makes clear his admiration for Marquet's grasping at things, signifying his own drift from a detached aesthetic and ethic. This poem's inclusion in later editions of Gray's selected work is a retrospective attempt to validate his newer stance. In the original version of this poem, though, Gray speaks of feeling "some of the gentleness that you'd *have given*" (*IR*, 15; *NASP*, 7) the painter's subject. This speaks of a shift from advocating a relative detachment to figuring relative attachment during the brief period between the 1994 and 1995 selected editions<sup>284</sup>: Gray swings from admiration for giving to justification of grasping. It is not possible to read this use of "grasp" without associating it with attitudes toward craving and grasping in Gray's Buddhist-oriented poems. What Gray appears to advocate here is an aesthetic located in a largely metaphorical "place/ where the mind has quietened, and not yet scuttled on", which

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<sup>284</sup> The final Angus and Robertson *Selected Poems* was published in 1994, and the Heinemann *New and Selected Poems* in 1995.

Marquet's mind or aesthetic has "grasp[ed]". This shows up a telling disjunction between Gray's espousal of non-attachment as a response to the experience of life as dissatisfactory, and the one he promotes here, based in some significant degree on attachment. Even if that attachment is to "gentleness", it remains a craving for an impermanent state. With regard to this transience, Gray comes close to suggesting that stasis can be achieved, and has been, in Marquet's art:

Unaided, I'd never have seen  
 the order which one needs to find so much  
 lies openly here, all the time –  
 and yet your art puts everything in place  
 so easily and so freely.

(*NSP*, 7)

Gray does seem to lean, here, at least, toward detachment, just the same. In his summation of Marquet's aesthetic, it is "where the mind has quietened" that a thing's "shape, ... its fullness" is to be found. It seems equally likely that Gray is giving lip service to non-attachment, without acting out his apparent concern. The quietened mind, while not having "yet scuttled on" as with Gray's own flashing from image to image in "Journey: North Coast", nonetheless possessing some elements of Buddhist non-attachment, not least in the attention, to the equanimity and calm suggested by the "gentleness" Gray speaks of. This disjunction between a stated belief and the ideas Gray constructs at the level of the image further demonstrates the split in Gray's sensibility that continues to fracture and drift throughout his career.

### **Gray's revisionism: poetics and Buddhism**

Barry Spurr asks Gray: "Have you ever felt the desire to rewrite or revise any of your published poems?" Gray's reply is:

Yes. I'm interested in the tone, the consistency of it, and in achieving this across my poetry. This perhaps leads to a narrowness in my work as I strive for a contemplative, susceptible, objective tone. But this tone creates the persona of my work. I have yet to find a convincing voice for the satirical and scathing aspects of my personality<sup>285</sup>.

Gray's revisionist stance permits the removal and addition of some poems from selected editions, such as the late re-appearance of "To Albert Marquet". A more critical aspect of this revisionism is Gray's shifting attitude toward Buddhism. Gray begins to privilege Western modes of thought and writing over the Eastern. While Gray claims that "The Buddhist ideas in my work, implicit or specifically stated, are a really major impetus"<sup>286</sup>, he nonetheless later de-legitimises Buddhism and favours Western scientific empiricism. He states, a little later:

But the point I want to make about Buddhism is that I certainly *don't* consider myself a Buddhist... My interpretation of Buddhism is a completely demythologized one, that I've arrived at after a lot of study, and I believe the essential idea, or couple of ideas, in Buddhism are facts of psychology and physics, independent of East or West ...

... I see Buddhism as containing a form of natural mysticism, or self-transcendence, and an ethical system, that is in complete harmony with scientific naturalism, with positivism, which is what I *do* believe.<sup>287</sup>

In his later interview with Barbara Williams, Gray sees Buddhism simply "as an addition to a philosophy like Anderson's – a rational, naturalistic, critical philosophy"<sup>288</sup>. With Koval he suggests that his interest in Buddhism is largely in the past: "I *was* interested in Buddhism because, basically, it's atheistic, it doesn't require faith... I *was* interested in it as a practical psychological discipline and as a system of thought that is totally this-worldly" [my emphases]<sup>289</sup>. At the time of his interview with Sophie Gee, Gray's interest in Buddhism appears reinvigorated. He does not qualify his Buddhist interests with

<sup>285</sup> Barry Spurr, *The Poetry of Robert Gray*, Pascal Press, Sydney, 1999, pp.16-17

<sup>286</sup> Sant, p.17

<sup>287</sup> Sant, p.17

<sup>288</sup> Williams, p.32

Western philosophical parameters, although he asserts “I can find my Zen in David Hume now”<sup>290</sup>. Gray’s alignment with or sense of loyalty toward Buddhism and Buddhist ideas appears to oscillate between enthusiasm and indifference. This slippage informs the tone and style in Gray’s later collections of poetry, particularly those key poems in books like *Certain Things* and *Lineations*, which are variously vitriolic, dogmatic and discursive. The intersection of ethics, aesthetics and Buddhist detachment that is such a powerful presence in Gray’s early work is muddled over with a variety of contesting routes, each competing for primacy in Gray’s work. The ascendant dominance of dualistic views encourages and fuels the vehemence of much of the tone, style, and the content of Gray’s later poems.

Coupled with Gray’s comments about a move away from Buddhism is his frequent revision of poems along similar lines. Alterations he has made to “To the Master, Dogen Zenji” and “Dharma Vehicle” do not provide material evidence of Gray’s move away from Buddhism *per se*. It does suggest, though, that Gray’s revised versions of these and other poems do betray an attachment to a specific readings of these poems, which evidently vary from one edition of his *Selected Poems* to another. It is difficult to ascertain whether Gray, over time, realises more accurately what these poems are “about”, and hence revises them from this perspective, or whether his revisions actually drive the realignments of meaning. Either way, this illuminates the workings of Gray’s attachment, as opposed to his cultivation of non-attachment that marks his treatment of things in *Creekwater Journal* and *Grass Script* especially.

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<sup>289</sup> Koval, p.43

If this process of ongoing revision does not make Gray's Buddhism into something other, as in Harold Stewart's case, it at least inserts some distance between Gray's current position and that of his earlier Buddhist-inflected work. In the *Creekwater Journal* version of "To the Master, Dogen Zenji", Dōgen speaks through Gray to state the identity of nirvāna and samsara, to enunciate the profundity of "the ordinary things" that Gray is preoccupied with:

- "It is this world of the *dharmas*  
(the atoms)  
which is the Diamond."

(*CJ*, 60)

Nine years later, with the publication of Gray's first edition of *Selected Poems 1963-1983*, he has subtly altered this passage:

- "It is this world of the dharmas  
(the momentary particles)  
which is the Diamond."

(*SP*, 30)

In substituting a more accurate term, "momentary particles", for "atoms", Gray perhaps provides more information about the nature of existence as Buddhism envisages it, but in doing so he rearranges the rhythm. The result of this is to place more emphasis on his re-definition of "atoms" than on Dōgen's original message, that "this world ... is the Diamond". In three later editions, Gray has opted to retain the wording, but to once again alter the passage's rhythms and emphases:

"It is this world  
of the *dharmas* (the momentary particles)  
that is the Diamond."

(*NASP*, 33; *NSP*, 31, *GS:SEP*, 21)

In this version the stanza's central line retains the previous version's distraction and expands it. It can be argued that Gray has now isolated the relative distraction to one line, but the weight of this line drags the rest of the stanza down. This would not necessarily be of great significance were it not the last stanza of the poem's first, orientating, stanza. As it is, the attention of a reader aware of these revisions is guided by both Gray's concern not to be misunderstood, and the effect his concern has on rhythm, syntax and, most significantly, the cultivation of Buddhist non-attachment the poem is ostensibly concerned with.

Perhaps the most illuminating revision to "To the Master, Dogen Zenji" Gray has undertaken is toward the very end of the poem, where Dōgen says

It is just sitting in meditation;

an awareness, with no  
clinging to,  
no working on, the mind.

Such *zazen* began a long time  
before Buddha,  
and it will continue forever.

(*CJ*, 63)

When the poem appears in Gray's first selected edition, he inserts an extra line into the second stanza here:

It is just sitting in meditation;  
an awareness, with no

clinging to,  
no working on, the mind.

It is a floating. Ever-moving. "Marvellous emptiness."



“Such *zazen* began a long time  
before Buddha,  
and will continue forever.”

(*SP*, 32)

Although the new long line alters the poem’s stanzaic structure, its discursive concern is embodied in its rhythm: the line is indeed “floating” out toward its own “emptiness”.

The most recent version of this passage is greatly altered by the addition of several new lines, creating a new stanza:

The world’s an incessant transformation, and to meditate  
is awareness, with no

clinging to,  
no working on, the mind.  
It is a floating; ever-moving; ‘marvellous emptiness’.

Only absorption in such a practice will release us  
from the accidents, and appetites,  
of life.

(*NASP*, 33; *NSP*, 33)

As Gray’s work displays more and more aversion and attachment to specific views, ironically this new stanza advocates non-attachment. It also becomes much clearer that “absorption in such a practice” is necessary to remedy one’s aversion and attachment to things in a world that is “an incessant transformation”. To cling to one’s attachments and aversions in such a world is to feed one’s “appetites” rather than to obtain release from them. While Gray alters this poem to seemingly re-emphasise his ethic of non-attachment, it is phrased in an almost admonitory fashion, as if a proscription. A doubled move such as this places this recent version of “To the Master, Dogen Zenji” at the centre of the ongoing tension in Gray’s work between a non-attached position and a tendency to make didactic, dogmatic statements about his political or aesthetic stances.

In straddling this divide, Gray sees of late the need to narrow the gulf. Instead, though, this particular revision, in fulfilling both criteria, fails to fully satisfy either standpoint. This is the source of the curious energy in Gray's later work. It is torn still between the ordinary things, and a preoccupation with making his intentions very clear and unambiguous, a preoccupation ingrained even in his dogmatic adherence to simile. While in some important senses Gray's drift from a primarily Buddhist-influenced aesthetic is, in his later books, considerable, it is neither part of a deliberate programme to re-order his sensibility, nor a process that is ever finally completed.

### **“No clinging”?: didacticism from *Creekwater Journal* to *The Skylight***

Although the lyrical, Imagist mode dominates *Creekwater Journal* and *Grass Script*, and to a lesser extent, *The Skylight*, there are instances just the same where Gray opts for a more discursive, conversational, and at times didactic, voice. These usually take shape as discursive passages within otherwise lyrical poems. In a poem like “Dharma Vehicle”, this latter mode is more recurrent in nature than pervasive. It sits within a framework incorporating both the lyrical and the discursive or abstract, achieving a balance of tones and styles. This allows the poem to integrate, on a formal level, both the practical and theoretical aspects of the Buddhist tradition.

In “To the Master, Dogen Zenji”, the discursive mode is restrained, even while it drives the poem's narrative, but is otherwise almost entirely absent from that book. In

“To the Master, Dōgen Zenji” there is a significant passage that is greatly altered in the 1995 edition of *New and Selected Poems*<sup>291</sup> onward:

It is just sitting in meditation;

an awareness with no  
clinging to,  
no working on, the mind.

Such zazen began a long time  
before Buddha,  
and it will continue forever.

– And upon this leaf one shall cross over  
the stormy sea,  
among the dragon-like waves.

(*CJ*, 63)

In Gray’s most recent intended version, the poem ends:

The world’s an incessant transformation, and to meditate  
is awareness, with no

clinging to,  
no working on, the mind.  
It is a floating; ever-moving; ‘marvellous’ emptiness.

Only absorption in such a practice will release us  
from the accidents, and appetites,  
of life.

And upon this leaf one shall cross over  
the stormy sea,  
among the dragon-like waves.

(*NSP*, 33)<sup>292</sup>

<sup>291</sup> Robert Gray, *New and Selected Poems*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1995

<sup>292</sup> Gray, *New Selected Poems*, p.33. This image of “the dragon-like waves” has an interesting counterpart in Dogen’s “Recommending Zazen to All People”. He says of “the practice-realization of complete enlightenment” (p.33) (not discriminating, notably, between practice and realisation) that “Once you experience it, you are like a dragon swimming in the water” (p.33). This seems to suggest that Gray also is creating an allusion to a non-discriminating (and therefore detached, in the Buddhist sense of detachment) view of practice and realisation. In the allusion his image makes to Dogen’s notion of a nondual “practice-realization”, Gray is also, implicitly, embodying that same nondual non-discriminating detachment.

There is a change in emphasis, from the process of “sitting in meditation”, to a more abstract, discursive contemplation. Gray comments in the author’s note in his 1985

*Selected Poems* that his

revisions have been restrained to an occasional word substituted or excised, and a few reworked lines or short passages, and have been made only in the interests of clarity or precision, as I’ve discovered what I was trying to say.<sup>293</sup>

A more specific rationale for these revisions is given in Gray’s biographical note in *The Younger Australian Poets*, co-edited with Gray by Geoffrey Lehmann. This note explains that “Such revision is sometimes undertaken to resolve the convoluted and expressionist syntax of his earlier poems”<sup>294</sup>. What is interesting about these changes is not simply Gray’s motivation toward them, but how this perceived “clarity or precision” changes the working of the poems, and how it might suggest Gray’s own detachment toward his original intention in those poems.

Two different versions of “Within the Traveller’s Eye” act out the tense drama present in Gray’s sensibility. In its original publication<sup>295</sup>, the poem closed with these lines:

... it feels that if you continue to watch  
you will see this shadow indicate, like a finger,  
a grave, lying open,  
somewhere there.

But you do not try to turn your face away.

(CJ, 33)

In subsequent editions of Gray’s *Selected Poems*, the poem finishes differently:

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<sup>293</sup> Gray, *Selected Poems 1963-1983*, no page given

<sup>294</sup> Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehman, eds., *The Younger Australian Poets*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1983, p.117

And it feels  
 this shadow is going to indicate, as though it were a finger,  
 a grave, lying open  
 somewhere here.

And you have to try to turn your face away.

(*SP 1963-1983*, 16; *NSP*, 20)

The original version is altered from the first edition of Gray's *Selected Poems* onward. The changes to the poem contest the terrain between two interdependent poles: on one hand Gray's non-attached attitude to nature, and, on the other, his relative aversion to the social realm. The refusal and reversal of the poem's original final line in all subsequent versions tells of a turning away from a cultivation of detachment in Gray's poems. In the first version, the speaker, perceiving potential unpleasantness, nonetheless faces it in a detached manner. In the revised version his counterpart consciously averts his gaze from the sight of the shadow: "You *have* to try to turn your face away" [my emphasis]. This latter aversion, moreover, has become a matter of urgency.

*The Skylight*, Gray's third book, marks the point at which a divergence from the tone, approach and temperament of his early work begins. Published in 1983, it coincides roughly with the publication of *The Younger Australian Poets*. *The Skylight*, as a collection, is less grounded in a concrete, Imagist technique or Buddhist-influenced aesthetic than Gray's previous two books, but nor does much of its content bear the outright didactic, abstract qualities of Gray's later collections. A poem such as "At the Inlet" is certainly emblematic, though, of a major shift in Gray's subsequent writing. This poem contains passages that are as discursive as some parts of the earlier "Dharma Vehicle", but they are not so rooted in Buddhist ideas, and less grounded in Gray's once-pervasive

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<sup>295</sup> The poem's initial appearance is in Gray's second book, *Creekwater Journal*. It also appears, in the same

awareness of the physical and concrete qualities of things. In "At the Inlet", a key poem in *The Skylight*, Angus Nicholls sees "Gray ... at his didactic worst; there is a decided lack of subtlety in such statements, a poetic dogmatism that is perhaps indicative of something contradictory operating deeper in his sensibility"<sup>296</sup>. Similarly, John Stephens notes a shift in the tone and tenor of Gray's poetic output by the time of *The Skylight*. He mentions "the large-scale drawing of analogies between various remembered moments of a life which result in the more discursive poems published in *The Skylight*"<sup>297</sup>. This broadening of scale detracts from Gray's acknowledged skill with the closely attended, even meditative observation of the concrete image, and thus asks for a new set of justifications.

The didactic tone that increasingly works its way into Gray's poetry is accompanied by an abstract poetics that attends less to physical, concrete detail, and more to ideas that are held strongly, even dogmatically at times. This tendency announces itself most stridently in "Aphorisms: On Politics" (*TS*, 26-27) and "At the Inlet" (*NSP*, 140-142). These poems, the former especially, are as far from Gray's lyrical early style as anything in his oeuvre. "Aphorisms: On Politics" is comprised of assertions like these:

If what is produced were agreed upon  
with consumer councils,  
then each enterprise might reach  
its social goals  
democratically, through self-discipline.

(*TS*, 27)

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form, in *Poetry Australia*, 53, November 1974 (pp. 36-37).

<sup>296</sup> Nicholls, p.106

<sup>297</sup> Stephens, p.459

The idea most important to socialism  
 has been forgotten  
 in the title of an essay  
 Shelley didn't live to write:  
 "A Proposal for Government  
 by Means of a System of Juries."

(*TS*, 26)

The prose poetry of "At the Inlet" is similarly discursive and didactic. Although some of the natural and sexual imagery retains some hint of lyricism, Gray does not maintain this tone in his more direct statements in the poem:

Thus nature maintains itself without my concurrence;  
 before it all my subjectivity has no standing and is dissolved. In  
 taking it to myself, I find an incomparable satisfaction.

(*NSP*, 140)

The didactic measures of this passage continue, and are perhaps intensified when Gray makes one of his numerous pronouncements on the intersection of aesthetics and ethics:

While the surrealists, who sought the Marvellous, that is  
 hidden somewhere within us, have produced only the  
 grotesque. How detestable, their facile sacrifice of the beauty  
 which things have –

(*NSP*, 141)

There appears a direct relationship between the evident strength of Gray's convictions and the heaviness of Gray's rhythms in these prose poems. The "detestable" here seems to correspond to the relative ineloquence surrounding it. Gray writes that "Nature, in Chinese religion, is the creator of itself. It is not necessarily benign or hostile to man, who is just a part, and must find its way within its being. The name of that teaching is sanity"<sup>298</sup> (*NSP*, 141). These poems of Gray's that deal didactically with such abstractions

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<sup>298</sup> In his 2001 UK selection, *Grass Script: Selected Earlier Poems*, Gray substitutes "Chinese thought" for "Chinese religion" (101). This UK selected edition provides a more recent intended version than that in the 1998 edition of *New Selected Poems*. Every other edition has "religion". Gray's revisionist approach to his history of involvement with and interest in Buddhism continues apace: here he dissociates the practical

often concern themselves with aesthetics. Again, in "At the Inlet", Gray contends that "With the natural object, an artist has all he needs to express himself" (NSP, 142). In a sharp irony, Gray's later work less frequently bears out such a dictum. Many of Gray's didactic poems are concerned with drawing up the parameters of an acceptable aesthetic or artistic approach. Gray does not necessarily apply such ideas to his own work, but rather makes these pronouncements in a proscriptive fashion.

The discursive elements in Gray's first two books are almost exclusively only parts of poems, rather than entire poems as in *The Skylight* and subsequent collections. This change in direction is formal and technical as well as attitudinal or ideological. These newer discursive, didactic poems resort to fewer conventional poetic strategies, setting them apart again from Gray's early work. The flatness of tone is a function of the move to deal more directly and plainly with abstract subject matter. These poems possess little if any of the sharpness associated with Gray's earlier Imagist-styled work. This is in part because these new topics own none of the physicality that Gray excels in. That this is so is seen in his comment that his recurrent obsession is with the things of nature and sensuous engagement with them<sup>299</sup>. In part this lack of focus and precision related to the fact that Gray's insights into the political and ideological matters with which he is increasingly concerned lack originality, and are not argued as he does so effectively in delineating the properties of the natural world.

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aspect of religion from the intellectual. Thus thought in this context becomes something different from the religious context within which it arises.

<sup>299</sup> Gee, unpaginated



In "Bondi", though, Gray mixes his imagistic and didactic modes successfully, permitting phrases and images to reinforce each other, rather than the more typical results of either cancelling each other out, or of favouring one mode over the other. Gray places Bondi the suburb in a set of cultural, economic and visual contexts:

... a white yacht will appear in the ultramarine passage, an icon  
of perfect adaptation, and the people along the sand,  
as though in a grandstand, or those wading out  
through the low waves towards it, seem all of them everywhere over this  
like walking moths, that fan its easy passage with their wings.

...

This is the only sort of vision we shall have, and it costs money,  
and therefore Bondi is lying crammed together, obtuse, with barely  
a tree, behind us –

Every cent is firstly for the secure mechanisms of comfort.  
It is not pleasure, to be exact, but its appropriation. And not  
mindlessness, but the mind.

For at the beach, so much that is nature can be seen to have been called  
into the one procession of decay ...

... So many of these people  
look as though used like Bondi grit ...

(*NSP*, 118)

Even the more imagistic passages in "Bondi", though, move less lyrically than similar passages in Gray's first two books. If anything, "Bondi" resembles what is almost the major genre in Gray's work, those poems dealing with personal memory. These poems, "Memories of the Coast", "Diptych", "The Home Run", "North Coast Town" among them, are neither predominantly lyrical and imagistic in nature or overly didactic and discursive. They incorporate features of both, showing to great effect Gray's capacity to step back from aversion and attachment, as much as from non-attachment, or detachment as he puts it.

“Karl Marx”, though, is didactic to its core. Where it differs from the outright statements of “Aphorisms: On Politics” is in Gray’s attention to some elements of poetic style and phrasing:

Karl Marx was playing a parlour game  
with his daughters. To their question  
What is the quality one should most abhor?  
he wrote. Servility.

This was found – a scrap of paper  
amongst the family albums and letters;  
it is the most essential of all  
the Complete Works.

(NSP, 130)

In some ways this is allied to the direct political opinions offered in “Aphorisms”. The concreteness of “a scrap of paper” also ties the poem to the greater part of Gray’s work, based as it is in working in a variety of ways with the concrete image. Gray sets up a situation which, although it provides little more than a vehicle for a view on Marx, still gives a context to Gray’s statement that “Aphorisms” plainly does not.

The shifting of modes in *The Skylight* is consolidated in *Piano*. In “A Garden Shed” the discursive elements remain abstracted, but are closer in tone to the didactic passages in say, “Dharma Vehicle”, rather than those making up “Aphorisms: On Politics”. Most of this poem is unremarkable as a barometer of shifts in Gray’s aesthetic stance until toward its close:

... I first recognized the frankness  
of nature’s appropriations there:

that it’s all effectiveness, inter-response;  
all mutuality and possibilities;  
just things happening among themselves.  
Things creating each other. And we

are only the expressions of circumstance,  
 of its tensions. Nothing belongs to any  
 separate thing. It was where I began  
 to understand: the less we think we are  
 the more we bear; and someone who sees  
 he is nothing, lightly will bear it all.

(*NSP*, 165)

Other critics have noted the way in which the last few lines seem to spring from Gray's mind rather than the context and situation of the poem itself. Alan Urquhart argues that

there seems little intrinsic connection between the image of the shed itself and the lesson of the final lines. One feels that just about any experience could be made to produce the same result. Perhaps it is the lesson that has become too trite and a little too much like the reiteration of dogma instead of a genuine discovery<sup>300</sup>

The unsatisfactoriness that Urquhart registers is doubled, given that the situation in the poem seems to suggest an experience which helped seal Gray's predisposition to Buddhist non-attachment. That it fails to act out this context more fully seems a deliberate ploy by Gray to keep his readership at a distance from this aspect of his personal narrative. The tone and drive again recalls the more discursive parts of "Dharma Vehicle" and "Plurality": "There is nowhere valuation. Everything, equally, is desire to live./ It is a oneness, always plural" (*NSP*, 172). This is consistent with the later assertion in "Illusions", where Gray weighs against the belief "That things are one, or that things are many" (*NSP*, 247).

Despite the turn to more discursive and didactic modes seen in *The Skylight*, it is the final poem in *Piano*, "Under the Summer Leaves", that clearly denotes not only this shift in tone and mode, but also Gray's turning away from Buddhism as received from

Japanese culture. Prior to *Piano*, this was, as Gray has stated, “a really major impetus”<sup>301</sup> in his work. Set partly in Japan, “Under the Summer Leaves” speaks of Gray’s dissatisfaction with Buddhism as he found it in the country from which Zen originated:

The Bomb’s of more influence in Japan than the Buddha;  
 they have suffered power and will now assert it.  
 (Though, the major tradition has long been the Confucianist,  
 with its utterly entangling obligations,  
 its narrowness of sympathy, its servilities.)  
 Buddhism is dead, like an empty crab shell –  
 Except, there is something of the name, which is an inversion,  
 Invented by a kind of Norman Vincent Peale.

(NSP, 199)

Recalling Gray’s contention that the aesthetic is inseparable from the ethical<sup>302</sup>, we can assume that for Gray this formal shift accompanies and informs a similar shift in ethical outlook. A drift from Gray’s erstwhile imagist-based technique calls into question the relation of Buddhism to the poetry: a turning from Buddhism, or an increasingly skeptical attitude toward it, will similarly circumvent a poetic approach in part predicated upon the ethical stance associated with Buddhism. Although Gray claims that his imagist technique is allied to his materialist convictions, such a technique lends itself very readily to a powerful evocation and enactment of a Buddhist-inflected sensibility as well. This is clearly evident in the lyrical passages in “Dharma Vehicle”. A drift away from such a sensibility, coupled with comments indicating a lessening interest in Buddhism, demands to be seen as evidence of a prominent Buddhist underpinning of this sensibility. This drift away from a predominantly lyrical and imagistic sensibility does not accompany a similar set of statements from Gray renouncing his materialist or positivist beliefs. The Imagism and Buddhism present in Gray’s work would seem to sustain each other to a considerable extent. A claim like “Buddhism is dead, like an empty crab shell” finds

<sup>300</sup> Alan Urquhart, review of *Piano*, *Westerly*, 2, 1989, p.106

<sup>301</sup> Sant, p.17

expression in a poetic form and tone that indicates that Gray's former Imagist incarnation has been similarly discarded. This is indicated again in "Under the Summer Leaves", where Gray describes Tokyo as "a city where only warehouses face the water" (*NSP*, 20):

When I saw this I knew  
that for all my love of things in their culture,  
and though I'd received there much formularized kindness,  
it is with *Die Natur*  
that my loyalties lie.

(*NSP*, 200-201)

This clarifies Gray's position. It is an explicit statement of loyalty and alignment to both nature and a materialist philosophical line, which also echoes similar sentiments expressed in interviews with Gray by Williams, Sant, Gee and Koval<sup>303</sup>. In these interviews he clearly redefines his relationship to Buddhism. Buddhist notions are no longer, it becomes apparent, one of the major strands in Gray's work. These notions are nonetheless present, but the sensitivity and subtlety of Gray's earlier work, which derive from both Buddhism and Imagism, are lacking somewhat in these new poems dealing with ideological and aesthetic matters. Just as Gray's aesthetic shifts, so does his ethical stance.

Significantly, "Under the Summer Leaves" demands to be seen as an antidote to the idealised Japanese culture and religion Gray proffers in his major "Buddhist" poems

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<sup>302</sup> Gray, "Poetry and living", p.118

<sup>303</sup> Gray comments to Sophie Gee that he "was always obsessed ... with the haecceity, the 'this-ness' of things" (Gee). In his interview with Williams, Gray comments that "my basic loyalty is always to the natural world" (Williams, p.32); he says to Sant that his Buddhist interests are secondary only to his "interest in sensory experience – primarily visual" (Andrew Sant, p.17). This granting Buddhism an importance as an underpinning element of his poetry secondary only to the natural world undercuts somewhat Gray's insistence on the significance of the materialist and positivist influences. It is, he says, "a really major impetus" (Sant, p.17).

such as “Dharma Vehicle” and “To the Master, Dogen Zenji”. This comparison is especially pertinent to “Dharma Vehicle”: both it and “Under the Summer Leaves” consist of interspersed passages of concrete imagery, discursive description, and didactic argument. The intent of this countering force is obvious in Gray’s disparaging of Japanese aesthetic etiquette:

Nature is just an approved view.  
 At prescribed places on the Hokkaido highway  
 one has a prescribed response.  
 Though, now you must censor for yourself  
 the pylons, in swathes, all akimbo like armoured samurai,  
 the chimneys, or reactors, that jostle a relic –

(*NSP*, 198)

And:

Nature manipulated, miniaturized is the preference  
 where earth and weather are so treacherous.  
 No one really cares there to live in the country:  
 ...  
 they pack into the cities ...  
 ...  
 where nature is only the moon

(*NSP*, 198)

The Japanese sensibility implied here is of mass culture, diametrically opposed to the spontaneity and mindfulness Gray presents in “Dharma Vehicle”. Graham Rowlands notes the irony that permeates “Under the Summer Leaves”, most particularly Gray’s disconcerting discovery of, as Rowlands writes, “a Buddhaless Japan buying up the Australian soil on which it’s still possible to be a Buddhist”<sup>304</sup>. Strangely, the resentment Gray expresses about Japanese purchase of Australian real estate edges into racial antipathy and stereotyping, an exaggerated response to Gray’s earlier idealised vision of Japanese religion and culture. Even this is transient, though. Gray rails against Japanese

ownership of Australian land, but counterbalances this by striking an uncompromising “Japanese” religious stance couched in non-attached terms:

all I'd just seen  
 became things that lay in a fire  
 in the moment when they still have their own form

(*NSP*, 204)

That is, they are about to join the impermanent, “glittering smoke of the world”, like all else. In so forcefully closing *Piano* with “Under the Summer Leaves”, Gray also closes off, quite finally, the pre-eminent position of Buddhism within his sensibility. Overall, *Piano* steps back a little from the didactic, discursive urge that begins to come to the fore in *The Skylight*. In this final poem in the collection, both the book and Gray take confident, vigorous strides toward a renunciation of the Buddhist-influenced aesthetic that marks Gray’s *Creekwater Journal* and *Grass Script*.

## Political anthologies

Gray’s drift needs to be seen, in part, in the context of the 1970s and 1980s “poetry wars” and his place as protagonist in them. The first Gray and Lehmann anthology, *The Younger Australian Poets*, needs to be seen as a response to Tranter’s 1979 anthology, *The New Australian Poetry*. Tranter’s anthology notably excluded Gray’s work entirely, despite his standing among the “mainly young writers who came to prominence in the closing years of the 1960s”<sup>305</sup>. Tranter states his criteria for inclusion and exclusion:

Many contemporary poets have not been included in this anthology. They have various virtues, but what they lack most, for my present purpose, is that commitment to the overhauling of poetic method and function that seems to

<sup>304</sup> Graham Rowlands, “After Poetry 8, A Quarterly Account of Recent Poetry”, *Overland*, 122, 1991, p.56

<sup>305</sup> John Tranter, ed., *The New Australian Poetry*, Makar, Brisbane, 1979, p.xv

become necessary from time to time in any culture ... this book is not meant as a state-of-the-art review.<sup>306</sup>

Gray's position as a poet arguing that language is transparent and directly referential ensures his work is dismissed from a context such as that with which Tranter is concerned.

Gray responds to his own exclusion from Tranter's first anthology not by a retaliatory exclusion of Tranter's material, but by a polemic against the poetics of the faction that to them Tranter represents:

In making selections for this anthology we have chosen only those poets who we feel can manage a precise, communicative use of language and who have something moving or interesting to say. We have looked for, along with other literary values, whatever impressed us as human ones; but the literary values have not been the less important... The essence of an anti-humanist position is solipsism, in its varying degrees; it can appear not only stylistically, but also as an intellectual pleasure in cruelty. We have rejected this aggression towards the subject-matter and the reader; it has been identified as reverse sentimentalism, and we have wanted to avoid sentimentality of all varieties (which is something more than a purely literary judgement).<sup>307</sup>

This clearly questions the literary and philosophical grounding of the poetic faction Gray and Lehmann associate with Tranter. Gray and Lehmann state they "have not included any abstractionist poems because of doubts about the motivation behind such writing: the genre seems obviously reductive"<sup>308</sup>. The "genre seems obviously reductive" to Gray and Lehmann precisely because they do not consider their own positionality to be something other than "natural" or "objective". By not questioning his own assumptions, and in so vigorously opposing Tranter's, Gray deepens his attachment to his own views.

<sup>306</sup> Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*, p.xxvi

<sup>307</sup> *The Younger Australian Poets*, pp.14-15

<sup>308</sup> *The Younger Australian Poets*, p.15



The introduction to *The Younger Australian Poets*, a retaliation of sorts against Tranter's methodology, finds an echo in the introduction to Tranter and Mead's anthology nearly ten years later. Gray and Lehmann's 1983 anthology is not mentioned by name in Tranter and Mead's introduction to *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, although that book's editors claim that theirs "is a pluralist reading of modernity and postmodernity"<sup>309</sup>. Tranter and Mead argue against Gray and Lehmann, contending that "The roles of gender, race and ethnicity are crucial in any act of reading"<sup>310</sup>. Tranter and Mead consign, by inference, Gray and Lehmann's unexamined ideology to history, describing their anthology as "part of the easing of the grip of a previous order". Gray and Lehmann characterise the "generation of '68" as "those who write in an inverted, deliberately amoral and non-communicative style"<sup>311</sup>, setting up this poetic sensibility against Gray's own as set out in "Poetry and living".

In the introduction to their 1993 anthology, Gray and Lehmann continue to evade self-examination. They claimed in 1983 to have "produce[d] a book which disregards partisan lines"<sup>312</sup>, while carefully delineating those very "partisan lines". The later anthology assumes what Gray and Lehmann claim as an objective position, heedless of the ideological formation of their own perspective. They write: "We have not tried to include poets on the basis of regional or any other prescriptive demands. It cannot be productive to pretend things are other than we have found them to be"<sup>313</sup>. The editors' presumption of objectivity recalls Gray's poem "At the Inlet", where he claims that "The

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<sup>309</sup> John Tranter and Philip Mead, eds., *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1991, p.xxxii

<sup>310</sup> Tranter and Mead, p.xxx

<sup>311</sup> *The Younger Australian Poets*, p.14

<sup>312</sup> *The Younger Australian Poets*, p.16

true nature of the world is not different to the things we see" (*NJP*, 142). To make this sort of leap is to confuse a Buddhist insight with Gray and Lehmann's own reading strategies in the partisan poetic environment of Australia in the 1970s and 1980s.

Everybody, it seems to Gray and Lehmann, is partisan but themselves.

## Why the dogma? Gray explaining Gray

Many of Gray's ideological, didactic poems attempt to provide his readers with an appropriate philosophical background to Gray's intended reading or meaning of his poems. He asserts that language is directly and transparently referential, and his poetic intent brooks no ambiguity, refusing an ambivalent relationship between objects and language<sup>314</sup>. As Martin Duwell suggests in his review of *Certain Things*, Gray's later didactic poetics provides a means by "which [he may] explain his stance ... [and can] ensure new readers know what he is on about"<sup>315</sup>. These are, Duwell continues "rather prosy poems of explanation laying out the propositions that underpin his work"<sup>316</sup>. There is a lapse here in Gray's confidence in either his readership or his facility with language and imagery, evident in his apparent need to explain his poetic program in such poems. Most notable are those pieces masked as poems but which are more akin to bald assertions about ideas or things, making no attempt to actually argue or embody those notions. The two prime examples of this tendency in *Certain Things* are "A Testimony" and "Illusions". Many of the aphoristic sections of "Illusions" and passages from similar poems point to Gray's changing aesthetic focus. In keeping with his reassessment of the place of Buddhism in his work and thought, there comes a re-ordering or reiteration, in

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<sup>313</sup> *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, p.xi.

<sup>314</sup> Sant, p.16

<sup>315</sup> Martin Duwell, "Loving Sketches of this Dewdrop World", *Weekend Australian*, 14-15 August, 1993, Review, p.6

often quite flat language of the critical, aesthetic and philosophical assumptions from which Gray operates.

Aesthetic, artistic and ideological assertions form the major component of the new rhetorical and abstract artillery Gray deploys. One illusion Gray rails against is “That abstracted shapes and colours make an efficient language” (*NSP*, 245). Gray makes a series of largely unsubstantiated statements about artistic and literary values: “That there is progress in art” (*NSP*, 245); “That having denied the artist’s conscious meanings and intentions, we can then appreciate the work of art (all of whose formal decisions were based on those intentions)” (*NSP*, 246); “That because ‘they once laughed at the Impressionists’, now everything in art that flaunts an innovatory mannerism must be good” (*NSP*, 246); “That art is for art’s sake. (In its sensuousness and its care, art is what Nietzsche says, ‘the great stimulus to life’.)” (*NSP*, 247); “That art requires theory. (Bad art justifies itself with theory; good art is justified by its immediate sensory appeal.)” (*NSP*, 247). This mode of poetry possesses, counter to Gray’s own dictum, no “immediate sensory appeal” whatsoever, only unsubstantiated rhetoric. By Gray’s own criteria, some of these poems are “Bad art”. It is ironic that in his appeal to aesthetic and artistic standards, Gray is at his least artistic or literary. Again, in a similar style, from “At the Inlet”:

While the surrealists, who sought the Marvellous, that is hidden somewhere within us, have produced only the grotesque. How detestable, their facile sacrifice of the beauty which things have -

(*NSP*, 141)

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<sup>316</sup> Duwell, “Loving Sketches”, p.6

He also states that “With the natural object, an artist has all he needs to express himself” (NSP, 142). Once more, from “A Testimony”: “What is needed most is that we become more modest. And the work of art that can return us to our senses” (NSP, 222). In “Epigrams” Gray writes that

Poetry is made of words,  
Mallarme claimed,  
which is not exact –  
feelings exist as images, not as words.  
(Images are the language in which we dream.)

(NSP, 294)

This runs counter to Gray’s continual argument in interviews that language is transparent and referential. Gray contends similarly in the later “Epigrams” that “All aesthetic judgements/ are self-evident” (NSP, 295), and that “A style in art is an attitude/ to experience. Looked at this way, a style can seem/ ridiculous (e.g., Mondrian’s)” (NSP, 294). Such a concern with aesthetics is expressed in language that itself pays less attention to aesthetics than it does to ideology or ideas *about* aesthetics.

Even when Gray most clearly and firmly lays out his aesthetic programme, he is unable to avoid the contradiction or ambiguity inherent in the nature of language. In a later poem like “The Drift of Things”, he provides a philosophical scaffolding for the poem almost before the poem itself begins. It opens:

Things, Berkeley said, are the language of God,  
this world that we know is really His thoughts –  
which Hume remarked brings us no conviction,  
but to me it is almost justified,  
for things are worthy of such an existence,  
of ultimate status. It often seems  
I am listening to them...

(A, 52)

A western philosophical tradition is given primacy here in Gray's contemplation of the world, replacing the Buddhist underpinning of his meditations elsewhere on the "ordinary things". Again, "things" are foremost in Gray's thinking, despite the shift in intellectual structures through which he speaks of them. While this suggests a non-attachment to specific views, the framework for contemplating those "things" remains much the same: "things are worthy of such an [absolute] existence" in God, Gray claims. This scarcely differs from Dōgen's dictum: "All that's important/ is the ordinary things" (*NSP*, 30). Even as Gray dictates his views and their context quite specifically to his readers, those views themselves seem to have changed little in over thirty years. This is despite Gray's new-found assuredness seemingly evident in his didactic manner, which is itself associated with his western philosophical interests in positivism and materialism rather than the non-attachment apparent from his more Buddhist-influenced early material. In "The Drift of Things" Gray also name-drops William James (A, 53), Aristotle (A, 53), Sartre (A, 55), and refers to "An image from the Flower Garland Sutra" (A, 57), a significant Buddhist text. This poem is notable for the way Gray spells out quite didactically what his earlier work embodied and enacted: "We live in a medium of paradox —/ a thing's both absolute and arbitrary" (A, 58), the "ordinary things are ultimate" (A, 58), "All things change" (A, 53), and

it's plurality  
we experience, it is differences,  
not the smear of Oneness

(A, 52)

In a related poem, "Dharma Vehicle", Gray intersperses discursive passages among the lyrical and imagistic in a complementary manner, but here the imagery is used sparingly, as if to support his contentions, rather than to embody or evoke them.

It becomes apparent that to a significant extent, Gray's over-riding subject is not those "ordinary things", nor is it poetics and ideology strictly speaking. Rather than simply things themselves, Gray is concerned with the *aesthetics* of things. This fits neatly with both his numerous prosaic assertions, in poetry, prose and interviews, about the nature of aesthetics and poetics, as well as his long-standing preoccupation with natural objects. These two strands meet when he speaks against the surrealists and "How detestable, their facile sacrifice/ of the beauty which things have" (*NSP*, 141) and his statement that "With the natural object, an artist has all he needs to express himself" (*NSP*, 142). Gray speaks not about aesthetics *per se*, or his sensibility in particular, nor about things, but about the ethics of the aesthetic representation of things. Nearly the entirety of "Poetry and living" is focussed on this intersection of ethics, aesthetics and things. The inextricability of these ideas at this triple nexus is an ideal embodiment of Buddhist interdependence in an aesthetic context. Each of the criteria assumes approximately equal, interrelated significance for Gray: aesthetics, ethics, and the thing itself. This accounts for Gray's repeated statement about finding an ethical and aesthetic position on things, but it also suggests his ethical concerns eventually come to over-ride the aesthetic. In expressing most clearly his ethical positions, Gray diverts himself from representing them as a vital force in his poems' consideration of things. As ethics and aesthetics rise to their positions of prominence as overt concerns, Gray's own practice of them, at the level of imagery and the treatment of people in his work, looks as if it drops away significantly. This provides an unhappy echo of Gray's stance on simile: even as he appears to succeed in his intention, his execution seems to dip away.

In turn, this triple standpoint is not unrelated to the Buddhist non-attachment central to Gray's poetic stance in his earlier collections, and which still wields not insignificant leverage. When he writes in "Poetry and living" "that by ethics I will mean an inherent potential of the mind for empathy"<sup>317</sup>, he strikes a stance that, while certainly not exclusively Buddhist in nature, does nonetheless encompass a Buddhist position. A similar stance is produced in his statement that "both ethics and poetry are the same if they are recognized as not dogma, but as the products of responsiveness, of empathy"<sup>318</sup>. Empathy results, in a Buddhist setting at least, from a cultivation of non-attachment and a recognition of interdependence. A poetry that derives its central tenets from these two focal points will be deeply concerned with both ethics and a contemplative awareness or self-reflexivity toward its own processes and practices: that is, aesthetics. Gray's poetic processes are vitally concerned with an ethical dimension, even at the level of the image. As he states in "Poetry and living",

I want to point out that mentioning the word empathy indicates the role of the imagination. The imagination is a an ability to create mental images. It is the conjuring-up, selection, rearrangement, and magnification of things already perceived. It might be said to be awareness by analogy; and therefore it gives insight.<sup>319</sup>

Crucially, Gray states his position in the most direct terms: "perhaps I should regard myself as a complete aesthete. I am talking about ethics because to me they seem an essential component of aesthetics"<sup>320</sup>. Not only does this return a consideration of Gray's ethics and aesthetics to his central concern with things of the natural world, but also to his insistence on simile as the primary analogical trope, which Gray argues has an ethical dimension as "the honest way to write"<sup>321</sup>. So, even as Gray moves away somewhat from

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<sup>317</sup> Gray, "Poetry and living", pp.117-118

<sup>318</sup> Gray, "Poetry and living", p.118

<sup>319</sup> Gray, "Poetry and living", p.118

<sup>320</sup> Gray, "Poetry and living", p.121

<sup>321</sup> Sant, p.16

the image as the central defining plank of his work, toward a relatively more didactic line, the particular arguments he puts forward return him, indirectly, to his preoccupation with things' presence, and an aesthetics comprising equal parts poetics and ethics.

In moving away from the concrete image as his primary vehicle, Gray seems concerned that language, after all, is not as directly or clearly referential as his rhetorical stance might suggest. He needs to write these poems to clarify his position, philosophically, poetically, ideologically and aesthetically. As Robert Adamson suggests in a deeply compromised review of *Grass Script*<sup>322</sup>, there seems something that tends toward compulsion. This can help account for lapses in poetic concentration in flat, prose-like pieces such as his more aphoristic work ("Aphorisms: On Politics", "A Testimony", "Illusions"). These are Gray's commentaries on his own poetic project, and they proscribe, it seems, any other approach. Duwell suggests that as Gray has many "admirers"<sup>323</sup>, "Perhaps he should trust them to be aware of what he is doing"<sup>324</sup>.

### **Loyalty to *Certain Things***

Gray and Lehmann claim that "Poetry is not primarily about ideas, although these can be and should be assimilated by it (and revealed at their origin, in feeling)"<sup>325</sup>.

Such a revelation is neither an option, nor is it present, in many of the flatly prosaic and

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<sup>322</sup> Robert Adamson, "I do not want to be what I am' – Robert Gray's *Grass Script*", *New Poetry*, 4, 1979, pp.67-70. In particular Adamson refers to an "almost compulsive mannerism" (69) where Gray "discovers an object ... then he immediately looks about to see if it is like something else. Everything in Gray's work is something other than it is" (67)

<sup>323</sup> Duwell, "Loving Sketches", p.6

<sup>324</sup> Duwell, "Loving Sketches", p.6

<sup>325</sup> *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, p.xii



bluntly political poems in Gray's later books, most notably *Certain Things*. This approach is, in many ways, the logical conclusion to Gray's insistence on the status of language: "I wanted to, perhaps, combat the current idea that language is an end in itself. That is a self-referential thing, that language is opaque. I wanted to say that what I'm interested in is a transparent language"<sup>326</sup>. This however is contradicted by what he says earlier in the interview, suggesting very strongly that Gray's own position is a tenuous one. He asserts that "poetry is about all the things that words don't say, that they can only hint at and imply"<sup>327</sup>. In this case, Gray clearly does not hold language to be transparently referential at all. There are realms of experience that he suggests language cannot represent. This unresolved central tension in Gray's logic underpins to a significant degree the prosaic abstractions of his didactic poems.

Many of the passages from Gray's aphoristic, argumentative poems, however, merely outline political views. They largely fail to elaborate on Gray's increasingly partisan aesthetic stances, and contribute very little to an understanding of how Gray perceives his own poetry. These fragments of dogma from poems like "Illusions" and "Aphorisms" do, though, illustrate the degree to which Gray has drifted from both his earlier aesthetic position and his ethical stance that he suggests is interdependent with his aesthetic influences. Gray has travelled some distance from the assumption that "All that's important/ is the ordinary things" (*NSP*, 30). "Dharma Vehicle", while at times didactic, returns again and again to concrete imagery, and so renews its discursive, doctrinal intent. In a great many of Gray's later didactic poems, such a concrete grounding is, by comparison, glaringly absent. What sort of position, then, has Gray moved to? In *Certain Things* he rails against notions such as: "That there have been works

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<sup>326</sup> Koval, p.42

of art produced in Hollywood” (NSP, 245). Slight commentary of this sort, and poems like “The Trendies”, illustrate the extent to which Gray increasingly moves from the representation of things through image to a point where he opines directly, without any resort to embodying or enacting those ideas. Lacking the scaffolding of concrete imagery and the suggestive power of Gray’s persuasive capacity with simile and metaphor, many of these later poems live or die on the elegance of their tone and expression. The greater of Gray’s skills remains a predominantly visual one rather than a remarkable aural, rhetorical or linguistic facility. It does appear that Gray’s developing ethical and ideological stances, in moving away from an image-based structure, have distanced him from an aesthetic that might conceivably represent or embody those ideas more fully. Gray’s ethics and his aesthetic, which once defined each other, are no longer a close fit. As a result, many of Gray’s more didactic, politically- or aesthetically-charged poems are compromised and lack a concrete grounding.

Some of the assertions Gray makes could be characterised as deeply unpoetic on the same grounds that he criticises poets aligned with the “generation of ‘68”: ignoring the source of ideas, which is, as he claims, feeling<sup>328</sup>. He writes in “Poetry and living” that his “belief is that poetry can be the most complete mode of apprehension, in which feelings and ideas matter and potentiate one another”<sup>329</sup>. Gray has written a number of poems which go against his expressed, and strongly held, preferences: “Work that is basically intellectualising, if presented as poetry, has assumed a decorative, redundant

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<sup>327</sup> Koval, p.42

<sup>328</sup> *The Younger Australian Poets*, pp.14-15. Gray and Lehmann have written: “In making selections for this anthology we have chosen only those poets who we feel can manage a precise, communicative use of language and who have something moving or interesting to say”.

<sup>329</sup> Gray, “Poetry and living”, p.122

form”<sup>330</sup>. Revealingly, Gray says: “Do I see political views informing my work? I hope they will, even more explicitly, in my next book. An interesting question, to me, though, is whether they should inform one’s work; is there any point in it? I think there is”<sup>331</sup>.

Again, Gray makes a wide range of statements, sweeping from the political, the religious and the ethical. He rails against a variety of views, such as: “That private enterprise is more efficient than public enterprise.// That public enterprise is more efficient.” (*CT*, 66); “That dreams are oracles” (*NSP*, 245); “That despite their evolving with separate functions, the sexes have in all things matched abilities” (*NSP*, 245); “That economics can be a science” (*NSP*, 246); “That morality is spiritual. (Morality is physiology: the nervous system.)” (*NSP*, 247). Some of these argumentative dicta can be seen as a direct response to skirmishes in the “poetry wars” that Gray was so involved with as both editor and combatant alongside Les Murray and Geoffrey Lehmann. What is most ironic, though, about these dry statements, is that they counter Gray’s own dictum:

How does one properly relate ethics to poetry? ... I think it must certainly be done without turning poetry into moralism; into the mere retailing of humanistic homilies – those things we know about, intellectually, already.<sup>332</sup>

In directly stating his position on various issues, Gray does not simply solidify his views, but in presenting those positions as *faits accomplis*, he also commits a self-defrauding: those poems at times become “humanistic homilies – those things [he] know[s] about, intellectually, already”.

A number of the negation-aphorisms in “Illusions” return Gray to a contemplation of some notions he initially received, it would seem, from Buddhism. In

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<sup>330</sup> *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, p.xii

<sup>331</sup> Sant, p.18

<sup>332</sup> Gray, “Poetry and living”, p.118

his denial “That there is a self ...” (*CT*, 67), we see this bald assertion set against Gray’s playing-out of the complexity of selfhood in “Dharma Vehicle”, or his embodiment of no-self elsewhere, such as in “Within the Traveller’s Eye”. Gray similarly denies

That Buddhism is a disenchantment with the world. (It is a disenchantment with wanting something from the world, which as a constant flux, a multiplicity of forces, is beyond our keeping and control.)

(*CT*, 68)

This defence of Buddhism is evidence of an ambivalence to be found in Gray’s stance on Buddhism, marking another point in Gray’s oscillation between Buddhism and materialism. This assertion about “disenchantment” recurs in “A Testimony”, which also partly consists of a set of strongly held positions. In this poem Gray contends, in keeping with Buddhist teaching, that

The one perfection of this world is lust: is grasping, scheming, longing. And  
entirely of nature,  
we’re continuous with whatever blinds the faceless pebble, that more truculently  
persists

(*NSP*, 219)

That Gray retains a significant though not major degree of his alignment with some elements of Buddhist thought is not really in doubt. Rather, the lesser weight he grants to Buddhist notions triggers suspicion that his avowal of belief in scientific materialism is a misrepresentation of what is actually at work in his poems. Although Gray claims a belief in scientific rationalism, he also claims that “There is a substance to things, which is ungraspable ... it both is and is not” (*NSP*, 220). This sort of comment is difficult to account for in a purely positivist or materialist framework, and it delineates the degree to which Gray has shifted in his poetic and aesthetic focus.

The dogmatic sensibility, so pronounced in *Certain Things*, recedes a little in *Lineations* and *Afterimages*. This recession is partly a function of the sheer vehemence of some views expressed in *Certain Things*. *Lineations*, though, possesses a worthy companion-piece to the most vitriolic poetry in its immediate predecessor. “The Trendies” is an anxious, self-preoccupied piece, not at all engaged, let alone concerned, with either the things of the natural world or a non-attached aesthetic or ethical viewpoint. This poem represents a serious misjudgement on Gray’s behalf, focussing on the need of this sort of poetry to feed on oppositions. Gray invokes enemies – political? poetic? – in this poem:

If my name is spoken amongst them, the intellectually chic,  
with their novelties and self-regard, I trust it’s one they denigrate;  
yet let me not be preoccupied with them, nor grow cantankerous,  
but simply like a wild animal, that turns aside from rotting meat.

(L, 83)

Gray’s own standpoint reaches a position diametrically opposing his earlier stated ethic of detachment, which was always compromised anyway by the differentiation in his treatment of people on the one hand and of the natural world on the other. Gray himself becomes the perceived focus of others’ attention in the poem. This once more, and most overtly, links Gray to the “wild animal” imagery he is both repelled and fascinated by, and in some ways identifies with, in earlier poems like “Diptych” and “Boarding House Poems, 8”. Gray evidently perceives his literary opponents as akin in some ways to the animal-like behaviour he aligns with his father. The aggressor in “The Trendies”, however, is Gray, who invokes the enemies. Their presumed obsession with him is in fact a straw man: this invented obsession of vaguely-defined others actually matches his own preoccupations. As with his dogmatic aphorisms, Gray attributes views, in this case

to “the intellectually chic,/ with their novelties”, simply in order to oppose them. He creates an enemy so as to demonstrate vigour and restraint: “let me not be preoccupied with them, nor grow cantankerous”, all the while writing in a “cantankerous” voice and tone.

“Aphorisms: On Politics” displays just how far Gray has travelled to a deeply attached, abstracted view. There, he suggests that “One’s touch with things, I have seen, is the same/ as one’s touch with other people” (*TS*, 27). Nearly verbatim, this repeats his assertion in “Poetry and living” that “people’s attitude to things is the same as their attitude to people”<sup>333</sup>. “Poetry and living” is a version of a conference paper Gray delivered at Macquarie University in May 1979<sup>334</sup>. This date places Gray’s assertion well before the publication of “Aphorisms” in book form, in *The Skylight*, in 1984. The collection was completed in 1983, given the copyright date Gray has assigned it, and “Aphorisms” does not appear anywhere prior to book publication. Although it is impossible, without access to Gray’s papers, to trace with certainty which of the two versions of this sentiment is the “original”, this might hardly matter. What is significant is the very considerable similarity in both tone and expression in the prose and poetry versions. Gray’s ideas and his poems begin to blur, to the point at which some poems begin to look like ideas *only*. The degree of Gray’s growing inattention to the ordinary things in his later books matches, approximately, the vitriol and extremes of aversion that accompany his writing, in those same books, about “other people”. The sharpness of the ambivalence toward things and people in Gray’s later collections is illustrated in the relationship between poems like “The Trendies” and “Illusions” on the one hand, and, on the other, “Epigrams”. In one part of this poem, Gray writes about nature’s

“unresponsiveness” (NSP, 295). Gray’s speakers in these later books busily shout down any “responsiveness” counter to his own. Again, as evidenced in the introductions to the anthologies Gray edited with Geoffrey Lehmann, he continually denies his own positionality and subjectivity as anything other than objective and “natural”, incapable of permitting contraries.

*Afterimages* consolidates Gray’s new poetic ordering. Although the poems are largely discursive, the only poem predominantly didactic and abstracted is “The Drift of Things”. It also includes a number of passages reminiscent of Gray’s earlier lyrical, Imagistic deftness.

Things, Berkeley says are the language of God,  
 This world that we know is really His thoughts -  
 Which Hume remarked brings us no conviction,  
 But to me it is almost justified,  
 For things are worthy of such existence,  
 Of ultimate stature. It often seems  
 I am listening to them.

(A, 52)

This last sentence is especially close to “Note”, where Gray writes of things, wishing :

if only we could hear  
 the eloquence  
 of their dumb ministry.

(NSP, 280).

The connections between “The Drift of Things” and other poems are not negligible.

Gray writes of things that

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<sup>333</sup> Gray, “Poetry and living”, p.128

<sup>334</sup> Gray, “Poetry and living”, p.xi

... I think the appeal  
is their candour, it's the lack of concern  
at being so vulnerable.

(A, 52)

This in its turn recalls "Epigrams", where Gray writes:

What one loves about nature  
is its unresponsiveness -  
it is, precisely,  
that it "neither cares nor knows".

(NSP, 295)

The connections and networks across his later books that show a pattern of thinking that corresponds with comments Gray has made in interviews. This line of thinking is of vital importance not simply because it informs Gray's body of work, but also because these ideas have played an increasingly central role in the aesthetic texture of Gray's poetry, displacing to a marked extent the imagistic, lyrical hallmarks of his first three of four books.

Nonetheless, it cannot be argued that even Gray's early collections are free of the discursive, didactic impulse that is now a marked presence in his work. *Introspect*, *Retrospect*, *Creekwater Journal*, *Grass Script* and *The Skylight* are not simply catalogues of natural or concrete images: they each include significant poems that are simultaneously image-driven and discursive. "To the Master, Dogen Zenji", from *Creekwater Journal*, and "Poem to My Father" and "Dharma Vehicle" from *Grass Script* respectively have already received plentiful attention here. From *The Skylight*, the structure of "Curriculum Vitae" roughly corresponds with these poems. Despite its discursive and seemingly meandering quality, where "Curriculum Vitae" differs from these other poems is in the nearly



complete absence of a didactic intent. There is only one passage which rivals its forerunners, and which more closely resembles the ideological concerns of "Aphorisms: On Politics" and prefigures the flatness of tone in similar poems in subsequent collections:

What is such an evil, but the continuing effect  
of capital's Stalinism?  
Enclosure, as John Clare has said, lets not a thing remain.

(*NSP*, 150)

This sits alongside imagistic bursts that typify a certain mode in Gray: "there were swallows that used to sew together/ the bars of a cattle yard" (*NSP*, 147); "A cow was in the stocks with the calm expression of a Quaker" (*NSP*, 148); "the mountain's image came apart/ suddenly, the way a cabbage falls into coleslaw" (*NSP*, 149). Lyrical moments like this are less than typical of this poem. Gray's lines are consistently longer by the time of *The Skylight* than they were in the first two books, and this propels Gray's increasingly discursive, chatty style.

Gray's didactic tone, his sometimes abstract concerns and at times dogmatic adherence to opinion are not at present *the* sole major force in his work, but it began some time ago to predominate somewhat over the formerly clear-cut primacy of the concrete image. While in *Afterimages* the image may have consolidated its position rather than losing further ground, the discursive still retains a privileged position. There is, nonetheless, in a few poems, a move to re-integrate the prosaic statements of these recent poems into more concrete, but still discursive poetic structure. This is most notable in "the Home Run" and "The Drift of Things". The latter, although quite prosaic, incorporates some imagery reminiscent of Gray's earlier lyrical moments: "The

clouds on water; in reeds, a boardwalk;/ a bus that rides the dust like a surfboard ...” (A, 52). This poem also returns, for the first time in a number of collections, to a direct reference to Buddhism: “An image from the Flower Garland Sutra —/ existence is a net of diamonds” (A, 57); “all things are born out of conditions” (A, 57), and

So streams and forests, the light-splashed mountains,  
the blown clouds and waves, are Gautama’s chant.

...

... the totality  
is just overlapping, temporary states

(A, 57)

Other poems mixing the modes include “Home Run”, “In the Mallee” from *Afterimages*, “Version”, “A Sight of Proteus” from *Lineations*; and “The Pines” from *Certain Things*. Like those in *Certain Things* and *Lineations*, many of the poems in *Afterimages* are conversational, and so borrow elements of the discursive, but are also imbued with Gray’s attention to things’ detail and concreteness. “The Drift of Things” could be seen as the didactic, even dogmatic, highlight of Gray’s career to date. “In the Mallee” is a mix of discursive tendencies and more lyrical moments and images. “Home Run” and “The Fishermen” are again, like “In the Mallee”, hybrids of Gray’s two major strands of poetic approach, but generally lack the force of his earlier concrete imagistic lyrical style, while softening the tough commitment to his didactic material. Gray’s vehemence, having found central status in *Certain Things*, and, to a lesser extent in *Lineations*, has receded somewhat in *Afterimages*. It is as if Gray has recognised that language’s clarity and referentiality does, after all, possess serious limitations:

But this is metaphor. Nothing endures.  
What strikes us most of things is their strangeness,  
and how speak of that, but through metaphor?  
In seeing things now, it’s as if they’re lost  
already.

(A, 59)

Things, seen through language's metaphoric prism, Gray writes, "pass us along the edge of darkness,/ ... changing, as we're changed" (A, 60). As if striving to reassert a place for the lyric representation of concrete imagery alongside his hitherto predominant discursive and didactic drives, Gray steps back from this proscription of views and gazes at the

low ridges, and great clouds;  
 a gravel lane; pale sun on dusty grass;  
 the broken palings and the wire netting

(A, 60)

He responds to this vista, certain that "No thoughts could approach their attendance here" (A, 60). This seems a proscription against views. If this is true now, as it was much earlier in Gray's career, then nothing (and everything) has changed but Gray and his ambivalence toward strongly held views, which stems in part from Buddhist non-attachment. The great irony is that this comes late in a collection, indeed in a series of collections, that places strongly-held views in high regard. As always, Gray's doubled and split aesthetic keeps him between the two positions he seems to hold, and distances him from both. The Buddhist influence so strong in Gray's first books, and which he almost unequivocally renounces, is one he cannot let go, even as his poetry simultaneously denies and embraces it.

## Conclusion

Unlike the relative success of his heavily haiku-influenced short poems, much of Gray's later poetic career bears plentiful evidence of the difficulty in integrating elements of the Western cultural tradition with those of the Sino-Japanese Buddhist tradition

where, early on, Gray's interest lies. These early poetic interests are not only those of content, but they are also formal in nature. Gray's poetic orientation drifts from a concrete poetic derived partly from both Imagism and Buddhist non-attachment, to an imperative to provide frequently didactic if not dogmatic prosaic commentary on keenly-held political and artistic views. Passages of realism and concrete imagistic flashes remain, but are usually similarly prosaic, or occur within a prosaic poetic context. Where Buddhist notions arise in Gray's work, or where images traditionally associated with Buddhism occur, they no longer assume the form of structural or guiding principles in the work. Often they are grist for commentary, where they are investigated in terms of the Western philosophical tradition, such as in the late "The Drift of Things", or the earlier "A Testimony". This need not be a problem, however. It is one, though, because of Gray's tendency to over-examine things and ideas in abstracted form. As is nearly invariably the case with Gray, there are issues of balance, arising from the variety of contradictions at work in his poetry, and in his conception of his poetry. That the "ordinary things" with which Gray claims to be preoccupied and "obsessed" are so closely aligned at an early stage of his career with his Buddhist interests necessarily means that his move away from Buddhism is accompanied by a similar loss of interest in things as a *primary* focus.

Les Murray sees this crisis in balance coming from some way off. Insightfully, he writes of Gray's Zen orientation:

The note Mr Gray strikes, the signature of his poetry as it were, is one well beyond the elitism and class warfare of so much other modern writing, but I suspect the path it is following is a dead end for Western poets, and that Mr Gray himself will turn aside from it fairly soon.<sup>335</sup>

He continues, writing that

Gray has been to school to the Zen masters, at the usual removes of ocean and language, but with more than the usual benefits. All the same, there is a sense in which Zen can be a knack ... which, once you master it, enables you to turn out neat, spare, portentous strings of free-form imagery till the cows come home. Gradually, you may lose touch with that Homeric many-mindedness and sense of wrestling with complexities of sense and music that has been the spinal strength of Western poetry, and increasingly write poems that read like rather knowing translations. Mr Gray hasn't starved his work in this way as yet, but I think he will need, and want, to develop an ear in his future so as to give his writing that richness of aural and rhythmical effect which to some extent it now lacks.<sup>336</sup>

As much as Murray perceives from the start Gray's difficult position, formal matters have been less problematic for Gray than finding a way for Buddhist ideas to co-exist comfortably and productively with Western philosophical traditions. This said, Gray's prosiness that Duwell notes is also a function of Gray's difficulty with his initial free verse impulse as it works in connection with his Buddhist imperatives. This is another manifestation of that difficulty Gray faces, given his apparent predisposition to creating oppositions where he claims through his Buddhism there are none. The Imagistic free verse is allied in important ethical, and hence aesthetic with Gray's Buddhist orientation. So when Gray's interest or confidence in Buddhism wanes, or his trust in free verse methods for that matter, so does its aesthetic twin. This accounts not only for Gray's drift from "ordinary things", but also from the suppleness of his early lyrical free verse forms. Hence his prosaic didactic tone in the most recent three books. Still, it is also a matter of Gray's ideas as explicitly stated and held not fitting with much of his Buddhist outlook of earlier books. Hence the shift in paradigm, tone, style, orientation and subject matter. The subject becomes not Gray's struggle against suffering and so on as it is in his early work. Instead, it transforms into a description of, or a commentary on, how Gray sees his poetry working, and an explication of his ideas: political, religious, and aesthetic.

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<sup>335</sup> Les Murray, "A North Coast Poet", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10<sup>th</sup> May, 1975, p.10

There seems a clear distinction in Gray's poems that can be made between a poetic embodiment of detachment, and merely speaking of detachment (between showing and telling, essentially). Discursive, didactic passages in poems like "Dharma Vehicle" and the much later "The Drift of Things" are incapable of embodying or enacting detachment or other Buddhist ideas, but discuss them just the same. The difference is that "Dharma Vehicle" embodies or enacts those ideas *as well as* talking about them in an abstract sense. That is, we see both aspects: abstract and concrete, theory and practice. Poems like "The Pine" or "Within the Traveller's Eye" do embody those ideas of non-attachment, demonstrating through imagery how the idea actually works in practice, as opposed to a somewhat theoretical view as we see in Gray's discursive poems. Poems like "Illusions", "Aphorisms: On Politics", "The Trendies", "A Testimony" neither discuss nor embody the views they propound: they merely assert and proscribe. Unlike these, the poems that work through embodiment fit approximately with the what Lucien Stryk writes of Zen poetry that "what makes it unique in world literature is that it is recognized as a mystic Way – to a most difficult truth"<sup>337</sup>. This poetry then is not only poetry *about* Zen Buddhist detachment, but actually embodies it, acting out the struggle toward non-attachment. Poetry for Gray has become no longer a "mystic Way" forward, but rather a site for putting forward his ideas. In clinging to so forcefully held a series of propositions, positions and beliefs, Gray's at times flat, and frequently didactic, prosaic and dogmatic poems ultimately deny what he contends, that indeed "The world is the mutual effacement/ of every separate point of view" (A, 57).

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<sup>336</sup> Murray, p.10

<sup>337</sup> Lucien Stryk, ed., *Zen Poems of China and Japan: The Crane's Bill*, p.xlvii

## Chapter seven

# Sacred yet common: manifestations of Buddhism in Judith Beveridge's poetry

### Introduction

The major focal point of the relatively small amount of critical writing on Judith Beveridge's work has rightly been the network of interconnectedness she fosters in a great many of her poems. Little attention, however, has been paid to what this web of interdependence stands for and how it operates in the poems in the intersection of subject matter and poetic form. Martin Duwell notes the complex of "interweavings" in Beveridge's poetry: "A poetry as carefully produced and sensitive to the dense interweavings of reality as that of Judith Beveridge can be difficult to describe since pulling one thread involves disturbing so many others"<sup>338</sup>. The presence of this interweaving quite early in Beveridge's career marks a sensibility predisposed to elements of a Buddhist influence. The transmission of this influence is highly visible in a poem like "The Herons", with its reference to "blue Gotama" (*DG*, 50) and the image of "the wrists of monks/ fasting for perfection" (*DG*, 50). David McCooey notes an "interesting fluidity between the natural world and the observer. One has to remind oneself that the natural scene hasn't been described at all"<sup>339</sup>. This "fluidity" is to do with Beveridge's dismantling of the boundaries between "the natural world and the observer", an expression of Buddhist ideas emanating from an awareness of no-self. The fluidity is

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<sup>338</sup> Martin Duwell, "Intricate Knots and Vast Cosmologies: The Poetry of Judith Beveridge", *Australian Literary Studies*, 2000, 3, p.243

incorporated at the level of sensibility: it is not simply an abstraction that Beveridge tries to make concrete. Such a sensibility is implied also in Beveridge's deep attentiveness to detail, coupled with her focus upon objects' interrelatedness. This is an imagination that anticipates the later overt interest in Buddhism. Like Gray, Beveridge sees likenesses between things. Hers is an analogical imagination where things are seen *through* their likeness and inter-relation to each other, whereas Gray more typically notes an area of likeness between things. For him, similarity seems the critical element of his imagination. With Beveridge, *connection* is what matters. This aesthetic begins itself to fashion the influence: Buddhism is a body of thought that fits Beveridge's developing sensibility, and confirms her perception of the relations between things.

Beveridge's aesthetic of interweavings does not manifest only through the poetry's subject matter. In fact, except for "The Herons", until the last poem of Beveridge's second book, *Accidental Grace*, there is practically no explicit reference to Buddhism or the Buddha anywhere in her work. Rather, her Buddhist-like sensibility shows itself in her choice of imagery, the way she aligns images and objects, her skill with metaphor and simile, and also on a formal, structural level. A great many of her poems feature, for example, references to threads, lines, ropes and related images, and these images generally either connect things, or suggest frayed connections. Rarely are images of threading static: typically, they are images of activity and intervention. This interdependence and the dynamic unity that underpins it is given considerable attention by Martin Duwell and Noel Rowe. While Rowe sees a meditative sensibility at work<sup>340</sup>,

<sup>339</sup> David McCooey, "New Poets, New Poetry", *Southerly*, 1, 1997, p.204

<sup>340</sup> Noel Rowe, "In Memory of Clear Singing: Judith Beveridge's *The Domesticity of Giraffes*", in Dennis Robinson, ed., *Distinctive Voices: some writers set for 2 Unit General*, The English Association, Sydney, 1994, p.12



Duwell ponders the future influence of Buddhism upon Beveridge's poetry<sup>341</sup>. While both move to address the "meaning" of the interdependence that they note, neither makes a major focus of the religious or spiritual nature of the interdependence that Beveridge enacts in her poetry.

Alison Croggon, conversely, questions significant elements of Beveridge's work. Croggon is preoccupied with Beveridge's concern with formal matters, and so takes insufficient note of the fundamental Buddhist ideas of interdependence, conditionality, no-self and transience at work in Beveridge's poetry. More critically, Croggon fails to see how these ideas are reflected in the formal imperative in Beveridge's work. Beveridge is busy creating structures that manifest her sensibility, not simply in terms of subject matter and imagery, but on a formal plane too. Her poems' formal structures give shape to the complex relations between people and things, and often insist on rhetorically building up the barriers that the poems are concerned with collapsing. Hence the tight structures of poems like "The Fishermen"<sup>342</sup>, or Beveridge's many other poems where liminal spaces (physical, emotional and personal) deconstruct difference. This attention to a scaffolding of distinctions that is then pulled away mirrors, in many ways, Buddhist meditation practices. In fact, it is quite feasible to suggest that Beveridge's work is a literary form of meditative exercise. Noel Rowe approaches this position when he writes of Beveridge's "images which invite the reader to stand within a quiet centre and witness the world being threaded towards wholeness"<sup>343</sup>. Not only, then, does Beveridge's poetry have a still and attentive, meditative eye and ear, but it is meditatively structured in its non-attached concern for things' relatedness; in its attention to their transient but integral

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<sup>341</sup> Duwell, "Intricate Knots", p.253

<sup>342</sup> There are two poems of this title, one each in *The Domesticity of Giraffes* and *Accidental Grace*. I will henceforth refer to these poems as "The Fishermen I" (DG, 31-32) and "The Fishermen II" (AG, 23-24).

nature, and in the worked-for evenness of tone. The poetry strives to understand and show the world through a lens inflected with, but not exclusively built by, Buddhist notions of impermanence, compassion, conditionality and its counterpart, interdependence.

### **“My neighbour opens his hands”: Beveridge’s embodiment and enactment of Buddhist interdependence**

Several critics took early note of Beveridge’s Asian influences in their reviews of *The Domesticity of Giraffes*. The novelist and short story writer Beverley Farmer, herself engaged with Buddhist ideas in her book *A Body of Water*, notes the “consciously Oriental precision and delicacy”<sup>344</sup> of Beveridge’s poems like “The Herons”, “Monarch Butterflies” and “Japanese Cranes”. Vera Newsom finds a parallel in Beveridge’s form rather than tone, likening “Reels” to “haikus or tankas”<sup>345</sup>. She also argues that “Each poem is a happening or a process, a sliding from image to image until intricate ideas or patterns are evolved”<sup>346</sup>. Joan M. Davis detects the “obvious Asian influence”<sup>347</sup> in “Japanese Cranes” and “The Herons” and “Eye Piece”. She notes that “The change is evident in the shorter-line, economical form, and in the imagery”<sup>348</sup>. This “Asian” influence largely takes place through Beveridge’s aesthetic, and hence operates on a cultural rather than solely religious level. The primary effect is literary, at this point shaping the form and style of the poems somewhat more than their subject matter and

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<sup>343</sup> Noel Rowe, p.12

<sup>344</sup> Beverley Farmer, Review of *The Domesticity of Giraffes*, *Island*, 33, Summer, 1987, p.69

<sup>345</sup> Vera Newsom, “A Prize-Winning Poet”, *Southerly*, 1, 1989, p.119

<sup>346</sup> Newsom, p.118

<sup>347</sup> Joan M. Davis, *LiNQ*, 2, 1988, p.18

<sup>348</sup> Davis, p.18

the tone. The presence of Buddhist and other Asian religious ideas is nonetheless clearly present in Beveridge's tone of detachment or compassion in a number of poems.

Martin Duwell describes Beveridge's work as "a poetry of personal reticence; never exposing the self in the way that the poetry of Bruce Beaver, one of Beveridge's mentors, does"<sup>349</sup>. The reticence in Beveridge's work is not simply a "personal reticence", but is in fact a Buddhist-inspired reticence about continuing to fuel the self's attachments and desires. Although the explicit Buddhist presence in Beveridge's poetry is preceded by this general reticence, there clearly exists in her work a predisposition to a Buddhist understanding of self in relation to the world. While Duwell claims that Beveridge's poetry "positions the reader as an intimate"<sup>350</sup>, it does more than that: it strives to force a fissure in the barriers between self (Beveridge) and other (her subject matter and her readers). Similarly, Duwell draws attention to this theme of interconnection throughout Beveridge's poetry:

in a poet obsessed by interweavings, by a perception of the world as 'a vast ecology in which everything/ connects', this tends to emphasise the threshold as a place of connection rather than one of separation leading to transformation.<sup>351</sup>

Again, Duwell's reading is astute, but here he stops short of seeing the simultaneously liminal *and* central role of the poetry itself. The poems themselves provide the threshold between self and other, where the reader is invited into and participates in the poem and its drives and textures. The transformation Duwell hints at is not the transformation of caterpillars into butterflies, but a transformation of the relation between self and other. There is no self, Beveridge suggests, and hence there is no other. Writer and reader meet within the transformative threshold, the simultaneously liminal and central site of the

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<sup>349</sup> Duwell, "Intricate Knots", p.243

<sup>350</sup> Duwell, "Intricate Knots", p.243

poem, which stands in for both self and other. Indeed, the poem combines them into a new, non-dual identity. In his reading of "The Herons", Duwell contends that the image of the "birds drift[ing] off like camp-smoke" (*DG*, 50) "reminds us that their borders are those of the primal elements because it brings the fourth element, fire, into the poem"<sup>352</sup>. Another reading, closer to the sensibility at play in Beveridge's work can be offered. The birds' identity, rather than just their physical form, is what drifts off "like camp-smoke". This image benefits from being read in conjunction with Robert Gray's handling of smoke imagery, which is very often related to a perception of insubstantiality and transience, key notions in Buddhist thought. The "drive towards transcendent unity in the poems"<sup>353</sup> that Duwell identifies is actually embodied in this nonetheless paradoxical, diffuse and transient image of camp-smoke. This apparently "transcendent unity" is transience itself, or emptiness, or insubstantiality, or conditionality. These, Buddhism teaches, are the basic facts of existence.

Beveridge makes use of simile and metaphor in a way that differs in some important respects from Robert Gray. Duwell writes:

These poems inevitably absorb features of the world into structures of meaning: everything from the girl's swing and the peacock on the lawn to the spider's web have a metaphoric significance. Another tendency within Beveridge's poetry is the desire to record in such a way that the uniqueness of the item is never compromised but is, rather, highlighted.<sup>354</sup>

Beveridge allows absorption of other things, where Gray has his subject acquire other things' qualities without such a definite reciprocal economy. Beveridge, like Gray,

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<sup>351</sup> Duwell, "Intricate Knots", p.243

<sup>352</sup> Duwell, "Intricate Knots", p.244

<sup>353</sup> Duwell, "Intricate Knots", p.244

<sup>354</sup> Duwell, "Intricate Knots", p.248

exposes the interpenetration of objects through analogy: one thing is like another because, ultimately, they have the same nature. Gray and Beveridge alike show this relatedness through sometimes startling images, similes and metaphors. Gray is more inclined, through his sometimes apparently arbitrary similes, to deface or efface some aspect of the original. Gray works through direct analogy where Beveridge shows and enacts connections on a broader scale. This defacement shows up the nature of that object's self: it is no-self. Beveridge's images and metaphors are perhaps more fully explored than Gray's later poetry, and through her attentiveness she retains much of the object's own, relative, attributes while also clarifying a range of interconnections between that thing and its environment. While Gray might be thought, in Buddhist terms, to concentrate on things' transience and no-self, Beveridge is more likely to show their interrelatedness, and to describe no-self this way, through connection rather than dissolution. Beveridge wishes to harmonise where Gray draws as much attention to *his* desire to negotiate harmony as to a sense of alienation.

### **Holding everything together: Buddhist interdependence and Beveridge's threading motif**

It is true of many of Beveridge's poems of quiet observation and meditation that "the speaker is and is not part of the pattern, the world"<sup>355</sup>. Rowe's proposition assumes the non-dualistic view upon which interdependence depends. Beveridge alternatively shows, enacts or participates in this interdependence through images of webs, threads, musical patterning and through the shaping force of her own metaphorical imagination. *The Domesticity of Giraffes* features two key poems that seek out interdependence and connection, "Catching Webs" and "Orb Spider". In these poems Beveridge weaves

images of a desire for connection and repair. Such images of wholeness do not simply coincide with Buddhist interdependence, but formally enact a version of it.

“Catching Webs” provides a portrayal of a world where all is connection, each thing sewn to another. There are “stars that sewed themselves onto air/ like buttons in order of brightness” (*DG*, 16); the speaker sees her “world/ snatched up in a mending” (*DG*, 16), and recognises her silence as a “thin thin darning that holds the heart separate/ from its white dress” (*DG*, 17). These metaphorical interweavings are not only visible to the poet’s eye, but become tangible: “sometimes coming back into the house/ I’d feel a thread break across my lips” (*DG*, 16). This interweaving is partly associated with domestic imagery, as the speaker watches the orb spider “pegging out her web/ thin as a pressed flower” (*DG*, 18), but this domestic spinning of lines extends itself, stretching beyond the speaker’s own small experience: “I’d go out after meals to watch a thread/ trace itself on the sky and wait for it/ to drift into my hands” (*DG*, 16). This particular image in many ways typifies Beveridge’s image-making, shifting and tightening the focus from the macrocosm (the sky) to the microcosm (“into my hands”).

Formally, the stray few lines that open and close the poem are drawn into and subsequently shed by the poem’s otherwise close structure of four-line stanzas. The poem opens with a couplet of varying line lengths, the speaker called “out of the house” by “threads sweet with pollens” (*DG*, 16). It closes with a single, enjambed line that literally drags out from its preceding stanza and provides an open ending: “in the fragrant air, //I felt the moon in my blood, trailing its wedding” (*DG*, 17). This line contains, in

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<sup>355</sup> Rowe, “In Memory of Clear Singing”, p.24

the poem's closing but open and suggestive phrase, simultaneous fraying ("trailing") and connection ("wedding"). This final split image haunts the poem. It casts the poem's network of threading images in a different light, creating a constant flux between patterning and disarray. Remember that the speaker's world is "snatched up in a mending" but is also "unspooled" (a play on "unspoiled"?). Similarly, the thread that drifts into the speaker's hands, while part of a pattern, has become a loose thread.

Beveridge often ensures that images of patterning are accompanied by a counter-image that sets up a tension. The "child's heart pushing in/ like a needle, making a pattern/ of its incisions" (DG, 17) is followed immediately by the speaker "making a web/ out of the stitch of [the heart's] own silence" (DG, 17). These apparently conflicting patterns are not so at all: rather, they form part of the same pattern of transience, in which order and chaos, threading and disarray, are manifestations of the same process. The sewing and repairing imagery also actively participates in perpetuating an element of disarray and disconnection: "the thin thin darning [of silence] that holds the heart separate/ from its white dress" (DG, 17). The speaker is not separate from the images she sees. She takes part in this broad context of threading and sewing imagery that connects things: she knows that "a thread/ could be pulled right through/ the human body" (DG, 17). The interwoven fabric that concerns the poem clothes everything: "(those stolen threads always fitted so close)" (DG, 16) (a phrase itself dressed in parentheses); "the undergarments of trees" (DG, 16); the "air crisp as dressmaker's paper" (DG, 16); "the bright textile of summer" (DG, 16); the "world/ snatched up in a mending" (DG, 16); "flowers draped in the negligee// of their leaves" (DG, 16); and "stars that sewed themselves onto the air/ like buttons" (DG, 16). The image of the "heart pushing in/ like a needle" (DG, 17) prepares us for other poems in *The Domesticity of Giraffes*, where the heart and the emotions are not only vehicles of connection and belonging, but also for

the alienation and puncturing of lives. Beveridge is not unaware of the darker side of interdependence.

A less ambivalent network is drawn in "Orb Spider" (*DG*, 18). Rather than the world that is threaded and sewn into existence in "Catching Webs", this one is threaded and literally drawn on the level of cartography. The metaphor aligns the spider's web-making with a picture- and map-making, which in turn resembles Beveridge's poem-making. Like the image of watching a loose thread first "trace itself on the sky" and then "drift into my hands" in "Catching Webs", "Orb Spider" drifts from observing a spider "pegging out her web" (*DG*, 18) to a musical and webbed notation of the metaphorical implications of observing that act. The poem's first two and last two lines reflect, or rather echo, each other a little, setting up a border for the webbed imagery within. "I saw her, pegging out her web/ thin as a pressed flower in the bleaching light" (*DG*, 18) is echoed and transformed into a more analogical image in the closing two lines: "I watched her above the low flowers/ tracing her world, making it one perfect drawing" (*DG*, 18). The transfer of this image from the beginning of the poem to its end not only encloses the images and networks within the poem much as the spider traps her prey, but actually extends the spider's activity into an endless present. This also signifies a correlation between the poem's imagery and subject matter, and its form, the poem preying upon and restraining its trapped imagery, formally mimicking the spider and the network of interdependence her web encapsulates. There is another web of interdependence, then, between the poem's material and its structure, just as there is a network of relatedness among the images within the poem. The imagery, part of an expansive mesh of meaning and connection, mimics the insects that "clicked like opening seed-pods" (*DG*, 18). And like the insects, the images, too, are "trussed up" in the lines of the poem.



The poem beckons a reading where images not only relate to many others, but in which a potential for connection, interconnectedness, or wholeness is, as Buddhism indicates, inherent in those images and metaphors. Sewing imagery is borrowed from “Catching Webs”: lost bees

could be gathered  
back to the anther, and threaded onto the flower  
like a jewel.

(DG, 18)

The bees’ “solar flight” also reflects the wholeness Beveridge works emphatically into the poem. Images of circles, a symbol of completeness, abound: “one perfectly-lit hoop”, “orbits”, “the sun burnt low on the horizon”, “spinning her web”, “seed-pods”, “tiny balls stuck in a grid”<sup>356</sup>. This last image of insects trapped in the web gathers the circular imagery of completeness with the interweaving, as Duwell puts it, of the web’s gridwork. Order and wholeness interlock, in the imagery as in the poem’s structure.

Beveridge expands her attention from close observation to a much broader vision, and in doing so, cleanly links the two. Midway through “Orb Spider”, Beveridge sets up another echo of the poem’s bound first and last lines, while widening her focus:

I watched her work, produce her known world,  
a pattern, her way to traverse  
a little portion of the sky;  
a simple cosmography, a web drawn  
by the smallest nib. And out of my own world  
mapped from smallness ...  
... I could see  
immovable stars.

(DG, 18)

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<sup>356</sup> This series of images couples with the proliferation of moon imagery in “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree” from Beveridge’s third collection, *Wolf Notes*. See Chapter 9.

Entire worlds become the focus, though the grandiose possibility of such a claim is restrained by clear limitation on these worlds' sizes, respectively "a little portion" and a "world/ mapped by smallness". The patterning of the spider's web-world and the speaker's mapped world are drawn together by the sound patterning in the disconnected rhyme of the speaker's "own world" with the spider's "known world". Again, the spider's "simple cosmography" is mirrored in "immovable stars". The spider's web, with its trapped prey, is likened to the night sky and its "immovable stars". This connection through seeming incongruity does not work only on the level of imagery, but in the language of patterning. The web is the spider's "known world, a pattern", while the speaker

... saw the same dance in the sky,  
 the pattern like a match-box puzzle,  
 tiny balls stuck in a grid until shaken  
 so much, all the orbits were in place.

(*DG*, 18)

The poem's key images, in fact, circle in tight orbits around the central focus of interdependent relations just as they orbit the pattern of webbing. These images collect in bundles within the lines of the poem, formally and structurally enacting the caught insects. The same networks of connectivity seen in the poem's images and subject matter are similarly etched into the poem's fabric, creating a close network of meaning and form.

This imagery of threads, webs and lines runs right through a great deal of Beveridge's poetry in both of her first two books and continues into *Wolf-notes*, in poems like "The Fisherman's Son" (*WN*, 33-35) and "Sailor" (*WN*, 110-111). The nautical

theme acts as a major vehicle for this imagery, most notably in the two poems titled “The Fishermen”, one in each of Beveridge’s first two books<sup>357</sup>, and “There is a Haunting Music Round the Bay” (AG, 3-4) from *Accidental Grace*. Set at the centre of “The Fishermen II” (AG, 23-24) is a knotting of thread, line and net imagery. This netting provides the connections that hold the poem together, and also offers a means by which liminal spaces (the land and sea) provide a site of connection for otherness. Martin Duwell notes this, remarking on “the fishermen standing at the shore (another liminal space) connected to the sea by a thread of monofilament line”<sup>358</sup>. Building on Duwell’s idea, it seems that Beveridge deploys the imagery of threading not simply to allow a momentary glimpse of the seashore’s liminality, but rather to provide a network of connections between spaces, thus drawing together apparent binaries. Duwell’s conception is based in a dualistic framework, whereas Beveridge collapses the very notion of such binaries in many of her poems, most notably those embodying Buddhist principles like interdependence, transience and no-self. Duwell writes of “The Herons” that the “identity of the bird as an inhabitant of liminal spaces emerges here through a lattice of images”<sup>359</sup>. The fishermen poems, particularly the second in *Accidental Grace*, sustain a reading where connection and interdependence dominate the site’s liminality. The site possesses qualities of *both* binaries, land and sea, through the tide’s constant flooding and receding. Ultimately, where the fishermen stand is both land and sea and is also neither, refusing categorisation.

In “The Fishermen I”, a lattice is provided by both musical and visual patterning. Contrarily, in “The Fishermen II”, Beveridge adopts the connective qualities of the

<sup>357</sup> Vera Newsom places these fishing poems from *The Domesticity of Giraffes* from between 1983 and 1987. Newsom, p.121

<sup>358</sup> Duwell, “Intricate Knots”, p.247

thread imagery of “Orb Spider” and “Catching Webs”. In “The Fishermen I” the speaker reports from immediate sensory experience: “I see birds” (*DG*, 31); “I listen” (*DG*, 31); “all you can see” (*DG*, 31); “I .../ hear my blood in shells” (*DG*, 31); “I hear the gasp” (*DG*, 32). This attention to the sensory helps in holding the poem and its images together. In fact the speaker’s senses structure the poem’s movement, acting as the poem’s connective tissue. There is a desire to repair and/or connect in a number of Beveridge’s poems such as “Catching Webs”. In Beveridge’s poems, more typically the desire is to find connectedness where there appears to be none. While “The Fishermen I” certainly contains a mesh of connective and interconnected imagery, it also contains several glimpses of disconnection: “The air’s a torn weave”; “birds thin as apple-cores”; “broken shells”; “dead voices” (*DG*, 31). Broken or not, the shells receive what the speaker receives:

I listen:

the wind and the sea  
move the same sound through broken shells

(*DG*, 31).

If the air is “a torn weave”, another image of fabric, then not only do the fishermen’s lines draw sea and land together, but so does the wind, though “torn”. The sameness of sound is inescapable, and is, so it seems, an innate quality of the littoral:

And sometimes that sound  
will never leave your hands;  
it will trail like something  
caught on the tips  
of your fingers.

(*DG*, 31)

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<sup>359</sup> Duwell, “Intricate Knots”, p.244

This image sets up several resonances. First, it recalls “Catching Webs” where the speaker feels the thread-like, waxing and waning moon “in my blood, trailing its wedding”. This is also echoed when the speaker notes that she can “hear [her] blood in shells” (DG, 31). Here, connection and fraying jostle. Second, there is a strong hint of the smell of gutted fish (these *are* fishermen) that is difficult to remove (“caught on the tips/ of your fingers”). Although Duwell sees the shore is liminal, even that categorisation is unstable, as we are shown through a repeated image: it is “a shore that seems/ to be drifting” (DG, 31), and the speaker can “hear the gasp in the shells/ when the shore drifts” (DG, 32). Duwell’s definition of liminal is itself dependent upon a view of things as dualistic: Beveridge might entertain this view, but only in order to set up *false* binaries and to dismantle them through her structuring and imagery of interconnection. The distance, physical and figurative, between the fishermen and the speaker also disappears as the poem approaches its conclusion. They are “the fishermen” (DG, 31), and the speaker states that she “stand[s] right at the edge/ with the men/ but at a distance” (DG, 32). There is a reciprocal movement in the poem’s second last stanza which draws together both speaker and fishermen, sea and shore, the liminal space and the binaries which support it. The fishing lines are

thread [which] pump back  
a secret voice

into my open hands

(DG, 32)

This initiatory rite allows the speaker to join the men she had remained aloof from, and there is a strange connectivity between them, the shore and the sea:

We don’t call, the one  
tense strand is enough.  
All night, our white breath

crosses into the cold  
ouija-world of the sea.

(*DG*, 32)

The association of the fishermen with connection seen in “The Fishermen (I)” is reiterated in “The Fishermen II”. This is the poem’s first sentence: “They have always reminded me/ of lace-makers” (*AG*, 23). This second poem’s structure is more overtly carried through its abundant imagery of threading. The first stanza alone contains no less than six instances of such imagery in its use of “knots”, “lace-makers”, “fabric”, “stitched”, “needles”, “darning” (*AG*, 23). The major strands of imagery and sites of meaning in the poem are configured in terms of threads or nets. The ocean is variously “an open page of knots” (*AG*, 23) and “a closed fabric stitched/ by needles” (*AG*, 23), “bunched about their wrists like cuffs” (*AG*, 23). The men fish as if they were sewing:

In their baskets  
are things found in the hands  
of needleworkers, haberdashers.  
And see how they sit in the garnet  
dusk, running threads into eyelets

(*AG*, 23)

Beveridge points out the similarities between the roles of fishing and sewing. This is another, gendered, set of binaries she is seeking to unthread, all the while demonstrating that there are no such ultimate boundaries in the first place. The fishermen “lift their arms into the sky” as they cast out their lines. This returns them to Beveridge’s network of similar imagery in “The Fishermen I”, as well as “Catching Webs” and “Orb Spider”, where there is a thin but nearly ubiquitous lattice-work of connection and interdependence between realms, here of shore and sea. The image of “music sewn in like pearls” (*AG*, 23) aligns with a series of sound patterns: the “gulls flying out from the

dunes" (*AG*, 23), of the men as, "In a chivalry/ of lines they listen to the sea,/ to the shells" (*AG*, 23). These images link Beveridge's formal music with other patterning, sewing together visual, formal and musical patterns into a broad design of apparently separate things that are shown, after all, to enjoy interdependent relations with each other.

Once again, in poems like "Hawkesbury Egret" (*AG*, 25-27) and "Yachts" (*AG*, 56-57) this interweaving is at work. In these poems the ropes and threads act as physical and figurative strings pulling toward interdependence and enacting Beveridge's metaphorical imagination. In "Hawkesbury Egret", Beveridge once more activates the complex of interwoven imagery, form and narrative drive behind her subject matter. As in "The Fishermen I", the poem's structure depends partly on a repetition of the speaker's sensory experience. This repetition opens the first three stanzas: "I have witnessed your quiet flight" (*AG*, 25); "I have seen those feathers evoke/ the smell and drift of lemon blossoms" (*AG*, 25); "Today I heard the sound of a little/ bridge creak" (*AG*, 25). Midway through the first stanza, this motif is repeated: "I have seen your white tapered length" (*AG*, 25). Once Beveridge establishes this thematic approach, she allows these statements of visual and auditory experience to slip into the structure of the stanzas. The "sound of a little/ bridge creak" in the third stanza is accompanied by the speaker seeing the egret "gaze/ beyond my shoulders" (*AG*, 25). Elsewhere, the speaker says: "I saw/ you lift into a channel of sunlight" (*AG*, 25); "how/ many times have I heard a craftsman's/ meticulous hands turn his shells/ to the light" (*AG*, 26); "How many times have I heard/ the halyard ropes ring" (*AG*, 26); "I/ could hear the lobstermen" (*AG*, 26). Beveridge closes off this sequence of sights and sounds with the quasi-anthropomorphic "you have shown me sites seen only/ from the willows" (*AG*,

27). While this does shift the emphasis onto an inhabitant of the environment the speaker visits, it perhaps lends too much weight to the egret as a conscious participant in the events of the poem, a weakness into which Beveridge's poems have at times slipped.

The egret itself, although a focus for Beveridge's metaphorical flair, is not her only concern. Rather, Beveridge's analogical imagination draws the egret within two specific contexts: its relation to its environment, and the relation of that environment to Beveridge's imagination. This accounts for images of crafting and creativity in the poem. There are images of making, as well: "craftsmen's meticulous hands" (AG, 26), "the nuchal plumes paint two/ brush-strokes of a long river" (AG, 25). This last image, then, re-focuses other images of the river. Reading the poem through this frame draws attention to its constructedness, and hence adds further weight to the drives and moves Beveridge installs through her imagery, the speaker's tone and preoccupations, and her formal structuring through networks of meaning and suggestion. Again, while Duwell affirms that Beveridge's poetry "can be difficult to describe since pulling one thread involves disturbing so many others", it is equally so that each of these threads needs to be considered in that context, and not solely in its own right. It should be reiterated that Beveridge's interweavings are formal *and* preoccupationual. The egret is linked intimately to its environment: "the way you settle into the casuarinas/ as if you had attained the sanctity of dusk" (AG, 26); "your white tapered length/ ...no more solid than a Taoist's beard/ perched beside the Tao Te Ching,/ a stick of incense and a butter lamp" (AG, 25); the "blue agates/ of your call" (AG, 25); "You evoked again and again the light/ of the wooden docks" (AG, 26); "you flew the skies a sail-maker/ touches with his hopes" (AG, 26); and its



feathers evoke  
 the smell and drift of lemon blossoms  
 while the nuchal plumes paint two  
 brush-strokes of a long river

(AG, 25)

The speaker finds a sort of serenity or stillness, which is contemplative if not exactly meditative in the Buddhist sense, within her grief by plotting the egret in terms of its belonging and environment. This environment is as much imagined as actual, as much cultural and literary as it is natural. These environments are not separate: they are the same thing mediated through different lenses: both co-exist necessarily within and through the poem. The repetition of the “two blasts” from the lobstermen’s boat is a variation on the eponymous five bells of Slessor’s poem. Beveridge’s poem plots a very similar movement as “Five Bells” in terms of mourning, place and longing. The way it shapes the combination of form and concern is also reminiscent of Slessor. The metaphorical flow is not as surreally disorienting as in Slessor’s poem, but the wealth of Beveridge’s imagery creates a similar grounding of aesthetic and experience in a specific place. The bird, the speaker says, has

... taken me the way the water does  
 an unskipped moon, fluttering it  
 back into a steadying beacon

(AG, 26)

The stillness of mood here, emanates from a recognition of underlying interconnectedness between the things the egret shows the speaker. The poem’s metaphorical and simile-driven drift is formally excessive, threatening to derail itself through its own momentum. It is kept under tight control, though, through the scaffolding effect of the speaker’s continual return to the senses, to her watching the

egret and its movements. This control over strong emotion allows the poem to retain its balance between mourning and living. Beveridge's speaker acts out a sort of non-attachment: while feeling and observing her sorrow she is not engulfed by it.

This continual return in the poem's structure to the speaker's sensory stimuli cements a link between this aspect of the poem's form and subject to its other patterning devices: metaphor, simile and allusions, musical or sound patterns, and references to the near-ubiquitous threading motif. These elements form a network that ropes together the poem's various structures on the levels of form, metaphor, imagery and subject matter. The threading motif is somewhat less evident as an overt presence in "Hawkesbury Egret", working more as a loose allusion: "the coursings your voice/ takes the river through" (AG, 26). Still, the effect of interweaving that Duwell alerts us to is achieved often by a simple texturing, with Beveridge dropping into the poem images of "the halyard ropes ring[ing] against the masts" (AG, 26) "a fisherman toiling/ with a rope by the pier" (AG, 26). The internal rhyme between "ropes" and "hopes" (AG, 26) two lines later subtly reminds us of Beveridge's intention. The rhyme does not work through direct statement, but through suggestion. There is, implicit in this rhyme, a positivity of attitude: things do not, through their interdependence upon each other, simply lose or gain attributes: there is a constant oscillation between loss and gain. This interdependence is closely related to no-self, through which Beveridge extends apparently straightforward depictions of relations between people, or between people and animals and their environments.

Beveridge's metaphorical daring is perhaps at its most heightened in "Yachts" (AG, 56-57). David McCooey sees that "one metaphor cascades into another, and the 'if/then' structure simply opens one string of metaphors up to another"<sup>360</sup>. In Beveridge's poetry, the working of metaphor, and the analogical tropes generally, follows the same approximate arguments as Buddhist interdependence (via conditionality) and no-self: that metaphor entails a simultaneous expansion and displacement of the object and its qualities. In Beveridge's poem, the yachts are present *only* through metaphor and simile. This does not mean they are in any way absent. As Beveridge exercises her facility with metaphor, she draws the analogical subjects together with the object, constructing, as she does in other poems, a web of connections in which the qualities of one thing are dependent upon those of another for a fuller understanding of its "self".

The images and metaphors that comprise most of the weave of "Yachts" seem somewhat attenuated until one realises that the poem circles rather than directly approaches the object of its title. These images echo and reflect the yachts themselves, so the poem is in this sense a diffuse representation and evocation of yachts. Beveridge draws out the images' yacht-ness and demonstrates, for example, the yacht's latch-ness ("you'll know the sound of a latch/ dropping shut": AG, 56). That is, the qualities and properties of these things interpenetrate each other, and are thus also interdependent. Similarly, all these properties, which ultimately belong to the yachts, are deeply provisional, unsatisfactory: this is why, in part (other than to create a poem), Beveridge drifts so many images of likeness of yachts past the reader, and indeed involves the reader in this floating. Beckoning the reader into the poem's lattice-work of metaphor, Beveridge extends a further invitation: to notice the degree to which the objects in the

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<sup>360</sup> McCooey, "New Poets", p.204

poem are interdependent, conditioned by each other, revealing new qualities in each other invisible without the comparisons Beveridge offers. In this way Beveridge proposes a Buddhist teaching that is embodied in her control of metaphor, image and form.

### **“A musical matter”: sound patterning in Beveridge’s poetry**

In “Yachts”, Beveridge makes the astute decision to implicate the reader in her making of metaphors. She repeats “if you can ...” four times, while variations on the intimate, conspiratorial tones of “then you’ll know” are repeated with rather more frequency (ten times). This conversational address, along with Beveridge’s auditory and visual imagery, forms the scaffolding of “Yachts” rather than the network of rope or threading imagery more typical of Beveridge’s poems. The poem is part dare, part complicity, and part game. The yachts take shape as the three-line stanza, the knot that allows the poem to hang together, entangles seemingly stray images and drags them toward their originating object: yachts. In the very first stanza,

They are the sound of teacups wheeled off,  
of a woolly butt’s littlest birds rattling  
song-bottles in all its sun-tiered racks.

(AG, 56)

These two improbable comparisons contain several of Beveridge’s recurrent motifs and concerns. The musical imagery of “song bottles” is fixed to the physical structure of “sun-tiered racks”. Beveridge’s poetry, Duwell insists, “is obsessed by patterning and the search for patterns, tapestries ... as well as chaotic contingency and its transcendent

'monarch note'"<sup>361</sup>. Musical patterns rarely predominate in Beveridge's poetry, but nonetheless form a diffuse framework of themes, motifs, riffs and formal virtuosity. Chris Wallace-Crabbe sees in Beveridge's work a "sensibility which perceives things vividly [and] can at the same time see them falling into structures, harmonious shapes"<sup>362</sup>. He returns to this theme of musical patterning, suggesting that "in this collection [*Accidental Grace*], the relation between the world's parts is a musical matter"<sup>363</sup>. In "Yachts" there are "brittle bells/ fiddled with and shaken", "the chime from/ a lacquered box", "the call/ of an oriole", "the tripping of bells" (*AG*, 56), and "the sharp strike-notes// of bell-ringers" (*AG*, 57). While these form another scaffold of recurrent images, they also lend an actual musical quality.

Everything is contained within the metaphors that structure the poem: the natural world, music, cooking, the world of work, leisure, death and fishing. Ordering all this is Beveridge's repeated injunction: "They *are*" (*AG*, 56, my emphasis). This credo signals from the outset Beveridge's intent to drive the poem with metaphorical flair, but also rings with a certainty that dares the reader to suspend their disbelief. Continuity with Beveridge's established modes of poetry-making confirm that the excessive, apparently chaotic metaphors and images in "Yachts" are not chosen randomly. There is a long thread of metaphor that links "Yachts" to another poem in *Accidental Grace*, "Shooting the Bird" (*AG*, 14-16). In the latter poem, the bird, like the yachts in this poem, is elusive, never sighted or described. The yachts and the bird both form a present absence

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<sup>361</sup> Duwell, "Intricate Knots", p.253. The title of *Wolf Notes* refers to the opposite of such a "monarch note". Beveridge provides this definition of a wolf note: "a discordant or false vibration in a string due to a defect in structure or adjustment of the instrument" (*Wolf Notes*, opposite contents page).

<sup>362</sup> Chris Wallace-Crabbe, *Australian Book Review*, 185, October 1996, p.58

<sup>363</sup> Wallace-Crabbe, p.58

at the heart of their respective poems, much as Siddhattha and the Buddha do in “The Buddha Cycle” and “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree”:

Or you might hear the bird, the one that  
 calls to whoever sits on the porch on  
 a summer's night and listens to the tripping  
 of bells from a bay, having already  
 struggled up a precipitous pass  
 and dared difficult, sultry questions  
 with their face open to the sea.

(AG, 56)

If the bird is connected to this string of imagery, so then are the yachts, no matter how loose this connection appears to be. The “bells from the bay” are emitted from the yachts, which the person in the poem sees, “with their face open to the sea”.

In all this flow of metaphor, the riffing of “you’ll know” and “you/ might even know” is a settling presence, allowing the reader to draw on Beveridge’s sureness, without needing to directly see the patterns emerge. These motifs, rather than the purely formal consideration of three-line stanza, carry the poem’s show of connectedness. The connectedness is not in the things themselves, but in their sometimes stretched and distant relation to each other. These connections are in danger of being closed off: hence the imagery of enclosure in “the sound of a latch/ dropping shut” (AG, 56) and “you hear yourself stumble/ up a staircase and drop your keys” (AG, 57). But the potential distance here is countered by images of closeness: “they pull in the weights” (AG, 57) and “Perhaps you hear your life winched in” (AG, 57). The network of imagery is, in many ways, that sound of “life [being] winched in”: Beveridge’s imagery draws the

connections between things visually, auditorially and formally, winching the interdependence she sees in the world into her poems.

Despite the apparent excess of imagistic and metaphoric sweep, Beveridge does hone the poem constantly back to its not quite missing centre. It is only because the centre *appears* absent that the anxious but fertile wedding of images and analogies attains the power it does. This absence, itself a formal, conceptual dare, fuels the playful, slightly uneasy energy in her work. This unease provides a test of Beveridge's skill at structuring poems and of her ability to sustain, through the poem, belief in the Buddhist underpinnings of many of these poems. The poem's conception asks: can an interdependent worldview be sustained without an apparent centre? This difficulty is central to Buddhist thinking in the West. If there is no centre, no ultimately stable, independently existing centre as Buddhism insists, can patterns still be created that allow us to discern things' interdependent relationships? "Yachts" suggests that we can, and that patterns and meaning need not be ultimately stable, or authoritarian as even a Buddhist like Harold Stewart might argue. Beveridge's Buddhism acts as a support for her aesthetic response to the world.

Beveridge's work "explores the significance of the continuous crossing of boundaries between orders of creation"<sup>364</sup>, Martin Duwell argues. Such boundaries undergo a "continuous crossing" because Beveridge is able to show that they do not truly exist as boundaries: rather they are convenient, dualistic constructs that allow us to talk about things as if they *were* separate, a notion of which Beveridge's poetry subtly

disabuses us. The connections and relations between things in Beveridge's poetry are not aligned exclusively with a Buddhist or Buddhist-like interdependence. There are numerous images of physical, psychical and natural connection and contact throughout Beveridge's work: the caterpillars touching in "The Caterpillars" (*DG*, 24-25); the uncomfortable contact between the speaker and the boys in "The Two Brothers" (*DG*, 57); the speaker as administrator of cultural and national connection in "On Polling Day" (*DG*, 44-45); and speech as an emblem of disarray in "The Lyre Birds" (*DG*, 20-21) and "The Fall of Angels" (*DG*, 66). This opens onto another, more direct layer of the connectedness and interdependence at play and enacted in Beveridge's work. Some of the contact and connection in these poems is desirous, attached, and is, then, in Buddhist terms, innately unsatisfactory. Interdependence, Beveridge allows, also has a downside: if a poem's characters or speaker do not see the interdependence, there is the trouble of attachment to unrequited, unfulfilled desire.

### **"A quiet centre": Poetry writing as meditation practice**

Noel Rowe writes that Beveridge's poetry "shapes ... meaning through a network of delicate observations and resonant images ... which invite the reader to stand within a quiet centre and witness the world being threaded towards wholeness"<sup>365</sup>.

Beveridge's poetry situates the reader as an observer of the poet's meditation-like writing practice as she contemplates specific objects, ideas or images. These poems maintain and sustain their focus, as simile, metaphor and form enact a meditation practice: this is what holds her poems together, give shape to them, and enhances their meditative qualities.

These structures provide a poetic, structural equivalent of breathing and *metta* practices.

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<sup>364</sup> Duwell, "Intricate Knots", p.253

<sup>365</sup> Rowe, "Clear singing", p.12



These poems decrease the distance between reader, poet and subject matter, allowing the reader, as Rowe observes, to “appreciate the poetry by participating in it”<sup>366</sup>. Toward the end of the chapter he suggests that “Orb Spider” is “covertly inviting us into the sound and shape of wholeness”<sup>367</sup>.

Beveridge searches for parallels between interdependence and poetic form on the one hand and Buddhist ethical and meditation practice on the other. Alison Croggon, in her *Quadrant* review of *Accidental Grace*, fails to see that behind Beveridge’s meticulous formal approach and her preoccupation with things’ detail and presence is a Buddhist-like concern with interdependence. Croggon writes that “Judith Beveridge approaches the dilemma of poetry almost wholly through craft. Her second collection, *Accidental Grace*, reveals a poet of ability and talent hobbled by conventions”<sup>368</sup>. More realistically, though, Beveridge renews form, applying it in order to create in her poetry what she sees in the world. She constructs a formal framework in order to dismantle ideas of binary, dualistic views of the world. Croggon, though, further implies that Beveridge’s craft is empty of anything but craft:

I started tiring of carefully turned lines, competent prosodies, polished metaphors, the elaborate demonstrations of vocabulary and sensibility – the imprisonments and defences of craft. It is a feeling that intensifies on subsequent readings. There are very few poems that are not well-written. There are not many that are more than well-written, either. The body of Beveridge’s work is not so much decaying as preserved in embalming fluids.<sup>369</sup>

Croggon, perhaps because of her own poetic and critical sensibility, is not able to credit that in Beveridge’s work, form does not simply serve its own purposes, but is a reflection, indeed a manifestation, of her Buddhist interests. This response to Beveridge’s

<sup>366</sup> Rowe, “Clear singing” p.

<sup>367</sup> Rowe, “Clear singing”, p.25

<sup>368</sup> Alison Croggon, “The Necessity of True Speaking”, *Quadrant*, November, 1997, p.75

intensive crafting (which at times renders a poem too cool or flat) could pass with little comment if it were not for what follows a little later in Croggon's review.

Croggon declines to see the connection Beveridge actively builds between Buddhist practice and poetic practice, but in the same review she nonetheless praises Louis de Paor for his poetry's evocation of the Buddhist tendencies that she sees in Jaan Kaplinski's work:

I can't help thinking of the grace and intensity that inhabit the poetry of the Estonian poet Jaan Kaplinski, whose stringent and pained insistence on the present, human moment opens into a Buddhist contemplation of the eternal.<sup>370</sup>

It is certainly arguable that such a "present, human moment open[ing] into a Buddhist contemplation" is precisely what Beveridge aspires to, and achieves, in much of her poetry. She is certainly able to focus a "Buddhist contemplation" of the nature of self and world through a "stringent and pained insistence on the present" that parallels and matches that of Robert Gray. In this context, Croggon's apparent interest in the Buddhist tendencies in Kaplinski's work is related to an appreciation of his aesthetic at least as much as with his religious inclination. That Croggon does not see this same Buddhist tendency in Beveridge's book betrays a surprising oversight, and speaks of a clash of sensibilities as well as a misapprehension of both Beveridge's mode and subject matter. It seems disingenuous at best to ignore the rather more obvious Buddhist aspects of Beveridge's work, such as her sequence, "The Buddha Cycle", that closes *Accidental Grace*. Croggon instead argues merely that "the imprisonments and defences of craft"<sup>371</sup> dominate Beveridge's poetry.

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<sup>369</sup> Croggon, pp.75-76

<sup>370</sup> Croggon, p.76

The watchfulness Beveridge demonstrates in her handling of imagery and objects is paralleled in her equally observant handling of tone, form and craft. This combination of visual and formal watchfulness is in part a manifestation of her Buddhist practice. As Beveridge claims:

If you're a serious practitioner [of Buddhism] then everything you do should be practice ... [but] sometimes I feel that my writing may be a kind of anti-practice in that my work is very sense-oriented, and so much of a Buddhist practice seems to be about getting away from the senses.<sup>372</sup>

Beveridge also suggests that "Poetry writing is similar to meditation"<sup>373</sup>. Buddhist meditation looks to cultivate of an attitude of openness, a feature which Croggon mentions in her discussion of "How to Love Bats": the "poem twists through its metaphors, refusing to close off the process of thought, the evolution of its becoming"<sup>374</sup>. In many other poems, this movement of becoming provides scaffolding for the poem's form and the narrative unfolding of the poem's source of apparent tension. This "evolution of ... becoming" is present also in Beveridge's attentiveness to objects. She refers to it in this way:

It's the quality of attention or awareness that you bring to something that's important. And certainly Buddhist practice is all about that, about being in the moment and experiencing the moment to its absolute fullest ... I do try to bring as much attention as I can to something. Which is where the hard work comes in.<sup>375</sup>

This last comment clearly suggests the possibility of a reciprocal response between form and subject matter. The "hard work" lies in finding appropriate formal, musical and rhythmic equivalents for the imagery. That is, the way Beveridge crafts her poems and images is a formal correlative to her clearly stated Buddhist interest in attentiveness. She

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<sup>371</sup> Croggon, p.75

<sup>372</sup> Greg McLaren, "Interview with Judith Beveridge", *Southerly*, Vol.62, 3, 2002, p.51

<sup>373</sup> McLaren, p.51

<sup>374</sup> Croggon, p.75

adds that "A lot of my poems tend to be quite formal. I think that helps me focus"<sup>376</sup>.

Moreover, Beveridge says

I'm always trying to order my poems stanzaically ... [as] a way of coming to terms with the chaos, or randomness I experience when I write. I find that I can control some of that uncertainty with form, gradually fixing a boundary.<sup>377</sup>

Form, then, is not at all arbitrary for Beveridge: she constructs order through a network of formal interdependence in order to demonstrate and enact the interdependence she sees elsewhere. She actually builds in the poem a formal enactment of the *apparent* separateness we perceive, in order to break it down, again through form and treatment of the subject matter, to show that the idea of separateness, unchanging self, is actually arbitrarily constructed, unreal. While at times Beveridge's crafting does create an undertow that distracts from or hinders a poem, this is by no means the over-riding tendency that Croggon suggests.

For Beveridge the relationship between practice and theory in writing, and the Buddhist integration of meditation and ethical practice and philosophy is clear. She recognises the need for balance between the two, noting that "my main dilemma as a writer [is] to find a balance between the practice required and a certain quality of living that will make the poetry richer"<sup>378</sup>. Beveridge affirms this connection between writing and a Buddhist or spiritual practice. She states:

I think there must be ways of living and being that promote the tendency towards poetical experience, as much in the way that certain disciplines give access to the transcendent. In fact, the two for me are interchangeable.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> McLaren, p.53

<sup>376</sup> McLaren, p.54

<sup>377</sup> McLaren, p.54

<sup>378</sup> Judith Beveridge, "Towards the Possible: A Personal Poetics", *Meanjin*, 2, 1989, p.334

<sup>379</sup> Beveridge, "Towards the Possible", p.334

Years later, Beveridge says, though, that “where I do feel a deep sense of connection is in the act of writing itself, in the act of doing; when I’m totally absorbed, concentrated, focussed ... when I’m just in the process itself”<sup>380</sup>. Finding ways to join the creative experience to the sacred or spiritual is an obvious choice for Beveridge: she finds each in the other. It is no great surprise, then, when Susan Lever suggests that Beveridge’s work “transforms even the everyday ... into something higher than itself – the source of prayer”<sup>381</sup>. Perhaps, though, Beveridge does not see “something higher” than the world she observes and writes about. Rather, she adheres to the argument Dōgen propounds in Robert Gray’s “To the Master, Dogen Zenji”, that “All that’s important/ is the ordinary things” (NSP, 30). The trick is to see, Beveridge suggests through her poems’ near-obsessive attention to detail, the interdependent, transient, *sunya* nature of all things, ordinary and otherwise.

### **Beveridge’s early predisposition to Buddhist ideas**

A poem placed close to the centre of Beveridge’s first book, *The Domesticity of Giraffes*, “The Herons” (DG, 50) features two critical images that signpost a significant Buddhist presence at work. She shows us the “slender, rag-thin bird we called/ blue Gotama” and the other herons, “beautiful as blue veins in the wrists of monks/ fasting for perfection”. Beveridge writes of the herons that it is

as if  
their eyes carried on  
  
through emanations.

(DG, 50)

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<sup>380</sup> McLaren, p.51. This interview was conducted in late 1998, nine years after the publication of the statement in *Meanjin*. This is a not insignificant similarity of approach over a considerable period of time.

<sup>381</sup> Susan Lever, “Three Women Poets”, *Australian Book Review*, 185, October, 1996, p.57

These more obviously Buddhist images radiate through the poem, drawing other images and phrases to them, and prefiguring and anticipating elements of other poems. The “bird we called/ blue Gotama”, Beveridge writes, “stood so peacefully” (*DG*, 50), invoking the stillness often ascribed to Buddhist monks. This stillness is a result of cultivating an attitude of non-attachment and echoes as the birds seem to have “looked past all hungers” (*DG*, 50). At the heart of this statement is the ambiguity of “looked”. The twinned meaning here hangs on whether Beveridge’s speaker or the herons are doing the looking. If the speaker thinks the herons look as if they are “past all hungers”, their ascetic-like thinness contains an admonition of a practice based in self-denial. If the agency belongs to the herons, the meaning and tone of this passage shifts demonstrably: they have seen beyond attachment, are “past all hungers” and desires. Beveridge’s diction here is critical and necessarily contains both meanings at once, suggesting a considered ambivalence toward the role of Siddhattha’s ascetic strictness prior to his attaining enlightenment and becoming the Buddha. This ambivalence is treated much more extensively in Beveridge’s later narrative sequence of Siddhattha’s ascetic wandering in *Wolf Notes*, “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree”.

Siddhattha’s ascetic wandering is mirrored in the speaker’s walking in “The Herons”, and again, this subtly anticipates “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree”. The use of “path” in the first line copies the ascription of the Buddha’s teaching as a “path”. As the speaker “trode quietly back”, a similar action is in motion. Their bush-walk is shaped as a quest, and it frames a hint of invocation, as if Beveridge’s speaker and her companion have summoned the herons. The placement at the line break of “called” and

“call” indicates this possibility the birds have been invoked by the speaker. The line breaks place emphasis on the creative act of naming:

slender, rag-thin bird we called  
blue Gotama. We crumbled a mushroom –  
all we could call  
sacred ...

(DG, 50)

Given that this poem was written in late 1981 or early 1982<sup>382</sup>, one might think the place of Buddhism in Judith Beveridge’s poetry was firmly established early on, some five or six years before the publication of her first book. In fact, the invocation of the bird “Gotama” goes largely unanswered. “The Herons” provides the only clear reference to Buddhism or Buddhist images in Beveridge’s work prior to the publication of “The Buddha Cycle” at the very end of *Accidental Grace*, her second book, published more than fourteen years after “The Herons” was written. “The Herons” was written “within two days”<sup>383</sup> of another poem, “The Fall of Angels”<sup>384</sup>. Again, it is possible to see in this poem a level of Buddhist-related thought in a reading of the Buddhist notion of *dukkha*, or suffering, as it arises from desire and attachment. Both poems are concerned with the discovery or loss of an existential unity. These ideas, to do with interdependence, detachment and transience, are often typified as Asian or “Eastern” in origin. In Beveridge’s first book, these Asian ideas are yet to coalesce into a form clearly discernible as “Buddhist”. Beveridge’s early Buddhist-like sensibility works through the imagery she deploys, and in the relationships she sculpts between images on the level of both subject matter and form.

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<sup>382</sup> Email from Judith Beveridge to Greg McLaren, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2003

<sup>383</sup> Email from Judith Beveridge to Greg McLaren, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2003

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The long gap between the Buddhist-inspired image in "The Herons" and *Accidental Grace* offers several suggestions. First, Beveridge's Buddhist interests are initially present not as thought-out doctrinal positions, or even as an abundance of Buddhist-related imagery, but rather they permeate her poetry at the level of relation between images in her formal and structural approaches, and her handling of metaphor and simile. That is, the Buddhist tendencies in her work are integrated formally and tonally, and are embedded within her aesthetic. There is no Buddhist programme in Beveridge's work: her outlook is inflected with Buddhist ideas such as interdependence or conditionality, no-self and its concomitant compassion, and the problem of *dukkha*. The second major implication to be drawn from "The Herons" is that it anticipates, without foreseeing in a teleological way, the later growth of overtly Buddhist imagery, ideas and iconography in "The Buddha Cycle" (*AG*, 78-85) and the (auto)biographical sequence about Siddhattha Gotama that underpins *Wolf Notes*. This predisposition draws like ideas to itself, finding in Buddhist ideas and imagery a body of thought that seeks to confirm Beveridge's sensibility of connection and interdependence. The embodiment of the Buddhist ideas works because this predisposition incorporates influence on an aesthetic plane instead of through doctrinal formulations. Furthermore, because Beveridge's Buddhism works through implication and embodiment, it sits comfortably alongside other sets of ideas, seen so strikingly in Beveridge's integration at times of Buddhist tendencies with her feminism, ecofeminism, ecological and humanitarian concerns. Taken as a body of work, these earlier poems, and many from *Accidental Grace*, begin to suggest a Buddhist shape to Beveridge's body of work, but this does not become an overtly central feature or stance in her poetry until her third book, *Wolf Notes*.



The Buddhism in Beveridge's poetry is an implicit presence in her work, operating through embodiment in her aesthetic, formal approach. A relatively early Beveridge poem, "Japanese Cranes" (*DG*, 39)<sup>385</sup>, draws on Japanese cultural material rather than anything specifically "Buddhist". Beveridge sketches this Japanese cultural context in brief imagistic strokes. She alludes to and allows glimpses of origami and tea ceremonies and flits between Japanese ceramics and landscapes. "Japanese Cranes" is also a poem about poems, or making poems:

Their frames –  
 an architecture of paper,  
 lightweight beams.

(*DG*, 39)

This "architecture of paper" resembles the way Beveridge designs and constructs the world of her poems: they are such an architecture. The aesthetic of minimalism implied here suggests elements of Beveridge's own sensibility. In trying to articulate her perception of the world's interconnectedness through a web of imagery rather than through a more sturdy method of direct exposition, Beveridge's predominant technique could be characterised by its strong but "lightweight beams". In developing this theme of fragility, Beveridge chooses perhaps the single best known Japanese cultural product, origami:

Mating – they are  
 the original origami:

one unritualised peck  
 could chip them.  
 Such a skilled brittle

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<sup>385</sup> Dates provided by email from Judith Beveridge to Greg McLaren, 4<sup>th</sup> November, 2003. "The Herons" and "The Fall of Angels" provide the one instance, Beveridge writes, where she had "written two poems almost together", in 1981 or 1982. "The Herons" followed the first angel poem ("The Fall of Angels") "within about 2 days". Other poems in this partial chronology include "The Lyre Birds" ("at much the same time" as "The Herons" and "The Fall of Angels"); "Japanese Cranes" ("a little later [than "The Lyre Birds"] - probably 1983); "At the End of the Day" (1977: Beveridge's "first published poem"); "Situation" (1978); and "The Two Brothers" (1986)

elegance. Earth can crack  
its icy ceramic

(DG, 39)

Such a set of images aligns the birds in “Japanese Cranes” to the egret in “Egret”, from *Wolf Notes*, “its neck/ a white ceramic” (WN, 72). The cranes and egrets are connected through Beveridge’s imagery to each other, and to the earth’s own “icy ceramic”. The place of “Egret” near the centre of Beveridge’s sequence in the voice of Siddhattha Gotama sharpens the closeness of Beveridge’s sensibility on the one hand and her aesthetic response to Buddhism.

Nonetheless, simply because an idea contained in an image resembles some element of Buddhist doctrine does not mean it *is* Buddhist. Conversely, if an image, phrase or idea does not carry an explicit reference to or association with Buddhism, in the context of Beveridge’s poetry, it does not necessarily mean that it is *not* Buddhist in orientation. Even if a “Buddhist” tag cannot be attached to these poems, they are significant nonetheless because they resemble the Buddhist ideas that begin to proliferate in her later work, and thus they demonstrate a clear receptivity to Buddhist and Buddhist-like ideas at the level of both thought and aesthetic. While poems like “Japanese Cranes”, “The Fall of Angels” and “The Herons” are not yet “Buddhist”, their preoccupation with connection, interdependence, empathy with suffering animals and people and the unobtrusive persona, all carry the hallmarks of a proto-Buddhist aesthetic.

Beveridge’s own statements of poetics affirm these proto-Buddhist leanings. In the statement preceding the *Compass: poetry and prose* selection of her poems, Beveridge

leans toward a non-attached poetic, writing that “I come to each poem with no preset ideas of what one is to be about. For me, a subject or idea for a poem is an alien and unworkable concept”<sup>386</sup>. The word or image that begins the path to a poem “suddenly becomes an enormous edifice of meanings and associations”<sup>387</sup>. Further, she writes that “Images must find a context that will connect them... Finding that relationship, for me, is the real work in a poem”<sup>388</sup>. This suggests an innate awareness of the conditionality of process that Buddhism asserts. Hence, this implies a contemplative, meditative quality to Beveridge’s writing processes and intentions, and an awareness of something that looks much like Buddhist conditionality. This search for context is a desire for insight and belonging on a practical level within and without the poem.

## Conclusion

If there is one particular overriding sensibility in Beveridge’s poetry, it is not the needless preoccupation with form that Alison Croggon asserts, nor is it simply the watchfulness or attention to detail and connection that most of her critics have described. Instead, it is an elaboration or expansion of this watchfulness: an aesthetic grounded in the meditative approach of a Buddhist practice. This aesthetic, as prefigured in several of Beveridge’s earlier poems, revolves around the Buddhist notion of interdependence, embodying this idea as an insight within the poetry’s images and formal structures. The nature of this anticipation in Beveridge’s early work of later concerns and methods is a key to Beveridge’s overall body of work. The Buddhist and Asian cultural imagery in poems like “Japanese Cranes” and “The Herons” looks toward elements of

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<sup>386</sup> *Compass: poetry and prose*, 2/3, 1981, p.38. Beveridge is the featured poet in this edition, with a twelve-page section devoted to some of her earlier poems.

<sup>387</sup> Beveridge, “Towards the Possible”, p.333

<sup>388</sup> Beveridge, “Towards the Possible”, p.333

much later work such as “The Buddha Cycle” and “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree”. These two former poems can hardly be characterised as “Buddhist” poetry, though. Rather, their images reflect and amplify a set of ideas that could be described as proto-Buddhist. Starting with these poems, Beveridge works to embed her proto-Buddhist leanings within both her imagery and language, as well as the formal structures she uses to shape her poems. This method recurrently enacts a version of the Buddhist interdependence implied by the teachings of conditionality, no-self and *śūnyatā*. In fact, the two “The Fishermen” poems, “Hawkesbury Egret”, “Orb Spider” and “Catching Webs” each embody this notion of interdependence not only through both imagery and form, but also through the vital interdependence of imagery and form. That Beveridge interweaves her form and content so tightly while handling material that becomes recognisably Buddhist, and with a tone that largely empties the poetry of a speaking self, indicates more than a conventional interplay between form and content. A number of Beveridge’s poems give literary form to Buddhist meditation practice. The cultivation of compassion and of non-attached watchfulness that Buddhist meditation aims at carries through a great many of Beveridge’s poems, and can also be plotted through her sequences “about” the Buddha, “The Buddha Cycle” and “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree”.

## Chapter eight

### When I watch myself watching: narrating the Buddha

#### Introduction

In 2000, Martin Duwell wrote that “it is still to be seen whether the epistemological and aesthetic implications of the Buddhism which the most recent poems deal with affect the nature of Beveridge’s future poetry”<sup>389</sup>. It is now possible, with the publication of *Wolf Notes* and its cornerstone sequence, “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree”, to make some judgement on this. Judith Beveridge’s two sequences that revolve around the Buddha, “The Buddha Cycle” (*AG*, 78-85) and “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree” (*WN*, 49-102), approach that central figure in what appear to be diametrically opposed ways. The earlier sequence, “The Buddha Cycle”, is a biography of absence, the Buddha’s presence in the religious, physical and cultural landscape spoken of by those who have crossed his path: the mahout’s wife, the vulture-trainer, the potter, the corpse-bearer. These are either internal monologues or are addressed indirectly to the Buddha, as if to a third person out of shot. These largely oblique angles illuminate not the stories of those sometimes overlooked in the Buddhist canon, but their perspective. Still, in this sequence the figure of the Buddha does take shape, but that shape is an empty form, surrounded by a series of disjointed if related narratives and impressions. In a roughly similar fashion, “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree” is not simply a poetic sequence *about* the Buddha or Buddhism. Beveridge approaches the story of Siddhattha Gotama and his pre-enlightenment wandering in the forest in an inherently “Buddhist” way. She embodies and enacts in her poetry a network of Buddhist ideas. In this long

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<sup>389</sup> Martin Duwell, “Intricate Knots”, p.253

sequence Beveridge extends this technique, not only narrating the Buddha's pre-enlightenment ascetic wandering, but also simultaneously enacting and embodying elements of Buddhist doctrine. Beveridge embodies these points of doctrine within her aesthetic while also maintaining the narrative drive, a move that strengthens both these aspects. Nonetheless there are issues raised by a modern Western woman writing an "autobiographical" sequence in the voice of an ancient Indian religious figure. Beveridge clearly deploys "other" bodies of thought (Buddhism) to interrogate and dismantle "Western" notions of self and other. The speaking as other in "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree" is simply an extension of this exercise.

### Speaking for others

Lyn McCredden draws attention to the question of the exotic in Beveridge's work. There is a tension between postcolonial ideas about the representation of the Other on the one hand and, on the other, Buddhist ideas about no-self, which themselves, particularly in Beveridge's work, impact on a literary-aesthetic consideration of Otherness. A Buddhist poetics would appear to take a different view to that which McCredden posits. This is a complex issue, and the discussion here is necessarily limited to a consideration of the work at hand rather than the entire topic it suggests. It seems sufficient to say that where theories to do with the Other see difference, an aesthetic approach informed by Buddhism is more likely to see no-self. That is, difference, while needing to be negotiated, is more porous and provisional than a clearly-defined boundary. McCredden is not unsympathetic to Beveridge. Indeed, her own ambivalent readings of the poems dealing with what she calls "other" seem to suggest a strong awareness of the claims of both Buddhist no-self and postcolonial theory. With reference to the poems in *Accidental Grace* dealing with India, McCredden writes:

The claim is that imagination need not be stopped by the barriers of otherness if sufficient sympathy is involved. This is, of course, a deeply humanist, and indeed spiritual insight, and it also makes Beveridge's poetry open to the accusation of exoticism and even perhaps imperialism. I am unsure finally of how to respond to some of these representations of otherness – cultural, animal, transcendental.<sup>390</sup>

It might be that the “sympathy” McCredden speaks of might be an empathy that is won and developed through the Buddhist meditation practices that give structure to many of Beveridge's poems. McCredden notes Buddhist no-self at work in Beveridge's poetry without identifying it as such. She writes of an implicit claim in Beveridge's poetry “that imagination need not be stopped by barriers of otherness”. More accurately perhaps, Beveridge's implicit claim is that ultimately there is no otherness. It is worth noting that *McCredden* assigns otherness here, not Beveridge. In Western terms, Beveridge herself is Other already: woman, Buddhist, poet. If McCredden's criticism and that of others is based on an identity politics, then Beveridge's complex identity might fruitfully be taken into account. McCredden's preparedness to see otherness where Beveridge sees and evokes a degree of likeness is a reminder that otherness is in part subjective and socially constructed.

Beveridge is vitally concerned, at the level of subject matter and sensibility, with questioning the boundaries we draw around ourselves and between things. By questioning this via Buddhist no-self, she interrogates and empties the very notion of otherness. She does not dismiss the concerns about the problematic representation of others that McCredden voices, but seeks to engage with them. This is much like the way McCredden's ambivalence (“I am unsure finally of how I respond”) works to make a place for Beveridge's Buddhist-poetic engagement with the very real circumstances of the

Indian people in her poems. While this does undercut, to a degree, the doubt McCredden casts over both Beveridge's meditative poetics and her treatment of experience and subject matter, the complexity of the issue remains.

Beveridge's poetry of observation, grounded somewhat in a meditative tone and context, is neither one-sided nor self-centred. While "Man Washing on a Railway Platform Outside Delhi" appears almost voyeuristic, it must be remembered that the man is washing in a public place. Beveridge structures the poem almost as if in anticipation of questions from critics like McCredden, drawing attention not to an idealised, exoticised, untouched, untouchable poverty, but to the man's actions and their implications alone:

It's the way he stands  
nearly naked in the winter sun  
turning on and off the railway  
station tap. I have seen people  
look less reverent tuning Mozart.

(AG, 39)

While drawing attention to the man's poverty and marginalisation, Beveridge is more concerned with his seeming un-self-consciousness. Although such un-self-consciousness could be construed as an icon of exoticism, Beveridge deflects attention from this potential criticism, arguing that such an attitude of non-attachment does nothing to change the facts of his circumstances:

Don't tell me this is a man  
released for a moment  
out of poverty ...

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<sup>390</sup> Lyn McCredden, review of *Accidental Grace*, *IHEAT*, 3, 1997, p.192



(AG, 39)

Beveridge neither avoids nor idealises the poverty in this or related poems.

... And it's  
the way he knows his poverty  
without privacy – and the way,  
though the water is free,  
he takes careful litres.

(AG, 39)

This does open Beveridge up to McCredde's concerns about appropriation, although Beveridge seems to anticipate these questions. Evidently, the poem is not concerned with only Beveridge's attitude to the man's poverty, but *his* apparent attitude to it. Although Beveridge makes this clear, she remains reluctant to speak so bluntly of it, hence the pause at the line-break "And it's/ the way he knows his poverty". It is as if, having gotten this far, having paid this much attention to the man's careful actions, it is still almost too difficult to speak of. She recognises the difficulties inherent in writing about these matters, but the reverence and attentiveness she sees in his un-self-consciousness overrides her misgivings. In fact the attentiveness he shows mirrors in some ways Beveridge's own attentiveness to detail and the minuscule. With this sort of emphasis, the man becomes an exemplar of attitudes to which Beveridge herself appears to aspire. As significant as the man's taking of "careful litres" is Beveridge's own care in positioning herself at the poem's margins, just as her subject is at the margins of his society. In placing herself outside (she is, in this context, an outsider, she is the Other), she makes the man, as he washes himself, utterly central. Beveridge's writing of others is central to her project of discerning and writing interdependence. The degree to which she inevitably others people is an inescapable result of the vital position of cross-cultural (and cross-species in many other poems) imagining in her writing. This sort of

imagination is of critical importance to her development of an aesthetic grounded in connection and interdependence.

Beveridge chooses a different angle of approach in “Tarepati” and “The Dung Collector”. These poems are structured around a twinned reciprocal gaze between Beveridge and the figures in the poems: she looks at them, and they at her. She makes it clear that she is the outsider, that she is also Other. This twinning, then, pushes the focus away from Otherness. If both are Other, then there is much less attention given to difference than initially suspected. Their mutual Otherness does not exactly cancel out their difference, but shows that if Otherness is universal in this way, such difference also becomes rather less significant. These two poems, if read consecutively, form a mirror image of each other. “Tarepati” opens with and “The Dung Collector” closes with the poems’ characters returning Beveridge’s gaze, as if inspecting the poem that features them: “He looks at me and I hear his breath journey/ deep into the Nepalese hills” (*AG*, 40), “But he looks at me/ with eyes that have kept their dark cool place,/ their lidded jars” (*AG*, 40) and the woman in “The Dung Collector”

... bends to scoop dung into a dish  
each morning with her arms and hands  
and looks straight into my eyes.

(*AG*, 43)

In having her own gaze returned, Beveridge does not simply incorporate these people’s agency in her poems, but also recognises and registers respect for their own authority. While this does not draw them into a co-authorship of either poem, their potential if unknowable authorship and authority is registered in both their returned gazes and the poems’ structure which is built around that gaze. These two poems, like “Man Washing on a Railway Platform Outside Delhi” are concerned in part with how one deals with the

daily fact of poverty. More significantly they show the attention paid by their subjects to whatever task is at hand. As in "Man Washing on a Railway Platform Outside Delhi" (It isn't just/ the water", *AG*, 39), Beveridge again shows that idealising or exoticising the dung collector's poverty is not the point of the poem:

Clearly, though, this is not  
about workmanship; not about having a thankful  
heart in a beautiful place; not about  
being a speck in the slurry of a rushing  
Punjabi street, or about a woman who must  
save herself by labour and prayers.

It's about a woman who  
must live under the anus of a cow as if  
it were her star ...

(*AG*, 42)

Again, Beveridge defuses suggestions of an exotic, idealised poverty through the ironic tone as she confirms that the poem is "not about having a thankful/ heart in a beautiful place", with the line-break's acid emphasis as it spits out "thankful". These latter two poems differ from "Man Washing on a Railway Platform Outside Delhi" in that both the woman and Tarepati visibly respond to Beveridge's observation of them. This reciprocal gaze reifies them, or, rather, clarifies them, as their own agents, able to interrogate Beveridge just as she watches them.

While this does not of itself entirely counter the charge of appropriation, in her use of the returned gaze, particularly as a structuring motif, Beveridge attempts to avoid that appropriation while still writing of an experience that also includes another. This reciprocal watchfulness also provides the poems with a vital symmetry. If the people in her poems are watchful and minutely observant, then aspects of their lives resemble elements of Beveridge's poetic. It is less than clear that Beveridge sees (and perhaps also

seeks) herself in others as much as she is concerned to show the creative, attentive attributes of others. Moreover, in Beveridge's poetry we see a world in which things' interdependence is in clear relief. In portraying her characters undertaking the same watchfulness as each other and as herself, she obviously highlights their similarity to her and vice-versa. In demonstrating this interdependence, and by avoiding overt exposition, Beveridge again embodies her Buddhist interests in the fabric of her work rather than simply through discursive language. While the gaze of Tarepati and the woman dung collector is explicitly signalled and stated, Beveridge's observation of them is merely implicit. She clearly retains the privileged position in this, but, just the same, she renounces this potential for total control by surrendering her own absolute primacy as writer and creator of these scenes.

Beveridge configures her Indian poems and relationships within them in terms of Buddhist no-self, which recognises a relative or practical distinction, but no fundamental distinction between self and other. The interdependence between self and other is a creative, enabling economy, and as seen in the returned gaze between Beveridge's speaker and her Indian counterparts, is also reciprocal. Beveridge says:

Buddhism certainly says that our seeing things as separate from each other is the root cause of all our problems. We need to carefully scrutinise the boundaries we construct ... When we really investigate this we find that our "boundaries" are nothing like boundaries ... All things interplay into each other.<sup>391</sup>

Given Beveridge's attentiveness to *śūnyatā* and its concomitant no-self, it becomes manifestly more difficult for her to appropriate. If things are considered empty of any ultimate, separate selfhood, a different attitude toward difference necessarily develops.

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<sup>391</sup> McLaren, p.56

On the one hand, this argument may open Beveridge up to accusations of appropriation. If this proposition is accepted, its converse implication also must be accepted: if *sūnyatā* or no-self is genuinely adhered to or striven towards, there is no substantial self left to do any appropriation. If, as Beveridge insists, there are no ultimate boundaries between self and other, this model of separateness collapses. The possibility, and degree, of cultural appropriation does not necessarily vanish outright, but is certainly diffused. Beveridge also says:

I was very fortunate in that we lived with an Indian family for several months, so I saw life on a practical, everyday level. I was able to watch people in their day-to-day lives in a way that would not have been possible had I been simply a tourist ... I was able to experience more richly the aesthetic as well as the political dimensions of people's lives. These people's lives were very harsh on a practical level, yet they also had this other compelling and extraordinary [dimension]. They seem to have a complete engagement with their lives.<sup>392</sup>

Some of the language gives away the distance that Beveridge places between herself and these people ("extraordinary"), but generally she remains aware of the problems of writing the "other" while recognising also her own experience of proximity to those lives. She remarks on the differences in the details of her life and theirs, but does not use those details to enforce emotional, existential or cultural difference: she chips away at cultural difference as simply another construct that establishes false boundaries. She nonetheless considers that she *may* have appropriated elements of Indian culture in writing these poems:

Some people would say a Westerner can never really write about another culture; that we will always be appropriating somehow. That cuts out a whole range of experience one can't write about ... there is authorial comment in those poems, which is unavoidable.<sup>393</sup>

By the same token, some critics in turn use others' difference in order to reinforce their own positions. They speak for others themselves: from where is it that they obtain the

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<sup>392</sup> McLaren, p.57

<sup>393</sup> McLaren, p.58

authority to claim and then delineate difference? Beveridge contends that “you have a right to write about your own experience”<sup>394</sup>. She does not speak *for* the people in the poems, only *of* them. The matter is more complex than that. In a number of Beveridge’s poems, such as those set in India, which Beveridge is speaking about, Beveridge’s experience necessarily includes the experience of others as well. In these cases in speaking for herself, she inevitably speaks of and for others, but in a limited way that seems to clearly acknowledge the difficult ethical terrain surrounding these issues.

It is not coincidental that a sequence of poems “about” the Buddha, or the person on the verge of becoming the Buddha, embodies and dramatises a key Buddhist notion such as no-self. In using Buddhist ideas in an embodied, non-dual way, to act out real or imagined events from the life of Siddhattha and the Buddha, Beveridge does indeed take a step further than many other poems written in the (imagined) voice of another person. Beveridge thus drops away something of the distinction between the Buddha and his teaching. The Buddha embodied those teachings just as Beveridge attempts to embody elements of the teaching into the dramatic, structural and imagistic weave of “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree” and “The Buddha Cycle”. Clearly, Beveridge would see Buddhist no-self as a filter and validation of this move: but this only means this is a cross-gender and cross-identity “autobiographical” sequence with a Buddhist underpinning. The sequence makes some oblique points about self, no-self and impermanence, but really it serves mainly to dramatises the spiritual struggle and life of a major religious figure prior to his enlightenment. In writing in another’s voice, Beveridge’s Siddhattha sequence is not so unusual; it is her assumption and enactment of Buddhist no-self that sets this work apart from many otherwise similar sequences.

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<sup>394</sup> McLaren, p.58

The real Otherness at work in Beveridge's Buddhist poems is not Siddhattha, not India, ancient or modern, not Buddhism, but the figure of the Buddha, or rather the enlightenment experience itself. Beveridge goes to great lengths to evade the question of representing this experience: it forms a great but vitally active absence at the heart of "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree" and "The Buddha Cycle". In "The Buddha Cycle", in fact, it provides the entire structural scaffolding for both sequences: the Buddha is spoken of, about and to, but is never himself present. His presence presents too great an obstacle to verbal, literary representation *except* as a vital absence, silence or emptiness. The sheer inimitability (it is illimitable, too) of the Buddha's enlightenment is the source of Beveridge's representation of him as an absence: real identification with his experience is impossible. It is the moment of his enlightenment that sets Siddhattha apart from other ascetics.

It cannot be forgotten that in Beveridge's context, Buddhism is "her" tradition: her practice of Buddhism means it is not Other to her. Buddhism has colonised substantial cultural and religious tracts of the west, and the Buddha, as the central historical figure in that tradition, is a centre of that power, as it were. In a very real sense, if we take Beveridge's engagement with Buddhism as genuine, "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree", "The Buddha Cycle" and even her Indian poems which McCredden criticises as colonialist instead typically look back to the source of the religious tradition Beveridge has taken into herself. Unless Beveridge's practice of Buddhism itself is a colonialist practice, her literary exploration cannot be considered anything like an outright "imperialist" appropriation of an "other" cultural context. There may be instances that look like appropriation, but this is a result of a set of dualistic readings that

would posit all Westerners as differing in all ways from an “East” that does not exist in the first place. Unless writers such as Beveridge speak of their experience, we are left with an inward-looking, solipsistic literary culture.

### “He comes walking”

The Buddha Beveridge represents is, as Martin Duwell argues, “an absence, or rather a continuously emerging presence”<sup>395</sup>. Her non-dual representation of him as both absence and presence, while also neither, is critical. The Buddha’s *sunya* nature is enacted in this sequence. While clearly “there” as Arittha, Suppiya and Dhaniya all seem to address him directly, the Buddha remains visible only as a trace. In presenting him this way, Beveridge deals directly with the Buddha while also avoiding the technical and dramatic dilemma of presenting a radically evasive figure like the Buddha. Beveridge incorporates, at various levels, her understandings of the Buddhist notions of impermanence, no-self and *śūnyatā* in her work. Her avoidance of representing the enlightenment experience does not represent a failure of technique or nerve, but rather shows Beveridge’s response to the difficulty of writing the ineffable.

The speakers in “The Buddha Cycle” form a community, without forming an actual *sangha*. Each of the speakers are, as Duwell writes, “people ... of the lowest status”<sup>396</sup>:

We have come from dust-heaps,  
charnel-grounds, river-sides,  
quarries

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<sup>395</sup> Duwell, “Intricate Knots”, p.252

<sup>396</sup> Duwell, “Intricate Knots”, p.252



(AG, 79)

This reminds us that the Buddha's teaching is radically egalitarian<sup>397</sup>. The speakers also each acknowledge *dukkha*, as Beveridge contrasts it with attachment:

... We have come  
with wounds, cankers,  
crooked limbs; with desires  
in our heads mounting  
in the heat in which the call  
of the brain-fever bird  
keeps us sleepless.

(AG, 79)

Beveridge mirrors and transforms<sup>398</sup> this "brain-fever bird" in the closing image of the poem's characters sitting listening to the Buddha:

And we will sit looking out  
...  
... at the egrets  
in flight like bodhi leaves.

(AG, 79)

These final lines of "Waiting", the first poem in "The Buddha Cycle", anticipate the later "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree" in its treatment of Siddhattha's meditation practice. This image mirrors "Egret" (WN, 72) from "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree". In that poem the bird is given a focus similar to that of the herons in "The Herons". Where the speaker in "The Herons" names the bird "blue Gotama" (DG, 50), in "Egret" it is "otherworldly, celibate" (WN, 72). Beveridge's ascription of some

<sup>397</sup> There are serious questions to be asked of early and traditional Buddhist attitudes toward women: for an in-depth if perhaps not definitive treatment of this subject matter, see Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, State University of New York Press, 1993.

<sup>398</sup> Duwell sees a strong alchemical element to Beveridge's work, and specifically to this sequence. The speakers, he writes, "represent alchemical transformable dust not only metaphorically but also metonymically since their occupations ... deal with dirt" (252). I question the centrality Duwell gives to the role of alchemy, seeing in it too much of Harold Stewart's odd mixture of alchemical and Shin Buddhist imagery.

figurative sacredness to waterbirds continues her use of liminal spaces, occupations and the marginalised (the seaside, fishermen, the people in her Indian poems) as a motif of connection and interdependence. Given those notions are associated very closely with Buddhism, the sacredness she sees in the egret, and the heron, is accounted for in a straightforward manner.

While across her body of work Beveridge typically weaves Buddhist ideas into a broad fabric of embodiment, she occasionally encloses an overt Buddhist teaching in a narrative or series of images. In “The Buddha Cycle” Beveridge obliquely narrates episodes of the Buddha’s teachings. The place of conditionality in the Buddha’s teaching is acknowledged in “The Street-Sweeper’s Wife Speaks”. We receive transmission of the Buddha’s teaching on conditionality from two removes: from the street-sweeper’s wife, who has heard it from her husband, who presumably heard it directly from the Buddha. This distance is acted out by her slowly disarmed cynicism about her husband’s new beliefs:

... I ridicule,  
I scold: he gently scoffs  
  
and tells me how each action  
sows its seed...

(AG, 84)

The small moment of openness here is emblematic of cultural transmission. Initial scoffing slowly gives way to a degree of tolerance and acceptance. Furthermore, this episode plots out, on a very small scale, the processes of influence and transmission that underline Beveridge’s reception and integration of Buddhism into her writing practice.

The ability to see through the desire that underpins *dubkha*, and thus to cultivate an attitude of non-attachment, is a key step toward enlightenment. Arittha recalls the Buddha's teaching on this: "I've heard you say/ desire is only a veil" (*AG*, 81). The primary focus of Arittha's attachment is his caste-ancestry, and he recognises that this oppresses him spiritually as well as socially. He sees the problem, and its solution, as evidenced by his question to the Buddha:

If I joined the Sangha  
would I unravel  
the string of blood  
to which I'm bound?

Perhaps, one day,  
I'll look into a bowl  
and see  
my undressed head.

(*AG*, 81-82)

The poem oscillates between two-, three- and four-line stanzas, finally cohering in these last two stanzas into a standard four-line structure. The formal resolution this suggests underpins the realisation Arittha arrives at. He sees that if he were to go forth as a monk, he might cut himself free of caste system's "string of blood", divesting himself of his old identity. Implicit in this image of the "undressed head" is Arittha's knowledge of the Buddhist teaching of no-self, freeing his mind of concern for a restrictive social status and its marks.

These glimpses of early Buddhist doctrine emerge in response to characters' requests for teaching or insight. The request Dhaniya makes to the Buddha is to do with

the meeting of spiritual and creative practices. As with Suppiya and Arittha, this request also revolves around his occupation. He asks the Buddha:

But if I saw  
you moving

towards my hands  
out of what

should I make  
the pedestal?

(AG, 83)

And:

how should I  
phase another

figurine?  
What can I do?

Buddha, teach me  
to throw the pot,

the one  
that will hold

the Dhamma

(AG, 83)

The critical question in this poem, though, is the most general: "What can I do?", a question that also dictates Beveridge's own poetic strategies. Beveridge, like Dhaniya, knows the answer already, but the answer that provides no concrete solution. Both Beveridge and Dhaniya know they must

throw the pot –

the one  
that will hold

the Dhamma,  
the flow ...

(AG, 83-84)

Dhaniya and Beveridge each need to find their own methods to respond creatively to the problems of representing the Buddha. Dhaniya wishes to renounce his work, hoping to spin a pot he “can shape/ free of the wheel”. This is not simply a potter’s wheel, but an allusion to the Buddhist Wheel of Life, which one escapes by ceasing attachment to things. Beveridge writes poems that are in the same sense “free” of the Buddha in that she avoids attempting to represent the Buddha’s Buddha-nature. Her response also contains a formal component, using poetic form as a means of articulating what cannot be spoken of directly or implied through images. Ultimately the Buddha, in Beveridge’s poems, is unknowable other than through this set of creative responses to him.

Beveridge’s formal response to the problem of representing the Buddha, then, is to not represent him, but his effect on others.

### **Telling stories: “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree”**

Martin Duwell exposes a difficulty that Beveridge’s poetry presents to critics when he writes about her then largely unpublished (auto)biographical Siddhattha Gotama sequence: “Dramatic portraiture is something that forces the poet to decide between detailing the uniqueness of a person and absorbing that person into existing structures meaningful to the poet”<sup>399</sup>. Such an absorption is one of the primary forces in “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree”, where Beveridge pulls Siddhattha’s narrative into a framework of images and formal structures. “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree”

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<sup>399</sup> Duwell, “Intricate Knots”, p.252

marks a departure from Beveridge's lyrical-imagistic mode seen in *The Domesticity of Giraffes* and *Accidental Grace*, as well as an extension of that sensibility as it encompasses, and is in turn encompassed by, Siddhattha's narrative. Beveridge demonstrates her character's developing patterns of thought and practice, as they become more recognisably "Buddhist". This is not to say she eschews the embodiment of Buddhist ideas as practised across the rest of her work: in this sequence the ideas previously handled in this manner are now more predominantly embedded in the flow of narrative.

Much of the imagery and metaphor in "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree" is drawn in various ways from Beveridge's earlier work. This indicates just how presciently the material from her first two books anticipates, and later, embodies, the Buddhist leanings in her work. Beveridge anticipates this process in "Quarry": in imagining Siddhattha's autobiography, she is seen to be "dredging up/ thoughts from the pit" (*WN*, 52) of her body of work. This body of images forms a partial narrative of Beveridge's own aesthetic encounter with Buddhism. That these images turn up time and again in a narrative, autobiographical sequence "about" Siddhattha, speaks strongly for the early presence of Buddhist ideas and structures at the level of image and sensibility in Beveridge's work. These images represent the aesthetic dimension of Beveridge's experience of Buddhist practice and doctrine. She then uses them to tell of Siddhattha's quest for spiritual truth and attainment as he moves, though never inevitably, toward becoming the founder of "Buddhism". It seems apparent from this that Beveridge is writing Siddhattha's experience through the filter of her own aesthetic response to and integration of Buddhism. Again, this further blurs the self-other divide, and draws doctrine, practice and sensibility closer together. The proximity of doctrine and practice on the one hand, and sensibility on the other, is cemented by Beveridge's constant

embodiment of Buddhist notions at the level of the image and poetic form. The embodiment of Buddhist doctrine and practice that Beveridge shapes requires little explicit assertion of those doctrines and practices: the poems' imagery and form achieve most of that effect themselves.

## Establishing a practice

From the sequence's outset, Siddhattha's ascetic and proto-Buddhist leanings coexist. In the sequence's opening poem, "The Rains", Siddhattha asks "Where shall I wander today// in my torn clothes?" (*WN*, 49). This situates the poem at the very beginning of Siddhattha's wandering: he has not yet exchanged his clothes for rags or robes. Soon after, Siddhattha is established in something resembling a Buddhist meditation practice: "I sit, settling into my breath, thoughts// calming" (*WN*, 50). This watching the breath is one means by which Siddhattha sees he must develop insight. In "Doubt" he tells himself "I must breathe myself wise" (*WN*, 79). As Beveridge's narrative progresses, so too do elements of Siddhattha's practice. While in "Dawn" (*WN*, 50-51) Siddhattha is intent on a calming, breath-watching meditation, the focus of "Quarry" is a contemplative practice. In this poem he also notices links between his immediate environment, the moon, and the creative aspect of meditation:

For a long time I sat, dredging up  
thoughts from the pit of myself,  
turning them over as if they were  
rocks capable of taking polish.

For a long time I looked into myself.

(*WN*, 52)

A basic assumption Siddhattha makes is that through contemplation and meditation, he might alter his patterns of thought and behaviour: hence Beveridge's simile of his thoughts as "rocks capable of taking polish". While meditating ("I sat for a long time"), Siddhattha makes the connection between the waxing moon and the limestone. The moon's luminous qualities are transferred, through the analogy, to the contents of the metaphorical "pit", Siddhattha's mind. If Siddhattha's "rocks [are] capable of taking polish" in their capacity for refinement, then, like the moon-like limestone, they also attain cyclical qualities. However, in likening meditation, ("turning them over") to the work of the stonecutters and the mason, Beveridge makes clear that it is a creative process rooted in temporality and transience. The moon with its phases and changing position in the sky and its near ubiquity throughout the sequence becomes an image ideal for focussing on transience. Throughout "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree" the moon assumes a structuring role, providing a connective tissue and supplying an implied narrative foil, plotting the passing months and years of Siddhattha's wandering in the forest. Not only this, but a cyclical element to the motif also emerges, with the moon's cycles mirrored in Siddhattha returning, in his memory, to his past.

Moreover, Siddhattha is also not limited by his thoughts:

Then I let go of all thought –  
and I felt like a bird  
floating in the clear, excavated air

(*WN*, 52)

In the brief space between these two poems, Siddhattha progresses from working at calming his thoughts to letting them go. The scattered layout of the lines in "Quarry" lends a simultaneously unfocussed yet somehow steady air to Siddhattha's meditation, a



split tendency that continues throughout the sequence. The two stanzas in this poem that are four and three lines long respectively jar formally with the one- and two-line stanzas that otherwise predominate (“I sat a long time in the cold air”, “I imagined the eyes of the stonecutters’ sons”, “Today when I went to the river,/ I heard the stonecutters in the quarry”, *WN*, 52). Although the longer stanzas concentrate ideas and permit greater focus on Siddhattha’s meditation experience, this still detracts from the steadier short lines that enact the watching of the breath in meditation. It is as if these two longer stanzas are moments of distraction from the structure of the meditation rather than the focus they initially appear to be. Siddhattha is caught up in his thoughts and experience rather than concentrating on the breath. Through her manipulation of form Beveridge achieves a relative lack of focus that steadily dissipates as the series of vow poems articulate and act out Siddhattha’s increasing control of his meditation and ethical practice.

“The Vow” establishes Siddhattha’s desire for insight and liberation. He rails against the societal, philosophical and religious dominance of Indian culture by the Brahmins while also determining to discover “truth” for himself:

Brahmins – even among  
the cuticles of the dead there is wisdom.  
And I’ll find it – no matter  
who says truth can’t be scratched open.

(*WN*, 56)

The strength of this vow is in Siddhattha’s determination, but this is also its weakness. The hostility and oppositional attitude Siddhattha aims at the Brahmins also contains a vigorous self-regard, an attachment to self that he later tries to sublimate through a

variety of harsh ascetic practices. Beveridge's use of the dash, in a vaguely Dickinsonian spirit, sharpens the language's punchiness, and makes Siddhattha almost seem to spit out his last promise. At this point of the sequence, Siddhattha's vow is quasi-religious vengeance, barely a vow at all.

### **Hindrances: desire and attachment**

The imagery of seasons and the moon's phases, and the attention to impermanence, all echo in Siddhattha's frequent eruptions of desire and longing for his past and his wife Yasodhara in particular. In returning time and again to Siddhattha's barely restrained desire for Yasodhara, Beveridge not only creates an effective structural motif that harmonises with similar patterning across the sequence, but convincingly characterises Siddhattha as someone subject to loathing, desire, delusion, rather than an enlightened being. Just as Siddhattha looks into himself in "Quarry", the crow acts out the same process:

... Only having  
found the malice in its own eye  
can it call out what it knows.

(*WN*, 54)

Where Siddhattha finds empathy with the stonecutters through his self-contemplation, the crow finds knowledge that allows it to speak in its own voice. The only knowledge that one can speak is knowledge of oneself, Beveridge suggests, setting up another set of echoes. The crow's call harmonises with the chanting that Siddhattha imagines:

I think I hear the sweetest  
sounds: men intoning vowels

into a chamber's deep echoes.

(*WN*, 54)

Siddhattha hears the crow's voicing of its apparent self-knowledge as these "sweetest/sounds". This compels Siddhattha, as the crow's call echoes, to look into himself once more:

But then I hear my heart  
and its target of serial blows.

O my Yasodhara! Then do  
I know how emptiness makes  
a grove an unquiet place.

(*WN*, 54)

Despite the grove's silence, Siddhattha's mind echoes with his preoccupation, his desire for and guilt about leaving Yasodhara. Siddhattha's cry for Yasodhara is a discordant echo too, in harmony with his erstwhile discovery of music in the crow's call. Beneath all this is Beveridge working to ensure that the poems speak not only of the subject matter, but enact it formally. Rather than approaching Siddhattha's troubled state of mind directly, Beveridge embodies it within the poems' formal properties and imagery. The literal echoing in the poem and the echo effect between Siddhattha and the crow supplement the recurrent moon and seasonal motifs proliferating in the sequence. As the crow's call echoes Siddhattha's cry of desire for Yasodhara, a repetition is set in train, trailing the constantly changing imagery of the moon.

Siddhattha's longing for Yasodhara is not mere lust. In "New Season" he craves a scene of shared domesticity with Yasodhara, and carries on a conversation with his absent wife:

I sit in the sunshine and warm my feet.  
 At my ankles a small wind stirs. Yasodhara,  
 I can almost hear you wiping away your tears  
 with your sari hem. Sometimes I dream  
 you've taken me in again for a simple repast

(*WN*, 57)

Immediately following this, Beveridge aligns the sequence's abundant moon imagery with images of Yasodhara: "the moon pares itself down/ into the smile of an obedient wife". He implores Yasodhara, as if she possesses the solution to his continuing attachments, which she does, given that she is the primary object of these desires:

... Yasodhara, how long  
 must I bear the echoes of dhobis beating  
 laments into your garments...

(*WN*, 57)

Beveridge's half-rhyming half-pun on "lament" and "garment" lightens the tone a little: Siddhattha's vision of Yasodhara is of a woman wearing her heart on the sleeve of her lamenting garments. Although the punning lifts the tone somewhat and provides a more nuanced voice, the playfulness Beveridge introduces here is a little distracting. In another pun, the garment is gilt with Siddhattha's guilt: "guilt like a prison/ cloak reaches down to my feet" (*WN*, 57). This subtle lift in tone seems to derive from Siddhattha's realisation that he and Yasodhara are in similar positions. His clothes, too, are wretched, but in a different way:

I wear clothes gnawed by vermin, singed  
 by fire, torn by dogs, but guilt like a prison  
 cloak reaches down to my feet...

(*WN*, 57)

These instances of Siddhattha's longing for the life he has left behind are not a "new season" at all, but simply repeat old patterns of attachment and desire. The seasons may change, but Siddhattha, as yet, has not.

Siddhattha's ongoing monologue with Yasodhara continues in "One Sight", where he attempts to justify leaving his wife and child. Even while concerning himself with his own impermanence, and its ultimate result, death, Siddhattha remains fixated on Yasodhara as his audience, a perverse continuation of their domestic routine in his absence from her. He explains, to himself as much as to the absent Yasodhara, his insight into death: "Yasodhara, if you came/ to me now, I'd say I saw death" (*WN*, 60),

even in the healing gauze of mist  
upon the water and the rushes.

I'd say there's death too  
in weather fine as your shawl,

...

and death in the half-wound turban

of my own smile...

(*WN*, 60)

Death, which Siddhattha later sees in "every stand of trees" (*WN*, 90), is inescapable: "there is no refuge" anywhere from transience and death. The two-line stanzas in this poem enhance the sense of fragility, with the white space of the page surrounding the poetry's slim, measured lines acting as a stand-in for the blankness of death. The page's relative "emptiness makes/ [the poem] an unquiet place" (*WN*, 54). Transience and its vehicle, death, is not simply a recurring theme, but continues in an ongoing cycle. There is also a glimpse of the Buddha's enlightenment contained in the image of the "half-wound turban// of [Siddhattha's] smile". Beveridge alludes to the Buddha's smile,

emblematic of both the compassion he cultivates and the steady non-attachment Siddhattha begins to cultivate.

Although Siddhattha's attachment to Yasodhara is ongoing and does not appear to shift readily, there is also evidence of a developing non-attachment. The closing of both "The River" and "New Season" peter out suggestively:

It is enough to watch a river widen with  
loose and silent evidence of a strenuous life beneath.

(*WN*, 55)

And:

I'll simply listen to the wind tell me where  
the sun is. That it blows quietly upon my feet.

(*WN*, 57)

In closing each of these poems in similar ways, permitting Siddhattha's thought to trail off into a silent contentedness ("I'll simply listen", "It is enough"), Beveridge recognises the need to reinforce Siddhattha's narrative with strands of recurrent imagery and phrasing. It is no coincidence that a number of these recurring strands also figure in poems from Beveridge's earlier two books. This suggests a pattern of similarity between Beveridge's own aesthetic experience of Buddhism and the story she wants to tell of Siddhattha's wandering.

### **Asceticism, denial and superstition**

Throughout the greater part of the sequence, Beveridge mingles Siddhattha's at times extreme ascetic leanings with his slow drift toward a more recognisably Buddhist system of ethical and meditation practice. Several episodes shift the balance of his

attitude so that the last half dozen or so poems (“The Vow”, “A Vow”, “Eight Gathas”, “Ficus Religiosa”) proliferate with altruistic desires that somewhat resemble the Bodhisattva Vow. Nonetheless, Siddhattha’s self-denying inclinations survive, as does his preoccupation with and desire for Yasodhara. As if trying to cover over his desire and sense of loss, in “At Uruvela (2)”, Siddhattha implores the god of death: “Yama, disfigure me” (WN, 81). He continues:

... Blemish me with thorns.  
 Give me a cough sharp as a leper’s clapper.  
 I will eat only dust swept up, drink only  
 water made muddy by a wallowing sow,  
 chew only reeds where the jackal has lain  
 giving up its life to the hook-headed worm.

(WN, 81)

In order to keep Siddhattha’s obsessive self-harm under control, Beveridge imposes the sonnet form in an ironic twist: there is no real “turn” after the octave, and Siddhattha’s self-admonition and -denial continues unabated. This apparent self-loathing undergoes an odd inversion in the series of vow poems interspersed throughout the sequence, although there is a sudden rush of them toward the sequence’s close.

As Joanne Burns also pointed out in her launch of *Wolf Notes*<sup>400</sup>, the use of the villanelle and similar forms<sup>401</sup> in the sequence can take on a mantric quality. Developing this line of argument, it could be suggested that this repetition of key lines manifests formally in a similar repetition of lines in the vow poems. Nonetheless, of all the villanelle and vilanelle-like poems, only “Path” is recognisably “Buddhist” in orientation: the others all recount arcane ascetic practices of self-denial and -flagellation. This

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<sup>400</sup> Gleebooks, February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2004

exception to the established pattern formally enacts Siddhattha's breaking-open of the closed cycle of continual rebirth. The repetition in "Overhearing an Ascetic in my way from Kosala" serves only to reinforce the atmosphere of self-deprivation that Siddhattha later renounces:

To find the layers you must live in the litter,  
live like a flea, the louse, the botfly;  
don't live by the flower, live by the fetor.

(*WN*, 73)

And:

Make your home among the foul excreta;  
wherever you go, follow this philosophy –  
to find the layers, you must live in the litter,  
don't live by the flower, live by the fetor.

(*WN*, 73)

In structuring the poem around the two refrains "don't live by the flower, live by the fetor" and "to find the layers you must live in the litter", Beveridge insists on a negative, self-denying backbone to Siddhattha's contemporaries' ascetic practice that is both nihilist and self-obsessed.

In another vilanelle, "Benares", Beveridge maintains the tone of uncase and doubt she builds from "Doubt" and "Grass", but also introduces an element of self-knowledge:

I know this road is hard and there's no detour.  
Though I've wandered over so much ground  
I still have not found my implicate law.

(*WN*, 91)

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<sup>401</sup> This includes poems such as "Overhearing an Ascetic on my way from Kosala", "A Way", "Benares", "Path", all of which are based in some way on walking or wandering.



This repetition of the two refrains, “I still have not found my implicate law” and “ten miles out of Benares my feet are sore” (*WN*, 91), constructs a more complex context than that offered in “Overhearing an Ascetic on my way from Kosala (*WN*, 73)”.

Beveridge links Siddhattha’s tiring wandering (“my feet are sore”, “I’ve wandered over so much ground”) with his search for “implicate law”. She also suggests that this very quest is, because of his attachment to finding his “implicate law”, among the sources of his suffering. Siddhattha half-knows this himself, pondering the futility of his wandering when he is no more enlightened than when he left his home: “What have I achieved that I didn’t before?”

In “A Vow”, Siddhattha’s determination is tempered by patience and an attention to the minutiae around him. The sturdiness of his patience is driven in part through Beveridge’s solidly anchored five-line stanzas. All the stanzas but the first run on, suggesting an initial meditative focus that drifts off, even if Siddhattha’s formal meditation structure remains in place. The repetition of detail is vaguely mantric, but lacks the doctrinal focus that comes into view late in the sequence:

I vow to live with those old trees on the hill  
 leaning like monks with windswept backs.  
 I vow that the trees full of the cries of the grivets  
 will hear only the rustle of their leaves as I sit  
 and pray under them until all their seeds drop.

(*WN*, 70)

And

... I vow that caraway,  
 mustard, fennel and rue shall inherit the sky,  
 and that bindweed, burdock, beggar’s ticks  
 and burr will know the perfume of asphodel

and the softness of lamb's tongue, while I sit  
among them watching a fly make a devout  
inventory of its mouthparts...

(*WN*, 70)

These passages give the vow an air of showmanship. Siddhattha's exercise here is not simply patience for patience's sake, but machismo, an über-spiritual display of patience.

Even in "Saddhus", with its focus on self-harming ascetic practices, a hint of liberation shines through. Just as "The River" and "New Season" both close with open-ended images, reflecting Siddhattha's developing attitude of non-attachment, so "Saddhus" ends on a glimmer of something more than the preoccupation with self that marks these ascetic practices. The poem ends with the promise of what the saddhus in the poem do not seem to recognise. Unlike Siddhattha who understands this, the saddhus are left

... still not knowing  
what is gathered, what is won  
beyond the vermin, beyond the dung.

(*WN*, 77)

In this, Siddhattha implicitly comes to understand that these practices with which he is so familiar, are like "vermin" and "dung", and are to be left behind. The potential for liberation beyond these drives him to doubt the path he has hitherto followed, and ultimately propels him, though never inevitably, toward Buddhahood.

### **Faith in crisis**

Coming as it does after a number of poems detailing a variety of rigorous, self-denying and self-harming ascetic practices ("A Vow", "Over hearing an Ascetic ...",

“Saddhus”), of superstition (“Snake”) and the prevailing religious orthodoxy (“Brahmins”), it is little wonder that Siddhattha’s unease is brought to the fore in “Doubt”. Two conflicting tendencies are at work in “Doubt” (*WN*, 78-79), acting out Siddhattha’s own tension. Images to do with breathing, associated with breathing meditation practices, brush against language that suggests the elusive nature of the truth Siddhattha seeks. The word “breath” occurs three times, “wind” three times, and “breathe”, “sighs” and “blown” once each. This language acts out a counterpoint to the regularity of breath: “wind smuggled in”, a receptacle “made illicit”, “I feel fugitive”, “sighs of a shady kind”, “some felony/ of breath following my unsanctioned/ mind”, “the wind’s shifting address”, “interdictory// shadows” (*WN*, 78), “the wind’s unlicensed truth” (*WN*, 79). This tension enacts the scattered thoughts during meditation. The uneasiness in “Doubt” starts to transform itself into a realisation that transience is a thing to be embraced and accepted, rather than acting as a source of disillusion and displacement. Siddhattha seems to know this, and has only begun to accept it:

My thoughts must run the interdictory  
shadows, tell me to endure the summer’s  
face: it is what gives the world breath,

the moon its mischievous beauty; from  
its charity I will receive a likeness. First,  
I must breathe myself wise...  
... breathe

in the wind’s unlicensed truth, and sit  
until the edges that implicate my doubt –  
faultlessly deliver some absolutes.

(*WN*, 78-79)

It is obvious to Siddhattha by this point that change is both creative and destructive, while being truly neither a positive or negative force.

This unease is not unrelated to Siddhattha's determined ascetic practice as seen in "At Uruvela (2)", where he implores "Yama, disfigure me. Blemish me with thorns" (WN, 81). "At Uruvela (2)" is in many ways the last stand of Siddhattha's ascetic fervour. He further promises to "chew only reeds where the jackal has lain/ giving up its life to the hook-headed worm" (WN, 81). The pressure from these wishes, joined with the suggestion of liberation implicit in the closing lines of "The River" and "New Season", and the insecurity evinced in "Doubt", leaves Siddhattha's belief system vulnerable and open to suggestion or example. Siddhattha's refusal to reject his vigorous self-denial in these practices, his willingness to repress his desires instead of understanding them, is the key to this restlessness and dissatisfaction.

Another critical shift in Beveridge's narrative of Siddhattha's outlook is brought on in "The Kite". Here Siddhattha watches a boy's mastery of control over his kite. As in "Grass" where he wishes he "could find precision among// unweighable songs" the reed-cutters sing, in "The Kite" Siddhattha also admires the boy's ability to "make it climb in any wind" (WN, 82) and "make it veer with the precision of/ an insect targeting its sting" (WN, 82). The control and steadiness the boy practices over the kite's movements in all circumstances strikes Siddhattha: such control and precision is what he desires in his spiritual pursuits. In pursuing outwardly rather than cultivating it inwardly, Siddhattha presumes such awareness lies outside the self. This is why he asks the boy

if it was made of some special silk,  
if he'd used some particular string –  
and what he'd heard while holding it.

(*WN*, 82)

It is evident that Beveridge allegorises Siddhattha's sometimes overly wilful search for truth: "And I'll find it – no matter/ who says truth can't be scratched open" (*WN*, 56).

Ironically, Siddhattha notes a similar allegorical structure:

He looked at me from a distance,  
then asked about my alms bowl,  
my robes, and about that for which

a monk lives. It was then I saw  
I could tell him nothing in the cohort  
wind, that didn't sound illusory.

(*WN*, 83)

The boy's humbling lesson revisits Siddhattha's earlier uneasiness. The truth Siddhattha seeks, and about which the boy asks him, is as "fugitive" as Siddhattha feels himself to be in "Doubt". Siddhattha's "unsanctioned mind" (*WN*, 78) is unable to tell the boy anything as Beveridge undercuts Siddhattha's confidence about the worth of any spiritual attainment he has reached: he realises that it is "illusory". It is no coincidence that "Four Summer Fragments", which follows "The Kite", focuses on the minute world that surrounds Siddhattha. By shrinking and sharpening Siddhattha's focus as a result of this encounter, Beveridge situates the small observations of dung beetles, ants, maggots and flies as significant moments. The shift in tone and concern between these consecutive poems is notable. Siddhattha's shock at the illusory nature of much of his hard-won spiritual "knowledge" knocks him into a less attached mode of perception in "Four Summer Fragments". This resurgent non-attachment emerges only after Siddhattha's struggle with desire, and supports a way of seeing that understands a variety of interdependent connections, such as those between change, or decay, and the sacred.

### Going forth: direction and reassessment

The boy in “The Kite” seems to effortlessly practise the control Siddhattha seeks. This realisation jolts Siddhattha out of his ascetic complacency. Although he is still searching during “Benares”, the five poems that follow set out a story of progress and realisation. The tension evoked in “Doubt” between elusive truth and regular breath, and the unfocussed meditation practice enacted by the formal irregularity of “Quarry” is largely resolved in “Grass”. The two-line stanzas mirror the structure of breathing meditation, focussing on the incoming, then the outgoing breath. Siddhattha absorbs the regularity implied through form and imagery in “Grass”:

Each stroke comes in on the surest  
waves; each blade reaches my heart

in regular rhythm ...

(WN, 86)

To Siddhattha, there is no obvious tension in the work of the reed-cutters. They have spent all morning, he says, “balancing/ among the perfection of those arcs” (WN, 86). Through this image, Beveridge finds a stability that further reinforces Siddhattha’s developing non-attachment that is present even in early poems. Where, in “The River”, Siddhattha finds it “is enough to watch a river widen with/ loose and silent evidence of a strenuous life beneath” (WN, 55), in “Grass” he is equally accepting of the “many imponderable things” (WN, 86), noting simply that “This river goes on” (WN, 86). The narrative Beveridge constructs, of a broadening and deepening meditation practice, is emulated through a series of images at least as much as through direct commentary.

The reed-cutters in “Grass” compel Siddhattha to radically reappraise his situation. His realisation in “The Kite” that all he could say about his practice would be “illusory” (*WN*, 87) seems to have little effect other than a sensation of inadequacy. In “Grass”, however, Siddhattha takes a positive direction from observing the men at work,

... wishing I too could take  
 my work into the cold; wishing  
 I too could find precision among  
 unweighable songs  
 (*WN*, 86-87)

The regularity and precision of the reed-cutters’ work inspires Siddhattha to emulate these qualities in what now seems a proto-Buddhist practice, just as the kite-flying boy alerts him to the previous inadequacy of his practice. Siddhattha finds their technical accomplishment remarkable: “Who are these/ men scything grass?” (*WN*, 86). The line break adds to Siddhattha’s incredulity and surprise. In fact the men’s precision can be read as Beveridge’s blueprint for the sequence. In order to make “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree” work as a narrative while remaining true to Beveridge’s consistently image-driven technique, she needs herself to “find precision among// unweighable songs”. Although Beveridge convincingly integrates elements of Buddhist practice into her writing technique, “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree” and its narrative of Siddhattha’s wandering provides a new formal challenge. She strives to find a way to integrate an overt concern for Buddhism and its key narrative *as narrative* within a poetic technique that does not necessarily favour the narrative mode. Beveridge embeds significant elements of Siddhattha’s narrative within a set of images, thus demonstrating her integration of the narrative mode and a more imagistic, lyrical one. This integration mirrors the way she brings Buddhist concepts into her poems at the level of the image and formal structure. As such her narrative of Siddhattha very rarely takes on the didactic

or discursive hue which colours a portion of Robert Gray's work. Instead, her deft handling of the image and manipulation of form and structure carry much of the narrative's undertow and nuance.

The image in "Grass" of the crescent moon is no longer simply a foreboding symbol of death as in "Circles" but a vehicle for "perfection", reflected in the blades of the reed-cutters' scythes. In so deploying the moon-motif, Beveridge complicates all these images. If the image of a crescent moon can contain death *and* perfection, then all images of the moon throughout the sequence at least imply this complexity. Death is the harvest's barely hidden counterpart. Siddhattha's search for spiritual knowledge, for an enlightenment that cannot yet be called "Buddhist", inflects the relation between Beveridge's images and the evasive knowledge that Siddhattha seeks outside of them. This is seen when Siddhattha remarks that "there's a sound too in the wind// of many imponderable things" (WN, 86). Or, "the men poise – / then scythe their absolute measures" (WN, 86-87). The language Beveridge deploys here points to the ineffable qualities that Siddhattha perceives lurking behind or within existence's "absolute measures". Still, ambivalence intrudes into this suspicion. Although Siddhattha hears the whisper of "many imponderable things" and desires "precision", the final allusion to this feeling is of men cutting *through* the idea of the absolute: the men "scythe their absolute measures". This signals and dramatises Siddhattha's move toward non-attachment. As Siddhattha recognises that ideas, even of an absolute, imponderable existence, are empty, so he moves toward the acceptance of circumstances that we notice at the end of the sequence.



Of the ten poems that follow “Grass”, eight follow some sort of standardised formal structure, only “Death” and “Source” eschewing regular form. “A Way” consists of a series of three-line stanzas built around repetition of phrases, as if it were a fractured villanelle. “Benares”, “Ganges” and “Path” are all villanelles, “Rice” is a sonnet, while “In the Forest” is structured in five-line stanzas, and is roughly iambic. “Eight Gathas” and “Ficus Religiosa” are formally identical, vow poems consisting of four-line stanzas. Beveridge’s increasing preoccupation with poetic form and control as the sequence and narrative approach a close mimics Siddhattha’s increasing control over his practice. The same precision and regularity Siddhattha perceives in “Grass”, and wishes to incorporate into his own practice, Beveridge formally enacts throughout the last third of “Between the Palace and the Bodhi ‘I’ree”.

The formal embodiment Beveridge offers Siddhattha’s new awareness is a notable feature of “Rice”. In this poem, Siddhattha takes note of the attachment of others without overtly applying this realisation to himself:

... those are  
the cries of *dukkha*. The animals  
are hungry, the men are hungry –  
and they are all craving the rice.

(WN, 94)

That this is one of the few recognisably “Buddhist” doctrinal insights clearly stated in the sequence adds to Beveridge’s formal crispness. At the turn between the octave and the sestet in the sonnet, Siddhattha’s insight takes shape:

But then I realise, it is something  
  
else: those are the cries not only  
of men...

... those are  
the cries of *dukkha*...

(*W/N*, 94)

The conventional formal turn in the sonnet is utilised by Beveridge to represent a turn in Siddhattha's thinking. By using the turn in this way, Beveridge packs a key moment in Siddhattha's experience into a clearly identifiable Western poetic form. In so subtly integrating the Asian Buddhist tradition with a key English poetic form, Beveridge again clearly shows off her ease at working in both realms. She shows off without an obvious display, as Alan Wearne suggests in his review of *Accidental Grace*<sup>402</sup>. Without speaking through Siddhattha of an increased restraint and structure in his practice and wandering, Beveridge nonetheless presents this restraint to the reader. Although this is a narrative sequence, Siddhattha never speaks directly or at length about his practice. Beveridge enacts her subject's spiritual attainment and experience largely through form and imagery, rarely resorting to any direct statement, let alone declamatory passages. As Siddhattha's practice increasingly nears what we now know as "Buddhism", so too does Beveridge's formal approach provide an underpinning of steady clarity and control of her elsewhere energetic imagistic drive. Just as Siddhattha brings his desires and attachments under control, so Beveridge restrains, without suppressing, her own poetic reflexes.

The insight shown in "Doubt", that impermanence cannot be denied and must be accepted, is the seed of the compassionate attitude we see in the final few poems in "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree". This is exemplified in "Eight Gathas" and "Ficus Religiosa":

Sitting under a cool moon

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<sup>402</sup> Alan Wearne, "Murray and other rivers", *Eureka Street*, Vol.7, No.4, 1997, p.43. He writes that "Beveridge may *look* as though she's playing safe. But no, she's showing off". He follows this a little later, discussing Beveridge and Elizabeth Bishop: "both treat their work and audience with respect, 'showing off' without anyone thinking they do".

I vow with all beings  
to find my place in the cycles  
seasons enjoy with the sun.

(*WN*, 93)

I vow with all beings  
to sit until at the root, every  
snake becomes an acolyte.

(*WN*, 101)

In “In the Forest”, Siddhattha’s desire for Yasodhara has practically subsided. He no longer sees visions of Yasodhara, but only remembers “how often I saw Yasodhara’s face/ under the sky’s veneer” (*WN*, 95), signalling that he has reined in his desire and attachment to the past. His exercise of non-attachment and control is evident in his actions:

All day I bow to these creatures –  
those who wait their cycles out more

devoutly than moons ...

(*WN*, 95-96)

And:

... as I watch, I feel my mind enter  
a vast space in which everything  
connects; and a grasshopper on a blade  
of grass listens intently with its knees.

(*WN*, 96)

Beveridge here makes Siddhattha’s body follow the precept of his mind from “Tree”:

I’ll have to ...

... learn to clutch  
at nothing

(*WN*, 69)

Siddhattha not only admires the natural non-attachment of the grasshopper and other creatures, but also now participates in it himself. As a result, Siddhattha is able to identify the motivating force in “Rice”. He sees his own *dukkha*, or dissatisfaction, in both animals and men (*WN*, 94). The dissatisfaction that results from Siddhattha’s unfulfilled desires and attachment lead toward a practice to dismantle these hindrances.

A relatively superficial ambition such as that expressed in “A Vow” has faded by the late vow poems like “Eight Gathas” and “Ficus Religiosa”. These two poems share the same religious and formal structure, laying down a consistent rhythm and tone that heightens the mantric implications and allusions of the other vow poems and the villanelles. Nonetheless, some small matters do clearly mark them apart. “Eight Gathas”, the first of the two final vow poems, acts out a sense of spiritual and natural community:

On the riverbank at sunset  
I vow with all beings  
to chant noisily, devotedly  
in honour of toads.

(*WN*, 92)

Listening to the reed-cutter’s blade  
I vow with all beings  
to acknowledge that my misfortunes  
have no permanence.

(*WN*, 93)

In a final renunciation of his last desires for Yasodhara, Siddhattha vows:

Yasodhara, when your image appears,  
I vow with all beings  
to shatter the mirror  
and bury the pieces with care.

(*WN*, 93)

While these poems are clearly informed by a compassionate yet non-attached concern for the welfare of all beings, the vows that make up “Eight Gathas” are more restrained than those in “Ficus Religiosa” in one regard. The vows in the latter are versions of the Bodhisattva Vow, in which one states one’s wish to forgo one’s own ultimate enlightenment until all beings have attained that state:

Under the bodhi tree –  
I vow with all beings  
to sit until I become one with  
all the heart-shaped leaves.

(*WN*, 101)

This vow, which is an ethical practice, is coupled with a structured meditation practice that mimics and is mimicked by Beveridge’s consistent use of poetic form and structure to shape a reciprocal, interdependent relationship:

... as I watch, I feel my mind enter  
a vast space in which everything  
connects...

(*WN*, 96)

From the sequence’s final villanelle, the quasi-mantric structure of repetition through echo affirms Siddhattha’s vow. This anticipates his seemingly imminent enlightenment, and echoes, with his vows from “Ficus Religiosa”, into silence: “Directionless once, but now I can orient// my mind against what’s waning, absent” (*WN*, 100); “now I can orient// my steps toward what’s latent, salient” (*WN*, 100). Beveridge’s representation of Siddhattha’s Bodhisattva Vow takes him almost to the very point of enlightenment, but not beyond it. Although the Buddha, the post-enlightenment Siddhattha, in some sense haunts all these poems, Beveridge wisely declines to include him in the sequence. He

remains an anticipated absence, much as he is in the earlier, shorter sequence from *Accidental Grace*, "The Buddha Cycle".

In her execution of "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree", Beveridge differs in one key point from Homi Bhabha. Where Bhabha, via Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, insists that where "we identify ourselves with the other precisely at the point at which he is inimitable, at the point which eludes resemblance"<sup>403</sup>, Beveridge stops short of directly representing the Buddha in his unfathomable enlightenment experience. The last moment at which Beveridge shows Siddhattha is in the last poem of "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree", "Ficus Religiosa", where he sits beneath the bodhi tree, vowing

... with all beings  
to sit until I no longer want  
to burgeon in paradise.

(*WN*, 102)

Then the poem ends. In this respect Beveridge declines to try to portray the Buddha, unless this sudden end of desire ("I no longer want"<sup>404</sup>) is taken to be the only literary response available to such an experience. Just as the Buddha is either absent or is indirectly portrayed in "The Buddha Cycle", so this absence that ensues in the very moment of the vow in "Ficus Religiosa" fills in for the Buddha. The Buddha actually *is* the emptying out of desire and attachment, a pregnant emptiness: in a very real sense he is no more than an example of this emptying out of the self. Beveridge represents him not by representing him at the point of inimitability, but *in* his inimitability. This presence-cum-emptiness is Beveridge's representation also of what Bhabha characterises

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<sup>403</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, pp.184-185

as the “subversive strategy of subaltern agency that negotiates its own authority”<sup>405</sup>. The Buddha removes himself from Beveridge’s depiction of Siddhattha through his “iterative ‘unpicking’”<sup>406</sup> of the sequence’s dramatic tensions. The “unpicking” of the Buddha’s enlightenment (the source of both his “authority” and others’ identification with him) pulls the sequence apart, making it no longer sustainable. It is one of Beveridge’s strengths that she recognises this and does not attempt to push the issue further.

## Conclusion

Although the poems in “Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree” are in Siddhattha’s voice, it does not rule out either elements of a narrative about Beveridge. Many of the poems in *The Domesticity of Giraffes* and *Accidental Grace*, then, do not simply embody or enact elements of Buddhist thought, but actually map out, in a fragmented way, Beveridge’s endeavour to integrate Buddhism into her poetic sensibility. Buddhism is an influence in Beveridge’s work as subject matter, but also, integrated into her poetic practice, becomes part of her way of responding more generally to things. That is, Beveridge does not just write “about” Buddhism. Her ability to integrate those Buddhist interests and practices into her work means that she writes *from* a Buddhist perspective more than she writes *about* it. Beveridge’s writing about Siddhattha seems informed by her own experience, not in terms of the plot, but, once again, at the level of the image. Beveridge is a poet who not only writes about Buddhism, but is one for whom Buddhism forms a significant part of her perceptual and conceptual outlook. While someone like Harold Stewart writes extensively about a particular strand of Buddhism

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<sup>404</sup> This is a powerful echo of Robert Gray’s “Dharma Vehicle”: “I do not want to be this sort of cripple/ in the world any longer”, Robert Gray, *New Selected Poems*, Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney, 1998, p.74.

<sup>405</sup> Bhabha, pp.184-185

<sup>406</sup> Bhabha, pp.185

and its cultural context, Beveridge almost entirely avoids such limitations on subject matter and setting. She moves fluently and fluidly between narrative and lyrical modes, between writing about and from aspects of Buddhism, between her own perspective and those of others while simultaneously questioning the nature of difference in the first place.



## Conclusion

### Composting culture

Describing the “echoes and allusions” of the English and Chinese cultural traditions in translation as “part of the compost”<sup>407</sup>, Nicholas Jose offers an image that makes room for the complexities and nuances of cultural transmission. While influence in a writer’s work may be more or less obvious, the actual means by which that influence is transmitted will almost invariably be less than clear. Harold Stewart, Robert Gray and Judith Beveridge all declare their interests in Buddhism, but there remains the problem of their predisposition to that interest. Beveridge writes that she sustained a general interest in Eastern philosophy, Gray recalls a Thai Buddha statue owned by his father, while Michael Ackland suggests that Harold Stewart’s decision to live in Japan was “subtly, though indirectly, influenced by [his father’s] 30 years in India”<sup>408</sup>, and that he had read some Indian poetry<sup>409</sup>. These early exposures to ideas and images from Asia and Buddhism account for some of their recipients’ later voicing of their Buddhist interests in their poetry, but it remains difficult to show the workings of cultural transmission, even if the various conduits can be isolated to a degree.

It does, though, remain eminently feasible to investigate the workings and the presence of those influences in the work of these poets. The means of integration of Buddhist ideas, images and practices into the poetry of Harold Stewart, Robert Gray and Judith Beveridge cannot themselves be easily seen, noted and dissected, but their

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<sup>407</sup> Nicholas Jose, “Compost and Pollination”, *Southerly*, 1, 2003, p.17

<sup>408</sup> Michael Ackland, *Damaged Men*, p.9

<sup>409</sup> Michael Ackland, *Damaged Men*, p.9

presence can be detected in the numerous traces that they leave. Much of the visibility of the Buddhist inflection in the work of these poets is due to the tensions caused in attempting to bring the Buddhist ideas and images into their work through their subject matter, tone, handling of formal matters and style. A converse pattern can be seen, where the less integrated into the sensibility the Buddhism is, the more apparent its presence. This is particularly so of earlier attempts by poets like Max Dunn, although it is true also of the greater part of Harold Stewart's work. In the work of Judith Beveridge on the other hand, in poems that do not feature overtly Buddhist images or ideas, the inflection is much more nuanced and subtle, interwoven into her fashioning of images, into the perceptual patterns that produce them, and in her manipulation of form. Gray's stance sits somewhere between these two relative extremes, exploring Buddhist ideas quite discursively while also presenting images with a clear, perceptive eye that declare a knowledge of Buddhist non-attachment.

Other than his recurrent motif of glimpsed images, acting as a manifestation of Amida, in Harold Stewart's work there is a negligible embodiment of Buddhist ideas or images. His haiku translations are not a high point in the cultural dialogue between East and West: in fact Stewart's translations do little more than colonise the haiku. His imposition of the formal strictures of the iambic pentameter rhyming couplet upon the Japanese haiku form both annexes it and denies its pleasures and its native qualities which make it an appealing form to potential translators in the first place. The strength of Stewart's insistence on the couplet as the ideal English-language form for the haiku speaks eloquently of his attachment to his self-image as an erudite scholar of all things Buddhist and Japanese. It does little, though, for his poetic reputation.

Stewart's two largest works, *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* and the unpublished "Autumn Landscape-Roll" are both quasi-epics that, like his published and unpublished haiku translations, expose his formal and temperamental limitations. *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* concentrates on finding a series of links between the religious history of the city and Stewart's own spiritual experience in and around the sites he visits. "Autumn Landscape-Roll" focuses on a fantastic imagined past in which, tellingly, a landscape painter vanishes into his own work. Stewart seems barely aware of the powerful irony at play here. In these quasi-epics Stewart demonstrates the sheer energy of his attachment to the past. There is, though, little real recompense for Stewart's expense of this energy. Almost Stewart's entire body of work shudders under the weight of explanatory notes: to his haiku translations, his shorter lyrics, his "epics". He fails, though, to integrate his apparent Buddhist erudition into the fabric of his work. On the evidence of the greatest part of his work, Stewart remains capable of little more than mere display of this formal or factual erudition.

The complexity of Robert Gray's Buddhist interests carries great import for a consideration of his work. He affirms that his interest in Japanese and Chinese Zen and Chinese Ch'an poetry led him to Imagism, which characterises much of his work, particularly his first three books, *Creekwater Journal*, *Grass Script* and *The Skylight*. In a substantial part of this early body of work, Gray took steps to integrate his interests in Buddhism at the level of his aesthetic. This attempt to enact and embody Buddhist ideas, image and practices through poetic form, attention to images and the speakers' attitude is a key feature of some of Gray's major early poems: "Dharma Vehicle", "To the Master, Dogen Zenji", "Journey: the North Coast", "Within the Traveller's Eye". Of particular interest in these poems, and Gray's work more generally, is his embodiment of his

struggle with Buddhist non-attachment. The difficulty of his struggle is clear in Gray's direct discussion of non-attachment in discursive passages in "Dharma Vehicle", as well as in his nuanced demonstration of a non-attached aesthetic in "Within the Traveller's Eye" and "Journey: the North Coast", where non-attachment is not overtly referred to but, rather, is present at the level of the speaker's perception.

A split develops, though, between Gray's efforts toward enacting non-attachment and the dialectic he sets up between his attachment to nature, which he associates with the mother in his poems, and aversion to society, represented by his father. This dialectic strengthens and leads, eventually, to a productive but perhaps limiting imbalance in Gray's work. This suggests that, despite Gray's avowal of Buddhist non-attachment, it is not, and perhaps never was, the central drive of his poetic as he has claimed. This suspicion is cemented by his visit to Japan in the early 1980s, which gave him the poem "Under the Summer Leaves". This poem tracks Gray's turning-away from Japanese culture, and an accompanying disillusionment with Buddhism. "Under the Summer Leaves" is an overt renunciation of Japanese Buddhist culture and aesthetics: after which Gray's work develops an increasingly didactic tone which impacts also on his aesthetics.

As Gray drifts from Buddhism, a move away from the refined Imagist technique can be traced, particularly through his collections *Piano*, *Certain Things*, and *Lineations*. The discursive and didactic poetry that becomes Gray's dominant mode in these later books represents a large shift in Gray's sensibility. Accompanying this drift away from Buddhism is an inverse resurgence of interest in materialist philosophy ("which is what I do believe"): as Gray's interest in Buddhism, as evident from his poetry, wanes, so does

the Imagist impulse that he learnt from Ch'an Buddhism. The cultivation of Buddhist non-attachment that was such a mark of his first few books recedes by the time of *Certain Things*, and its binary other, aversion, reaches a nadir in "The Trendies" in *Lineations*. After "Under the Summer Leaves" in 1988 with its narrative of disillusion with Japanese culture and Buddhism, Gray makes no direct reference to Buddhism (except that brief, self-reifying mention in "Illusions" in 1993's *Certain Things*) until "The Drift of Things" from *Afterimages* in 2002. While in this poem Gray's work evidently retains some limited interest in Buddhist ideas and images, his engagement with Buddhism certainly no longer remains the "really major impetus" driving his work, as he once described it. Indeed Gray undertakes a career-long revision of his work. This does not remain confined to re-working his poems and providing altered versions of them in his series of *Selected Poems*. The revisionist impulse is concerned also to re-calibrate Gray's early work so that it is in closer agreement to his current philosophical outlook. Accompanying this is a tendency for Gray's always discursive poetic towards an increasing self-justification: some of Gray's later poems almost contain their own commentary. Gray's didactic inclination is, at times, such that he appears unable to let his poems speak for themselves. This seems to compromise a portion of his work to such an extent that Martin Duwell, typically quite sympathetic towards Gray, felt compelled to remind him of his numerous readers and that "Perhaps he should trust them to be aware of what he is doing"<sup>410</sup>.

Judith Beveridge notes an early interest in "Eastern philosophy" that inflects her earlier work. This general interest does not really focus on a specific interest in Buddhist images, practices and ideas until toward the end of *Accidental Grace*, with the sequence, "The Buddha Cycle". Her work prior to this, namely her first book, *The Domesticity of*

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<sup>410</sup> Duwell, "Loving Sketches", p.6

*Giraffes*, makes abundant use of imagery of interconnection that continue to inform her work. This imagery is vital in assessing Beveridge's aesthetic predisposition to Buddhist doctrinal, literary and artistic influences. While the idea of inter-relatedness is not in itself Buddhist, Beveridge's later use of images of interdependence alongside other ideas and images that are recognisably Buddhist suggests that she has developed her use of that set of ideas as her Buddhist interests have also developed.

Beveridge's integration of Buddhism into her body of work tells of and demonstrates some of the ways that cultural transmission works through various conduits, influences, inflections, and how that transmission is in turn represented by a variety of poetic means. She does, though, display a direct, doctrinal influence in some of the poems in "The Buddha Cycle" and, to a lesser extent "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree". Her work is also alive to the subtler cultural and aesthetic influences that play out in and through a poet's sensibility. Many of her formal structures could be considered as embodiments of Buddhist ideas about interdependence and conditionality. Her long sequence in the voice of Siddhattha, "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree" not only follows Siddhattha on his ascetic wanderings through northern India, but the poems conceal a formal narrative as well, where established forms, or variations on them, increase in frequency as he nears enlightenment. This use of formal technique points to a subterranean evocation of Buddhist meditation practices through form which complements Beveridge's occasionally faltering handling of the dramatic flow of her narrative.

Beveridge's embodiment of interdependence and a range of other Buddhist ideas, and images, on an almost purely aesthetic level, through form, structure, rhythm and image rather than through any overt discussion sets Beveridge apart from Harold Stewart and Robert Gray. Where these two poets almost invariably return to doctrinal or discursive set-pieces through which to explore the Buddhist ideas they represent, Beveridge, in nearly complete contrast very rarely indeed overtly mentions Buddhist ideas, let alone discusses them. In this way, in standing some distance from her two main counterparts, Beveridge demonstrates the possibilities of working within an aesthetic that draws richly, but not entirely, on a range of Buddhist sensibilities and traditions. The possibility of embodying Buddhist images, doctrine and practices through a range of imagery, poetic form, structure and a palette of poetic techniques, such a key to Beveridge's poetry, is something of a touchstone for Australian poetry engaged with Buddhism, and with Asia more broadly. Rather than needing to directly explore Buddhist ideas, Beveridge shows how to use a range of Western poetic conventions and techniques to engage with Buddhism on its own terms, and indeed *through* its own language.

Ultimately, it is not possible to definitively plot the workings of the cultural transmission of Buddhist ideas, images, aesthetics and practices through these poets'. This carries through a proliferation of conduits, influences, vehicles and inflections. These might be various in their orientation: direct doctrinal influences, ideas or images abroad in popular culture, and other subtler, aesthetic channels. It is an irony that the more directly doctrinal the influence in these poets' work the easier it is to trace, whereas more nuanced aesthetic influences that register quite subtly on one's sensibility might

suggest a broader and deeper integration of those ideas, but except for obviously borrowed images, they are much more difficult to plot, if they can be mapped-out at all.

## Critical overview

Numerous gaps appear in the body of critical work on Australian poetry (and Australia literature generally) when it comes to speaking of the religious. Critics writing on the influence of Buddhism in the work of Gray and Beveridge in particular have perpetrated some significant misreadings. Alan Urquhart, John Stephens and Alison Croggon are among these. Martin Duwell is especially thorough on this area of the work of both Gray and Beveridge. Duwell has published a major article on Beveridge, and several reviews of Gray's books. The review culture seems to represent Gray and Beveridge more adequately than longer critical pieces: most longer articles on Gray's work have been found somewhat wanting. Haskell's article in *Westerly* on Gray is inconsistent. It remains quite strong in terms of straightforward literary criticism, but like many others, his understanding of Buddhism, as Gray uses it in his work, seems inadequate. The work of both Gary Catalano and Kevin Hart on Gray sufficiently accounts for the religious aspect of Gray's work. These two critics, strong poets themselves, exhibit considerable understanding of Gray's work and how his interest in Buddhism sits within it. In her review of Beveridge's *Accidental Grace*, Lyn McCredden, like Alison Croggon, mistakes elements of the Buddhist presence in her work for potential imperialism. It is also clear from interviews and other poems that Beveridge is not unaware of the critical and political discourse about self and other: she enacts a subtle yet powerful feminism and eco-feminism in much of her work.



## New directions

While Harold Stewart's position as a poet of some repute seems to owe as much to his role in the Ern Malley affair as to his long-term absence from Australia and the partisan exchanges between schools of poetry, this seems likely to change. While Stewart remains a key figure in the continuing literary and cultural engagement of Australians with the many forms "Asia" assumes in our national imaginations, his own engagement bore little in the way of fruit for his work. Currently, Robert Gray remains the prime exemplar of a "major" Australian poet engaging with Buddhism, despite his ambivalences in this regard. It appears that Judith Beveridge is in a position to join him as she continues to develop her reputation: her poetic reach and her range of concerns, natural, social, political, religious, familial, seem to ensure this.

In researching, thinking, talking about and writing this thesis it has become increasingly apparent that there is much work in what is a broad area that remains to be done. This is so of some very well-established and even "major" writers, and it is also true of a number of emerging figures who it appears will, with good fortune, continue to contribute new and vital work for some decades to come. Certainly, there are numerous topics that beckon promisingly to the future. I wish to outline some of these areas that call for reconsideration, or for renewed, continuing or future attention.

A really significant period in Australia's cultural and political engagement with "Asia" was the 1960s and early 1970s, a period that is generally considered to herald some sort of reawakening of Australian poetry. Many of the poets emerging throughout this period in some way flirted with the counter-culture: Michael Dransfield, Vicki

Viidikas, Charles Buckmaster and some of the members of the “Generation of ‘68”. Not insignificant bodies of work took part in a broad flirtation with the East as part of this counter-cultural project. A part of this flirtation involved use of images and terminology from Buddhism and other “Eastern” religions, whether through a genuine interest in these ideas and practices or as a more general embroidering of their work with exotic images and ideas. Some further study of the appropriation or other uses of Asian cultural images and ideas by Australian poets of the time seems a fruitful possibility. I had considered some substantial work on this topic for this thesis, but the dictates of space argued against this.

John Tranter is one of the major figures in Australian poetry of the last thirty years. A reconsideration of his very considerable body of work in light of his interest in Buddhism seems another very worthwhile avenue. John Tranter’s encounters with Buddhism are manifested in a surprising number of sometimes vague allusions to various Buddhist images, phrases or texts. The Buddhist images in his work do warrant some serious investigation. His first collection, *Parallax and other poems*, contains “Bardo Thodol (1918)”<sup>411</sup>: the *Bardo Thodol* is a Buddhist text better known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. *At The Florida*<sup>412</sup>, his 1993 collection, concludes with a thirty page sequence of haibun, a Japanese form popularised by Bashō<sup>413</sup>, thus deriving in some way from a Buddhist-inflected aesthetic. Tranter adapted this part-prose, part-haiku form to his own needs, closing with a passage of prose poetry rather than the haiku of conventional haibun. He follows these hybrid haibun with a sequence of four others (“The Seasons”) in *Studio*

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<sup>411</sup> John Tranter, *Parallax and other poems*, South Head Press, Sydney, 1970, p.22

<sup>412</sup> John Tranter, *At The Florida*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993

<sup>413</sup> Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, Nobuyuki Yuasa, transl., Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966

*Moon*<sup>414</sup>: these adhere rather more closely to the Japanese form. Several of the “sonnets” in *Crying in Early Infancy*<sup>415</sup> feature some form of Buddhist reference (“The Diamond Sutra”<sup>416</sup>, “The Soto Zen School”<sup>417</sup>), while “The Famous Chinese Poet”<sup>418</sup> toys with the style of English-language translations of ancient Chinese like Tu Fu, Li Po and Wang Wei; “Jack’s Tracks” parodies Jack Kerouac’s “Dharma holiday”<sup>419</sup>. Given the breadth of allusions, and the long period of time over which Tranter has sustained these references, it seems fair to suggest there is a considerable, if unmapped, area of Buddhist influence at work in Tranter’s poetry.

Much the same can be said for Laurie Duggan’s work. Much of his early work bears some sign of the influence of Philip Whalen. This is certainly so of *Under the Weather*<sup>420</sup> and *The Great Divide: Poems 1973-1983*<sup>421</sup>, Duggan’s second and fourth collections respectively. These books could be read in parts as if an antipodean intersection of Whalen and Gary Snyder. His most recent collection, *Mangroves*<sup>422</sup>, carries “No name” which covers, in a condensed manner, some of the concern with self that Robert Gray goes over in parts of “Dharma Vehicle”. There is a persistent attitude to self that suggests some awareness of Buddhist ideas about no-self and non-attachment. Duggan’s treatment of self is a major underpinning of his entire aesthetic, and it allows for a very fluid subjectivity, connecting Buddhist thought with some postmodern

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<sup>414</sup> John Tranter, *Studio Moon*, Salt, Cambridge, UK, 2003, pp.10-13

<sup>415</sup> John Tranter, *Crying in Early Infancy*, Makar, St Lucia, 1977. This has recently been reprinted in a compendium volume, *Trio* (Salt, Cambridge, UK, 2003) with two other early Tranter collections, *Red Movie* and *Dazed in the Ladies’ Lounge*.

<sup>416</sup> Tranter, *Crying in Early Infancy*, p.52

<sup>417</sup> Tranter, *Crying in Early Infancy*, p.80

<sup>418</sup> Tranter, *Crying in Early Infancy*, p.49

<sup>419</sup> Tranter, *Crying in Early Infancy*, p.55

<sup>420</sup> Laurie Duggan, *Under the Weather*, Wild & Woolley, Sydney, 1978

<sup>421</sup> Laurie Duggan, *The Great Divide*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1985

<sup>422</sup> Laurie Duggan, *Mangroves*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2003, p.17

theories about self, subjectivity and identity. Again, on these grounds alone, Duggan's work merits some further research.

Terry Gillmore's sequence "The Art of Dense Conversation", from his second book *Surviving the Shadow*<sup>423</sup>, covers similar territory to Gray's "Dharma Vehicle", in attempting to find a place for Buddhist practice in an Australian setting: again, "the bush". He belongs somewhere among Tranter and Duggan, but, despite the strength of some sections of "The Art of Dense Conversation", his work is uneven, and will probably remain consigned to a secondary significance.

Of developing significance is a number of poets who have emerged over the last five to fifteen years who have in common a broad series of cultural engagements with that entity, "Asia": Adam Aitken, Caroline Caddy, Jane Gibian, S. K. and Christopher Kelen, and Noel Rowe. These poets are, by and large, relatively young, and as such their work can be fairly expected to continue to develop in interesting ways. Caroline Caddy is a significantly under-estimated poet, particularly in this cross-cultural context. Her broad cultural engagement with China and Japan as documented in two of her most recent books, *Working Temple*<sup>424</sup> and *editing the moon*<sup>425</sup>. Her work alone could sustain some substantial critical work. None of these poets have publicly asserted that they are "Buddhist" poets in the same way that Robert Gray once did, but they each demonstrate an awareness of Buddhism as both a religious and a cultural underpinning in the societies they sometimes write "about", and in their own work.

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<sup>423</sup> Terry Gillmore, *Surviving the Shadow*, Paper Bark Press, Sydney, 1990, pp.3-11

<sup>424</sup> Caroline Caddy, *Working Temple*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1997

<sup>425</sup> Caroline Caddy, *editing the moon*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1999

Rosemary Dobson's sequence on Chinese poetry translation, "The Continuance of Poetry"<sup>426</sup> seems a vital model, or at least precedent, for much of the more recent work discussed here. While Dobson's sequence is not in any way ostensibly Buddhist, it does come out of an engagement with translations of the Chinese poets, Wang Wei and Li Po, whose work is influenced by the Buddhist- and Taoist-influenced culture of T'ang Dynasty China. Dobson and David Campbell's (Dobson's sequence is dedicated to Campbell) literary engagement with their work is an important conduit for both Buddhist-inflected and Sino-Japanese aesthetic influence in Australian literary circles.

J. S. Harry has written some substantial poems inflected with imagery from Japanese cultural settings: namely rigorous but playful poems like "waiting for the express, to go north to Ôsaka"<sup>427</sup>, "to Shiki who died of consumption"<sup>428</sup>, "Kaguya-hime"<sup>429</sup> and "temple-viewing"<sup>430</sup>. While many of her contemporaries from the late 1960s and early 1970s simply appropriated Asian religious and cultural imagery, Harry's handful of Japanese poems adopt some elements of Japanese or Buddhist-inflected bodies of thought as a sort of scaffolding. That is, Harry attempts to use local ideas in her representation of images and experiences of those places.

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<sup>426</sup> Rosemary Dobson, *The Three Fates and Other Poems*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1984, pp.35-46

<sup>427</sup> J.S. Harry, *the deer under the skin*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1970, p.29

<sup>428</sup> J.S. Harry, *the deer under the skin*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1970, p.30

<sup>429</sup> J.S. Harry, *the deer under the skin*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1970, p.28

<sup>430</sup> J.S. Harry, *A Dandelion for Van Gogh*, Island Press, Sydney, 1985, p.11

There are some poets currently on the margins of a canon who have nonetheless done some very interesting, if not vital, work with their engagements with Buddhism. Primary among these is M. T. C. Cronin, mainly for the haiku spread across her books<sup>431</sup>, but also for the undertone of Zen surreality in her recent *beautiful, unfinished*<sup>432</sup>. Barry Hill's novel *The Best Picture*<sup>433</sup>, is set in an Australian Tibetan Buddhist retreat. He also has a substantial sequence, "Twenty-One Sonnets to Tara" in his first book of poetry, *Raft*<sup>434</sup>. Like Cronin, Bronwyn Lea includes a number of haiku in her first book, as well as "Found Wanting at Zen Mountain Monastery"<sup>435</sup>. Sydney poet Carolyn Gerrish's work displays an occasional undercurrent of Buddhist ideas, mainly in her first collection *The Ground Slides Away*<sup>436</sup>. Her epigraphs demonstrate a strong interest in Buddhism that is not always apparent in much of her work: the epigraph to her second book, *Learning to Breathe Under Water* is from *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, and she quote from the haiku poets Ikkyū and Bashō in her third, *Hijacked to the Underworld*<sup>437</sup>.

The Buddhist presence in Australian society and literature offers new ethical and cultural models for writers, and reflects a perhaps increasing willingness to look beyond one's own cultural background. Australia's long engagement with that entity known as "Asia" has expanded the aesthetic, and ethical, palette of a range of contemporary and near-contemporary Australian poets. This is, of course, an ongoing process.

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<sup>431</sup> M. T. C. Cronin, *The world beyond the fig*, Five Islands Press, Wollongong, 1998; M. T. C. Cronin, *Everything holy*, Balcones International Press, Temple, Texas, 1998; M. T. C. Cronin, *Bestseller*, Vagabond, Sydney, 2001

<sup>432</sup> M. T. C. Cronin, *beautiful, unfinished: PARABLE/SONG/CANTO/POEM*, Salt, Cambridge, 2003

<sup>433</sup> Barry Hill, *The Best Picture*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1988

<sup>434</sup> Barry Hill, *Poems 1983-1990*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1990, pp.49-69

<sup>435</sup> Bronwyn Lea, *Flight Animals*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2001, pp.51-54

<sup>436</sup> Carolyn Gerrish, *The Ground Slides Away*, Five Islands Press, Wollongong, 1993

<sup>437</sup> Carolyn Gerrish, *Hijacked to the Underworld*, Five Islands Press, Wollongong, 2000

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