

Translating Transcendence : R.H. Blyth, Zen and English Poetry

James TINK

In her book *The Translation Zone*, Emily Apter proposes a critical history of modern comparative literary studies that begins with an encounter between East and West. In this case, it was in Istanbul in the 1930s and 40s, the city where the German critics Leo Spitzer and Eric Auerbach are said to have inaugurated the modern European discipline of comparative literature through their encounter with the Turkish university system : it was where Auerbach wrote his book *Mimesis*, and Spitzer pioneered seminars on comparative philology. Moreover, Apter claims that their project retains a relevant, if controversial, legacy for contemporary literary studies. She credits Leo Spitzer in particular, with his interest in translation studies, as being the forerunner of a “transnational humanism” which attempts to explore cultural and linguistic differences in a spirit of a self-critical and secular inquiry (56). For Apter, writing after 9/11, comparative criticism must rethink the literary and cultural status of religious discourse (especially the transcendent claims of fundamentalism) from a perspective of an inclusive, and non-coercive, secularism (75). The lasting legacy of Istanbul is, then, the attempt to rethink the global position of the European : “As the status of European traditions within postcolonial studies continues to be negotiated, this transnational humanism may be construed as a critical practice that reckons with the uncertain status of European thought in the future global marketplace of culture” (46). Humanism here names that practice of cosmopolitan or intercultural exchange that is said to be the proper object of world literature.

This paper addresses the relationship of comparative literature, religion and secularism through another example of East/West comparison from the late 1930s. This will be the rather less well-known example of the British scholar in Japan Reginald Horace Blyth, and in particular a book he published in the difficult circumstances of 1942, *Zen In English Literature and the Oriental Classics*. While this is not a well-known work that carries much influence

today, it rewards study as an historical example of Anglo-Japanese writing, and as a rather wayward experiment in comparative literary criticism that arguably did enjoy some influence among writers in the mid-century. While no doubt terminally eccentric to many contemporary tastes, the work nevertheless poses the question of how to translate concepts of aesthetics and religious transcendence between literary cultures. And even if Blyth's suggestions may be problematic, it may be useful to consider exactly why that is so, and what this has to say about our own historical moment.

R.H. Blyth (1898-1964) was among the generation of foreign specialists recruited to Japanese universities to teach English as a language and a body of literature. A conscientious objector during World War One, he had taken a degree in English Literature and moved to Korea in 1925, where he taught at Keijo Teikoku Daigaku and became interested in Zen Buddhism and the works of D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966). He eventually came to Japan in 1939 to teach at Kanazawa, where he finished the book under discussion, but was soon interned as an enemy after the declaration of war against Britain. The book itself was published, in English, in Tokyo during wartime. After the war he taught at Gakushuin University and enjoyed a career as an educator and writer on Zen Buddhism and haiku. He can be credited with helping to popularize both of these in English in the post-war period : *Zen in English Literature* was a direct influence on the American Buddhist writer Alan Watts, and several post-war American poets, notably Gary Snyder, were influenced by his haiku studies (Watts ix ; Pinnington 605-6).¹

However, Blyth's reputation today as a critic is low. First time readers of the text may well be stuck by the polyglot dexterity of the work, and the sheer visual excitement of the printed page, as Blyth switches from English, Japanese and Chinese quotations as part of his enthusiastic survey of different poetics. Nevertheless, it also frustrates the expectations of modern academic writing. The lack of a sustained or patient analysis of most sources, the absence of citation, and a tendency to make sweeping statements about Japanese and Buddhist beliefs betray a lack of analytic rigour or a sustained thesis. It may be fair to say that Blyth represents an earlier paradigm in both literary criticism and Japan studies, in which his literary analysis is more appreciative and *belle-lettrist* than historical or formalist, and his approach to Japanese culture (whatever his linguistic expertise) is essentializing, reductive,

and too anecdotal. In the wake of the more professional, post-war (and American) scholarship of Japanese literature in English – however implicated in the cultural politics of the Occupation and Cold War – the book has been relegated to a work of well-meaning amateurism.

These are legitimate caveats, yet, for all that, the work remains interesting as a singular experiment in a transnational poetics. This might be seen as a consequence of the work's stated aim. It is an attempt to both explain Zen Buddhist terms and Japanese poetry to English readers and also provide a primer on English literature for Japanese (Blyth x), and also to claim that it is possible to uncover the “Zen attitude towards life [found] most consistently and purely in Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Dickens and Stevenson” (viii). This essay will focus on the discussion of poetry, and his proposed comparison of English and Japanese poems under the rubric of Zen.

Although Blyth's discussion of the topic is scattershot, it is possible to derive some basic claims about poetry from the volume. Foremost, according to Blyth, is the claim that poetry and the “poetical” is a condition of experience that is the equivalent of the religious: “The poetical and the religious are identical states of mind, in which everything is seen to have its real value, that is an absolute value, which cannot be compared to that of any other thing. To the religious, all things are poetical··[t]o the poetical, all things are religious, every blade of grass, every stick and stone, the butterfly and the intestinal worms” (33). This conflation of poetry and experience comes in fact from Blyth's adherence to Suzuki's teachings on Zen as a mental state of pure experience. This is acknowledged openly in Blyth's definition of poetry, which incorporates the kanji in the text.

[To] express this in another way, suggested to me by Prof. Suzuki, in connection with seeing into our own nature [見性] [kenshō]; poetry is the something that we see, but the seeing and the something are one; without the seeing there is no something, no something so seeing. There is neither discovery nor creation: only the perfect, indivisible experience. (84)

Kenshō describes a form of enlightened knowledge that is a sudden experience; it is a

counterpart to the more complete state of *satori* (Abe 71). Zen or Chan Buddhism is a complex topic that deserves a fuller examination than is possible in this essay, suffice to say that if we could deduce a thesis from Blyth's book, then it would arguably be this alignment of (English) poetry and aesthetic experience to this phenomenon of insight that Suzuki popularized as an everyday and universal sensation of Zen.² However, the work also allows Blyth to read back from Zen experience to the English literary canon. One of the peculiarities of the text – and a sign of its “transnational” ambition – is the claim that English literature can be read in terms of Zen :

From the 16th century, the thought of the importance of the mind enters into English Literature. We must be careful by the way to distinguish, both in life and in art, talking about Zen, and Zen itself. So in the following examples, Zen is being alluded to, hinted at, dimly described. (If we want to find Zen itself, we may begin at *Beowulf*, and speak of his *Bushidō*). (97-8)

In other words, everything in English (or at least since the renaissance) is translatable as Zen, because it is already partly there as a latency. The affinity of *Beowulf* to *bushidō* (presumably as some form of warrior ethic ?) remains unexplored ; the sceptical reader may argue that is just as well as the comparison is unviable, or the concomitance of bushido to Zen itself dubious. What is more interesting is the suggestion to re-think English literary history through the act of comparison with Asia.

Where this is developed most interestingly in the work is the use of Zen experience as a critique of the aesthetics of symbolism. One of the peculiarities of the work is Blyth's avoidance of Euro-American Modernism (T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound are conspicuously absent) ; Blyth's taste in poetry seems to be more Georgian. However, he is at pains to deny that poetic experience is related to the transcendent poetics of the symbol as developed by Symonds, for, “It is hardly necessary to say that Zen has nothing to do with symbolism. In fact it might be called the opposite of Zen...” (68). The commitment to an everyday experience of Zen noted above means that for Blyth “there is nothing which is *not* a symbol” (70) and so he refuses to align poetics to a transcendent literary figure or sign as

advocated by Yeats (54). Rather than promote Japanese and Chinese poetry as a superior model of symbolism for English poetry (in the spirit of Imagism, say), Blyth tries to argue that poetic language is an intensity of experience that is not a transcendence.³ We can explore this in more detail by looking at two readings of seventeenth century poetry.

The first example is perhaps the best -known haiku of Bashō Matsuo (1644-1694), which Blyth chooses to translate as follows (217) :

<i>furuike ya</i>	The old pond-
<i>kawazu tobikomu</i>	A frog jumps in-
<i>mizu no oto</i>	Plop !

Blyth's insists that the poem exemplifies a Zen concept of experience, but maintains that it is not an experience of transcendent symbolism. Hence, I would argue, his choice of the defiantly downward, demotic, plosive "plop!" as the antithesis of the lofty or celestial. The potential bathos of this is acknowledged and refuted :

Against this translation it may be urged that "plop" is an unpoetical, rather humorous word. To this I would answer, "Read it over slowly about a dozen times, and this association will disappear largely." Further, it may be said, the expression "plop" is utterly different in sound from "mizu no oto." This is not quite correct. The English "sound of the water : is too gentle, suggesting a running stream or brook. The Japanese word "oto" has an onomatopoeic value much nearer to "plop." Other translations are wide of the mark. "Splash" sounds as if Bashō himself has fallen in. Yone Noguchi's "List the water sound," shows Bashō in a graceful pose with finger in air. "Plash," by Henderson, is also a misuse of words. Anyway, it is lucky for Basho that he was born a Japanese, because probably not even he could have said it in English. (217)⁴

We can sense here Blyth's interest in "ordinary language" and the avoidance of pretentious, poetic diction. Blyth's concern in translation is to emphasise the empirical sensation of the diving frog. The diction supports his metaphysics, because he denies that there is a

prior symbolic value to any of the elements in the poem (as subsequently claimed by Haruo Shirane (277)), or that the poem suggests a type of epiphany, as in the interpretation later suggested by Donald Keene (289). It is said to be even too ordinary for that. However, in order to verify the poem as a Zen poem, he also is forced to counter the commentary of Masaoaka Shihi, for whom the poem is nothing other than a description of a commonplace empirical event (220). Instead, (and again, this seems indebted to Suzuki) he tries to insist that the poem as Zen demonstrates profundity without transcendence :

It is just the old pond and the frog and the “plop” and no more and no less. “No more” means there is no symbolism, no mysticism, no diving into infinity, no listening to the voice of Universal Nature. “No less” means that the mind is spread out in a smooth glassy surface ; the mind is green (“a green thought in a green shade”) with goggle eyes and webbed feet. It is “plop!” The real pond, the real frog, the real jumping were seen, were heard, were seen-heard, when Bashō’s eyes were flicked open by the “plop” of the water. (222-3)

The impression is of the actuality and gravity of the frog’s plop as the alternative to transcendence. The allusion to “the green thought” of Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden” is also tantalizing, implying a philosophy of imminence or Buddhist “no-mindness” to that metaphysical poem. This may serve as a bridge to the second seventeenth century poem discussed at length in the work, the metaphysical George Herbert (1593-1633), and his celebrated poem “Love (III),” which is quoted in full in the volume (249).

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
 But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here :

Love said, You shall be he.

I, the unkind, the ungrateful ? Ah my dear,

I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand and smiling did reply,

Who made the eyes but I ?

Truth, Lord, but I have marred them ; let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame ?

My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat.

So I did sit and eat.

Herbert's extraordinarily evocative poem –an encounter between two voices of the 'I' and the mysterious "Love"– can be read as exploring the sacrament of the Eucharist : the eating of the bread and wine that symbolically relates the individual to the body of Christ and so to the transcendental community of the Church (Drury 3). How can Blyth translate this English Protestant poem into a Zen idiom ? His strategy is to traverse the monotheism of the poem by reading it instead in accordance with Buddhism, which he rather boldly presents as an "opening up" of the poem : "Christian religious Poetry (not mere verse) gains much and loses nothing from an interpretation according to Zen. ...Without twisting the thoughts or spoiling in any way the original meaning of the poet, let us re-read them in the light of Zen, and universalise them" (249).

Blyth translates the dialogue of the poem from a personification of the Holy Spirit to something more like a wider Buddha-Nature. He does this by glossing nouns in the poem in accordance with his metaphysics : Love, "means...Nature, Reality, God, Life" ; guilt : "...dust and sin are not in actions...but in the will" ; lack, "What do we lack ? Nothing at all" ; meat, "What is the taste of this meat ? This, with the answer, will make a *Mondō*, and everyone must answer for himself." The closure of the poem, "So I did sit and

eat” is transcribed as, “No gibble-gabble, no humming and hawing, just sit when you sit, eat when you eat, nothing poetical, nothing religious in it, and yet it is the poetical life, the religious life, the life of Zen” (251). In the last case, the “meat” that might be thought of as a metaphor or symbol of the Eucharist is turned into something more like a metonym for food-in-itself. The poem is “brought down” to an ordinary level, stripped of symbolism, (no “gibble-gabble” here) which Blyth can then claim provides an equivalent expression of Zen as in the Bashō poem.

What exactly is at stake in this reading? Herbert’s poem is of course also about the incarnation and incorporation of the Church in the food that the speaker will eat and digest. So Blyth’s reading identifies a potential figure of immanence already in the poem, at the expense of the transcendental reading of the Eucharist. However, he also modifies one of the poem’s other figures, which is the idea of the gift. Herbert’s poem is also about an encounter of the speaking self with the other (Love, the Holy Spirit, or God). This other also comes bearing the free gift of food, which in Christian terms represents the gift of grace (love, forgiveness for sins); arguably the key doctrinal theme of Protestant devotional poetry in the English Renaissance (Cummings). Blyth, who has less doctrinal need for the gift logic of grace, downgrades this by turning the encounter presented in the poem into the pedagogy of a Zen dialogue (*Mondō*). The dialogic quality of the poem therefore becomes less transcendent and more a form of mutual meditation and inquiry.

Yet on what ultimate grounds can Blyth propose this intercultural reading of the poem? The main objection to his work would be that despite its appeals to the concrete and self-evident status of poetry, it is eventually based on a conviction of faith. Blyth’s work is simply too *pious* a work of Buddhist criticism to allow the sincere non-Buddhist reader much ground for agreement. It is arguably a straightforward “Buddhification” of poetry rather than a secular comparison of cultures. A manifestation, perhaps, of that variety of Orientalism critiqued by Richard King, whereby East Asia is seen as a space of spiritual or mystical values. An immediate cause of this problem for Blyth is the influence of D.T. Suzuki. Suzuki remains a complex and admired figure in Japanese intellectual history, whose English language works still enjoy a wide currency. His work has been interpreted as a form of “Buddhist Modernism” that sought to modernize and promote a form of Japanese

Zen Buddhism as a universal category of psychological experience (McMahan 166). Yet this was based on asserting an “‘essential core’ of religion, conceived of as a private, veridical, ineffable experience inaccessible to empirical scientific analysis” (Sharf 34). At his most ambitious, this could lead him in 1927 to posit Zen as the universal condition of all world faiths :

As I conceive it, Zen is the ultimate fact of all philosophy and religion. Every intellectual effort must culminate in it, if it is to bear any practical fruits. Every religious faith must spring from it if it is to prove at all efficiently and livingly workable in our active life. Therefore Zen is not necessarily the fountain of Buddhist thought and life alone ; it is very much alive also in Christianity, Mahommedanism [*sic*], in Taoism, and even in positivistic Confucianism. (Suzuki 268)

Modern critics of Suzuki variously complain that this was a distortion of Zen Buddhism’s historical legacy, a misreading of religious practice that perpetuated an ‘Orientalist’ idea of the mystic East (King 158), or, at its worst, a proto-fascist form of militant 1930s “Zen nationalism” (Victoria 112). Blyth’s project could be equally criticised as an attempt to promote a simplified version of Zen as a universally translatable form of religious culture ; as he claims, “It is a world-power, for in so far as men *live* at all, they live by Zen” (vii). Certainly, Blyth’s admiration for Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō (1848-1934) as one who, “looked on the face of the Emperor and [whose] real essence or mind was expressed in all that he did not say” raises the spectre of a Zen nationalism in at least one point in the text (325). At its worst, the “transnational” project is less a type of cosmopolitanism than a variety of *Zen imperium*.

It might be better, then, to view *Zen and English Literature* as an historical example of “Buddhist Modernism” and part of the longer encounter between the literature of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the alternative metaphysics of East Asia. This is of course part of the experience of global modernity that “world literature” or modern comparative literary studies has sought to understand. Blyth is a very modest example of the tradition of writers in English rethinking European literature through Asian categories of thought. Perhaps he is best seen as playing an early part in the post-war transmission of “Zen Japan” into North

American Beat and avant-garde practices, whose later history is well known (Napier 89). Another pertinent example would be Blyth's contemporary William Empson, who also engaged with Buddhism while teaching in East Asia in the 1930s. In particular, Empson's reflections on Buddhist Nirvana as a form of negation that, by seeking a cessation of identity, refutes the mode of self-preservation implicit in literary formalism, provides a potential counterpart to Blyth's notion of the poetic (Empson 424-5). However, as Empson's speculations were unavailable at the time, the dialogue never happened.⁵ In the twenty-first century, the philosopher Peter Hallward has revived D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watt and Zen *satori* as a way of thinking of knowledge as an absolute singularity, or even a catastrophic destruction of received thinking (Hallward 285-7). Both Empson and Hallward attribute a negationist or "destructive" potential to Buddhist philosophy as a critique of western thought ; Blyth's poetics also acknowledges the suddenness and disruption of Zen thought, but his tone remains too affirmative, too genial, even too evangelical, to follow this approach. Whether through conviction, naivety, or political evasion, Blyth insists that the affective power of poetry is a measure of its universal Zen consciousness, and do proposes a transnational humanism for 1940s based on an implicit religious insight.

In conclusion, does Blyth have anything to offer a contemporary transnational humanism or critical secularism in the "future global marketplace of culture" (Apter 46)? Whatever its eccentricities or evasions, the most enduring aspect of the text is the attempt to translate metaphysical and religious categories of English poetry into a different cultural idiom. That this may derive from a universalized idea of Zen proves less damaging if we consider it as an experiment in intercultural poetics. In particular, we might ask what is at stake in the act of interpretation by reconsidering the two poems discussed in this essay. Herbert's poem in particular would seem to pose ethical and literary questions that remain pertinent for an avowedly secular criticism. These are questions of the encountering the other—the encounter of hospitality, of the stranger, of the other who comes to live with us, and of the gift and the translation of something unknown into the homely—, all of which have been a part of what Jacques Derrida called the responsibility of writing itself, and moreover as something which he identified as the innate condition of "religion" as just such an opening response to the other (Derrida 64). Herbert's poem thus seems to provide a scene or fable of the

humanist reader, translator or critic who comes to understand the otherness of the text. Yet perhaps that reading is already too self-assured for some sceptical readers : by imposing an anthropomorphic form to the other, in the guise of the personified figure of Love that can easily be read as divine intervention, the critic restores the Judeo-Christian logic of monotheism and reassurance to the event, a secularization of Christian grace. In that case, might not the example of Bashō's poem provide a corrective ? That poem, as Blyth suggested, invites a response to a singular but decidedly non-human event : the blurring of the landscape and the animal in the sound of the a water –“plop!” The ethics of response and hospitality might then require a less anthropocentric idea of the other and the event to do the poem justice. This is to acknowledge that contemporary European literary theory retains a monotheistic and anthropocene bias to its ethics of criticism that dialogue with East Asian or Buddhist metaphysics might illuminate.⁶ Any project of “critical secularism” or “transnational humanism” would involve understanding how poetry creates literary events that are prior to any codification by religious discourse. This may seem a long way from Blyth's strange little book, but is a continuing part of the challenge of translating and transfiguring transcendence in global literary studies.

*This essay is a revised version of a paper first presented at “Transform, Transfigure, Transcend : Translation in Cultural Studies. The Third International Symposium on Comparative Culture,” Kanagawa University, 15th June 2013. I am grateful to the audience for their questions and comments.

- 1 : The biographical details in this paragraph are indebted to Adrian Pinnington, “R.H. Blyth, 1886-1964,” in *Britain and Japan : Biographical Portraits*, ed. Ian Nish, (Folkestone : Japan Society, 1994), 252-67.
- 2 : In this essay, in addition to material cited in the text, I have used the following material on Zen : Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*. 1959. Tokyo : Tuttle, 1988 ; Steve Odin, *Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West : Psychic Distance in Comparative Aesthetics* (Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 2001) ; and Shoji Yamada, *Shots in the Dark : Japan, Zen and the West (Buddhism and Modernity)*, trans. Earl Hartman (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2011).
- 3 : On the connections of Imagism and Japanese poetry see Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago & London : Chicago University Press, 2009) 113.
- 4 : Yone Noguchi (1875-1947), poet and translator ; Harold Gould Henderson (1889-1974), professor at Columbia University.
- 5 : Empson's use of Buddhism and its connection to Freudian notions of the death drive, are discussed in Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Destructive Element : British Psychoanalysis and Modernism* (Houndmills : Macmillan, 1998), 27-8. In contrast to Empson, in *Zen in English Literature*, Blyth seems content to align Zen to the Freudian pleasure principle : “What is this fundamental instinct, this ground of being which Zen wishes us to reach ? Freud tells us it is sex, and Zen will not wish to dispute this. Satori is spiritual orgasm” (176).

6 : Slavoj Žižek gives a rather hostile reading of haiku as a Zen ethics in *Event : Philosophy in Transit* (London : Penguin, 2014), 157-60.

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James TINK

Recent critical studies have debated the historical origins of modern comparative literary studies, and also questioned its commitment to secularism and the examination of religious discourses as part of a “transnational humanism.” This paper looks at a neglected example of comparative literary criticism published in Japan in 1942, R.H. Blyth’s *Zen in English Literature and the Oriental Classics*. Although this work has been dismissed in recent literary studies, it was an attempt to promote a transnational poetics between English and East Asian Literature through a hermeneutic of Zen Buddhism. The essay explores the intellectual background to this work, and considers his approach to poetic criticism by considering two readings of seventeenth century poetry : a haiku by Bashō Matsuo and a lyric poem by George Herbert. The paper examines how Blyth proposed a non-transcendental, and non-symbolic mode of reading, and assesses what this approach might imply for more recent comparative literary criticism. It proposes that even though Blyth’s text is problematic, it nevertheless raises questions about the translation of “religious” discourse that remain relevant for literary studies.