

”Borrowed Scenery” : Poems & Commentary

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1.

My first room in Japan was the size of a walk-in closet, approximately one tatami mat in length and two widths of a mat wide—meaning it would be long enough for me to stretch out head to toe with a few inches left over, and wide enough to sit comfortably, my back to the wall, facing the built-in sink, refrigerator, and cabinet, as I typed on my laptop or ate a solitary *bento*. There was no space for a table and a chair. The landlord’s selling points were the flowering tree in the modest courtyard beneath and the good natural light coming through the double-paned window, which ran nearly the whole side of the room.

Curtains drawn on my first night, the room unmercifully illuminated by a fluorescent ceiling fixture, it looked even smaller. I couldn’t believe that I had traveled so far to end up living in a space that seemed like a parody of Japanese smallness. My unconscious mind, however, was not dismayed. The next morning I woke up elated, having dreamt of a diminutive gentleman-rat walking on his hind legs, properly attired in a green lotus-leaf cloak. I took it as an auspicious sign: I was born in the year of the rat; Ganesh’s vehicle is a rat; a cartoon rat rules the most popular destination in Japan.

In the coming weeks, as I walked Kyoto, I soon learned my way through the intimate lanes and by-lanes of my new neighborhood. Since there were so few street signs (and I couldn’t read them anyway) I stored

up directions in my eyes and feet. Looking back now over the many poems I wrote in my first six year stay in Japan, I am struck by how obsessed I seem to have been with positioning, noting sight-lines and boundaries, delineating movement through space, taking the measure of my perceptual experience. It is not for me to say how superficial these poems may or may not be. If they are irredeemably an outsider’s view, they are also written from *inside* that outsider, looking out through his own eyes, following his own steps, leading ultimately to what cannot be measured.

At the same time, my experience was not entirely unmediated. Indeed, local “points of interest” put on their best face for others, foreigners and natives alike. Translators, guides, and guide books are continually interpreting and presenting Japan for everyone’s sake. When I first came to Kyoto, by chance I met a young folk-singer eager to show me out-of-the-way places in the city she loved. One day she took me to the Fushimi-Inari Shrine; we hiked up through hundreds of vermilion torii gates, past the little stone fox-shrines and came back down through the woods on a vacant path that led us into a neighborhood of unassuming-looking houses, one of which was open to the public. More than a year later, when I started to write about Kyoto, I wrote this poem:

The Water-Harp Cave

The caretaker
in the old garden
we have paid a few coins
to visit
patiently ladles water
from the dipper
onto the rocks

that drip drops

ONE by one
by ONE...into the water-harp-cave
as we take turns
listening through
the hollow bamboo,

and this you
say, “is the true sound
of Japan...” a music of echoes
which can never
repeat itself, hidden away
in a clay pot
underground,

to be heard only
ping... by one person...PING
one guest...ping,
ping...at a time.

If “the true sound of Japan” means the most common or typical sound, no one would ever think of this garden instrument or *suikinkutsu*. How could something so exclusive, so rare be representative? One would sooner think of piped in mall-music, the whirl of falling pachinko balls, the loud welcoming shouts of *irasshaimase* in restaurant-bars, something to do with the urban intensity of famously crowded Japan. The day I was taken to the garden there were no tour buses outside, no queues, no souvenir shop. In

fact, my friend and I seemed to be the only two visitors there.

If “true,” however, means “ideal” then, indeed, the *suikinkutsu* could be a candidate for the true sound of Japan. It is a perfect expression of the aesthetic refinement commonly associated with traditional Japanese crafts that make so much out of a few natural materials--in this case, bamboo, clay, rock, and water. The experience of the *suikinkutsu* is delightful, both for the sound it makes and the manner of its offering. That, in fact, seems to be the real marvel. Listening to a *suikinkutsu* is perhaps analogous to wearing head phones in public, but unlike the person wired to an I-Pod, you cannot pour the water on the rocks and listen through the bamboo at the same time. The experience is social--it is an act of hospitality, a gesture of good faith. Even if your host standing next to you cannot hear what you hear, he can take enjoyment in providing for your pleasure. In this sense, I would say that the true sound of Japan is to be found in the subtle rituals of politeness so important in everyday life, whether one has the luxury of a *suikinkutsu* or not.

2.

Before I came to Japan, I had written a chapter in my dissertation on the importance of Buddhist practice in the poetry of Gary Snyder, who had been a lay monk in Kyoto during the 1960s. Necessarily, I had read studies of Buddhism and English translations of basic Buddhist texts. Having grown up in a Protestant society, which has taken religious doctrine so seriously, I wanted to learn about Buddhist doctrine. Because the historical Buddha was at heart a reformer the basic tenets of his teaching are clearly stated and often repeated. It is easy to find out about The Three Treasures, The Four Noble Truths, and The Eightfold Path. Challenging as they may be, these are lists to study and live by. As far as I can see,

though, there is no equivalent form of doctrine for the other great stream of religious practice that takes place throughout Japan in the Shinto shrines. This is clearly not a problem for the millions of people who pass through the gates, make offerings, ring bells, and clap hands. The shrines themselves are inviting. They remind us of the natural world by honoring old trees, rocks, streams, and mountains. As such, they are idyllic places to get married, bless babies, and offer thanks for good fortune.

Temples, too, have their gardens and are places to see, make offerings, and linger in quietly. I suspect most visitors, especially if they are young, are not thinking of the Three Treasures when they pay their respects to the Buddha. Their experience of religion is more unconscious, immediate, and sensory than doctrinaire. This thought occurred to me one early morning when I walked past the office buildings lining Karasuma Avenue, on my way to Kyoto Station, and noticed how different I felt when I came in sight of a temple set back from the street—it was a lovely hour, cool and quiet before the traffic started up.

Line and Form

The temple roof breaks the monotony
of box shapes stacked against the sky
with the sweep of its ridge pole and two
down-sloping sides, shingled with gray
lapping tiles: the upswing at each eave's
end reclaims the true shape of space--
connects the famished heart with the eye.

And inside our taste for depth is fed by
the cool tatami expanse, forested pillars,

and polished gloom around the altar,
as though by sense alone we could grasp
the real source of this temple’s power:

not the Buddha, his donors, or the Way
but line and form fashioned out of
wood, straw, and clay.

3.

The Three Treasures are obviously not wood, straw, and clay--the material means of housing the mission are not to be confused with the mission itself. And yet if the temple building feeds our sense of beauty and eases our mind is that not also spiritual? I cannot help but think of the non-dual traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism that underpin the esoteric and Zen sects of Japanese Buddhism. All throughout India in temples, ashrams and homes, brahmins, sadhus, and householders alike chant these lines from the *Isa Upanishad*:

This is perfect.
That is perfect.
From the perfect, springs the perfect.
If from the perfect you take the perfect
only the perfect remains.

From the point of view of enlightenment, there is no separation between *samsara* and *nirvana*, between the phenomenal world and the transcendent, between the self and Atman, or the individual mind and Buddha mind. This truth is easy to miss when we venerate the sacred and

abhor the profane, when we raise up images and inadvertently lower ourselves. Worship should not distance us from the goal of worship, which in non-dual terms is nothing less than the realization of our own perfection.

The following poem on the famous statue of the *Mikaeri Amida* is all about positioning vis a vis the object of worship. The posed figure is said to be the embodiment of compassion. According to legend, the Amida Bodhisattva came down off his pedestal to accompany his chief disciple Eikan in his circumambulations and then reprimanded him when he didn't keep up. Surely, the saintly priest, who attracted the personal attention of the Amida himself must be more advanced than us, poor tourists who need a guidebook even to know what we are looking at! We cannot help but feel humbled, and yet ironically facing the Amida as he glances back over his shoulder at Eikan we have, so to speak, already arrived.

Amida-Glancing-Back

Sunlight takes the shape
of the opened sliding
door where we kneel down
on the tatami mat floor,

eyes angled up towards
the Amida-Glancing-Back,
who stands before us
in full view beneath

the hanging altar cloth,
a slight upright figure
still on the path or

nearly approaching its

end, having forestalled
his arrival for this one
saving glance back
over his shoulder into

an imagined darkness
filled with our own
faltering footsteps.
“Compassion,” says

the temple brochure,
but just our luck! we
had not been told
the real Buddha had

gone on tour, and in
his place stood a copy
Buddha, replicating
grace in our unwitting

gaze upon a half-turned
face catching the light
that shines behind
us—as well as before.

The Heart Sutra's teaching “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form,”

declares that there are no fixed selves in nature, no inherent identities--what we commonly take as real is not real. If all natural phenomena is called into question by Buddhist epistemology, how much more illusory must be the “made up” legend and fabricated image of the *Mikaeri Amida*? Could any serious follower believe that this particular statue, in this particular temple, came “alive” one day some 900 years ago and, curiously enough has not been seen alive there since? If all seventy-seven centimeters of its gilded body were suddenly to go up in flames would the Amida in “The Pure Land” feel the flames too? And how should we feel if it turns out that the figure is not the original figure but rather a copy? Should this be a problem in a land where the most sacred shrine is torn down and duplicated on an adjacent site every twenty years? Whoever thought the legend and its rendering are meant to be taken literally? What counts most is the artist’s *skillful means*, which make it possible to imagine that the Amida is present *here, now*, reflecting the “Buddha of Infinite Light” like Dogen’s dewdrop reflecting the whole moon within its tiny orb. In a sense, all bodhisattvas are “copy Buddhas.”

Another example of an artist’s *skillful means* is the famous statue of Asura at Kofukuji Temple in Nara. The following poem, in effect, gives the same answer Coomaraswamy gave years ago to Western critics who recoiled at the representations of the multi-armed Indian deities--as he says: “so far from being bad art, or needing any apology, [they] are in themselves unanswerable evidence of the wonderful creative energy of the Indian genius.” The surreal Asura figure in the hands of an anonymous 8th century Japanese genius not only successfully suspends our disbelief but transforms a wrathful and power-hungry demi-god into an epicene figure as sensitive and elegant as the *Mikaeri Amida*. One explanation given for this transformation is that the Hindu asura was converted into a peaceful

protector upon learning about Buddhism—its *treasures, truths, and paths*.

Asura

Impossible to focus on the god's
three faces and three pairs of arms
at the same time, and yet also
impossible not to see the other two
faces in profile, sharing ears and
hair pulled into a central top-knot.

From a distance, the figure as a
whole appears disquietingly like
some kind of human dragonfly
poised for flight, but look again;
there is nothing alien in particular
shapes, no feature in each softly
modeled face and limb that is
not touched by a natural grace.
The tug earthward is so strong—
clothed from the waist down
in a gold-bordered sarong, he's
entirely human with two human
legs and two sandaled feet.

Freeze-stopped, the outer arms
are raised, palms upward in
praise; fingers of the middle pair
in mimic motion curl around

an instrument, pick sound out of
the air, while the inner hands,
chest high, press together in
greeting--elegant, controlled:

“I am Asura--through my form
may the unreal become real.”

4.

One Sunday I decided to go to Sanjusangen-do Temple. I had no idea beforehand, but it turned out to be its yearly Coming of Age Day ceremony. Young men and women who have earned their first *dan* in archery are given two arrows and two minutes to hit a 100 cm target at 60 m. I stood and watched many groups for several hours, and few of the archers came anywhere near the targets. I understand that the purpose of such an archery contest, according to the Nippon Kyudo Federation, is not simply to hit the target but to embody “truth--beauty--goodness” (*shin-zen-bi*). What an extraordinary measure! I wonder if any of the judges there happened to note the “truth--beauty--goodness” I found in the performance of the young woman described in this poem:

Coming of Age

Having stepped to the line with twenty other
kimonoed girls, bow bent and string pulled
to the ear, her arrow slips from its thumb-bridge
and dips, waving un-targeted in the air, before
she can nudge it back into place with her tensed
upper lip and chin, barely saving the second of

only two chances to mark her coming of age.

Not all slip-ups are human. Of course, in nature itself there is no such thing as a mistake per se--what happens happens. Only a human would call attention to something wondrously out of the norm or seize upon its metaphorical possibilities and write a poem, which has both personal and, perhaps, even wider significance.

Pine-Cherry

The gardeners of the *Gosho*
park have placed a sign
in kanji next to an uprooted,
wind-felled tree, which you
tell me says, “inside this pine
grows a young cherry, still
alive, waiting to bloom,”
the reason why the gardeners
have not removed the old trunk,
curiously sprouting reddish
branches, elliptic green leaves,
in itself an ideogram I must
learn to read. About pine,
says Basho, study pine (and
cherry, cherry), but each alone
will not give you what their
compound means. I am staking
this poem to declare how you
have taken root inside of me,

as though I were both gardener
and transfigured tree.

5.

My life as a tourist tapered off after I changed my visa status, found work teaching, and regularized my daily schedule. I no longer wandered around on foot, visiting temples and gardens. I commuted on trains, rode my bicycle, and jogged up and down the same path along the Kamo River, early in the morning or late in the evening. Tracks, lanes, and cemented banks direct the flow of energy swiftly and efficiently, when possible in straight lines, as space is simplified by Euclidean geometry. Yet urban life, for all of its artifice, still obeys laws of the physical universe. In this sense, it is as “natural” as a forest, just far less diverse in the living things it makes room for. One thousand, two hundred years ago in the Tang Dynasty, Tu Fu isolated by the An Lushan rebellion could write--

The nation is ruined, but mountains and rivers remain.

This spring the city is deep in weeds and brush.

Now, it seems, human population has tipped the balance. The city swallows up ‘weeds and brush’; the green world previous generations worked so hard both to cultivate and keep at bay is receding like the ice-caps and glaciers; the State survives, warns Nanao Sakaki, not mountains and rivers. And, yet, close up the city is more porous than one might imagine.

If By Hand, Old Hands

On either side of

the commuter tracks,

flooded flat-land,

divided and edged

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like adjoining tatami
mats, flashes past
between stations and
yard-less two story

housing tracts shot up
in unyielding rows,
the plots once dotted
with wavery shoots

thrust down into mud
by compact paddy
machines or if by hand,
old hands poked

from bundled bodies
bent at the waist
and locked into place,
step after step

teasing apart each
seedling from bunches
of concentrated
green--rooting whole

fields of green.

In The Midst of It All

Pedaling hard on Kujo
in the midst of it all
ear tuned to the traffic
behind me, always it

seems the same pack
of scooters gunning
past as I try to hold
my line where the far

edge of asphalt meets
the concrete verge
in the shoals next to
the curb, poised to

swing wide for parked
cars and opening
doors, wider still for
the loading-unloading

bus, a gamble to clear
its length from stern
to stem as it lurches
into the deeper stream

to the right, but you
can play it both ways

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and cut straight to
the sidewalk slalom,

weaving in and out
of walkers and
other riders on bikes
coming at you,

before jumping a light
and sneaking ahead
of the scooters again,
up on the pedals,

until suddenly in little
wafts from low
bushes, overlooked
somewhere in a row of

planters or the distant
median, there is
... jasmine in the air!
jasmine stirring desire

and the memory of
lost, night-blooming
trees carried whole
across half a life-time

--their heady scent
now mingled
in the midst of it all
pedaling hard on Kujo.

River Run

All along my river run
between its two fixed
banks, my river's been
carrying fine silt and
gravel, imperceptibly
making islands, now
thickened with grass
around which my river
can bend, split itself
--pretend to meander.

6.

One of my students, who often talked to me on the train, said that she was surprised when she came to Kyoto from Nagasaki to find so many small neighborhood shrines of O-Jizo. Since her childhood, she had always thought this bodhisattva was the God of Death and, hence, was a figure to be feared, not welcomed. Her words, in turn, surprised me, for I was used to thinking of O-Jizo as being unequivocally benign, a soothing god-like presence, and in particular a protector of children. Her calling attention to the shrines as markers of neighborhoods reminded me of Hermes whose image was carved into stone signposts that were placed at crossroads and borders. Similarly, he also was a god of transitions and conveyed souls to

the Land of the Dead. Both are associated with fertility: O Jizo’s Sanskrit name *Ksitigarbha* may be translated “Earth-Womb”; a sculpted phallus often juts out of the base of a herm. I have never read that O-Jizo shares Hermes trickster characteristics, too, but one thing is clear from the story my student told me--you are better-off greeting him in your local shrine than meeting him when and where you least expect to see him.

O-Jizo-San

O-Jizo-San,

ancient boundary stone
white-washed and bibbed,
Bosatsu herm,
marker of coming and going, of
where is home.

Now placed on roadsides

where children in cars
have been killed.

*The Rescuer of Souls, The Remover
of Fear...* I wanted to
advise my student
should not be feared.

But when she dreamt of

O-Jizo,
she awoke in terror,
pinned down to the bed, unable to breathe or
scream--she said

“He was still there....”

*Dear girl,
sweep the shrine,
sprinkle the water,
offer the sweets--
we keep house for the gods so
they will disappear.*

7.

Although I lived only several blocks north of the Kyoto Imperial Palace, not everyone in my former neighborhood lived in proper dwellings with water, gas, electricity, and postal service. Just a few minutes walk towards the east, the Kamo River flows with its regularly spaced bridges that attract “the homeless,” some of whom have fashioned huts about the same size as Kamo no Chomei’s famous ten foot square hut that he built on a mountain top near Kyoto. Now that the river has been channeled by the city’s engineers, it is not nearly as dangerous to live on or near its banks as it was in 1212 when its course continually shifted and flooding was a familiar problem. Still, the moral of Kamo no Chomei’s *Ho-jo-ki* is just as relevant: everything flows and nothing is permanent. Whether we take this negatively or positively would seem to depend on how much we have to lose or gain.

Ho-jo-ki

At first, under the bridges, there were
only cardboard boxes, a few feet high
but long enough to carry a single man

to sleep, and then bigger ones appeared
which you could crawl into and sit
cross-legged. Now whole huts, raised

up on wooden platforms, nearly ten feet
square, are being made out of sheets of
blue plastic, pulled taut and neatly tied off

with string or trimmed with strips of lath.
Some have front doors fitted with hinges
and cut-out windows propped open on

sticks; floors inside are lined with carpet
scraps and old futons, aired on rare, sunny
days along the sloping river bank where

couples and dog-walkers pass. It's dank
under a concrete span the width of a city
street, but there's free protection from

downpours and February snow. And free
space to hang laundry lines, collect empty
cans, feed cats, and tend potted plants.

This life lived only on what's recyclable,
far apart from women and children, yet so
close to the sound of flowing water, says--

in time everything possible comes my way.

8.

My former Israeli apartment-mate, whom I met by answering a notice on the bulletin board of the International Community House, was a serious aikido student. One day, he described a visualization that his Japanese teacher had given to his dojo and asked me to translate it into proper written English. A few hours later, I ended up writing this poem, which now hangs in my friend’s own dojo that he has opened in Tel Aviv.

The Wizard’s Egg

The wizard’s egg balanced on Hakuin’s head
will balance just as easily on yours if you
can hold still for the short spell necessary to
imagine its shape; then let it melt shell-less
into your subtle self, flowing downwards
through each radiating center, successively
filled and drained of the egg’s luminous fluid
until it passes out through the soles of your
feet, to pool around your body, now poised
in the middle of a circular, spreading tide,
slowly rising back up towards your head
but only as high as your navel; hold it there
and bathe for as long as you need to bathe
in the wizardry of Hakuin’s seamless light.

At the time I wrote the poem, I was familiar with Hakuin’s “Song of Meditation,” but I knew virtually nothing about his life, in particular that as

an ardent young student he had fallen seriously ill for several years and then sought help from a Taoist hermit who prescribed various breathing exercises and visualizations to strengthen his body and cure him of his “zen sickness.” Presumably, he followed the same or similar steps as the poem describes. Another version of this practice has him placing a “butter pill” on his head. I cannot help but think of Huck Finn sitting uncomfortably in front of Aunt Sally and the fifteen armed farmers, as the stolen butter oozes beneath his hat and dribbles down the sides of his head. The point of the Wizard’s Egg, of course, is that it melts inside your mind, is invisible, and belongs to both teacher and student.

9.

Noh drama is not at all “popular” and was never meant to be. It is an aristocratic art form, originally supported by shoguns and performed for exclusive audiences, who were scholarly enough to catch the allusions. However difficult, subtle, and literary Noh may be, it is also remarkably resilient, not the least because of its intrinsic theatrical values. Noh audiences may drift in and out of sleep during a performance but I suspect not without being impressed by its elegance. You need not understand a word of the story to appreciate the splendor of the kimonos, the rhythms of the chanting, and the other-worldliness of the accompanying music.

Fifty-three years ago, when I was twelve years old, I saw “Agamemnon” in a night performance in the ancient out-door amphitheater at Epidaurus. Images from that spectacle stuck with me when I first read the play as a college student. My sensory experience would have been similar if I had been sitting in the Heian Shrine observing, say, “Chikubu-shima,” the god-play I describe in the next poem. According to Zeami, “At the moment when the fragrance of the actor’s song moves past that boundary into the

dance itself, a strange power of beauty is created.” The overall effect, in short, is uncanny--and lasting.

Holding a Mirror to the Flower

There are paths within paths,
windows inside windows.

Lost in the scudding clouds
a helicopter circles
in and out of mind, where
we sit cross-legged,

next to

an empty, torch-lit stage
in the wide-open courtyard
of the Heian shrine--

before us, the backdrop
of its orange pillared hall,
pine trees silhouetted
above the surrounding

garden wall.

*

The relentless pulse
of the copter's blades
like distant traffic
in the street does not

drown out but fills

*bursts from the lake
whipped by wind...*

*

And with a sudden
leap pulls us into the quickening
pace of...

*churning water,
tossing waves.*

This we can understand:
the shaking earth,
the vigorous dance
of its underworld...

A wonder, supremely rare!

*

Now here and gone
with a flip of a sleeve
but holding us
fast in silence
blossoming along
the bridge-way

as the actor takes his...

*

impossibly slow leave.

10.

The Ashikaga shogun Yoshimasa is famous for his “staggering incompetence as a ruler.” In the middle of the Onin War, while corpses piled up in the Kamo River, he retired from office to finish building his costly Higashiyama villa, which he named (apparently with no sense of irony) *Jisho-ji*--“Shining Mercy.” Here, he involved himself in the promotion of an aesthetic culture that made him, not as a ruler but as an arbiter of taste, one of the most influential figures in Japanese history. As Donald Keene argues, Yoshimasa’s brilliant connoisseurship--the improbable flip-side of his neglect and profligacy--has set the standard for the Japanese sense of restrained elegance.

Aesthete as he was, when he discovered cracks in a rare Sung Dynasty tea bowl he had inherited, he shipped it off to the Guan kiln in Ming China with instructions to replace it with another of the same color, design, and quality. The bowl itself came back stapled together with several metal clamps, one of which was said to resemble a large locust. That the living potters could not (or would not) match it with a new bowl only increased its value. At the same time, one often reads that the way this particular bowl was repaired inspired Japanese craftsmen to develop *kintsugi*, a more refined technique for mending broken pottery that mixes a lacquer resin with powdered gold. More refined techniques for mending a broken Kyoto would have been better appreciated by the rioting citizens who denounced Yoshimasa. At least now, his villa and “treasures” are put on display for the public. Metaphorically speaking, such cultural heritage is a kind of “borrowed scenery.” You do not own it; you cannot occupy it; living actors no longer strut on its stage, but if you have an eye for its intrinsic value, even as an outsider you can use it to frame the view from your own private garden.

Kintsugi

After Yoshimasa’s bowl
became all the more prized
for having been broken
and not so skillfully mended

the next step was to forego
chance and break bowls
on purpose for the sake of
repair as though this were

the higher art: to show how
and on what fault lines,
when the right pressure is
applied, the most perfect

bowl will cease to hold.
We both know what it
means to break bowls and
now finally to mend one:

though what truly binds
jagged shards can’t be seen,
this aesthetic gives back
our bowl’s original shape

by making a virtue of all
that could be hid in shame--

look, love, how veins of
pure gold zigzag through
soft glaze.

11.

Ekphrastic poetry, a species of art about art, reminds me of a Sheik Nasreddin tale. Once he cooked a big pot of duck soup and invited his closest friends to dinner. By the next evening, the word was out that his soup was the best duck soup ever. Friends of the friends who had not attended the party showed up at his door and asked if they could have some soup too. Even after diluting it a bit to make it go around, the soup was still tasty. Predictably, over the next few days more people arrived and more water was added to the pot until finally one of the friends of the friends of the friends complained. In defense, Nasreddin said, “What do you expect from the soup of the soup of the soup.”

At least half of the poems included here are ekphrastic--this last one, in fact, is a representation of a representation of a representation, which gives me pause because in terms of the Nasreddin tale that would seem to be a recipe for failure. All poetry that takes the external world as its subject matter is, in a sense, second-hand, but poetry that is third or fourth hand, how satisfying can that be?

The idea for the poem came to me while I thumbed through a Japanese art book on the top floor of the former Maruzen book store in downtown Kyoto. As I opened up one of the folding pages, a reproduction of a large folding screen, I was immediately taken in by its scenes in a way, I believe, that was more immediate and more direct than if I had been standing in a crowded museum looking at the original work of art. I stood there a long time before I bought the book and took it home. A few days

later I wrote a poem while constantly glancing over at the open page beside me on my desk. At the same time, since the screen itself was said to be a representation of two episodes in *The Tale of Genji*, I was studying my Seidensticker translation in order to find out just exactly what had been illustrated. The two scenes on either side of the screen, which appear as though they were contiguous, are actually separated in the novel by many chapters. This means that the two distinct groups of figures are removed from each other in both time and space: those painted on the right are part of a “court outing” that takes place west of Kyoto when Genji is still alive, while the three figures on the left appear at the end of the novel when the action of the narrative has shifted to Uji, long after Genji has died.

The screen is hardly a literal representation of the original story. The images belong as much to the artist Tosa Mitsuyoshi (1539-1613) and the long tradition of *Genji* illustration, as they do to the actual novel Murasaki Shikibu composed some five hundred years before in the Heian period. But even if the artist has skewed his representation of the *Genji* material for the sake of his own composition, I do not think that the experience of viewing the screen becomes “thinner” as though it were merely the soup of the soup. Visual arts and novels do different things and produce different effects. Both painters and writers can exercise poetic license. In this case, there is so much flavor in the design and painterly detail of the screen that Tosa Mitsuyoshi can afford to ‘cut and paste scenes’ from the original novel. The resulting panorama is not only compelling in itself, but if you have read *Genji* closely, you can enjoy the counterpoint between its inner complexity and the outer splendor of the screen.

I would also like to think that a poem one step further removed from “the source” is not necessarily thinner. It, too, may have its own flavor if it can attract aesthetic interest and be savored for its language as well as its

subject matter. As long as ekphrastic art is *art*, it will not end up tasting like a duck-less duck soup. Though I fully intended to write a poem about Tosa’s screen, I had no idea what shape it would take until the first three lines popped into my head and caught me by surprise. The image seemed apt, the words worth repeating--a modest measure for artistry but reason enough to continue on.

There is another reference here I need to explain: the two sentences by Dogen, which I have used as an epigraph. I have been happily dipping into a selection of his writings for many years now without the benefit of a roshi’s guidance. All of Dogen’s essays and poems, I am tempted to say, comprise one long unanswerable koan, daunting for even the most serious student, but on the other hand any interested reader can enjoy his gnomic brilliance without having “inside” knowledge of his work. When I first gazed at the reproduction of the screen, I was not thinking of Dogen. The sumptuousness of the painting, which indeed reflects the erotically driven romance of *Genji*, is far removed from the ascetic atmosphere of the zendo or, for that matter, the minimalist aesthetic of zen art. It wasn’t until I started considering *how* this painting had captured my attention and held it so successfully in a kind of blissful stasis that I turned to Dogen for insight. The passage I came across in his *Genjo-Koan* reminded me, in turn, of the opening of Lao Tzu’s *Tao Teh Ching*. Both texts help to bring my poem to a close.

A Boat Upon Waters

To carry yourself forward and experience myriad things is delusion.

That myriad things come forth and experience themselves is awakening.

--Dogen

River banks combed

like curling waves rush down to meet
a black void of wintry water
cut by a pleasure boat's prow.
Hidden from the poling boatman,
two lovers sit face to face
behind a discretely placed
folding screen, a faint moon
tucked above them in
the left-hand corner sky.
In the distant daylight,
a palanquin is hurried down
a mountain road by a horseman
and liveried runners sweeping in
and out of gold clouds torn open
by shifting patches of evergreen.
Close up you can spot a hawk
on a gloved hand, the slung bows,
and beaters with staffs
racing open-mouthed
alongside dogs on leash,
and more riders “in fine hunting dress”
urging their horses forward
from the far right panel
towards the bottom crossroads.
Knowing the story whole,
why not move Oharano to Uji,
join West and East,
see new connections between one

generation and the next, as unborn
Prince Niou and Ukifune
steal away before dawn
to a strange Islet of Oranges,
herself *a boat upon waters*
“frightened like an exile”
rowing towards some
hopelessly distant shore.
So decorous is this genre,
three little brush flicks
for lips and eyes could
scarcely betray her feelings,
nor a stock profile
“the burning impatience”
of Niou’s princely gaze,
which all but strips away
“the rumpled layers of Ukifune’s
white singlets,” covered up here
for propriety’s sake
with a woman’s court dress.
Yet the swirling pattern of
leaf and tendril on her finely
worked kimono, echoing
every other particular, saturated
with such painstaking desire,
from the palanquin’s filigreed roof
to gray lichened rocks
and the ghostly current

of hilly waves bearing
the over-sized wooden boat away,
stays my hand
on the double page
and makes its own present claim:
*this floating world opens itself
wonder into wonder...
that is awakening.*

Notes

Section 1

- The fifteen poems I have gathered here have been lifted from different sections of a digital book I produced ten years ago called *Phantom City* (South Pasadena: Tonodan Press, 2004). The order of the poems in the original work is chronological. I have kept to that order in this “reading” but have taken the liberty of revising lines which never did seem quite right. For the record, I have discussed a number of other poems from *Phantom City* in two other articles. Both appeared in the journal of *The Society of the Study of Foreign Literature* in the Faculty of Letters at Nara Women’s University—“Holding a Mirror to the Flower: Native Poetry in a Non-Native Land” (Vol. 26., 2007) and “My Ginkakuji & The Ghosts of History” (Vol. 27, 2008).
- Ganesh is also known as “The Remover of Obstacles.”
- When I started writing *Phantom City*, I had internet access, but there was much less information on the web then, and down-loading was slow. A few days ago, I googled *suikinkutsu*, and seconds later I was able to view a video clip of the *suikinkutsu* in the “*Ohashi-ke*” garden in Fushimi Inari. I believe this is the same garden I visited.

Section 3

- The Three Treasures (or Three Jewels) are the *Buddha*, the *Dharma* (i.e. the Teachings, Law, or Way) and the *Sangha*, which normally refers to the community of believers that is either practicing the teachings or supporting them in one way or another.
- See Red Pine, translator, *The Heart Sutra* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004).
- In Sanskrit, the mantra from the Isa Upanishad is: *OM purnamadah purnamidam purnnat purnnamudacyate purnasya purnnamadaya puurnnamevavasisyate--OM shantih shantih shantih*. There are, of course, many translations of this mantra. The key word *purnam*, for example, is also rendered as “fullness,” “all-embracing,” “infinite,” and “whole.” For the above transliteration see www.estudentedavedanta.net.
- The term *skillful means* in Buddhist pedagogy refers to the practice of fitting the teaching to the occasion. *The Lotus Sutra*’s “Parable of the Phantom City” illustrates how this works. Walking through a forbidding wilderness with his followers, the Buddha takes pity on their suffering and creates an illusory but sensually gratifying rest-stop. He tells them explicitly that it is not real and sooner or later they will have to continue their journey towards enlightenment. The Buddha’s skillfulness not only resides in his ability to create and dispel illusions but also in understanding the limitations of his followers (see Burton Watson, translator, *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
- Eihei Dogen (1200-1253)--“Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water...the whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in dewdrops on the grass, or even in one drop of water.” See--Kazuaki Tanahashi, editor, *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985) 71.

“Borrowed Scenery”: Poems & Commentary

- See Ananda K. Coomoraswamy, “Indian Images with Many Arms,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* Vol.22, No. 118 (Jan., 1913) 189-191 + 194-196.

Section 5

- On what is “natural” see Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990) 8:

“Science and some sorts of mysticism rightly propose that *everything* is natural. By these lights there is nothing unnatural about New York City, or toxic wastes, or atomic energy, and nothing--by definition--that we do or experience in life is ‘unnatural.’”

- The two lines from Du Fu’s poem “Spring View” were translated by Gary Snyder. For the rest of the poem see the website “50 English translations of a poem by Du Fu,” www.chinapage.com/poem/dufu/chunwang.html
- Nanao Sakaki (1923-2008) Japanese poet, founder of “The Tribe,” Banyan Ashram, and world wanderer. In the forward to a collection of his poems, *Break The Mirror* (Maine: Blackberry Books: 1996), Snyder notes that their “conversations on the banks of the Kamo River...led to a long collaboration in...‘fields and mountains theater’” (x). Here is the first poem in that book:

If you have time to chatter
Read books
If you have time to read
Walk into mountains, desert and ocean
If you have time to walk
Sing songs and dance
If you have time to dance

Sit quietly, you Happy Lucky Idiot (3)

Section 7

- See Kamo no Chomei, translated by Yasuhiko Moriguchi & David Jenkins, *Hojoki: Visions of a Torn World* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1996).

Section 9

- The title of the poem comes from Zeami’s essay “A Mirror to the Flower.” See Thomas J. Rimer & Masakazu Yamazaki, *On the Art of Noh Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 77; and Royal Tyler’s translation of “Chikubu-shima” in *Noh Dramas* (London: Penguin, 1992).

Section 10

- See Donald Keene, *Yoshimasa and the Silver Pavilion: The Creation of the Soul of Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 166; and also a short review of this book in *The New Yorker* (12/1/2003) from which I took the phrase “staggering incompetence...”
- See the website www.emuseum.jp/ for photos and information about Yoshimasa’s bowl, now known as “Bakohan” after the large so-called “locust clamp” (also said to resemble a horse-shoe nail.)
- The following definition of “borrowed scenery” (*shakkei* in Japanese) is from JAANUS (Japanese Architecture and Art Net Users System.)—“The method of incorporating a distant vista into the composition of a garden. A river, the ocean, fields, forests, large trees, or even a building may all serve as *shakkei*, but the most frequently borrowed scene is a distant mountain.” A good example of the latter can be found at Entsuji Temple in Kyoto, where its garden is positioned with an unobstructed view of Mt. Hie.

Section 11

- Nasreddin stories have been around a long time and have been told and retold in many different languages. Sometime in the early 1970's, I first heard “Nasreddin's Duck Soup” translated from Hindi into English. Later, I found it in Idries Shah's, *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mullah Nasrudin* (New York: Dutton, 1972).
- The screen is titled “Scenes from The Tale of Genji: ‘The Royal Outing’ (*Miyuki*, chapter 29), ‘A Boat upon the Waters’ (*Ukifune*, chapter 51)”. See the website for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, www.metmuseum.org.
- See Dogen (69); and Witter Bynner, translator, *The Way of Life, according to Lao Tzu* (New York, Perigee, 1986).
- After listening to me talk about this final section, my wife suggested I read “Lemon,” a short story by Kajii Motojiro that is set in the art section of Maruzen Bookstore c.1925. For an English translation see the blog 3chopsticks.wordpress.com. Had I learned about this Dadaist story at the time I was writing “A Boat Upon Waters,” I imagine it would have “blown up” my poem. Now that the building where Maruzen was housed has been given over to *karaoke*, perhaps a living Kajii Motojiro will be inspired to sneak into one of the boxes and recreate the *depaysement* described in “Lemon.”