

Turning Toasters into Toasters
and Teacups into Teacups:
The Zen Poetics of Richard von Sturmer

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts in English, The University of Auckland, 2017.

Abstract

This research is interested in the intersection of the artistic and the religious in the poetry of Richard von Sturmer (1957-). Having undertaken over ten years' intensive training in Zen Buddhism, and having co-founded the Auckland Zen Centre with Amala Wrightson, von Sturmer is an accomplished practitioner of Zen. Two of his published literary works present themselves in explicit dialogue with Indian, Chinese and Japanese writings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and demonstrate an extensive engagement with Zen literature.

Being the first scholarly study of von Sturmer's writing, I begin with a consideration of how von Sturmer's biography and Zen poetry fits into wider frames of Western Buddhism and Western Buddhist literature. How does von Sturmer reinterpret Buddhist teachings according to his own time and place? In what ways does von Sturmer's Zen poetry differ from his American peers and his Japanese and Chinese predecessors to offer something of relevance to New Zealand? Through these questions, I explore in what way von Sturmer contributes to the creation of a Buddhist literature for New Zealand.

The second half of the thesis constitutes a doctrinal reading of von Sturmer's work. I investigate the impact of Zen meditation on von Sturmer's poetry and elucidate the philosophical underpinnings of his imagistic holism. I suggest that the dominant aesthetic characteristics of his poetry arise as a reflection of his meditation practice, so that for him, "ontological and poetic experience are one." I also address how von Sturmer responds to the Zen imperative that the poet produce literature that proves a soteriological aid on the Buddhist path through an analysis of his use of apophysis. In conclusion, I suggest that von Sturmer's own poetic practice of bringing mundane settings into the sphere of meditative inquiry becomes, in turn, a soteriological aid for readers.

The mode of the thesis is explorative scholarship and critical reading rather than polemic. By way of descriptive modularity, my writing follows and contextualizes the engagements between Zen practice and poetic practice in von Sturmer's work.

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Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my gratitude to my primary supervisor, Lisa Samuels, without whose generous guidance and ceaseless encouragement I would not have been able to pursue this topic. I wish to thank Selina Tusitala Marsh for her support in the early stages of the thesis, and Sally McAra, who kindly offered her expertise in the field of Buddhist studies. Thanks are also due to Richard von Sturmer for agreeing to be interviewed and for providing me with unpublished material.

I am ever grateful to my parents and parents in law for their infallible support, to Daniel Baigent and the “occupants” of the Arts Grad Labs for all the merry cheer, and most especially, to Balamohan Shingade.

Notes on the Text

For Sanskrit words and names, I use the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration which allows for a lossless Romanization. For Chinese words and names, I use Wade-Giles Romanization in keeping with the majority of the scholarship I have consulted. The names of most Zen masters have multiple variations so I strive to use the most popular Wade-Giles Romanization for each. Dates of birth and death should aid in their identification, although some of these are also disputed by scholars.

“Zen” is the Japanese name for a particular school of Mahāyāna Buddhism which originated in China in the sixth century CE and was established in Japan in the twelfth century. While using the term “Zen” to refer to the school in general, I will use its Chinese name, Ch’an, when speaking specifically about a Chinese context. While some authors use “Zen” to refer to Korean Son (Seon) as well, I have not attended to Son literature in this thesis as von Sturmer’s poetry does not present itself in conversation with Son traditions.

A glossary of Buddhist terminology and other non-English words can be found at the back.

Introduction

Richard von Sturmer's first notable artistic work can be traced back to 1976 when, at the age of 19, he wrote the script for David Blythe's first film, *Circadian Rhythms*.¹ Since then, von Sturmer has written and performed with bands and theatre troupes, written and staged plays, recorded a host of short films, collaborated with a photographer on a book which detailed daily life at Rochester Zen Center, edited the journal of the Rochester Zen Center, and published six books of poetry. Arguably, von Sturmer's most famous artistic venture was as the lyricist for Blam Blam Blam's "There is No Depression in New Zealand," a song which enjoyed national success as a political rallying point in the early 80s. Von Sturmer's literary works have been widely anthologized in New Zealand collections,² but despite his contributions to the New Zealand film and literary scenes, no criticism of his work of a sustained length has yet appeared.³ This study begins with the motivation to redress that, with an aspiration to make a contribution to discussions on New Zealand poetry.

The thesis centers on von Sturmer's "Zen poetry,"⁴ a particular thread of his published writing which presents itself in conversation with Zen literature, beliefs, and practices. Two of von Sturmer's books declare themselves as in dialogue with Zen literary traditions: *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose* (Headworx, 2005), and *Book of Equanimity Verses* (Puriri Press, 2013). Other parts of his published writings are also directly or indirectly related to his Zen practice, and I bring these into my discussions from time to time.⁵ If Zen is a religious and philosophical tradition that underpins von Sturmer's writing, how does it manifest aesthetically? Such a question warrants consideration of his work in

¹ "Richard Von Sturmer: Writing History," *New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre*, <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/features/taonga/sturmer.asp>.

² One would expect to find Von Sturmer's Zen-influenced literature in an anthology of New Zealand religious poetry. However, New Zealand's only two such anthologies to date, *Spirit in a Strange Land* and *Spirit Abroad* (both edited by Paul Morris, Harry Ricketts, and Mike Grimshaw, published by Godwit in 2002 and 2004 respectively) were published prior to the release of von Sturmer's first overtly Zen-influenced book (*Suchness*, 2005).

³ It should be noted, however, that von Sturmer's situation is by no means unusual: many books of New Zealand poetry go without reviews, let alone critical scholarship.

⁴ Throughout this thesis I will use the term "poetry" with an expansive definition, including to describe non-Western forms of writing such as *shih*, *waka*, *gāthā*. Some characteristics of these writings are brevity of form, use of metre, syllabic or other determinate structuring techniques, and potential for mnemonic use, so they are generally considered as poetry in contemporary scholarship. Furthermore, my expansive use of the term poetry follows von Sturmer's own blending of distinctions between literary forms.

⁵ A chronological list of von Sturmer's published works can be found in the appendix.

terms of a Zen poetics: a study of the techniques, conventions, and strategies which have roots in the Buddhist-influenced literary traditions of Japan and China.

Von Sturmer's Zen poetry offers an opening through which to explore a long history of Indian, Japanese and Chinese religious practices and literature. Writing within such a history prompts a number of questions of a contemporary Zen poet such as von Sturmer: What is the relationship between his poetic practice and meditative practice? How does he, as a Western convert to Buddhism, engage poetic techniques from Japanese, Chinese and Euro-American canons? How does a religious tradition which strives to have "no dependence on words and letters" simultaneously produce an immense field of poetry, and how does von Sturmer navigate that history? Since writing "Zen poetry" means writing within a particular tradition, it is my intention to illuminate something of that tradition in von Sturmer's writing.

As the first extended scholarly study of Richard von Sturmer's poetry, some contextual groundwork was crucial in order to develop answers to my starting questions. First of all, what kind of writing qualifies as "Zen poetry"? Secondly, how did von Sturmer as a Pākehā New Zealander encounter and convert to Zen Buddhism? How is his biography similar to wider sociological trends, and what kind of political project accompanies his Zen practice and writing? Thirdly, what are the major concerns and aims for "Zen poets," contemporary and historical? The two parts of the thesis thus contextualize von Sturmer's work from two angles: the socio-historical, and the doctrinal.

Part One considers von Sturmer's work within his immediate literary context: that of Western Zen Buddhist poetry. I situate von Sturmer's biography and writing within the formation of a Western Buddhism and Western Buddhist literature, and then consider how his writing contributes to the formation of a Buddhist literature for New Zealand. Bringing the thousand-year-old Sung Dynasty kōan collections to New Zealand contexts, and the tradition of Buddhist hermitage to Great Barrier Island, I elucidate the histories of Japanese and Chinese literature that von Sturmer brings to bear on New Zealand social geographies. To conclude this part, I suggest that the hermit-poets whose writing von Sturmer draws from helps him to establish a role for himself as an artist, spiritualist and cultural critic.

Part Two performs a doctrinal reading of von Sturmer's work, identifying the Zen philosophies and practices which inform his poetics. In particular, I focus on the influence of Zen meditation practice on von Sturmer's work and propose the idea of a "thing centered holism" to describe von Sturmer's appreciation of singular objects and harmonious wholes. In Part Two, I also address a history of tension between Zen practices and poetic practices within Zen institutions and explore how von Sturmer meets the challenge of writing a

“soteriological literature” – a literature that will aid one along the Buddhist path towards liberation from suffering. I conclude by suggesting that one of the most important accomplishments of von Sturmer’s poetry is to lead readers toward the ontological and somatic cancellation of separated “aboutness” thinking and a non-thinking communion with the phenomenal world.

The mode of the thesis is explorative scholarship and critical reading rather than polemic. My writing follows and contextualizes the engagements between Zen practice and poetic practice in von Sturmer’s work, by way of descriptive modularity, and does not attempt to form one vertical line of argument throughout the whole paper. However, if this thesis has a thesis, it is that Richard von Sturmer’s Zen poetry lends itself toward a soteriological reading. That is to say, it brings the reader closer to an embodied understanding of Buddhist truths through its emphasis on a meditative communion with the phenomenal world.

Some of my questions on this topic are material for a longer study, but this thesis takes a step towards them. For example, given the long debates about a putative separation between language as form and language as content, how does “Zen poetry” weigh this balance or choose a “side”? Another way of asking that is, what is the relation between the linguistic and nonlinguistic within Zen poetry and spiritual practice? And when might a reader declare – and for what reasons – that some of von Sturmer’s poems are not interested in matters of Zen?

There are also many aspects of von Sturmer’s creative work that lie outside of the scope of this study. Over the course of his career, von Sturmer has devoted himself to what local filmmaker Gabriel White calls an “almost delirious range of artistic means: music, song, performance, costume, film, theatre, set design street art, photography and writing.”⁶ His artistic output has been so diverse that multiple studies from different disciplinary standpoints would be fruitful. In 2009, White commented that “one cannot help wondering if his highly prolific and versatile approach [to the arts] might unintentionally have obscured his importance subsequently.”⁷ One of von Sturmer’s films, *Twenty-Six Tanka Films*, is overtly “Zen-influenced” and incorporates poetry, and while the film has informed my generalized statements on his work, I keep my main arguments to his published literature.

⁶ Gabriel White, “Both Sides of the Street,” in *Rubble Emits Light* (Auckland, NZ: The Film Archive, 2009), 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

Some directions for future scholarship in “von Sturmer studies” might include the following areas (some of these I touch on in this thesis, but do not pursue): Firstly, von Sturmer’s position as a Pākehā convert to Buddhism who draws heavily on Chinese and Japanese literature (among other influences) would make for an interesting study of his work from a postcolonial perspective. By taking on the position of a religious minority, and dedicating himself to co-founding (along with his partner Amala Wrightson) and running the Auckland Zen Centre, does von Sturmer’s identity sit on the margins of New Zealand cultural and political life? According to the taxonomies of some scholars of Western Buddhism, von Sturmer would fall into a category of “elite” Buddhists who have the money and the leisure to “import” Buddhism and go on meditation retreats.⁸ Such “elite” Buddhist converts are usually Caucasian, have a middle-class income and a University education, and benefit from more scholarly attention than recent Buddhist migrants from Asian countries.⁹

Secondly, von Sturmer’s regard for environmental causes would create a worthwhile topic of study. Much of his writing centers on observing events in the natural world, and his poetry bears similarities to other Buddhist environmentalists such as Gary Snyder. Von Sturmer’s compassion for living things, and will to see all beings as interconnected and interdependent makes his work a good candidate of study from an ecocritical standpoint. Lastly, von Sturmer’s recontextualization of Chinese and Japanese literature would make for an engaging comparative literature and historical study. Focusing on the historical and cultural contexts in which Chinese and Japanese poetries were written and received, and von Sturmer’s responses and recontextualizations of them hundreds of years later in new cultural and historical contexts would provide material for a book-length study in its own right.

The remainder of this introduction will explore definitions of Zen poetry, and outline some of the aesthetic characteristics and philosophical concerns. This sets up the necessary groundwork for the consideration of von Sturmer’s Zen poetry that will follow in parts One and Two.

⁸ Wakoh Shannon Hickey, "Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 11 (2010): 11.

⁹ Ibid.

Zen Poetry

Poetry has played a central role in Zen Buddhism from its beginning.¹⁰ According to the philosopher and Zen scholar Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, "in Zen literary expression, poetry ranks first."¹¹ Favouring the use of concrete and straightforward images over analytical or theoretical prose, poetry has been used as a vehicle for transmitting the Dharma since the inception of the Ch'an school.¹² However, what we call "Zen poetry" from a contemporary standpoint is an umbrella term for many different styles of poetry composed over hundreds of years in different languages and different countries. What has brought them together as a category has been their use within the Ch'an/Zen school's training framework. In one sense, "Zen poetry" cannot be seen to pre-date the formation of the Ch'an school in China in the sixth century CE. However, older Sanskrit forms of verse, including *gāthā*, *mantra* and *dhāraṇī*, could be considered "Zen poetry" due to their use within Zen institutions. To be sure, any of these definitions of Zen poetry require an expansive use of the concept "poetry."

A good place to start would be to consider "Zen poetry" as originating in mid-eighth century China, when scholar-poets such as Wang Wei and Meng Haoran and monk-poets such as Jiaoran, Guanxiu, and Qiji popularized *shih* poetry on Buddhist themes.¹³ *Shih* poetry, a lyrical style developed by the literati, thus became a favourable expression of Buddhist ideas.¹⁴ Collections of *shih* poetry were developed and used for teaching purposes in temples, and the composition of poetry became a medium of practice in Ch'an monasteries.¹⁵ It was during the T'ang Dynasty, and later Sung Dynasty, when Buddhist monks and lay officials associated with the Ch'an school made poetry "a conspicuous and permanent aspect of Buddhist practice."¹⁶

The poetic elements of *shih*, which featured concrete imagery, concision, strict meter and rhyme scheme, and complex use of allusion and metaphor, were then used toward

¹⁰ Jonathan Stalling, *Poetics of Emptiness: Transformations of Asian Thought in American Poetry* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 98.

¹¹ Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*, trans. Gishin Tokiwa (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1971), 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³ Charles Egan, *Clouds Thick, Whereabouts Unknown: Poems by Zen Monks of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6; 34.

¹⁶ George A. Keyworth, "Poetry and Buddhism," in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003), 656.

Buddhist ends. Earlier types of Buddhist poetry, such as the *gāthā*, which was used to summarize passages of sutras, decreased in popularity as Chinese monks and scholars adapted their own native poetic form to Buddhist doctrine.¹⁷ As Sandra Wawrytko writes in her article “The Poetics of Ch’an,”

Building upon both the indigenous and imported traditions, Chinese Buddhists gradually adapted doctrines to their own cultural context...The Ch’an school is particularly noteworthy for its expansion of traditions, as well as its infusion of Taoist elements.¹⁸

The translator and scholar of Chinese and Japanese literature, Burton Watson, characterizes “Zen poetry” as “brief, highly compact poetical expressions that are expressive rather than expository in nature” which usually eschew “specifically religious or philosophical terminology in favour of everyday language, seeking to express insight in terms of the imagery or verse forms current in the secular culture of the period.”¹⁹ Watson associates these aesthetics of Zen poetry with two characteristics of Zen which distinguish it from other forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism: the tendency to deemphasize the study of doctrines and direct students to focus their energies on the enlightenment experience; and the demand that students understand the enlightenment experience in terms of their own immediate situation.²⁰ Due to these two aspects of Zen teachings, students were often required to use poetry to express doctrinal ideas or demonstrate their level of enlightenment, and they usually did so in the language and verse forms available to them. This “deliberate avoidance of technical religious terminology,” Watson adds, “is a reflection of the Zen belief that one has not fully grasped the significance of enlightenment until one can manifest it in the language of daily life.”²¹ Thus, some forms of Zen poetry are difficult to distinguish from the secular poetries of their time.²²

¹⁷ “Doctrine,” in a Buddhist context, denotes a systematic presentation of teachings, usually derived from the sūtras and roughly equivalent to “Buddhist thought” or “Buddhist philosophy.” Peter Jaeger, *John Cage and Buddhist Ecopoetics* (New York; London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹⁸ Sandra Wawrytko, “The Poetics of Ch’an: Upayic Poetry and Its Taoist Enrichment,” *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* 5 (1992): 358.

¹⁹ Burton Watson, “Zen Poetry,” in *Zen: Tradition and Transition: A Sourcebook by Contemporary Zen Masters and Scholars.*, ed. Kenneth Kraft (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 106.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

²² *Ibid.*, 106.

Lucien Stryk defines Zen poetry by its “celebration of, its wonder at, the intimate relationship of all that exists in this world.”²³ “The phenomenal world,” he continues,

is never treated as mere setting for human actions; the drama is there, in nature, of which the human is an active part, in no way separated from his surroundings, neither contending with them, fearing them nor – for that matter – worshipping them.²⁴

The hermetic-like seclusion from human interactions and the focus on the events of the phenomenal world is certainly characteristic of Zen poetry. Much of Zen poetry demonstrates “a very conscious ignoring of part of their [the authors’] world” and constitutes “a constriction of the perceptual field that was almost a litany inviting anything outside that field – social and political change especially – to leave the world of their experience.”²⁵

To these descriptions, we could add some more aesthetic characterizations of Zen poetry. Burton Watson outlines the field as “a body of poetry that is studiously calm, lowkeyed, and lacking in individuality, adroit in its handling of a particular range of imagery.”²⁶ Hisamatsu gives the following qualities as characteristic of Zen arts: “asymmetry, simplicity, freedom, naturalness, profundity, unworldliness, and stillness.”²⁷

The editors of anthologies of Western Buddhist poetry have their own definitions of Western Zen poetry. In *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Poetry*, editor Andrew Schelling defines Chinese-influenced North American poetry (of the sort Ezra Pound popularized) as having an intimacy of tone “that is deliberately non-sensational, somewhat dry, unsentimental in its approach, and results in a poetry that sounds as though one reasonable person were conversing intimately to another.”²⁸ In the introduction to *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry*, Gary Snyder outlines Western Zen poetry as having an “elegant plainness,” being “unsentimental, not overly abstract, on the way toward selflessness, not particularly self-indulgent, wholehearted, nonutopian, fluid (that

²³ Lucien Stryk, *Encounter with Zen: Writings on Poetry and Zen* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), 55.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁵ William LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 10.

²⁶ Watson, 118.

²⁷ Quoted in Stryk, 62.

²⁸ Andrew Schelling, ed. *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry* (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2005), 15.

is, able to shift shapes), on the dry side, kindhearted, unembarrassed, free of spiritual rhetoric and the pretense of magic, and deeply concerned with...questions of knowing.”²⁹

The various forms taken by “Zen poetry” can be grouped into three main categories. The first category of poems are those which are used in religious contexts in service of religious aims. These include *gāthā* (formal, metrical verses which appear in the Buddhist sutras as a mnemonic device to summarize prose sections of teachings), *kōan*³⁰ (short anecdotes, dialogues, or questions to be contemplated by a Zen student), enlightenment poems (written by practitioners following an apprehension of insight), death poems (poems elicited from respected teachers on their deathbed), occasional poems (such as when a master presents *inka* to a student (spiritual certification that the student in question can now be regarded as a Zen Master), or on the celebration of the Buddha’s enlightenment), capping phrases (a few lines of poetry composed or selected by students to show their level of understanding of a *kōan*), appreciative verses or verse commentary on *kōan* (using a variety of line lengths, often ironic and cryptic), and contemporary poetry that seeks to interpret or expound Zen teachings.

In this category of poems, the writers or speakers do not necessarily consider themselves as poets. Instead, they are serving as monastics or religious teachers. Enlightenment poems, for example, were seen by advocates of Zen as a duty from enlightened masters to students. It was not enough to *be* enlightened, they reasoned, one had to *convey* that experience to others.³¹ Moreover, the reflective process in which a Zen master puts their enlightenment experience into words would function as a kind of self-confirmation, a demonstration of their enlightenment to his or herself.³² Poetry was seen as the ideal vehicle for transmission of an enlightenment experience, and priests who did not think of themselves as poets were called on to write.³³

The second category of poems are those for which the religious and literary functions are more difficult to distinguish. Not necessarily sacred yet neither secular, these types of

²⁹ Gary Snyder, "Introduction," in *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich (Boston: Shambhala Press, 1991), 8.

³⁰ Whether *kōans* can be categorized as poetry is debatable. Usually figured as the record of dialogue between a Zen master and an interlocutor (student or otherwise), *kōans* have been variously described as anecdotes, riddles, and puzzles. I loosely suggest their categorization here alongside “Zen poetry” in that they have a brief form, are meant to be easily remembered, and are used within pedagogical situations.

³¹ Iriya Yoshitaka, "Chinese Poetry and Zen," *The Eastern Buddhist* 6, no. 1 (1973): 60.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Wawrytko, 343.

poems are usually an amalgamation of Buddhist ideas in local poetic forms. *Shih*, *waka* (*tanka*) and haiku are the most famous verse forms through which Buddhist ideas have been explored in Japan and China, and contemporary poets continue to explore Buddhist ideas through a range of verse forms. This kind of Zen poetry is interested in poetic form and poetic practice, as much as any “transmission” of Buddhist teachings. von Sturmer’s *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose* and *Book of Equanimity Verses* can be best placed in this category of Zen poetry. Although many of the poems in *Suchness* and all of the poems in *Book of Equanimity Verses* are in explicit conversation with Zen literature and teachings, they do not assume to be received and used in service of religious aims on the part of the reader. Both books are published by New Zealand poetry presses which do not specialize in Buddhist literature per se, and *Suchness* includes a glossary of Buddhist terms, indicating the expectation of a non-religious readership.

The third category of poems are those which are associated with Zen through the interpretations of readers or critics. In some senses, this category forms the central definition of “Zen poetry,” if we remember that the kinds of literature which have come to count as “Zen poetry” have been largely due to their inclusion within Zen training.³⁴ The *Zenrinkushu*, for example, is a seventeenth century anthology of quotes from Chinese and Japanese sources – some of which are poetry written by people who were not Buddhist – used by Zen institutions for soteriological purposes. This way of using literature can be described as *upāya*: literature as a skillful means to lead one closer to enlightenment.

Indeed, one of the most important functions of Zen poetry has been to provide an enlightenment experience for the listener or reader. While not strictly poetry, the many *kōans* which contain the phrase “at these words, [the listener] became enlightened” testify to the Zen belief that a single sentence had the power to elicit spiritual realization:

When Banzan was walking through a market he overheard a conversation between a butcher and his customer.

“Give me the best piece of meat you have,” said the customer.

³⁴ In other senses however, this category of Zen poetry has the potential to widen the field too much. Western critics in the twentieth century, operating by the idea of a “Zen spirit” (according to Lucien Stryk, a “spontaneous activity free of forms, flowing from the formless self”) have found this “Zen spirit” in the work of anyone from Shakespeare to Wallace Stevens. Quote above from Stryk, 40. An example of attributing the Zen spirit to a range of Western literatures include R. H. Blyth’s 1964 *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*.

“Everything in my shop is the best,” replied the butcher. “You cannot find here any piece of meat that is not the best.”

At these words Banzan became enlightened.³⁵

In a similar way, enlightenment poems written by previous Zen masters and students were used in Zen training to elicit spiritual apprehension, with the enlightenment poems themselves sometimes becoming reframed as kōans.³⁶

The worldly, bodily moment of enlightenment experienced by Banzan in the above kōan points to the Zen demand that its adherents reach a state of embodied knowledge. Literature can only be a soteriological guide if Zen practitioners can “physically actualize” the Buddhist teachings. In *Zen Poems of China and Japan: The Crane’s Bill*, Lucien Stryk compares Zen poetry to *teishos*: lectures given in Zen training which students are meant to remember and “apply.”³⁷ Gary Snyder has written that Zen poetry is valued “not for the literary metaphor but for the challenge presented by the exercise of physically actualizing the metaphor in the present.”³⁸ To this end, Zen privileges literature that can serve as a practical guide: short, memorable anecdotes, kōans, or poems that can be memorized and contemplated by the student.

More than any other Buddhist sect, “Zen is famous for its experiential methodologies.”³⁹ The mythological origins of Zen are traditionally attributed to the Buddha’s Flower Sermon, when, instead of preaching to his disciple Kāśyapa, the Buddha silently held up a flower. Stories abound in Zen circles of sutras and scriptures being discarded in favour of present moment attention, such as the famous T’ang Dynasty master Te-shan Hsüan-chien (780-865) who allegedly burned all his commentaries on the Diamond Sutra after taking up Zen study.⁴⁰ The worth of literature, in this perspective, is to cause a psychosomatic transformation of the sort that is sought in meditation. In other words, reading Zen poetry of this kind becomes a kind of practice, so that understanding the words

³⁵ Paul Reps, ed. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (Middlesex, England; Victoria, Australia: Pelican Books, 1973), 41.

³⁶ Wawrytko, 359.

³⁷ Lucien Stryk and Takahasi Ikemoto, *Zen Poems of Japan and China: The Crane’s Bill* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), xxvi.

³⁸ Snyder, 3.

³⁹ Stalling, 98.

⁴⁰ Jerome Griswold, “Zen Poetry, American Critics; American Poetry, Zen Criticism: Robert Aitken, Basho, and Wallace Stevens,” in *Zen in American Life and Letters*, ed. Robert Ellwood (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1987), 1.

transforms the listener or reader on physical and spiritual levels. The poem itself becomes the enlightening flower one Zen practitioner can hand to another.

In sum, for our treatment of von Sturmer, we are concerned with a mix of the second and third categories of Zen poetry. The second category is applicable, because von Sturmer's poetry is closely connected with the secular literature of its time, and third category is applicable because von Sturmer's poetry, I will argue, can operate as a soteriological aid for the reader.

Part One: Toward a Buddhist Literature for New Zealand

As a missionizing religion, Buddhism has always sought to domesticate or indigenize its doctrines for local traditions. In the case of poetry, this discursive proselytizing has created a rich history of Buddhist-inspired poetries in many languages. Literature has historically been a successful way for advocates and missionaries “to weave it [Buddhist teachings] tightly into the fabric of [the local] society and implant it into the very landscape... demonstrating its efficacy on [the local] soil despite its foreign provenance.”⁴¹ In this way, local poetic forms would come to embody Buddhist teachings.⁴²

I argue in Part One that von Sturmer’s poetry can be considered within this tradition of interaction between Buddhist teachings and local poetic forms. Elucidating the ways in which von Sturmer makes Buddhist literature relevant to New Zealand, I also give ample context to the political and cultural project that accompanied the formation of a Western Buddhist literature.⁴³ Western Buddhist literature is still a relatively new phenomenon,⁴⁴ and since no critical writings on a New Zealand Buddhist literature have yet emerged, I contextualize von Sturmer’s writing alongside American authors.

I begin by giving a biographical overview of von Sturmer’s creative work and conversion to Zen Buddhism, situating them within the development of a Western Buddhism, and a Western Buddhist literature. I then progress to demonstrate how von Sturmer’s poetry brings Buddhist teachings, role models, and literary tradition to a New Zealand context, with a focus on how von Sturmer alters the cultural geography of Great Barrier Island. Following that, I suggest that the biographies of Buddhist poet-recluses in China and Japan help von Sturmer to develop a role for himself as a poet, a cultural critical, and a spiritualist. Lastly, I

⁴¹ Campany quoted in Charlotte Eubanks, *Miracles of Book and Body Buddhist Textual Culture and Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 12.

⁴² Beata Grant, "Buddhism and Poetry in East Asia," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to East and Inner Asian Buddhism*, ed. Mario Poceski (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 408.

⁴³ It should be noted that when I speak of Western Buddhist literature, I am primarily focussing on the writing of middle-class white convert Buddhists (or those who claim a deep connection with Buddhist ideas or practices) who were consciously forging a new poetry and new forms of social organization from a foreign religio-cultural framework. This is not to discredit the writing of other “Western Buddhists” such as Asian American writers, but merely to identify the closest peers of Richard von Sturmer.

⁴⁴ As a field of study, Western Buddhist literature is still rather new. The first major edited collections of critical writings on Western Buddhist literature are those of the SUNY series *Buddhism and American Culture*: the first title in the series, *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, was published in 2009, with the follow-up *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-first Century*, published in 2011.

consider through what political means his poetry can be said to contribute to the making of a New Zealand Buddhist literature.

Richard von Sturmer and the Formation of a Western Buddhist Literature

During the 1960s and 70s, significant social upheavals erupted in Western nations.⁴⁵ Dissatisfied with the dominant modes of social, political and religious organization, young people began to question the power of “the establishment”: those who would act in their own “misguided, materialistic self-interest at the expense of the environment and its inhabitants.”⁴⁶ The economic boom which followed World War II and Fordist manufacturing systems (to cite just a few factors) had contributed to the creation of a consumerist society in which material goods were promoted as satiating one’s every need. For writers, intellectuals, and supporters of the countercultural movement, it was precisely the unsatisfactoriness of this “pleasure palace” which required creative intervention and social activism.⁴⁷ Seeking alternatives to the dominant social and religious ideologies of the time, many young Westerners looked to non-Western cultural traditions for alternative modes of spirituality and social organization.⁴⁸ As the civil rights movement, women’s liberation movement, and environmental movements arose, so did the formation of a “Western Buddhism.”

Born in Auckland, in 1957, Richard von Sturmer came of age as the counter-cultural movement was at its height in New Zealand. Political stability and economic expansion throughout the post-war years had given young New Zealanders like von Sturmer the freedom to challenge the old order, and his generation would come to political consciousness protesting New Zealand’s involvement in the Vietnam War, sporting involvements with apartheid South Africa, and French nuclear testing in the South Pacific.⁴⁹ Between such momentous political events, however, von Sturmer found the daily cultural life of Auckland

⁴⁵ Terms like “West” and “Westerners” are an oversimplification of what might be counted as diverse language and culture groups. However, I use the term to describe a globalized, transnational context in which countries outside Asia are repurposing Buddhism for their own cultural needs. As for particular characteristics, the term West can be seen as gesturing towards secular, (post-)industrial, urbanized and wealthy countries who have colonial connections with Western Europe.

⁴⁶ Sally McAra, “Amala Sensei: Zen Priest,” in *Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism through the Lives of Practitioners*, ed. Todd Lewis (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 134.

⁴⁷ John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, eds., *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 2.

⁴⁸ Tom Lavazzi, “Illumination through the Cracks: The Melting Down of Conventional Socio-Religious Thought and Practice in the Work of Gary Snyder,” in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 139.

⁴⁹ “1981 Springbok Tour,” *New Zealand History* (2016), <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/1981-springbok-tour/battle-lines-are-drawn>.

excessively dull. Auckland was not the “major metropolis” that filmmaker Hugh Macdonald had claimed in 1967;⁵⁰ for von Sturmer, it was far behind the technological, artistic and political cultures of major cities around the world.

von Sturmer’s young days were characterized by a series of artistic and activist projects set on transforming his local political and cultural scene. His first project of note was in 1974 at the age of 17, when he formed “Pie in the Eye International,” an organization which vowed to put a cream pie in the face of any nominated person for \$5.⁵¹ Their first customer nominated the then-leader of the opposition party, Robert Muldoon, and so von Sturmer and friends surprised Muldoon with a pie while he was disembarking from a flight at Auckland Airport.⁵² As Muldoon moved into power as the Prime Minister in the mid 1970s, von Sturmer flew to London and encountered the punk movement there. Squatting in north London, and going to concerts at which there would be hundreds of young people, von Sturmer found this new scene “a complete explosion of energy.”⁵³ Its songs were like “gritty grains of sand that would cause irritation in the general psyche,”⁵⁴ making London a “vibrant, revolutionary place to be at the time.”⁵⁵ Most people at the concerts were young teenagers, von Sturmer recalls, and he felt old at the age of 20.⁵⁶

Von Sturmer would return to Auckland to begin his own punk initiatives in 1978. The abrasive and dictatorial Muldoon reigned, representing the interests of working-class rural war veterans but alienating the urban liberal baby-boomers.⁵⁷ During the nine years that Muldoon was in power, recalls von Sturmer, “there was this...suppressed feeling. He [Muldoon] kept a very tight lid on things. It was definitely something to react against.”⁵⁸ Schoolmates Tim Mahon, Mark Bell and Andrew McLennan from Westlake Boys High School collaborated with von Sturmer in bands The Plague (formed 1978) and Blam Blam

⁵⁰ Hugh Macdonald, *This Auckland (1967)* (Archives New Zealand: Department of Internal Affairs, 2012).

⁵¹ *Decades in Colour*, (Presented by Judy Bailey, Prime, Sky Network Television., Screened 17 April 2016).

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ "Richard Von Sturmer on Punk Rock, Buddhism and the Missing Silver Scroll," *Stuff.co.nz* (2015), <http://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/music/71933528/Richard-von-Sturmer-on-punk-rock-buddhism-and-the-missing-Silver-Scroll>.

⁵⁶ *Decades in Colour*.

⁵⁷ "1981 Springbok Tour"; Gavin McLean, "Robert Muldoon: Biography," *ibid.* (2015), <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/people/robert-muldoon>.

⁵⁸ *Decades in Colour*.

Blam⁵⁹ (formed 1980). Von Sturmer was a lyricist for both bands and a vocalist in The Plague's "art rock theatre anarchy,"⁶⁰ penning antagonistic songs such as "The R.S.A.," "Private Property," "Mr Muldoon," and "Frank Gill." The lyrical attacks on politicians and institutions were clamorous, with the main tag line of the song "Frank Gill" (who was then a Member of Parliament) being "Frank Gill is an Idiot." The Plague's "vicious noise" became notorious around Auckland, Blam Blam Blam member Don McGlashan recalls, and the whole front line of the band performed naked in body paint at New Zealand's Woodstock-inspired Nambassa Festival of 1979. Blam Blam Blam, a more straightforward rock band, would achieve national fame with von Sturmer and McGlashan's song "There is No Depression in New Zealand," serving a "highly political time where an overdue re-examination of New Zealand's self and place heralded a period of societal change."⁶¹ Over time, "There is No Depression in New Zealand" became known as an "alternative national anthem" associated with the resistance movements of the 1981 Springbok Tour, even though the song had been performed well before those events.⁶²

An excerpt from The Plague's song "Auckland" provides some insight into von Sturmer's upbringing on Auckland's North Shore:

Auckland
You're a pensioner's
Delight
Put to sleep
Early every night
...
Auckland
There's too much control
Auckland
You've grown very old
Auckland
In French it's ennui

⁵⁹ Don McGlashan, also a graduate of Westlake Boys High School, would join Mark Bell and Tim Mahon to form Blam Blam Blam.

⁶⁰ Andrew Johnstone, "Andrew McLennan: Profile," Audio Culture, <http://www.audioculture.co.nz/people/andrew-mclennan>.

⁶¹ Andrew Schmidt, "Blam Blam Blam: Profile," Audio Culture, <http://www.audioculture.co.nz/people/blam-blam-blam>.

⁶² Ibid.

Auckland

Is this a boring place to be?

Auckland

It always was for me⁶³

Both McGlashan and McLennan describe von Sturmer as holding a central place within the artistic endeavours that shook up the culture of Auckland in the late 70s and early 80s. “Being involved with anything he had a hand in was always something special,” McLennan recounts.⁶⁴ The cabaret performance troupe Insider Information, which revolved around von Sturmer and Amala (then Charlotte) Wrightson,⁶⁵ worked to enliven what they saw in the mid 70s as “little more than a farming town at the bottom of the world” characterised by “narrowed-mindedness and insularity.”⁶⁶

Auckland City, at times so dull and drab that you would think it still existed in the 1950s [the year was now 1975], became a vast wall on which our performances burst forth like brightly coloured and transient graffiti.⁶⁷

Much of von Sturmer’s contributions to cultural and political change in New Zealand were inspired by his travels overseas. In the vein of the Overseas Experience, a “rite of passage” for young New Zealanders,⁶⁸ von Sturmer discovered a range of alternative artistic and cultural practices which propelled him to establish new ways of living when he returned home. After a trip to Italy in 1977, von Sturmer writes, “a window onto a vibrant and chaotic way of living” had opened, “one which [he] had never experienced growing up in New Zealand.”⁶⁹ As well as London and Italy, his travels took him to other parts of Europe, North America, and Australia. His longest trip away from home, and the trip from which he would make his most long-lasting contribution to cultural change in Auckland, was the ten years spent at the Rochester Zen Center in New York.

⁶³ Richard Von Sturmer, *Songs of the Plague* (Auckland, NZ: The Plague, 1978).

⁶⁴ Quoted in Johnstone.

⁶⁵ Richard von Sturmer’s partner, who upon her ordination as a Zen priest in 1999, was given the Sanskrit name Amala.

⁶⁶ Richard Von Sturmer, *On the Eve of Never Departing* (Auckland, NZ: Titus Books, 2009), 35.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁸ Jude Wilson, *Flying Kiwis: A History of the Oe* (Dunedin, NZ: Otago University Press, 2014).

⁶⁹ Von Sturmer, *On the Eve of Never Departing*, 40.

Being Pākehā, with a middle-class upbringing and artistic tendencies, von Sturmer typifies the characteristics of those who would adopt the “culturally foreign” religion of Buddhism during or in the aftermath of the counter cultural movement. However, this is not to say that Buddhism did not already have a presence in Western nations: it had already been brought to countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand by migrants from East Asia during the mid-nineteenth century gold rushes.⁷⁰ A marked increase in immigration of East Asian peoples in the 1960s, however, would coincide with the social unrest of the countercultural movements and make possible the establishment of uniquely Western Buddhist institutions.⁷¹ Over the 60s and 70s, a number of charismatic Buddhist teachers would arrive, capturing the interest of convert audiences and publishing their “dharma talks.”⁷² In the United States, books such as Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa’s *Meditation in Action* (1969) and Shunryu Suzuki’s *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (1970) quickly became bestsellers.⁷³ Western adaptations of Buddhist thought would effect a “transmission and transformation of Buddhist beliefs, practices, and institutions,” creating a uniquely “Western Buddhism.”⁷⁴

Converting to Buddhism could be an important marker of identity for certain groups of Westerners such as von Sturmer, operating as a demonstration of their determination to “reform and ultimately transcend the self” and implicitly, their wider society.⁷⁵ More than a rebellion of a younger generation against their parents, the interest the spirituality of non-Western cultures also came from a place of anti-capitalist and environmentalist politics. Commenting on the making of a Buddhist sacred place in New Zealand, Sally McAra writes that Western converts to Buddhism wanted to prove “a counterweight to the overall trend perceived in terms of materialism, rationality, economic development and the failure of all these to produce individual and social ‘happiness.’”⁷⁶ The adoption of a culturally alien knowledge system, McAra continues, can be read as a refusal of mainstream Western cultural

⁷⁰ Sally McAra, Franz Metcalf, and Anna Halafoff, "Buddhism in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to South and Southeast Asian Buddhism*, ed. Michael Zimmermann (Wiley Blackwell, forthcoming).

⁷¹ Charles S. Prebish, "Buddhism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*, ed. Philip Goff (Chichester, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 472; McAra, Metcalf, and Halafoff.

⁷² Prebish, 472.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff, 2.

⁷⁵ Sally McAra, "Land of the Stupa and the Sacred Puriri: Creating Buddhism in the Tararu Valley, New Zealand" (Masters Thesis, University of Auckland, 2000), 11.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 17.

norms, “including (ideally, at least) a refusal to be complicit in the destructive and exploitative practices of capitalism.”⁷⁷

While in Italy in 1982, Von Sturmer and wife Amala (Charlotte) Wrightson had encountered *The Three Pillars of Zen* by Philip Kapleau. As one of the most influential books on Zen in the English language, the book had a profound impact on the pair and they travelled to Sweden to where Kapleau was teaching an introductory workshop on Zen.⁷⁸ After four years back in New Zealand, writing and touring as the theatrical duo The Humanimals, von Sturmer and Wrightson travelled to Rochester Zen Center in New York for the first time. Upon their return to New Zealand in 1986, the pair continued to practice *zazen* (seated meditation) and ran a small Zen group from the basement of Richard’s father’s house in Milford.⁷⁹ Further trips to Rochester Zen Center ensued, until Wrightson entered full time residential training there in 1989,⁸⁰ and von Sturmer made the Zen Centre his home in 1992.⁸¹

Due to a widespread interest in meditation, it was the Zen school of Buddhism that became one of the most popular forms adapted by Western audiences.⁸² In hindsight, the scholar David McMahan notes, it is surprising that Zen gained such a foothold among Western converts considering that the “strict uniformity, inflexible routine, almost military sense of order and discipline” present in Japanese Zen monasteries ran counter to Western cultural ideals such as democracy, reverence for individual freedom, and suspicion of hierarchy.⁸³ Moreover, McMahan observes, it would seem very strange indeed that iconoclast poets, artists, and refugees from Christianity and Judaism would be its first converts.⁸⁴

However, as might be expected, the resulting forms of Zen Buddhism in the West are very different to their Japanese and Chinese counterparts.⁸⁵ The process of indigenizing Zen for the West saw many aspects of Asian cultural practices discarded or interpreted to appeal to Western cultural ideals.⁸⁶ What it is important to realize, therefore, is that what Westerners may think of as “authentic Zen” is largely a product of twentieth century Asian reformists

⁷⁷ Ibid., 17-18.

⁷⁸ "Amala Sensei: Zen Priest," 139.

⁷⁹ Ibid.; Amala Wrightson, "The Well," in *Auckland Zen Centre Tenth Anniversary 2004-2014*, ed. Richard von Sturmer (Auckland, NZ: Auckland Zen Centre, 2014), 2.

⁸⁰ McAra, "Amala Sensei: Zen Priest," 140.

⁸¹ "Richard Von Sturmer," *Best New Zealand Poems 2003* (2003), <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/modernletters/bnzp/2003/vonsturmernote.htm>.

⁸² Prebish, 472.

⁸³ David McMahan, "Repackaging Zen for the West," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 218.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 219.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

and intellectuals who sought to “rid Buddhism of its ‘cultural accretions’,” focus on the attainment of enlightenment, and dismiss aspects of Buddhism which encourage magical aid and merit-making for a better rebirth.⁸⁷

Following over ten years’ training at the Rochester Zen Center, von Sturmer and Wrightson returned to New Zealand in 2003. In 2004, they founded the Auckland Zen Centre, which ran formal meditation sessions and workshops out of a rented room in Royal Oak.⁸⁸ Wrightson recalls that the move back to New Zealand was difficult, having left an “almost hermetically-sealed world,” large Zen community, and highly structured life, for “secular New Zealand society.”⁸⁹ The Auckland Zen Centre gradually grew in size until 2010 when it moved to Onehunga and von Sturmer and Wrightson purchased a house nearby to provide residential training.⁹⁰ Wrightson sees the Zen Centre as providing a context in which to confront “the greed, hostility and indifference present in our own hearts” which, Buddhist teachings maintain, is the root cause of all social problems.⁹¹ Members from the Centre do not attempt to seclude themselves from their social environment, however. Wrightson, von Sturmer and Centre members practice a form of socially engaged Buddhism⁹² which sees them participating in political activities including writing letters for prisoners of conscience and attending local marches and rallies.

That von Sturmer actually converted to Buddhism and founded an institution which could serve as a Buddhist *sangha*⁹³ classes him in the minority of Western Buddhists. Most Buddhists in Western countries are descendants of migrants from East Asian countries rather than non-Asian converts, so the widespread influence that Buddhism has effected on non-Asian Westerners might be best described as a cultural one.⁹⁴ That is to say, that while less than 1% of Americans identify as “Buddhist,”⁹⁵ many Americans incorporate elements of

⁸⁷ McAra, "Amala Sensei: Zen Priest," 136.

⁸⁸ Wrightson, 5-6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁹² Socially engaged Buddhism combines traditional Buddhist teachings and practice with a consciously activist approach to address the social, political and economic causes of suffering in contemporary society. Steven Emmanuel, "Buddhism: Contemporary Expressions," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, ed. Michael D. Palmer and Stanley M. Burgess (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 30.

⁹³ The Buddhist monastic order, and more loosely in this case, a Buddhist community.

⁹⁴ Jan Willis, "Foreword," ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-first Century* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011). xii; McAra, Metcalf, and Halafoff.

⁹⁵ Willis, xii.

Buddhist ideas into their worldview or Buddhist practices into their daily lives.⁹⁶

Mindfulness meditation practices which are derived from Buddhism, for example, have been adapted to secular contexts to address psychological disorders, stress, and illness.⁹⁷ The word “Zen,” has become an adjective in common usage, denoting a “free-floating state of being...relaxed and disciplined, engaged yet detached.”⁹⁸

Looking back on the development of Western Buddhism, various scholars⁹⁹ have commented that Buddhist-inspired literature played a large part in motivating the cultural shift toward Buddhist ideas. In some ways, literature was at the vanguard of popularizing Buddhism, contributing to the formation of Western Buddhist social groups and institutions. Authors of the “Beat generation” like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg or Gary Snyder who came to be seen as early celebrities of the countercultural movement, were all party to the popularization of Buddhist teachings.¹⁰⁰ A younger generation of Buddhist authors would first learn of Buddhism through literature, in the emerging Western Buddhist-influenced literature or in translations of Japanese and Chinese literature. (Richard von Sturmer and his contemporary Jane Hirshfield, for example, both cite translations of Noh drama as their first encounter with Zen.¹⁰¹ Perhaps stylistic innovation in literature also effected alternative types of social formation as the new aesthetics intervened with socially-accepted forms of cultural production.¹⁰²

Those Western Buddhist writers¹⁰³ such as Richard von Sturmer who came of age during the 1960s and 70s saw their spiritual interest in Buddhism as intimately bound up with their political and artistic aims. Contrary to the modernist notion of “art for art’s sake,” Western Buddhist poetry was used as a means of political agitation and envisioning an

⁹⁶ Robert Wuthnow and Wendy Cadge, "Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: The Scope of Influence.," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 3 (2004).

⁹⁷ McAra, "Amala Sensei: Zen Priest," 134.

⁹⁸ McMahan, 218.

⁹⁹ Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff; Willis; Jaeger.

¹⁰⁰ Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff, 2.

¹⁰¹ Jane Hirshfield, "Poetry, Zazen and the Net of Connection," in *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich (Boston: Shambhala, 1991), 150; Richard Von Sturmer, interview by Erena Johnson, 15 Jan 2017.

¹⁰² Jaeger, n. pag.

¹⁰³ While most of the scholarship on the emergence of Western Buddhist literature focuses on the United States, writers across many other Western countries have been influenced by Buddhist ideas and practices. Those writers often mentioned in scholarship on American Buddhist literature include the aforementioned Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Diane di Prima, Philip Whalen, as well as John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, Michel Heller, Jane Hirshfield, Norman Fischer, Joanne Kyger, Dale Pendell, Leslie Scalapino, and Anne Waldman.

alternative future.¹⁰⁴ Gary Snyder's 1969 "Four Changes,"¹⁰⁵ for example, diagnosed three ills of "civilization": overpopulation, environmental pollution, and overconsumption. These called for a societal-wide transformation which would stop the continuous expansion of capitalism, encourage the return of endangered species, and promote a harmonious social pluralism.¹⁰⁶ According to Snyder, the whole of the developed world needed a "revolution of consciousness" that would "be won not by guns but by seizing...images, myths, archetypes, eschatologies, and ecstasies" of "transforming energy."¹⁰⁷ For Snyder, Zen practice, poetry, political agitation and community work formed a unified whole, "the practice of life."¹⁰⁸

Contrary to the modernist notion that "poetry does nothing," Western Buddhist literature was deeply concerned with the ethics of aesthetics.¹⁰⁹ Inspired by the Buddhist teachings of interconnection and interdependence, Western Buddhist writers saw their work as having a direct ethical impact on their social surrounds. From their point of view, writing would function as a demonstration of the behaviours and attitudes they wanted to promote, an implicit kind of teaching. The editors of *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* note that in this particular way, Western Buddhist literature might bear more resemblance to religious art than to its modernist predecessors.¹¹⁰

Western Buddhist literature also served the formation of a community among the alienated.¹¹¹ In particular, Buddhism seemed to hold special interest for artists and communities of creative practitioners. As Diane di Prima writes,

what then appeared to us to be a Zen point of view was soon taken for granted as the natural – one might say axiomatic – mind-set of the artist. A kind of clear seeing, combined with a very light touch, and a faith in what one came up with in the work: a sense, as Robert Duncan phrased it years later, that "consciousness itself is shapely." A kind of disattachment goes with this aesthetic: "you" – that is, your conscious controlling self – didn't "make" the work, you may or may not understand it, and in a curious way

¹⁰⁴ Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Written, self-published and circulated 1969 and later included in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Turtle Island* (1974).

¹⁰⁶ Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 100.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Lavazzi, 142.

¹⁰⁹ Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff, 8.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

you have nothing to lose: you don't have to make it into your definition of "good art." A vast relief.¹¹²

Or, as Philip Whalen said in a 1991 interview, part of Zen's attraction was the fact that it "allowed people to be poets and painters – or at least I thought it did – these were acceptable creatures to be Buddhist practitioners... You could be crazy and still be a Buddhist of some stripe or other."¹¹³

Of the challenges that Western writers might have faced in their quest to incorporate Buddhist ideas or practices into literary composition, the most fundamental may be the conception of a "Buddhist English." The widespread "repackaging" of a religion whose cultural forms are intimately related with their linguistic contexts in Asian countries has necessarily required a translation of scriptures, lectures and other literatures into English for Western audiences in English-speaking countries.¹¹⁴ How could English, with its Abrahamic theological underpinnings, adequately articulate an entirely different epistemology? How can a world view developed from Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics become a vehicle for Buddhist theories of metaphysics?¹¹⁵

In some ways, the groundwork had already been done by an earlier generation of Westerners such as Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound.¹¹⁶ The publishing of Ezra Pound's 1915 translation of Chinese poetry in *Cathay*, and Fenollosa's "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" in 1919, brought forth a very different vision for English

¹¹² Quoted in Snyder, "Introduction," 8.

¹¹³ Jane Falk, "Finger Pointing at the Moon: Zen and the Poetry of Philip Whalen," in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 105-06.

¹¹⁴ For many people who are coming into contact with Buddhist ideas and practices for the first time, English is the medium of contact. Indeed, one of the characteristics of "American Zen," according to Zen scholar Kenneth Kraft, is "insistence on texts in English" such that only the names of certain social forms (like *zazen* – seated meditation, or *dokusan* – private interview with the teacher) and some chants are retained in Japanese or Sanskrit. Richard von Sturmer, for his part, engages with the Buddhist poets of China and Japan through translations in English. Kenneth Kraft, ed. *Zen Teaching, Zen Practice: Philip Kapleau and the Three Pillars of Zen* (New York: Weatherhill, 2000), 17.

¹¹⁵ Wai-lim Yip, *Chinese Poetry: Major Modes and Genres* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 25.

¹¹⁶ Many of the aesthetics of Chinese poetry that Pound and Fenollosa brought into English can be seen as manifesting Buddhist concerns: the omission of a speaking "I" as demonstrative of *anātman*, the shared preoccupation with the process of perception, the focus on the natural world as the locus of a fundamental truth, the allowing of the poem's objects to "reveal themselves" without the poet's interference, the ocular-centrism of Chinese poetry and Buddhist imagery. As I will mention later in the thesis, Fenollosa himself had studied Buddhism in Japan and undergone training in Buddhism (even converting), which influenced his vision of a new poetics.

which would prove popular among poets. As Robert Kern argues in *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem*, Pound would “demonstrate what it means to allow one’s own language to be affected – to the point of being deflected from its syntactical and idiomatic norms – by the difference of another language, so that one’s own language...becomes alienated from oneself.”¹¹⁷ That von Sturmer’s poetry bears signs of this translation dilemma only lightly, arguably marks his writing as a later development in English-language Buddhist poetry.

¹¹⁷ Robert Kern, *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 186. Interestingly, it seems that Buddhist missionaries to Japan faced the same dilemma of creating a Buddhist language of Japanese vernacular. The first identifiably Buddhist poems appeared in Japanese imperial poetry anthologies two hundred years after Buddhism had reached Japan, which Robert Morrell attributes to the necessary development of a “comfortable vocabulary to supersede the often abrasive transliterations of Chinese (and even Indian)” and the refinement of a phonetic syllabary “to supplant the often stodgy Chinese compounds.” Robert Morrell, “Buddhist Influences on Vernacular Literature in Japanese,” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Jr. Robert E. Buswell (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 397.

Kōan to Poem

Von Sturmer's Zen Buddhist poetry makes extensive use of forms traditional to Japanese literature (*tanka*, haiku, *haibun*, *zuihitsu*) as well as bearing influences of modernist free verse and imagism. Often, he develops his own particular poetic forms, such as the eight-line *tanka*-like poems which make up *Book of Equanimity Verses*. However, the most compelling way that von Sturmer situates his poetry in relation to Zen literature is through intertextual conversation. Much of his Zen-influenced work is structured as a response to other Buddhist literature, which then loops those literatures into the cultural geography of present-day New Zealand. The pieces "Writing with Issa" and "Working with Nāgārjuna," for example, interweave verses from the two earlier Buddhist writers with von Sturmer's prose responses. Similarly, the section "Zen poems" in *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose* consists of poems which respond to Buddhist concepts, practices, and kōans. Von Sturmer's *Book of Equanimity Verses* presents the most sustained engagement with Buddhist literature, intertextually looping the kōan collection *Book of Equanimity* into a contemporary present.

Each of von Sturmer's poetic responses are intended to function discretely as self-contained texts, meaning that they can be read by those who are unfamiliar with Buddhist ideas, practices, or literature. However, in combination, von Sturmer's poems enact a dialogue with prior Buddhist literature, compounding points of view on the same situation or topic. In the paragraphs that follow, I read two poems from von Sturmer's *Book of Equanimity Verses* to see how his contributions compound commentary on the kōans and bring the Sung Dynasty works into a New Zealand present.

Von Sturmer's *Book of Equanimity Verses* is a collection of one hundred poems which correlate to the one hundred kōan cases in the *Book of Equanimity*. Each of his poems bears some resemblance to the original kōan case and its attendant commentary, often with the characters, places, and objects from the kōans becoming re-contextualized in another setting and another era by von Sturmer. The gavel from kōan case 1 resurfaces as a mallet striking a block in von Sturmer's verse 1; Emperor Wu from kōan case 2 becomes "his royal highness" in von Sturmer's verse 2; Baizhang's Fox from kōan case 8 reappears in verse 8; Yumen's sicknesses from kōan case 11 are transformed into tourniquet, bandages and bed pans in verse 11. Von Sturmer's verses do not attempt to "explain" or "solve" the kōan cases, but in an indirect manner, develop the kōan. In this way, his poems are best seen as "appreciatory verses" of the sort that are published alongside each kōan.

Kōans, which have their roots in T'ang dynasty China (618-907) (called kung-an in Chinese contexts), are a literary form peculiar to Zen.¹¹⁸ Functioning as a kind of puzzle, they are regarded alternately as vehicles to spiritual achievement and highly stylized literary texts. Usually structured as an enigmatic dialogue between a Zen master and student or a cryptic narrative, kōans feature minimal verbiage, indirection, and the impulse toward full silence. Most kōan cases include quoted speech, which indicates that the rhetorical flourishes of the characters and historical figures were oral, only to be written down in literature as a case record. Indeed, Zen masters of pre-modern China and Japan strove to demonstrate their worth through ingenious verbal expressions and nonverbal actions, so it is likely that many kōans would have been developed orally even if they were edited considerably by anthologists during publication.¹¹⁹ Kōans were not developed solely within training halls, though, with the educated literati taking an interest in and influencing the development of the collections.¹²⁰ Called “kōan cases,” the term is derived from the legal authority of public records in the Chinese court system.¹²¹

Kōan cases were first collected and published in the Song dynasty (960-1279), with the *Book of Equanimity*¹²² (one collection among others) dated to 1224.¹²³ The government of the time promoted the production of kōan collections “as a way of encouraging harmony through spiritual creativity,” with some of the leading secular intellectuals of the era sharing an intense interest in the composition of spiritual literature.¹²⁴ In its published form, each kōan in the *Book of Equanimity* is presented alongside a capping phrase (an introduction), a prose explanation, an appreciatory verse, and added sayings on both the kōan and the verse. Many more collections of prose and verse commentaries on the kōans have been published since, including von Sturmer’s *Book of Equanimity Verses*. Through von Sturmer’s writing, the thousand-year-old texts enter into dialogue with a contemporary cultural geography, Buddhist

¹¹⁸ Hisamatsu, 14.

¹¹⁹ Steven Heine, *Zen Koans* (Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 15.

¹²⁰ John McRae, *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation and Genealogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 131; Heine, 7.

¹²¹ Heine, 8.

¹²² Also translated as *Book of Serenity* or *Record of Serenity*.

¹²³ Heine, 21.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

literature weaving itself into a New Zealand setting.¹²⁵ Here, I will present Kōan case 85, “The Appearance of the National Teacher’s Monument,” alongside von Sturmer’s verse:¹²⁶

Emperor Suzong asked National Teacher Zhong, “After passing away, what will you need?”

The teacher said, “Make me a seamless monument.”

The emperor said, “Please tell me the monument's appearance.”

The teacher, after a silence, said, “Understand?”

The emperor said, “I don’t understand.”

The teacher said, “I have a disciple to whom I have transmitted the teaching, named Danyuan: he knows about this matter.”

Later the emperor summoned Danyuan and asked him about the meaning of this.

Danyuan said,

South of Xiang, north of Tan:

Therein is gold filling the whole country.

Under the shadowless tree, the communal ferryboat:

In the crystal palace, no one who knows.¹²⁷

Von Sturmer’s verse:

On a hot day
in midsummer
when the concrete boat
docked at Onehunga Wharf
Jellicoe Park fountain
came to life
and walked up the hill

¹²⁵ Not all of von Sturmer’s poems that respond to kōans are set in New Zealand, most of them are not “set” in specific geographies at all. Nevertheless, I emphasize this aspect of his poetry as it represents a unique mode of poetic composition in New Zealand.

¹²⁶ Kōans are multifaceted, condensing hundreds of years of philosophical development, and are constructed so as to engender great doubt in the Zen student. Needless to say, my reading of two of von Sturmer’s verses in relation to their corresponding kōans does not presume to be a comprehensive interpretation of the kōan.

¹²⁷ Thomas Cleary, *Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues* (Boston; London: Shambhala, 2005), 361.

on its pale blue legs.¹²⁸

Immediately, one can see intertextual resonances between von Sturmer's poem and the kōan: the teacher's monument and Jellicoe Park fountain (officially called John Park Memorial Fountain); the communal ferryboat and the concrete boat; the shadowless tree and the hot midsummer's day; the crystal palace and the fountain's plumes (if the spray of water is what "coming to life" suggests). Von Sturmer's poem also has a factual element, grounding the kōan in the present-day cultural geography of Onehunga: the John Park Memorial Fountain does indeed stand on three pale blue "legs," and the Holcim Cement silos that occupy Onehunga Wharf do receive regular shipments of concrete.¹²⁹

The teacher's suggestion of a monument perfectly complements what the Emperor might expect for himself after he dies. However, for a Ch'an practitioner, creating a monument in the usual sense would only serve to reify a sense that the teacher possesses a distinct, individual self-essence. Moreover, it would create a duality between the holy and the profane, making him seem in death what he would deny to describe himself as when alive. The teacher's suggestion of a seamless monument then, is a vision of a "monument" which is completely smooth, unbroken, having no separations or divisions. The seamless monument would not discriminate between the memorial, the one who is memorialized, and the one who memorializes.

In contrast to psychologized interpretations of this kōan, in which the seamless monument is imagined as "the mind of not-knowing, of nongrasping,"¹³⁰ von Sturmer gives the seamless monument a physical form. Humorously, he imagines it as a concrete fountain seamlessly born out of a concrete-carrying boat. Concrete, although poured into many different shapes, taking on many different forms, remains consistent across footpaths, buildings, bridges, carparks, and fountains. That the fountain forms of its own accord avoids any separation between memorialized/memorializer/memorial, and von Sturmer's description of it as walking on "pale blue legs" denies the monument an air of holiness. John Park, the former mayor of Onehunga for whom the fountain is a memorial, is portrayed by von Sturmer as being as seamless a part of the cultural geography as the concrete that Onehunga,

¹²⁸ Richard Von Sturmer, *Book of Equanimity Verses* (Auckland, NZ: Puriri Press, 2013), 50.

¹²⁹ A news article from 2015 suggests that the concrete boats would be docking at Waitemata harbour from 2016 onwards: Tom Carnegie, "Onehunga Wharf to Lose Cement Boats," *Stuff.co.nz* (2015), <http://www.stuff.co.nz/auckland/local-news/70443312/onehunga-wharf-to-lose-cement-boats>.

¹³⁰ Gerry Shishin Wick, *The Book of Equanimity : Illuminating Classic Zen Koans* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 270.

and the rest of Auckland, and most other cities, are made of. In universalist Buddhist terms, von Sturmer affirms the smoothly continuous interconnectivity of all forms (boats, fountains, mayors, literature), including that of the Sung Dynasty kōan with its new socio-geography.

Another example from the *Book of Equanimity Verses* develops the kōan in a contemporary New Zealand context. Kōan case 92, “Yunmen’s ‘Jewel’”:

Great Master Yunmen said, “‘Within heaven and earth, in space and time, there is a jewel, hidden in the mountain of form,’ holding up the lamp, heading into the buddha shrine, bringing the triple gate on the lamp.”¹³¹

Von Sturmer’s verse:

The Transit of Venus was observed
behind the garden shed
between a dented petrol can
and a broken-toothed rake.
Tiny planets could also be seen
in the back of my uncle’s Holden.
He once drove an entire galaxy
from Ashburton to Timaru.¹³²

Like in the previous example, subject matter and images resonate from kōan to poem. The Transit of Venus and an “entire galaxy” recalls “within heaven and earth, in space and time”; the triple gate over the monastery entrance and the garden shed share a similar physical structure; the hidden jewel in the mountain is comparable to the tiny planets in the back of the Holden.

The jewel hidden in the mountain of form is likely the Buddhanature dwelling within the human form,¹³³ since it is this jewel (person) that holds up the lamp and enters the shrine. The full quote that Yun-men Wen-yen (circa 864 – 949) draws off states that the jewel is “empty inside and out, alone and still, invisible; its function is a dark mystery.”¹³⁴ The human

¹³¹ Cleary, 394.

¹³² Von Sturmer, *Book of Equanimity Verses*, 53.

¹³³ Buddhanature denotes a person’s inherent potentiality to become a Buddha. Wick’s translation “secretly dwelling in a mountainous shape” better suggests that the jewel is a person’s Buddhanature, especially since the shape taken by those doing Zen meditation is often compared to a mountain.

¹³⁴ Cleary, 394.

body is invisible to us in many ways, since it is inseparable from the mind and senses that observe it, and we certainly can't comprehend exactly how it functions: how blood is pumped, how cells reproduce, and so on.

Von Sturmer's poem extends the jewel hidden in the mountainous form of the body to jewels found in backyards, backs of cars, and small New Zealand towns. A rare and grand event such as the Transit of Venus is framed between humble household objects (garden shed, dented petrol can, broken toothed rake); an entire galaxy can be found within an uncle's Holden (a brand of car found only in New Zealand and Australia¹³⁵); and that galaxy is locatable in mid-Canterbury,¹³⁶ in and between the small farming towns of Ashburton and Timaru. The human body as a jewel that is entirely familiar yet an unknown mystery is externalized as the astronomical within the homely familiar.

Things interpenetrate: the "tiny planets" that might "realistically" been seen through the rear window of the car are *in* the back of the car; the rare event of the Transit of Venus occupies the same visual space as well-worn household objects; the entire galaxy becomes encompassed within Ashburton and Timaru. The Holden becomes the point of intersection between the magical and the ordinary, a fleeting universe (indeed a moving one, travelling from Ashburton to Timaru) that contains the sediment and the firmament. The use of the passive voice in von Sturmer's poem also functions to demonstrate the "dark mystery" of the human form, dissolving the human observer (the nephew) into the wider cosmos, spectacular and quotidian. The "dark mystery" seems to be the fundamental unity of all things, from local familiarities to galactic movements. The most profane or quotidian of things can thus hold this "hidden jewel."

In these examples, von Sturmer reinterprets Buddhist teachings for his own social-geographic locale, in line with the Zen demand that students understand the teachings on their own terms.¹³⁷ Eschewing religious or philosophical language through which to add commentary to the kōans, von Sturmer expresses the Zen insights in terms of "the imagery and verse forms current in the secular culture of the period."¹³⁸ The verse form he uses for *Book of Equanimity Verses* is his own innovation of the Japanese *tanka*, which was itself not the type of poetry usually presented alongside kōans. In this way, von Sturmer both takes

¹³⁵ A subsidiary of General Motors of Detroit

¹³⁶ Mid-Canterbury also has a particular status as the locus of "authentic kiwis": the rural, white, working class.

¹³⁷ Watson, 106.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

from and innovates the tradition of “appreciatory verses” to kōans, adding a set of commentaries which demonstrates the *Book of Equanimity*’s relevance in a New Zealand setting. In the next section, I make a more sustained discussion of how von Sturmer brings Zen literature to bear on a New Zealand setting, looking particularly at how he creates Great Barrier Island as the site of a Buddhist hermitage.

Great Barrier Island as a Site of Buddhist Hermitage

Von Sturmer's *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose* exhibits a sustained focus on the natural world through the observations of an autobiographical speaker. One site of focus in *Suchness* is the rugged landscape of Great Barrier Island (Aotea). As part of the *brief* Writer's Award 2003, von Sturmer spent two months in residence on Great Barrier Island. This period of writing is recounted by von Sturmer in two pieces published in *Suchness*, "Writing with Issa" and "Barrier Crossings." His writing on Great Barrier Island locates an autobiographical self within the literary tradition of a Buddhist hermitage: solitary wanderings, attention to animals and the natural world, and observation of the impermanence of life draw parallels with the writings of Japanese and Chinese Buddhist renunciants.

cooking my porridge
at dawn
I feel aligned with
those ancient
Chinese hermits¹³⁹

As in the above quotation, von Sturmer's poetry in "Barrier Crossings" and "Writing with Issa" exhibits the ideal of a reclusive life which combines literary undertaking with sensitivity to nature and practice of Buddhist austerities.

The identity of Great Barrier Island itself gives rise to the possibility of Buddhist hermitage. According to a *Metro* Magazine article in 2003, Great Barrier Island's main impression on contemporary New Zealanders is that of a "trackless wilderness."¹⁴⁰ Although the island has been populated since the earliest Polynesian settlements of New Zealand,¹⁴¹ the idea of it as rugged and "untouched" led to it becoming the setting of the 2007 BBC reality TV show *Castaway*.¹⁴² The contemporary impression of wilderness is more likely due to lack

¹³⁹ Richard Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose* (Wellington, NZ: HeadworX, 2005), 99.

¹⁴⁰ Simon Farrell-Green, "The Last Frontier," *Metro* (2003),
<http://www.thebarrier.co.nz/Magazines/Metro.htm>.

¹⁴¹ "Historic Great Barrier Island Aotea," *Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai* (2000),
<http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/places-to-go/auckland/places/great-barrier-island-aotea/historic-great-barrier-island-aotea/>.

¹⁴² Margaret McClure, "Auckland Places - Barrier Islands," *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (2016), <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/auckland-places/page-3>.

of available transport, the fact that 70% of the land is controlled by the Department of Conservation,¹⁴³ and the 900 or so residents who go without reticulated water or electricity.¹⁴⁴

The social isolation of the island (although only 90 km north-east of New Zealand's largest city¹⁴⁵), makes it the perfect site for a hermetic contemplation of nature:

through the reeds
a wooden walkway
trees like sentinels,
no one comes
no one goes¹⁴⁶

fantails
the slanting rays
of winter sunlight
and my own
disjointed thoughts¹⁴⁷

These tanka, written on Great Barrier Island, observe plants and animals with a clear, vernacular vocabulary and equanimous mood. The descriptions are concise and modifiers are sparse, and the syntax straightforward. In classic Buddhist fashion, the description of landscape in the second tanka juxtaposes the phenomenal world with the state of the speaker's mind, suggesting their interconnection. Since Mahāyāna philosophy suggests that the reality of the "outer" "physical" world, is in part, dependent on one's own "inner" "perceptual" faculties, the Buddhist poet's contemplation of nature also entails awareness of one's mind. The "disjointed thoughts," being in a line of their own, subtly mimic the "disjointed" enjambment of the rest of the tanka and its listing of observations: fantail/sunlight/thoughts.

That the speaker is able to see his own "disjointed thoughts" as if they were sunlight or birds suggests that he is in a state of Zen meditation. Similarly, the description of the trees in the first tanka as "sentinels" watching the activity on the wooden walkway suggests they

¹⁴³ Farrell-Green.

¹⁴⁴ 927 permanent residents in 2013 according to McClure.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 103.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 106.

are also in a state of meditation. Zen meditation requires that one remains attentive and watchful to the thoughts that occur within the mind, as well as all the fluctuations of the phenomenal world. In this way, von Sturmer's tanka suggest that that the natural world is both a conducive setting for meditation and that nature itself also exhibits the same qualities that one develops in Zen meditation.

Von Sturmer's treatment of the natural world as a setting for meditation is exemplary of the Zen poetic tradition, in that it demonstrates a belief that trees and fantails already possess what meditative practices seek to cultivate. Perhaps due to its Taoist enrichment, Ch'an landscape poetry is described by anthologist Charles Egan as "inspired by a mystic philosophy which sees all natural phenomena as symbols charged with a mysterious or cathartic power."¹⁴⁸ This poetic tradition continued to Japan, where a "deep feeling for nature" became one of the characteristic religio-aesthetic qualities of poetry written by Buddhist monks and hermits.¹⁴⁹ Nature came to be seen as a salvific force, since all sentient beings were thought to possess Buddhahood and therefore the possibility of enlightenment.¹⁵⁰

In less esoteric terms, Japanologist Ivo Smits describes the Buddhist poet's view of nature as a focal point for meditation, with its calmness being thought to mirror the calmness of mind which comes with enlightenment.¹⁵¹ As a focal point for quietism, Smits writes, nature was both actual scenery and a symbol for the poet's state of mind.¹⁵² Since natural

¹⁴⁸ Egan, 41.

¹⁴⁹ Herbert Eugen Plutschow, "Is Poetry a Sin? Honjisuijaku and Buddhism Versus Poetry," *Oriens Extremus* 25, no. 2 (1978): 206.

¹⁵⁰ It should be noted that the "natural world" and "sentient beings" may have a wider definition than they first appear. In his scholarship on the religious history of Japanese nature poetry, William LaFleur describes how Buddhism's move to China involved an expansion of the definition of "sentient beings" to include other natural phenomena such as plants, trees, and rocks ("Part I" 95). LaFleur explains that the Chinese thinkers who proposed the expansion of Buddhahood wanted to extend Buddhist universalism to the mundane world as a whole, meaning that lowly or banal objects might also have the potential for Buddhahood ("Part I," 97). (The meditative consideration of banal objects in von Sturmer's poetry suggests that he has been influenced by Chinese universalism of Buddhahood: "end of summer –/the soft tar now hard,/a cigar butt/stands upright/on the sidewalk." (*Suchness*, 86) When adopted in Japan, however, the emphasis moved from the "value of the concrete and mundane per se" to the special value that the natural world might have for a Buddhist practitioner ("Part I," 97). Eventually, objects of the natural world came to be regarded as models of Buddhist enlightenment, something practitioners could aspire to ("Part II," 227). In sum, "the discussion that began with the question of the possibility of salvation for plants and trees eventually led to the position that there was a salvation for man which was derived from plants and trees" ("Part II," 227). William LaFleur, "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature, Part I," *History of Religions* 13, no. 2 (1973); "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature, Part II," *History of Religions* 13, no. 3 (1974).

¹⁵¹ Ivo Smits, "The Poem as a Painting: Landscape Poetry in Late Heian Japan," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* Fourth Series, Volume 6 (1991): 66.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 67.

phenomena were thought to possess Buddhature, observation of them would teach the Buddhist poet the “true nature of the dharma.”¹⁵³ A focus on the natural world demonstrated a detachment from worldly affairs on the part of the author, and a commitment to pursuing a spiritual path.¹⁵⁴

The belief in nature as a salvific force had particular significance for Chinese and Japanese hermits, being a place of refuge from political upheavals and “wordly” concerns. Exiled from the city by force or by choice, the social and geographic isolation of Buddhist renunciants allowed them to turn a self-reflexive gaze on their relationship with the natural world. Wang Fan-chih, a seventh century T’ang poet, characterizes the hermits’ life as harmonious communion with natural surrounds:

The melancholy of worldly things
Can’t match the hills and mountains,
Where green pines hide the sun
And jasper streams flow long.
Mountain clouds are my tent,
The night moon is my fishing hook;
I sleep beneath wisteria,
My pillow a block of stone [...] ¹⁵⁵

Since the natural world embodied the Buddhist dharma, the poet could learn from rocks, plants, trees, or clouds. The clouds in T’ang poet Chiao-Jan’s (730-799) “Clouds on the Stream” demonstrate detachment from the desires and goals of social life, and a renunciation of consistent identity:

Stretching and curling to what purpose?
Twining around the stream and belting the void above.
You have form, but are not an encumbered thing;
Following the wind, leaving no trace behind.
Don’t blame me for always pursuing you:
Floating without roots, you’re just like me. ¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Ibid., 78.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 64.

¹⁵⁵ Egan, 68-69.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 72.

Buddhist hermits' sensitivity to nature was accentuated by their distance from the material comforts of urban life. Most hermits claimed to live in huts, since material austerity was thought to be conducive to one's spiritual practice. As a Buddhist wayfarer's temporary lodging, the hut held a special place in hermetic literature, with its own genre of *sōan no ki* (grass hut accounts).¹⁵⁷ Hermits would typically build their huts out of fragile materials such as grass, bamboo, miscanthus reed or brushwood, which demonstrated the inherent impermanence of life.¹⁵⁸ Without a place to return to or a dependable shelter, hermits could experience more freely the impermanence of the phenomenal world, and eventually transcend their attachment to material comforts. Since the doctrine of *antiya* (impermanence) suggests that all things are, by nature, ephemeral, and all attachment to things is a source of suffering, the hermit's embrace of flux is a mark of their spiritual practice. Those who would build extravagant houses in cities were deluding themselves to the true nature of existence, and fighting a losing battle.

As the T'ang poet and Ch'an Buddhist teacher Shih-t'ou Hsi-ch'ien (700-790) wrote in his "Grass Hut Song":

Beneath green pines,
 Within bright windows,
 Jade palaces and red mansions cannot compare
 [...]
 Why live in this hut?
 No need to explain;
 I'm not talking up prayer mats to sell you
 [...]
 Spend a lifetime following change,
 And then wave your hand and go without regret¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Herbert Eugen Plutschow, "Japanese Travel Diaries of the Middle Ages," *Oriens Extremus* 29, no. 1/2 (1982): 2. Also called *sōan no bungaku*, "the literature of Grass hermitages."

Sōan no ki also had literary antecedents in the writings of Chinese hermits. Famous examples of grass-hut accounts by Buddhist recluses include works such as *Hōjōki* by Kamo no Chomei (1155-1216; Japan), *Chiteiki* by Yoshishige no Yasutane (934-1002; Japan); and *Ts'ao T'sang* ("Record of a Thatched Abode") by Po Chü-i (772-846; China).

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁵⁹ Egan, 60-61.

Another example of grass hut literature, Kamo no Chōmei's 1212 *Hōjōki* ("Account of my Hut") opens by describing both the impermanence of the human life in Buddhist terms, and the impermanence of human life in the capital city Heiankyō where fires regularly destroyed the thousands of wooden buildings.¹⁶⁰

The flow of the river is ceaseless and its water is never the same. The bubbles that float in the pools, now vanishing, now forming, are not of long duration: so in the world are man and his dwellings. It might be imagined that the houses, great and small, which view roof against proud roof in the capital remain unchanged from one generation to the next, but when we examine whether this is true, how few are the houses that were there of old. Some were burnt last year and only since rebuilt; great houses have crumbled into hovels and those who dwell in them have fallen no less. The city is the same, the people are as numerous as ever, but of those I used to know, a bare one or two in twenty remain. They died in the morning, they are born in the evening, like foam on the water.¹⁶¹

The comparisons of human bodies to bubbles and foam in the first and last lines is reminiscent of the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, which expounds the doctrine of *anitya*.

Von Sturmer's sojourn on Great Barrier Island also features a hut in which the autobiographical speaker becomes acutely aware of the impermanence of all things. Located at the bottom of a valley and allocated to him as part of the aforementioned *Brief Writer's Award*, the hut's setting meets all the requirements of a traditional hermetic landscape: having water – a river running alongside the hut; rock – the hills surrounding the hut; and vegetation – puriri trees and native bush. Although located on a small island remote from the mainland, and although situated away from the main settlements on Great Barrier, we are told that the hut was once lived in by a family. The memory of its inhabitation, and the death of the owner's teenage son, becomes a "sadness contained within its walls."¹⁶²

As von Sturmer encounters it, the hut is inhabited by the kind of animals that move in when people move out: spiders, fleas, mosquitoes and a rat. Each of these animals are taken as companions by von Sturmer in his seclusion, and become the focus of his writing:

¹⁶⁰ Brittani Faulkes, "Politicized Aesthetics: Reclusion Literature in the Late Heian and Early Kamakura Eras of Pre-Modern Japan" (Masters Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1994), 71.

¹⁶¹ LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan*, 62.

¹⁶² Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 138.

While meditating upstairs one evening, a tiny spider suspends itself from the hood of my jacket and dangles in front of my eyes...Last evening I wrote a letter to the rat, asking him not to leave his turds on the kitchen bench. In return I said that I would put a little food for him outside each night...¹⁶³

During his time in the hut, von Sturmer becomes attuned to the movements and needs of insects and small animals, coming to terms with the fragility of life. By noticing the minute and insignificant, the writer himself becomes alert and receptive to the fluctuations and transformations in his present environment.

Von Sturmer's solitary treks on Great Barrier Island in the tanka sequence "Barrier Crossings" resemble another genre of Japanese and Chinese hermetic literature: travel diaries. Travel diaries, called *kikō* (Japanese) or *yu-chi* (Chinese),¹⁶⁴ had widespread uses among the literate classes in medieval Japan and earlier in China.¹⁶⁵ Poetry was a dominant element in all Japanese travel diaries, excepting the few written in a purely historical mode.¹⁶⁶ Since poetry had become an acceptable expression of religious insights by the middle ages in Japan, there was "no large discrepancy between purposes in traveling and writing"¹⁶⁷ Thus, the travel diary was often a way of ordering and presenting poetry written on a journey.¹⁶⁸ Some travel diaries, such as Saigyō's *Sanka Shū* are ordered geographically and are preceded by prose prefaces, making them similar to private anthologies of poetry.¹⁶⁹ Other travel diaries developed what became known as *haibun* – a kind of writing which oscillates between prose and haiku, made famous by Matsuo Bashō.¹⁷⁰

Von Sturmer's tanka in the solitary journey across the south of Great Barrier Island recall Bashō's haiku and headnotes from his travel diaries. A focus on the changing scenery, the mention of names of places as the setting for more detailed observations, and the

¹⁶³ Ibid., 134; 39.

¹⁶⁴ A few examples of travel diaries by Buddhist recluses include *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (*Oku no Hosomichi*) by Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694; Japan); *A Record of the Road to Tsukushi* by Sōgi (1421–1502; Japan); *Sanka Shū* by Saigyō (1118-1190; Japan); and *Preface and Poem on a Journey to Stone Gate* by Hui-yüan (334-416; China).

¹⁶⁵ Plutschow, "Japanese Travel Diaries of the Middle Ages."; Richard Strassberg, *Inscribed Landscapes: Travel Writing from Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

¹⁶⁶ Plutschow, "Japanese Travel Diaries of the Middle Ages," 63.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 70.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷⁰ Bruce Ross, "North American Versions of Haibun and Postmodern American Culture," in *Postmodernity and Cross-Culturalism*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (London; Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 2002), 169.

consideration of the solitary writer's place in relation or comparison to his surrounds characterize the two pieces. The poems also share formal characteristics, each having two parts that hinge on a juxtaposition, and each using enjambment to emphasize their subjects (mountain path/gravel road/lonely moon/mosquito):

Crossing the mountains of the road to Ōtsu
on a mountain path,
somehow so moving:
wild violets¹⁷¹

walking down
the gravel road
by Kaitoke Swamp,
no traffic
just the buzzing of flies¹⁷²

a lonely moon:
from the eaves of the temple,
drops of rain¹⁷³

a mosquito
even on this
remote rock,
is it aware
of the crashing surf?¹⁷⁴

Travel diaries written by monks and renunciants were often the account of religious pilgrimage, foregrounding impermanence in the very medium of travel itself. Since the essence of travel is change, it was seen as an aid to help the Buddhist hermit come to terms with the constancy which underlies flux. In this way, comments Herbert Plutschow,

¹⁷¹ Bashō quoted in David Barnhill, *Bashō's Journey: The Literary Prose of Matsuo Bashō* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 21.

¹⁷² Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 103.

¹⁷³ Barnhill, 25.

¹⁷⁴ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 100.

evanescence assumed a positive religious value. It was chosen willingly by the pilgrim, a choice of motion over stagnation, and impermanence over permanence. Travel implied willingness to undergo the solitude resulting from emancipation.¹⁷⁵

The physical hardship and ascetic discipline that Buddhist hermits had to undergo were thought to sharpen one's aesthetic sensibility and spiritual vision.¹⁷⁶ "From the Buddhist perspective, the danger in worldliness lies in its false fixity," so travelling was both a physical and psychological freedom.¹⁷⁷ The wayfarer was the ultimate embodiment of freedom from attachment, and the poetry such a person produced would be permeated with the same spiritual insight. Even on his deathbed, Bashō did not stop travelling, leaving Edo on a journey to the southwest and dying in Osaka.¹⁷⁸

The experience of impermanence that was inseparable from travel is best expressed by von Sturmer through his encounter of ruins on Great Barrier Island. As von Sturmer traverses the island in "Barrier Crossings," he encounters a number of traces of former activity: the white terraces of the old whaling station, an abandoned car, and the graves of those who died in shipwrecks. Despite its current cultural isolation,¹⁷⁹ Great Barrier Island has seen intense economic activity and geographical transformation in the last one hundred and fifty years. Since European settlement, it has been characterized by boom and bust industries, including kauri timber milling, mining for copper, silver and gold, and whaling.¹⁸⁰ The island has also notably been the site of many shipwrecks, with the 1894 sinking of the SS Wairarapa among New Zealand's worst maritime disasters.¹⁸¹

The below photograph, taken by von Sturmer on Great Barrier Island and included in *Suchness*, gives reference to a more recent part of the island's history:

¹⁷⁵ Plutschow, "Japanese Travel Diaries of the Middle Ages," 91.

¹⁷⁶ Barnhill, 6.

¹⁷⁷ LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan*, 161.

¹⁷⁸ Barnhill, xiii.

¹⁷⁹ The premise of both Farrell-Green and Hewitson's articles (published in 2003 and 2004, respectively), is that Great Barrier Island has been a "forgotten place" in recent cultural history up until their time of writing, when wealthy city people may overtake the island's former identities by building expensive baches (a transformation of the sort that Waiheke Island has been through over the last thirty years).

¹⁸⁰ "Historic Great Barrier Island Aotea".

¹⁸¹ Ibid.



The black and white photograph shows a barren landscape and a standalone rotary washing line. The Hills Hoist washing line which characterized post war New Zealand is a permanent fixture cemented by a concrete pad, but there are no houses in sight. The wires of the washing line are rippled as if made slack by the weather, and the ground is rocky with patches of driftwood. There are no signs of the utopian suburbs and nuclear families whose architecture mimicked the “self-sufficient” national economy.

Indeed, the washing line marks the cultural and economic context of the 60s and 70s in which Zen first gathered interest in New Zealand. The roughness and simplicity of the weathered washing line denotes a Buddhist-like detachment from artificiality and superficiality, which resonates with the Buddhist-inspired aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*.¹⁸² Perhaps this washing line is more like a sentinel, a meditator who puts herself through a training that seems ascetic in comparison to the comforts provided by a burgeoning consumer economy. At the same time, the washing line appears now to be one among the other ruins of the island,

¹⁸² A Buddhist-influenced concept in Japanese aesthetics which foregrounds an appreciation of the transient and the imperfect.

a mark of another era,¹⁸³ and representative of Great Barrier Island's status as a place whose height of economic and cultural power has been and gone.

The island's contemporary identity is an interesting mix between the "trackless wilderness" that is a "mystical, mythical place,"¹⁸⁴ and the former site of intensive economic activity. Blended in with this is the island's identity as "a haven for dropouts and eccentrics": libertarians wanting to forge a life without governmental interference, and hippy conservationists looking for an alternative lifestyle.¹⁸⁵ Strangely enough, the classic tropes of Japanese and Chinese Buddhist hermetic literature seems to encompass all the same markers of place: one of history, rudimentary material infrastructure, and great spiritual wealth. A wilderness that nevertheless displays signs of historical human settlement is often portrayed through the mention of "ancient temples," "rustic seasons," "ruined tombs," and profound spirituality is affirmed by "old monks," and "distant bells." In this way, von Sturmer's poetry very smoothly loops the literary traditions of Buddhist hermits into the present day Great Barrier Island.

¹⁸³ characterized by the "New Zealand dream": a detached family home on a quarter acre section of land with at least one car (and if, lucky, a bach).

¹⁸⁴ Farrell-Green.

¹⁸⁵ Michele Hewitson, "Great Barrier Island, Last Stronghold of the Independent Spirit," *The New Zealand Herald* (2004), http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=3547940; Farrell-Green.

The Buddhist Poet-Recluse

Earlier in Part One, I suggested that von Sturmer's biography might characterize him as something of a cultural critic: someone on the artistic and political margins that "writes back" to the centre. Certainly, his countercultural stance and travels overseas in order to bring back something of artistic and cultural worth to his home community seem to warrant such a description. Von Sturmer's decision to return to New Zealand after ten years living in Rochester, and his choice to publish *Suchness* and *On the Eve of Never Departing* with New Zealand literary presses, follow this pattern of contributing something that would expand the cultural horizons of New Zealanders. One of the reasons that von Sturmer may have aligned his Great Barrier Island residency with the writings of Japanese and Chinese Buddhist hermits is that such writers provide an important role model for him.

Despite claims to have abandoned social life, literate hermits of the sort we have been considering often took to reclusion as a result of political upheavals, their position being motivated as much by social circumstances as religious ideals. The hermit's writing thus often reflected their discontent with the political arena back in the city.¹⁸⁶ Although the hermit did not, in theory, seek an audience for his/her writing, such an "assumed posture" of seclusion did not mean, in practice, that the hermit cut off all communication with his/her society.¹⁸⁷ In the above quoted opening of *Hōjōki*, for example, Chōmei positions himself as an outsider even as he considers the capital city he grew up in. As a recluse, and Buddhist, and a member of the educated literati, he is able to look back at the city-dwellers' desires to build "great houses" with a critical gaze.

Most Buddhist recluses who produced travel writing or grass-hut accounts were educated literati, having connections to the court as tutors of aristocrats, being nobility themselves, or being the head of a school of poetry.¹⁸⁸ Some were scholars or bureaucrats who had been pushed into exile as a result of political upheavals.¹⁸⁹ Some renounced the world for a period but were coaxed out of hermitage with an offer of reinstatement in the government.¹⁹⁰ Hermetic life could be a deliberate political protest on the part of the author or an unintended result of tumultuous political circumstances; either way, the choice to

¹⁸⁶ Faulkes, 42.

¹⁸⁷ LaFleur, "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature, Part II," 239.

¹⁸⁸ Plutschow, "Japanese Travel Diaries of the Middle Ages."

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Faulkes, 12-14.

become a hermit was a “double renunciation” in the sense that the hermit also rejected the Buddhist priesthood.¹⁹¹ Buddhist vocation, for the hermit, was “something to be carried out in the mountains rather than in temples and monasteries.”¹⁹²

Often times, there were significant discrepancies between the kind of lives Japanese and Chinese Buddhist hermits lived, and the kind of writing they produced. That is to say, the ideals of hermetic literature – complete solitude, non-attachment, and one-ness with the flux of all things – were not often achieved by those who promoted them. Po Chü-i, for example, despite authoring *Ts'ao-t'ang Chi* (“Record of a Thatched Abode”; an important example of a grass hut account), also drank regularly, hosted parties, and kept two singing girls as part of his household.¹⁹³ Although writing the *Chiteiki* (“Record of a Pond Pavilion”), Yoshishige no Yasutane did not live in a grass hut but in a large, grand house in the capital of Heiyankō.¹⁹⁴ And travel writers who travelled with companions often omitted their company from their travel account in order to emphasize the ideal of solitude.¹⁹⁵

Overall, most hermits actually kept much closer ties with the society they had renounced than their ideals suggest. Moreover, according to Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine, total isolation from social ties was not a means of salvation. Because *nirvāṇa* was to be found within the world of *samsāra*, ultimate truth could not be obtained by leaving the conventional truth of the secular world. Rather than living out their lives on “sacred peaks[,] apart from worldly affairs,”¹⁹⁶ many poet-recluses continued to engage in discussions with their home communities, at the least through their writing.

As the translator Burton Watson writes in his introduction on the Buddhist recluse Saigyō, the ideal of the hermetic life was one that “customarily combined literary and artistic interests and a keen sensitivity to the beauties of nature with the practice of Buddhist devotions and austerities.”¹⁹⁷ In other words, Po Chü-i, Bashō and Kamo no Chōmei demonstrate how one can be an accomplished poet, cultural critic, and spiritualist at the same time. As Bashō saw, it, “poetry draws a certain kind of practitioner...who is not exactly a

¹⁹¹ Plutschow, "Japanese Travel Diaries of the Middle Ages," 39.

¹⁹² LaFleur, "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature, Part I," 94.

¹⁹³ Burton Watson, "Buddhism in the Poetry of Po Chü-I," *The Eastern Buddhist* 21, no. 1 (1988): 14.

¹⁹⁴ Faulkes, 73-74.

¹⁹⁵ Plutschow, "Japanese Travel Diaries of the Middle Ages," 2.

¹⁹⁶ Susan Bush, "Tsong Ping's Essay on Painting Landscape and the 'Landscape Buddhism' of Mount Lu," in *Theories of the Arts in China*, ed. Susan Bush and Christian Murck (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 138.

¹⁹⁷ Burton Watson, *Saigyō: Poems of a Mountain Home* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 4.

priest, not exactly a layperson, but something other...”¹⁹⁸ It is exactly this kind of practitioner that seems to inspire to von Sturmer: one whose spiritual, political, and artistic aims were united in their social position as renunciant.

Interestingly, other Western Buddhist poets have explicitly invoked Buddhist poet-recluses as representatives of the oppositional politics from which Western Buddhist literature was born. The T’ang Dynasty poet Hanshan and his companion Shih-te were reimagined by Gary Snyder in 1965 as the American countercultural intelligentsia: “you sometimes run into them today in the skidrows, orchards, hobo jungles, and logging camps of America.”¹⁹⁹ The Chinese Buddhist poet-scholars Po Chü-i and Su Shih proved influential for Philip Whalen for their reputation as both renowned poets and Ch’an Buddhist practitioners.²⁰⁰ Comparing himself at one point to Po Chü-i, who endured exile on account of his poems, Whalen expressed his feeling of exile from the mainstream attitudes towards work and money that characterized American society in the 1950s.²⁰¹

For Whalen and Snyder, taking influence from T’ang and Sung Dynasty poets was also a deliberate move to indigenize Zen Buddhism for a Western audience, showing how its poetry and people could be relevant to an entirely different age and culture. Their acts were the formation of an American Buddhist literature, but simultaneously, an “anti-American” Buddhist literature, in that it stood opposed to the mainstream values that characterized American culture at the time (Gary Snyder, in particular, saw America as need to be “saved” by the wisdom of indigenous and non-Western cultures). In other words, American Buddhist literature was American precisely because it was focussed on using ideas of other Buddhist cultures to feed ideas back into its own image of what was possible for Americans. In being anti-nationalist, it was still operating within a nationalist framework. How similar is the political project which accompanies von Sturmer’s New Zealand Buddhist poetry? Or, in what way can von Sturmer’s poetic project be characterized by the making of a New Zealand Buddhist literature?

Being anti-nationalist, von Sturmer’s poetry does not share political concerns with the New Zealand poets of the early to mid-twentieth century who actively sought to define a unique New Zealand poetry (as exemplified in Allen Curnow’s 1945 collection *A Book of New Zealand Verse, 1923–1945*). However, neither does his Zen poetry fit in exactly with

¹⁹⁸ Schelling, 21.

¹⁹⁹ Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 35.

²⁰⁰ Falk, 105-06.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

the political project of the hippy counterculture and anti-Muldoon activism. Although von Sturmer's conversion to Buddhism was typical of those Westerners of the baby-boomer generation, and he shares many of the concerns of Western Buddhist poets, his Zen poetry emerged decades after the poetry of Snyder and Whalen. On top of this, von Sturmer's diverse artistic output has always been influenced by his international travel, so not all of his Zen poetry is focussed on New Zealand.

The haibun piece "In Transit," for example, exemplifies a thread of transnational mixing in von Sturmer's work, in addition to his transhistorical dialogue with Zen literature. Tracing his passage from Rochester to Auckland and back, "In Transit" runs through seven different airports (four on the North American continent, three in the Pacific) in snapshots of pastry crumbs, tea-bags, and motionless baggage. Three Buddhist metaphors for impermanence which were used in Ch'an poetry²⁰² appear in the piece: sounds passing through the air, the complexion of a face, and an image reflected in a mirror. "Bach organ music is being piped through a crowded men's room on Concourse B of Chicago O'Hare Airport"; "Once in a while I do catch a glimpse of a familiar mouth, a recognizable forehead...but these are just fragments in the endless variety of faces and shapes that keep circulating"; "On the subterranean, neon-lit moving walkway, which links Concourse B and Concourse C, I look up at the mirrored ceiling and watch myself floating swiftly by on the dark, metallic surface."²⁰³

Von Sturmer's autobiographical travels in "In Transit" draw attention to the difficulty of simply declaring that von Sturmer's writing is reflective of a "New Zealand Buddhist literature." The ten years' Zen training which informs his writing actually took place in the United States, and the Auckland Zen Centre which he and Wrightson founded was established in explicit affiliation with the Rochester Zen Center. What makes his Zen practice and literature markedly different from his American counterparts? In some ways, a "New Zealand Zen literature," like a "New Zealand Zen" would first need to establish itself in contrast to the Zen religious and literary traditions of United States, which led the development of a "Western Buddhism" and "Western Buddhist literature." While the pioneers of American Zen Buddhist poetry looked to Japan and China for inspiration, the New Zealand Zen poet must define her art against both American and Asian traditions.

²⁰² Halvor Eifring, "Beyond Perfection: The Rhetoric of Chan Poetry in Wang Wei's Wang Stream Collection," in *Zen Buddhist Rhetoric in China, Korea, and Japan*, ed. Christopher Anderl (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2011), 242.

²⁰³ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 69-71.

Among all these concerns, however, it seems necessary to account for the fact that von Sturmer's sustained engagement with Zen training and Zen literature takes place, often, in New Zealand settings. In this regard, his writing is unique and deserves comment from the perspective of his immediate national literary context.

Perhaps the political project which accompanies von Sturmer's Zen poetry might best be seen in his demonstration of an alternative way of living: one characterized by a solitary artistic and spiritual inquiry, a deep regard for living things, and the relinquishment of desire for worldly successes. Indeed, the autobiographical positioning of *Suchness* would support this idea: the collection is framed by an overt, authorial self-telling kind of mode, with an introductory page situating the writing within von Sturmer's biography. Throughout the collection, there are references to dates and places which explain when and where a piece was composed, so the collection reads as a literary account of ten years' intensive Zen training. *Suchness* also avoids overtly engaging with political or social life besides one mention to the Bush Administration's preparations for war in Iraq, instead presenting a detachment from worldly affairs is characteristic of some Buddhist poet-recluses. Von Sturmer's sense of fulfilment through meditation and communion with nature forms its own indirect critique the values of mainstream New Zealand society.

Unlike the political agitations of writers like Gary Snyder, von Sturmer is not suggesting the universal applicability of Buddhism to solving the problems of "civilization" at what seems to be a crisis point in history.²⁰⁴ Instead, his writing subtly suggests the Buddhist teachings as a possibility for New Zealanders by reimagining the Dharma within New Zealand landscapes. Even then, his poetry does not give the impression that he is imagining the Dharma within New Zealand landscapes for the sake of proselytizing (although, as I have argued, the indigenization of Buddhism for New Zealand is the effect of this). The Buddhist Dharma appears, it seems, because it is an intimate part of von Sturmer's own way of comprehending the world. Von Sturmer's contribution to the formation of a New Zealand Buddhist literature is thus through the relevance of Buddhist teachings to his own, personal cultural geography.

²⁰⁴ In "Four Changes," Snyder suggests that the solution to environmental degradation is an expanded self-awareness, in which one would come to understand her own existence as dependent on other sentient beings and the natural environment (*Turtle Island*, 101). In this way, he implicitly suggests that Buddhist ideas such as dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and Buddhist meditative techniques should be adopted by the American citizenry en masse.

Part Two: Poetry as *Upāya*

While Part One focussed on the socio-historical context of von Sturmer's Zen poetry, Part Two performs a doctrinal reading of his poetics. The first section, "the Mind of Meditation," suggests that von Sturmer's writing arises as an unselfconscious manifestation of his being in the world. Contrary to the modernist notion of art as artifice, von Sturmer's poetry is an embodied way of regarding the world cultivated through his intensive training in meditation. The idea of poetry as arising from the meditative mind is developed in the second section, "Thing-Centered Holism," which elucidates the vision of emptiness/suchness that gives rise to the equanimous mood of von Sturmer's poetry. Together, the first two sections suggest that for von Sturmer, as for Ch'an poets, "ontological and poetic experience are one."²⁰⁵

The third section, "The Anti-language Doctrine," addresses a crucial history which confronts the Zen poet even today. If language in Mahāyāna Buddhism is understood to have the potential to delude one as to the "true nature of reality," thereby hindering one's journey on the Buddhist path, how do poets forge a practice that can act as a soteriological²⁰⁶ aid rather than a cause for further delusion? How can poetry act as *upāya*:²⁰⁷ a skilful means through which to apprehend the "ultimate nature of things"? "The Anti-language Doctrine" gives a short history of how Zen poets have dealt with this demand in the past, providing a context through which we can view the soteriological properties of von Sturmer's poetry.

The fourth section, "Zen Apophasis," details the way in which von Sturmer negotiates the anti-language doctrine and the Zen imperative that poetry act as *upāya*. I argue that von Sturmer's way of marking the conventional truth of language is through apophasis, and that his poetry presents a Sinitic type of apophasis characterized by a radical affirmation of phenomena. The affirmations, arising from a nirvāṇic perspective, simultaneously mark the emptiness of all phenomena – including language itself. Bringing the discussion back to von Sturmer's poetry as an embodied mode of apprehension, I suggest that his nirvāṇic

²⁰⁵ Chung-yuan Chang, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art and Poetry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 174.

²⁰⁶ Soteriology, as the study of salvation, is often used in contemporary scholarship to denote study of the Buddhist path. The use of this Christian theological term is not unproblematic, though, since many Buddhists do not see their salvation as the result of an external agent. Dan Cozort, "Soteriology," in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert Buswell (New York: Macmillan, 2004), 782.

²⁰⁷ Usually translated as "skilful means" or "skill-in-means," something which acts as *upāya* aids an adherent of Buddhism along the Buddhist path. In pedagogical situations, it denotes the ability to teach to the needs of others.

perspective functions like that of a Zen enlightenment poem in that it invites the reader to regard his work as an object of meditation.

At its core, Part Two suggests that von Sturmer's writing presents itself as a reflection of his intensive training in meditation and becomes, in turn, a soteriological aid to readers. von Sturmer's own practice of bringing mundane settings into the sphere of meditative inquiry (turning toasters into toasters, and teacups into teacups) acts as a demonstration to the reader of a poetry informed by "the mind of meditation." His repeated use of the referential function of language indicates that his poetry arises as a result of a non-thinking communion with phenomena. Through demonstration, that same referential "pointing" invites the reader to notice the phenomena in his or her own environment. As in kōan case 37 from the *Gateless Gate*, von Sturmer's poetry implicitly suggests that the reader who is earnestly compelled by spiritual curiosity would do best to turn a meditative attention to the stones, dragonflies, toasters or teacups in her own present surrounds.

The Mind of Meditation

And if anyone were to ask me what this practice is – this practice of Zen – I would have to say:

*It's simply the pleasure
of watching patches of sunlight and shadows
glide over the coat of an old man
as he walks beneath the linden trees.*²⁰⁸

Von Sturmer's most characteristic markers of style arise from his meditation practice. While other poets may use their practice as a way of dealing with emotional confusions or a means of "self-expression," von Sturmer's Zen-influenced poetry is an emptying of a sense of "self." His poetry has a measured and fact-like tone, suggesting an absence of striving, and a tendency towards "impersonal" or "objective" modes of description. As such, most of von Sturmer's writing demonstrates a kind of emotional stability – a calmness, an unruffled place from which to engage the world around him. His writing is marked by an attentiveness to the phenomenal world which Zen meditation practitioners seek to develop, and many of the adjectives one might use to describe von Sturmer's poetry are the same qualities sought in Zen meditation: unobtrusive, observant, calm, detached, composed.

One could say that von Sturmer's meditation practice becomes an experiential methodology for the composition of poetry. Certainly, the above quote of his suggests a conflation of poetic and meditative practices. In the history of Zen, the possibility of one's meditation practice informing one's poetic practice is a recurring point of contemplation for poets and scholars: Su Shih (1037-1101), a Ch'an poet and statesman of the Sung Dynasty, insisted that one's consciousness must first be characterized by emptiness and quietude if one is to produce worthwhile poetry.²⁰⁹ T'ang Dynasty poet and critic Liu Yü-hsi (772-842) theorized an ideal "state in which the interdependent functions of perception and verbal articulation attain perfect and natural spontaneity."²¹⁰ In this ideal marriage of meditation and

²⁰⁸ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 147-48.

²⁰⁹ Richard John. Lynn, "The Sudden and the Gradual in Chinese Poetry Criticism: An Examination of the Ch'an-Poetry Analogy," in *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1991), 385.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 384.

poetry, poetry would arise at the moment of perception itself as an embodied act of apprehending the world.

It is also not surprising that von Sturmer's poetic practice is reflective of his Zen meditation practice if we consider the Zen mandate to maintain a meditative state of mind in all activities. In his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*,²¹¹ Shunryu Suzuki says that any activity, when done with single-minded concentration, is as good as *zazen*:²¹²

To cook, or to fix some food, is not preparation, according to Dōgen; it is practice... You should work on it with nothing in your mind, and without expecting anything. You should just cook! That is also an experience of our sincerity, a part of our practice... Whatever you do, it should be an expression of the same deep activity [as *zazen*].²¹³

As von Sturmer himself says, one of the purposes of undertaking Zen training is so that one can “integrate the clarity and concentration of the *zendo*²¹⁴ into everyday life,” so that one's practice “becomes a moving *zazen*, a *zazen* that expresses itself through our actions and interactions.”²¹⁵

Since enlightenment is “an awakening to a pre-existing reality rather than an accomplishment to be achieved,”²¹⁶ maintaining a meditative state of mind in all one's activities is not something to be worked towards as much as something to be remembered. The meditative state of mind, according to Suzuki, should be devoid of any thoughts of starting points, goals, or attainment.²¹⁷ As such, *zazen* is a “practice free from gaining ideas,”²¹⁸ an activity in which there should be no striving. The founder of Sōtō Zen, Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253), emphasized that any “conscious endeavor” in *zazen* is illusory: “*Zazen* is not thinking of good, nor thinking of bad. It is not conscious endeavor.”²¹⁹ It requires a kind of “effortless effort,” a middle way between action and inaction, an unforced action

²¹¹ One of the most well-known and best-selling books on Zen meditation in the West.

²¹² Seated meditation, a “non-thinking mode of consciousness.” Carl Olson, *The a to Z of Buddhism*, ed. Charles S. Prebish (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 245.

²¹³ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice*. (New York; Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1995), 37-38.

²¹⁴ The meditation hall at a Zen monastery or centre.

²¹⁵ Richard Von Sturmer and Joseph Sorrentino, *Images from the Center: Daily Life at an American Zen Center* (Rochester, NY: Rochester Zen Center, 1998).

²¹⁶ Wawrytko, 373.

²¹⁷ Suzuki, 38.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

²¹⁹ Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed. *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen's Shōbo Genzō* (Boston: Shambhala, 2011), 29.

which appears as if spontaneously manifesting rather than as the result of conscious action on the part of the meditator.²²⁰

In fact, particular types of Zen meditation including *zazen* are described as a mode of consciousness characterized by “non-thinking.”²²¹ As one allows all discriminative thoughts to dissipate, the mind becomes empty. Introspection and speculation are relinquished in favour of a not-knowing, a non-thinking, an emptying-out. For American Zen poet Jane Hirshfield, it is this particular kind of non-thinking, not-knowing concentration which is common to both poetry and meditation: a state in which “the [is] mind open, inclusive, alert, receptive to whatever comes, quietly aware.”²²²

The open and empty mind becomes, as Hirshfield suggests, ready to be filled with whatever enters it. For earlier Ch’an poets too, “receptivity is the key point”: “being ready and able to resonate with what reveals itself.”²²³ T’ang poet Liu Yü-hsi confirms this when he says that keeping a mind clear of thoughts and desires is what allows the “myriad forms of phenomenal reality” to enter it.²²⁴ For his part, von Sturmer describes Zen training as a kind of emptying out of the mind and self: “If you allow yourself to become empty, then the world can reveal itself to you in a sparkling way.”²²⁵ All of these writers in the Zen tradition suggest that poetic composition first demands an empty mind. As a common Buddhist metaphor figures it, one should make the mind a mirror for the phenomenal world.

Von Sturmer’s piece “The Bodhisattvic Garden,” set at Rochester Zen Centre, is filled with the movements and sounds of the poet’s environment:

The leaves are whispering to each other in a light and steady rain. Summer is now well-established, and the covering of myrtle under the locust tree is a deep shade of green. Beyond the myrtle, a dogwood is in full bloom, its white, four-leafed flowers resembling clusters of child-like stars. Overhead, hidden by the foliage, a crow caws twice and then falls silent. The dry pebbles under the eaves of the covered walkway seem whiter than usual. And the rain continues, discreetly, accompanied by the rustling of sparrows.²²⁶

²²⁰ J. P. Williams, *Denying Divinity: Apophysis in the Pastric Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 50. Williams notes that this conception of “effortless effort” in Zen owes a great debt to the Taoist concept of *wu-wei*, “actionless action.”

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 49; Olson, 245.

²²² Hirshfield, 150.

²²³ Wawrytko, 353.

²²⁴ Lynn, 384.

²²⁵ White, 8.

²²⁶ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 149.

Containing no concerns of the private self which might ordinarily occupy one's mind, von Sturmer's focus on the non-human implies an empty and receptive mind. A sustained focus on the non-human can be found in earlier poetic works too, including *A Network of Dissolving Threads*, published in 1991:

Walking up from the beach, noticing how the cracks in the asphalt are filled with pohutukawa needles. A crimson fading into purple. Sparrows dart through a hibiscus bush. Several of the flowers, weighed down by their stamens, have fallen into the long grass. And the ear perceives a subdued hum, beneath the pulse of the cicadas, a hum which can be traced to a transformer. In the shade its metal casing is nearly invisible. Painted a dark green, surrounded by weeds.²²⁷

In both passages, the speaking subject is elided altogether. The absence of the speaking subject is most obvious in the excerpt from *A Network of Dissolving Threads* where (someone) is walking up from the beach, (someone) is noticing how cracks in the asphalt are filled with pohutakawa needles. As the passage continues, the subject recedes further, diffusing into a generalized, speculative human presence: "and the ear perceives a subdued hum... In the shade its metal casing is nearly invisible." The omission of a speaking subject in these passages recalls von Sturmer's statement that through allowing the self to become "empty," the world reveals itself.

Just as an empty mind allows the myriad forms of the phenomenal world to enter it, keeping one's focus on the phenomenal world helps von Sturmer to maintain a mind that is empty of its "own" content. His enumeration of intact multiplicities in the above paragraphs resembles the Zen practice of counting, a technique given to beginning meditators which helps train the mind toward a single-pointed awareness. If the meditator is to effectively maintain count, then there is no chance to follow other thoughts that arise, and von Sturmer's paragraphs suggest this by disregarding any tangential speculations or internal conversations.²²⁸ By omitting the "psychological content" of the observer, von Sturmer

²²⁷ *A Network of Dissolving Threads* (Auckland, NZ: Auckland University Press, 1991), 32.

²²⁸ Von Sturmer's technique of single-minded focus in writing is even more pronounced when compared with other Western Zen poets. Philip Whalen and Leslie Scalapino, for example, both see the content of one's mind as being inseparable from the perceptions of phenomena in the "outside" world, and as such, include in their poetry memories or thoughts that occur at the same time as their observations of the phenomenal world. The perspective on poetic and meditative practice that von Sturmer demonstrates would likely see Whalen and Scalapino's technique of recording thoughts as well as perceptions gives too much credit to thoughts (which should be let to recede of their own accord). Nevertheless, through their divergent techniques, von Sturmer, Whalen, and Scalapino all

allows phenomena to unfold themselves unhindered by rationalization, analysis and judgments. von Sturmer's vivid imagery and clear verbal expression reflect the single-pointed concentration of meditation; a mind uninterrupted by myriad thoughts.

Each act of noticing a small fluctuation – a sparrow or the barking of a dog – confirms to von Sturmer's poet that he not lost count, that his mind is still clear and attentive to the movements of his environment. As per Suzuki's explanation of meditation as a "practice free from gaining ideas," and a "single-minded way,"²²⁹ the poet says that to notice a fallen leaf is "enough" to keep him on the "right track":

When I return to Auckland in a few weeks, things will not be so simple. But the city has its own continuity: buses will stop for passengers at bus stops; mail keeps on being delivered; food appears on the shelves of supermarkets. In spring, fireworks will briefly light up the night sky; by summer the smell of mildew will have begun to rise from the piles of old books in the secondhand bookshop at the end of the arcade; and on the balcony of a restored villa, an Alsatian dog will poke his head between the balustrades, as he did the year before, and bark frenetically as I walk past. This is sufficient; I will take the barking to be a confirmation. And afterwards, to see a sparrow or a fallen leaf will also be enough to keep me on the right track.²³⁰

The importance of the speaker in the above paragraph is downplayed, his role being merely the observation of small birds or inconstant sounds. Instead objects and animals²³¹ are given a degree of agency. The city, the sum of all movement, has its own particular rhythm formed by the agency of objects, machines, and animals: buses, fireworks, food, dogs, sparrows, and falling leaves all mobilize themselves. The degree of agency afforded to objects and animals is reflective of the non-attachment that is cultivated in zazen: allowing thoughts to pass through the mind without needing to accept, reject or control them. As the Hirshfield describes this process,

achieve a collapsing of the duality between inside ("mind," "self") and outside ("world," "other"). All three poets are also concerned with how "internal" and "external" contexts shape the process of writing.

²²⁹ Suzuki, 25; 53.

²³⁰ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 139-40.

²³¹ I find "objects and animals" to be an unsatisfactory way of referring to the diverse sentient and insentient beings that fill von Sturmer's poetry. However, as I am attempting to emphasize the vividness and physicality of "things" in this context, I prefer the grouping "objects and animals" over more ambiguous terms such as "phenomena" or "environment."

If you are in shikantaza,²³² and do[ing] shikantaza, [and] a thought comes: it's just like any other phenomenon. The ideal would be the image of a lake and a cloud that goes through the sky. The lake does not grasp the cloud and it does not accept the reflection on its surface. If there is a cloud, there is a cloud. The lake does not care. The lake is just being a lake.²³³

Here, Hirshfield connects the process of watching thoughts with the practice of allowing other beings to move about unhindered by human attachment. It is a sense of detachment and non-controlling on the part of the meditator that allows other non-human beings to have agency and autonomy, in life as well as in poetry.

As well as being filled with the movements and sounds of objects and animals, von Sturmer's poetry seems to actually be motivated by objects and animals. Rather than having any internal impetus to write for the sake of externalizing his thoughts, von Sturmer's writing seems to be dependent on and driven by his environment. In "Barrier Crossings," and later in "The Bodhisattvic Garden," the natural environment dictates the shape of the writing:

a green haze
deep in the valley,
when I finish my paragraph
the wind tells me
it's time to turn the page²³⁴

Today, having nothing to write down, I leave my notebook open on one of the tables. As the pages flutter in a light breeze, the white paper with its thin blue lines absorbs the chattering of nearby sparrows, the scuttling of a squirrel as it spirals down a tree trunk, the flickering of someone walking briskly behind a fence.²³⁵

Allowing his environment to dictate the shape of his writing suggests the non-intentionality of zazen. Instead of approaching writing with a view towards goals and

²³² Referred to as "just sitting," a Zen meditation technique developed by Sōtō school founder Dōgen (1200-1253).

²³³ Chung Ling, "Jane Hirshfield's Poetic Voice and Zen Meditation," in *American Modernist Poetry and the Chinese Encounter*, ed. Zhang Yuejun and Stuart Christie (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 158-59.

²³⁴ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 99.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

attainment, von Sturmer forgoes conscious endeavor, exhibiting a state of mind that poet Jackson Mac Low has called being “choicelessly aware.”²³⁶ In the second quote, von Sturmer suggests he has no part to play in the writing at all – the sounds of sparrows and movement of a squirrel interact with the white paper of their own accord. The total effacing of the observing subject here demonstrates the “effortless effort” of meditation: the activity arises without the controlling intention of the self.

The second quote also illustrates a saying by Dōgen which draws a direct relationship between the relinquishment of a sense of subjective self and the possibility of becoming intimate with the non-human: “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things.”²³⁷ Leaving his notebook open, von Sturmer allows the myriad sounds and movements of his environment to “actualize” the writing. The Zen poet Bashō viewed the poetic process in a similar way, eschewing contemplation at the personal or individual level in order to become closer to the object of his attention.²³⁸ Before a poet should begin to speak of an object, Bashō wrote, the poet must first concentrate his or her whole attention on the singular object until “the space between himself and his object has disappeared.”²³⁹

It is a kind of non-thinking meditative communion with an object, that for Bashō, leads to apprehension of its “true nature.” In the *Book of Equanimity Verses*, von Sturmer affirms the idea that one must relinquish the sense of being a separate subject knowing *of* the world and speculating *about* the world in order to achieve true connection with non-human beings. In a poem centered on the moment of communion between a man and a poplar tree, von Sturmer declares that, “not knowing is most intimate.”²⁴⁰ In a similar vein to Bashō, then, von Sturmer adopts a kind of imagistic poetry which foregrounds a “non-thinking” communion²⁴¹ between poet and environment.

²³⁶ Quoted in Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich, eds., *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991). Mac Low is describing how Zen meditation influenced his chance-based composition procedures.

²³⁷ Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed. *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1985), 70.

²³⁸ Jin'ichi Konishi, *Image and Ambiguity: The Impact of Zen Buddhism on Japanese Literature* (Tokyo: Program for Comparative Study on Japanese and Chinese Literatures, Tokyo University of Education, 1973), 67.

²³⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 50.

²⁴⁰ Von Sturmer, *Book of Equanimity Verses*, 17. Von Sturmer signals that this fragment is itself a quote from the original *Book of Equanimity*, kōan case 20.

²⁴¹ My choice of the word “communion” signals a relationship characterized by mutual presence rather than by any psychologized “knowing” or “understanding” of the non-human other.

Von Sturmer's poetic practice of emptying the mind and its concomitant sense of subjective self leads to a poetry which exhibits Suzuki's concept of "Big Mind." "Big Mind" is a meditation technique taught by Suzuki in which one's sense of self is extended to encompass all the myriad things in one's environment. A contemporary innovation on Ch'an master Huang Po's (unknown-850) statement that the mastery of meditative techniques leads to mind and environment becoming one,²⁴² "Big Mind" draws meditators towards the nonduality of mind and environment. "When everything exists within your big mind," writes Suzuki, "all dualistic relationships drop away" so that one comes to feel that there is no person inside "here" and no external world "out there."²⁴³

If your mind is related to something outside itself, that mind is a small mind, a limited mind. If your mind is not related to anything else, then there is no dualistic understanding in the activity of your mind...Big mind experiences everything within itself.²⁴⁴

Disregarding any thoughts and becoming "choicelessly aware," von Sturmer allows an empty page (and empty mind) to become filled with all the phenomena in his environment. This puts von Sturmer's enumeration of intact multiplicities into perspective: the myriad objects and animals become the focus of poetry as they are inseparable from the "private" or "personal" concerns of the poet.

In the nonduality between mind and environment, the distinction between personal and impersonal also falls away. While *Suchness* is thus framed by an autobiographical set of writings, it is also full of "impersonal" seemingly "objective" observations in which private feelings of the individual psyche are omitted. Many of the objects and animals observed are quite generic, too:

rollerblades and sparrows
cut straight through
the late afternoon sunlight²⁴⁵

"Communion" has resonances for a sharing of the natural environment, eroding the distinction between human, animal, object, and "environment." Of course, "communion" also suggests a spiritual relationship which is quite relevant to the discussion of meditation.

²⁴² Dale S Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 160-61.

²⁴³ Suzuki, 44.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁴⁵ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 40.

The image of rollerblading people and small birds intersecting the sunlight as dark figures is sensuous and vivid, but not particular. Refusing further description or contextualization, the sparrows – a common bird, and the rollerblades – an activity common to many countries – are generic. The impersonal aspects of von Sturmer’s poetry suggests that the embodied experience which prompted the poem is not historically or personally unique. Meditative states of mind, this would suggest, are not “subjective” experiences. Indeed, when one comes to apprehend the “true nature of things” (suchness), this is described as an “objective reality.”

Writing in the “objective descriptive” mode, von Sturmer’s Zen poetry might first appear to exemplify exactly the kind of quirky, quotidian realism that Williams Carlos Williams is so famously remembered for. However, as I have argued, von Sturmer’s realist mode of writing also has as its source the mind of meditation. Although his writing shares many of the same aesthetic characteristics as those of the imagists, not the least of which is the emphasis on seeing minute particulars clearly, there is a very real psycho-somatic practice that accompanies and makes possible his poetry. The seemingly effortless realism of von Sturmer’s Zen poetry actually requires, as Allen Ginsberg observed, “a life’s preparation in practicing awareness...to stay in the body and observe the space around [one].”²⁴⁶

While this section served as an overview of some of the principles of Zen meditation and how they directly impact on von Sturmer’s poetry, the next section takes the core quality of von Sturmer’s meditative and poetic practice – equanimity – and elucidates its doctrinal underpinnings.

²⁴⁶ Quoted in Johnson and Paulenich, 97.

Thing-Centered Holism

The predominant affective mode of von Sturmer's poetry is one of equanimity. Equanimity, which is characterized by "evenness of mind" and "unruffledness," is a psychosomatic state in which one is "undisturbed by elation, depression or agitating emotion."²⁴⁷ Equanimity is a desirable state of mind for meditators, as it encompasses a non-attachment to thought or emotion, and an absence of "gaining ideas." Complemented by the description of being "choicelessly aware" and engaging with activities in an "effortless effort," the state of equanimity in meditation means that "you are within the complete calmness of your mind."²⁴⁸

The opening poem of *Suchness* demonstrates the emotional stability, detachment, and clarity of vision sought in meditation:

Justice
just is.

The just is
of a sparrow.
The just is
of a lamppost.

Everything
obeys the Law.²⁴⁹

The wording in this excerpt is sparse, and the generous page space that surrounds the lines give the poem a sense of ease. The short lines slow down the pacing, and the repetition of "just is" underscores the physical form of the sparrow and the lamppost. The capital letters and full stops convey a declarative tone, with each small sentence emphasizing the certainty and determinacy of the statements. The affective mood is un-excitabile and fact-like.

In von Sturmer's photographs which preface the six sections of *Suchness*, the same kinds of equanimous mood can be found. Sometimes this is a floating, unmoored serenity (the statue of a bodhisattva against a clear sky), sometimes a release of life (a dead fish

²⁴⁷ "Equanimity," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2016), <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/view/Entry/63711?redirectedFrom=equanimity&>.

²⁴⁸ Suzuki, 121.

²⁴⁹ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 10.

washed up by the tide), sometimes a delivery from *samsāra*-like systems of industry (what appears to be a deserted salmon farm), sometimes a quiet endurance even among unfavourable circumstances (a weathered washing line). That the images are all black and white enhances the sense of composure by limiting the number of different factors which might catch the viewer's attention.

As well as being a quality sought in meditation, equanimity is the affective mode which characterizes the apprehension of "ultimate reality." "Just-is-ness," along with "thusness" and "suchness," are translations of *tathatā*, which denotes the "eternal nature of reality that is 'ever thus' or 'just so' and free of all conceptual elaborations."²⁵⁰ Synonymous with enlightenment,²⁵¹ the apprehension of *tathatā* is simultaneous with the cessation of desire and suffering. This suggests that the emotional state of an enlightened person is marked by the absence of strong emotions, for when one realizes that everything already "just is," one no longer feels the need to crave or reject things. If enlightenment is "an awakening to a pre-existing reality rather than an accomplishment to be achieved," then the enlightened mode of writing is characterized by the author-speaker's stating of present facts.²⁵²

The vision of ultimate reality thus presented in von Sturmer's poetry is one of harmony and unity. Nothing is ever "out of place," and nothing is hindered by emotional reactions on the part of the speaker. Everything "just is" in a relational harmony. As von Sturmer writes in *Suchness*, "everything corresponds/from a pencil sharpener/to a passing comet."²⁵³ In this way, von Sturmer can be seen to be writing from the nirvāṇic perspective: a mode of poetry which describes the world from the point of view of an enlightened person.²⁵⁴ In this enlightened way of seeing, the poet displays a heightened sensitivity to the meanings of ordinary objects, and everything appears as connected and significant.²⁵⁵

The Hua-yen school of Buddhism (Kegon in Japanese), while not a form of Zen Buddhism, has an influential metaphor for universal emptiness which comes through in von Sturmer's Zen poetry. Basing their teachings on the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (Flower Ornament Scripture), the central teaching of the school is that "all phenomena are interconnected in an infinite web and every point in the web reflects every other point."²⁵⁶ The metaphor is known

²⁵⁰ "Tathatā," in *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald Lopez (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

²⁵¹ Olson, 225.

²⁵² Wawrytko, 373.

²⁵³ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 81.

²⁵⁴ Egan, 38.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁵⁶ Stalling, 105.

as “Indra’s Net,” a seamless and infinite net of jewels in which each individual jewel represents each individual phenomenon. Each node of the net, being reflective like a diamond or a dewdrop, reflects the entire structure, the web in its totality.

The metaphor of “Indra’s Net” illustrates *pratītya-samutpāda*, the doctrine of dependent origination. Dependent origination suggests that all phenomena arise dependently on myriad causes and conditions so that “when one thing arises, another thing comes to be.”²⁵⁷ In this way, every singular phenomenon is both interconnected to all other phenomena and dependent on all other phenomena for its continued existence. However, the interdependency of all things also supposes the ontological emptiness of phenomena.²⁵⁸ As Nāgārjuna writes in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, “If something comes from its own essence,/How could it ever be arisen?/It follows that if one denies emptiness/There can be no arising.”²⁵⁹ In Madhyamaka terms, no thing can be discrete or autonomous, no thing can possess its own essence, and there is no antecedent reality “behind” the thing. So while a thing has form, it does not have an ontological weight of its own; everything in the phenomenal world is ultimately “empty” of self-existence.²⁶⁰

In von Sturmer’s poetry, we find statements which affirm both sides of Indra’s Net: the vividness of the singular phenomenon – the jewel – and the interconnectedness of things – the net. The two kinds of observations combine to suggest a harmonious vision of universal emptiness/suchness, which is accompanied by a pervasive sense of equanimity. (In the Madhyamaka school from which von Sturmer’s poetics draws, “ultimate reality” is equated with “universal emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) which is also equated with *tathatā*. When I say that von Sturmer writes from the nirvāṇic perspective, then, I am claiming that his poetry incorporates a vision of “universal emptiness” which is also a vision of “suchness.”)

The integrity of singular objects and events in von Sturmer’s poetry can be seen as representative of the “jewel” in Indra’s Net. Depicting whole, intact bodies, he emphasizes the physicality of objects, showing them to have weight or density. Bodies of objects or

²⁵⁷ Olson, 191.

²⁵⁸ Jay Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 305.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 309.

²⁶⁰ However, this is not to say that the universal emptiness of phenomena results in the idea of an ontologically separate realm of “emptiness.” In the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna is careful to show that emptiness should not be reified, but is itself empty. To say that a thing is empty presupposes a “thing” to start with, so the condition of “emptiness” is dependent on the form of the “thing” (Garfield, 316). Because emptiness is dependent on form, it can have no inherent existence: that is to say, “emptiness” is not an ontologically separate realm of “ultimate truth.”

animals are usually depicted with a sense of stillness, which emphasizes their mass even when they are engaged in an interaction. As I implicitly suggested earlier in the chapter when talking about von Sturmer's enumeration of intact multiplicities, it is the physicality of objects or sentient beings which constitute the focus of the writing.

As such, simple vernacular vocabulary is used to represent objects in the most direct and uncomplicated way possible, and the number of nouns in any given image is limited. Even the use of modifiers would distract from the weight and substance of the nouns, the only common exception being adjectives which designate colour. The asyndetic syntax, devoid of any (subordinating) conjunctions or relative pronouns, also leaves the nouns unhindered. The sparseness of detail creates a kind of "shorthand of seeing" in which the physical, not the intellectual, has primacy. For example, this fragment from "Desert Solo" in *On the Eve of Never Departing*:

At midday, the wing-beats of a raven.

*At dusk, the rapid fluttering of small bats.*²⁶¹

Each of these sentences foregrounds a particular event. The capital letters, full stops and comma give the statements a declarative tone of the sort I previously identified with the affective mode of suchness. The normative rhetorical guiding structures give the impression that the content of the statement is a fact, a verifiable event, and the elision of any observing subject supports the notion of an objective actuality. Thus the wing-beats of the raven or the fluttering of the small bats become isolated as significant events, and this effect is enhanced by the opening words which evoke much wider temporal frames. The whole of "dusk," and the whole of "midday," manifests in the minute and instantaneous movements of animals. The comma which separates the temporal indicators "at midday," "at dusk," and the lack of any subject or verb in the succeeding clause, make the two parts of the sentence seem equal and balanced. Midday is equal to the wing beats of the raven; dusk is equal to the rapid fluttering of the small bats. The omission of the verb means the events don't so much happen as *are*.

Von Sturmer's singular object or event is "whole and complete in itself." In fact, as the metaphor of Indra's Net suggests, the entirety of the Net can disclose itself in the reflection of a single jewel. As the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* suggests,

²⁶¹ Von Sturmer, *On the Eve of Never Departing*, 56.

Each particle of dust contains in itself all the Buddha-fields and the whole extent of the Dharma-element; every single thought refers to all that was, is and will be; and the eternal mysterious Dharma can be beheld everywhere, because it is equally reflected in all parts of this universe. Each particle of dust is also capable of generating all possible kinds of virtue, and therefore one single object may lead to the unfolding of all the secrets of the entire universe. To understand one particular object is to understand them all.²⁶²

Similarly, in von Sturmer's fragment, the wing-beats of the raven *are* the entirety of "midday," and the fluttering of bats *is* the entirety of "dusk." The fluttering of small bats is not grammatically subordinate to the "dusk," or a causal product of "dusk." Instead, the fluttering of small bats, because it arises dependent on all other phenomena in the universe, "manifests everything everywhere."²⁶³ In the nirvāṇic perspective,

each nondual event – every leaf-flutter, wandering thought, and piece of litter – is whole and complete in itself, because although conditioned by everything else in the universe and thus a manifestation of it, for precisely that reason it is not subordinated to anything else but becomes an unconditioned end-in-itself.²⁶⁴

Because all phenomena are empty of their own essence, they are able to function as a vessel for ultimate truth. In this way, von Sturmer's objects or events just "are," free from any pretense of causal explanation. And as the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* suggests, one singular thing reflects the entirety of all things. The idea of universal emptiness, then, "leads not to despair but to the vision of the Ultimate in the tiniest particle."²⁶⁵

The way that seemingly discrete objects transform or support each other in von Sturmer's poetry can be seen as representing the "net" of Indra's Net. Many of his poetic fragments, for example, comprise of an unusual event in which a synchronicity of colour or form appears, or when one "sentient being" or "object" effects a momentary transformation

²⁶² Quoted in Egan, 14.

²⁶³ David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 1998), 235.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Williams, 157.

upon another. If the foregrounding of a singular object was representative of the “jewel,” these kinds of fragments are representative of the “net”:

white butterflies
under the ragged edge
of a rain cloud²⁶⁶

The shadow of a cat sits on the shadow of a fence²⁶⁷

At midnight
the crack
that splits the windowpane
sparkles like a river
in the light of the moon.²⁶⁸

The wings of the butterflies and the ragged edge of the cloud share a similarity of form, while the butterflies and the clouds both share a colour. The cat and the fence both make shadows at such angles so as to form a synthesis of bodies, and the particular angle of the moon transforms a crack of glass into a luminous miniature river. Each fragment, though, shows the nouns in a different relation: in the first fragment, the vertical stacking of lines mimics the butterflies as being “under” a cloud, in the second, the parallelism of the sentence places the shadow and the cat beside each other, while the third joins the two parts of the sentence by a simile.

These fragments demonstrate the interpenetration and dependent arising of all phenomena. Rather than animate agents motivating a dynamic interaction, the fragments instead depict the intersection of their shadows, their light, or their natural course. There is a stillness to each noun (cloud, cat, fence, butterflies etc) effected by static verbs (“sits” and “sparkles”) or no verbs, which suggests that the intersection happens as a result of the effects of bodies: their shadows, their light, their course of movement. This gives the impression that bodies do not act intentionally on their own free will, but are acted upon by a multitude of factors which had conditioned their arising in the first place. The miraculous transformation of the crack comes about not as a result of a subject’s agency, but as a result of the glass,

²⁶⁶ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 45.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

crack and the sun existing at all. The conditions which accompany their possibility of existence (in this case, the diffusion of light) are what brings other events or objects into being.

The interconnectedness of things is also shown in the way the fragments draw similarities across objects: windowpanes and mirrors, butterflies and clouds, cats and fences. The effect of yoking unlike objects together cuts through the unenlightened conception of the world as a series of discrete, self-existing objects, and proposes a profound likeness. The logic of oppositions is undermined by the assertion of a fundamental oneness between different objects. Statements in which von Sturmer affirms the dependency of phenomena are common in his writing, showing “unrelated” things supporting each other in unforeseen ways:

The meditator recalls that the Japanese have a special word for the sound the wind makes in a grove of pines. But his trees are absolutely still; their collective silence sustains the path of the moon.²⁶⁹

The way in which the silence of the pine trees sustains the path of the moon suggests that “phenomena are not hard-edged, substantial entities...but events, confluences of forces, eddies in the stream of life.”²⁷⁰ They arise dependently and recede when the conditions which had sustained them dissolve. In this way, the “form” of phenomena dissolves into the universal emptiness that is the net.

Von Sturmer’s way of portraying universal emptiness has, at its base, the idea of the ultimately singular nature of reality. Butterflies, clouds, cats, fences, pine trees, moons, and human observers are all part of “the same dynamic Reality, which, being a dynamic whole, is entirely unobjectifiable and non-substantial.”²⁷¹ More specifically, von Sturmer’s poetry displays what philosopher Simon P. James has called “thing-centered holism.”²⁷² While ultimate reality consists of a dynamic whole, individual things still have intrinsic worth. Individual things display a sense of integrity that suggests they are somehow “complete-in-themselves,” but on the other hand, individual things are ultimately empty of self-existence

²⁶⁹ *On the Eve of Never Departing*, 21.

²⁷⁰ Simon P. James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 73.

²⁷¹ Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 20.

²⁷² Simon P. James, "'Thing-Centered' Holism in Buddhism, Heidegger, and Deep Ecology," *Environmental Ethics* 22, no. 4 (2000).

(and therefore, not ultimately “individual”). In sum, von Sturmer’s vision of reality is that of a “coherent whole formed of mutually-dependent elements.”²⁷³

²⁷³ *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*, 75.

The Anti-language Doctrine

Far from the contented equanimity of von Sturmer's "thing-centered holism," "Zen poetry" has been a historically troubled category of verse. This section and the next are devoted to giving an overview of this history, and von Sturmer's place in it. As we shall see, given the emotional turmoil that some Zen poets have gone through in the past as a result of the Zen ambivalence towards language, the contentedness of von Sturmer's poetry is actually a significant achievement.

The history of "Zen poetry" has been characterized by ongoing debate over whether it is prudent of Buddhist monks, nuns and devoted lay practitioners to engage in the practice of poetry. As a sect which prized itself as having "no reliance on words or letters,"²⁷⁴ Zen has often appeared as being hostile to poetic endeavours, even though poetry played an important role in the literary culture of China.²⁷⁵ The *Lañkāvatāra* and *Vimalakīrti Sūtras* express their distrust of language, holding long silences in the face of crucial questions or producing phrases such as "what one teaches, transgresses; for the truth is beyond words."²⁷⁶

Attachment to any idea, words, activity, object or person is seen as a malady in Buddhist soteriology, which meant that those who wanted to reconcile their monastic and literary interests were often plagued by a fear of expending their energy on fruitless artistic endeavors. The T'ang Dynasty poet Po Chü-i (772-846), for example, famously struggled with his pursuit of what he labelled "foolish words and flowery language."²⁷⁷ "Let me come on a bit of scenery and I start my idle droning," he wrote, desperately wishing his poetry might come to be seen as an act of Buddhist merit: may the "worldly literary labors of my present existence, these transgressions of wild words and fancy phrases...be transformed into causes that will bring praise to the Buddha's doctrine in age after age to come."²⁷⁸

Others endeavoured to resolve the tension between their religious and literary pursuits in similar ways. T'ang Dynasty poet Chiao-jan (730-799) attempted to acquit himself from attachment to poetry by claiming it as an instrument of Buddhist practice, subordinating his

²⁷⁴ A famous quote attributed to Bodhidharma, who is said to have brought Buddhism from India to China in fifth or sixth century CE.

²⁷⁵ Watson, "Zen Poetry," 113.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Yoshitaka, 65; Watson, "Zen Poetry," 114.

²⁷⁸ Quoted in "Zen Poetry," 115.

poetry to the service of Buddhism.²⁷⁹ But eventually he gave up writing altogether in his later years, despite having been the author of much poetry and a critical work on poetics.²⁸⁰ Even in the twentieth century, the Zen poet Shinkichi Takahashi expresses a similar fear of attachment to poetry: “as a follower of the tradition of Zen, which is above verbalization, I must confess that I feel ashamed of writing poems or having collections of them published in book form.”²⁸¹

The first few hundred years of Buddhism in Japan saw an atmosphere of animosity between Buddhist practice and the literary arts, likely inspired by earlier hostilities in T’ang Dynasty China.²⁸² The T’ang Dynasty poet Po Chü-i’s (772-846) condemnation of poetry as “foolish words and flowery language”²⁸³ (Japanese: *kyōgen kigo*) was used extensively by poets and critics in the Nara period to denote the sinfulness of poetry.²⁸⁴ While native poetry forms such as *waka* were used to express devotion to Shinto deities, such poetry – and by extension, the Japanese language – was seen as an inadequate means to worship Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.²⁸⁵ This was partly because Shinto deities were regarded with lesser esteem than Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in this period, and partly because “the Shinto deities were considered to belong to the world, a world of sin from which Buddhism offered deliverance.”²⁸⁶ It took a complex syncretism of Shinto gods and Bodhisattvas in order to justify the adequacy of poetry for Buddhist religious practice, so that by the middle ages (1185-1573), *kyōgen kigo* had come to suggest that secular literature could serve a positive religious function.²⁸⁷

²⁷⁹ William H. Nienhauser, *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 270-72.

²⁸⁰ Watson, "Zen Poetry," 113.

²⁸¹ Quoted in Stryk, 11. Perhaps it should be noted at this point that at certain times in the history of Zen, poetry has been seen as being as important as meditation itself. The scholar and translator Burton Watson writes that in the late Sung Dynasty, when Chinese Zen had apparently lost something of its religious vitality and monks increasingly turned toward the arts (poetry, painting, calligraphy, among others), the “Way of Zen” and the “Way of Poetry” were increasingly seen as one (115). An extreme example of this viewpoint comes through in the preface to the *Kishudan* (an anthology of Chinese poems compiled in 1483 by Japanese monk Ten’in Ryūtakū): “outside of poetry there is no Zen; outside of Zen there is no poetry” (Watson, 115). However, these examples of the appreciation of poetry still testify to the Zen school’s deep ambivalence about the capacity of language to accurately express embodied experience.

²⁸² Plutschow, "Is Poetry a Sin? Honjisuijaku and Buddhism Versus Poetry," 206.

²⁸³ Yoshitaka, 65.

²⁸⁴ Plutschow, "Is Poetry a Sin? Honjisuijaku and Buddhism Versus Poetry," 208.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 207; Margaret Childs, "Kyōgen-Kigo: Love Stories as Buddhist Sermons," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 12, no. 1 (1985): 92.

Another important reason for the mistrust of poetry in medieval Japan was that *kigo*, a Buddhist term for verbal deception (Sanskrit: *sambhinna-pralāpa*), was regarded as one of the ten transgressions.²⁸⁸ Speaking forth at random, inconsiderately, or deceptively, was to be avoided by Buddhists.²⁸⁹ Thus, a poet such as Yoshishige no Yasutane (unknown-1002), who had formerly been employed by the court, would become convinced of the sinfulness of metaphor and simile:

...in writing poetry at the sight of springtime blossoms I have used the word snow to designate the blossoms, and when I composed poetry in front of the bamboo fences in autumn, I distorted the chrysanthemums by calling them gold. Unable to escape feelings of guilt for having written such lies, how can I escape the sins committed through the excess of such ornate language?²⁹⁰

A further reason for the mistrust of poetry in medieval Japan was the “strong emphasis on single-mindedness and concentration” that came to prominence in Japanese Buddhism in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.²⁹¹ Only one kind of religious practice could aid a student in their quest to achieve single-mindedness and concentration, it was thought, so while “different schools placed the emphasis on different kinds of practice and different foci of concentration...almost all alike stressed the importance of focused rather than diffused and scattered energies.”²⁹² Even Dōgen, who famously used language in a poetic way to great effect, saw the practice of poetry as a dangerous diversion to meditation.²⁹³

The emphatic suspicion of language promoted by the Zen school in general was one way through which the school differentiated itself from others and gained followers. The mythological origins of the school, for example, are said to be at the Buddha’s Flower Sermon, where, instead of preaching to his disciple Kāśyapa, the Buddha silently holds up a flower. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, which is especially important for Zen, is prefaced with this statement:

Buddha nature is void and has no form

²⁸⁸ According to Margaret Childs, the “ten evils” or the “ten transgressions” are taking life, theft, lewdness, lying, dazzling rhetoric, slander, equivocation, greed, anger, and complaining. 92; 103.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁹⁰ Quoted in Plutschow, “Is Poetry a Sin? Honjisuijaku and Buddhism Versus Poetry,” 209.

²⁹¹ LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan*, 7-8.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

The Truth is silence, inexplainable in words.
Transmitting words and speeches
Are the *Zen* of illusion.²⁹⁴

And the semi-mythological Bodhidharma (d. 534?), who is said to have brought Buddhism from India to China, is attributed with the idea that is a “special transmission outside the scriptures.” Subsequent commentaries on Bodhidharma’s writings suggest that the use of language should be avoided in Zen, and in the Sōtō school in particular, “language was considered sinful because it emanated from intellectual activities and human consciousness, all of which had to be avoided in order to attain enlightenment.”²⁹⁵ The kind of literature which was most closely tied to Zen training was language that tried to “undo itself” using paradoxes, tautologies, oxymorons, misdirection and duplicity – as in the kōan collections.²⁹⁶

Some kōans, such as Case 40 and Case 43 from the *Mumonkan (Gateless Gate)* explicitly call attention to the “delusions” of language. In Case 40, Master Hyakujo was looking to nominate one of his monks to head a new monastery, so he placed a jar of drinking water on the ground and asked his monks what he would call it if not a water pitcher. While one monk says “you cannot call it a wooden stick,” another monk walks up and kicks over the pitcher. He is rewarded with a new temple to lead. The commentary on the kōan says that “you cannot use words and you cannot not use words,” which kōan scholar Steven Heine interprets as “don’t speak and don’t remain silent!”²⁹⁷

Some of the more extreme reactions against the potential attachment to language gave the Zen school notoriety. Despite having lectured upon the *Diamond Sūtra* extensively, Teshan Hsüan-chien (780-865) burned all his scholarship on it when he believed that his attachment to his own commentaries was hindering his spiritual progress.²⁹⁸ “Seeing the need to be rid of the intellect,” other practitioners of Zen burned images of the Buddha and used the sūtras for toilet paper.²⁹⁹ These bizarre behaviours were supposed to demonstrate that Zen practitioners were “far removed from the stultifying influences of intellect;” a reaction

²⁹⁴ Plutschow, "Is Poetry a Sin? Honjisuijaku and Buddhism Versus Poetry," 216. Emphasis in original.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 207.

²⁹⁶ Heine, 20.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 18.

²⁹⁸ Katuski Sekida, *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan, the Gateless Gate; Hekiganroku, the Blue Cliff Record* (New York; Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1996), 93-96.

²⁹⁹ Wawrytko, 363.

against what they saw to be the over-intellectualization of Zen practice.³⁰⁰ These infamous events came to characterize the Zen school so that even modern Zen master Shin'ichi Hisamatsu confirmed this stereotype: "from the Zen perspective, scriptures are nothing but scraps of paper for wiping up filth."³⁰¹

In translation of Zen to Western audiences, the idea that language is extraneous to true "Zen experience" is widespread. Following what they perceived as a duality between language and silence, the majority of English-language texts on Zen³⁰² take the position that the experience of enlightenment transcends language.³⁰³ In an important essay on the status of language in Zen Buddhism, the religious studies professor Dale S. Wright argues against this pervasive notion of an "anti-language doctrine." Wright puts this claim into historical context and re-evaluates its efficacy in light of the "linguistic turn" in contemporary Western thought.³⁰⁴ That is to say, Wright suspects the interpretation that the enlightenment experience transcends language may be a product of Western thought at the time when Zen became popular in the West rather than a simple importation of Asian thought.

The texts Wright surveys suggest that enlightenment is an "immediate, intuitive grasp of reality," a kind of "direct perception" without the "mediating effects" of language.³⁰⁵ On this view, such "direction perception" would offer a liberation from linguistic and cultural conditioning, transcending all conceivable bounds.³⁰⁶ As such, language is taken as a distortive interruption between the knowing subject and an objective reality, a "social filter" which generates "false consciousness."³⁰⁷ The view put forward by these English language texts on Zen reflects an instrumental theory of language: a tool that we can pick up and put down at will, something that we act on but which does not act on us reciprocally. This view assumes that language is an optional aspect of human experience, that there is a fundamental separation between "language" and "experience." In such a duality, "experience" has the upper hand.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, *Critical Sermons of the Zen Tradition: Hisamatsu's Talks on Linji*, trans. Christopher Ives and Tokiwa Gishin (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 24.

³⁰² According to Dale S. Wright, up until his time of writing (1992). Wright cites, as particular examples, Erich Fromm's seminal 1960 essay "Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism," and T. P. Kasulis' influential 1981 book *Zen Action: Zen Person*.

³⁰³ Dale S. Wright, "Rethinking Transcendence: The Role of Language in Zen Experience," *Philosophy East and West* 42, no. 1 (1992): 114.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 113.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 114.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

We can see some of these ideas at work in the poetry of Gary Snyder, who came of age as Zen Buddhism was reaching the height of popularity in the West. Texts such as Erich Fromm's 1960 essay "Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism," which Wright focuses on, would have made a significant influence on the ideas about Zen for Snyder's generation. Literary critic Jody Norton describes Snyder's poetic project as one which attempts "to make possible a kind of immediate knowing that language is not theoretically designed to produce,"³⁰⁸ and scholar Jonathan Stalling claims that Snyder "envisions a poetics that leaves language itself behind."³⁰⁹ In the Afterword to the 1990 reissue of *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, Gary Snyder himself comments that:

There are poets who claim that their poems are made to show the world through the prism of language. Their project is worthy. There is also the work of seeing the world *without* any prism of language, and to bring that seeing *into* language. The latter has been the direction of most Chinese and Japanese poetry.

In his 2004 essay "Reflections on My Translations of the T'ang Poet Han Shan," Snyder makes a similar claim for the essence of a Zen poem as being beyond language:

The translator who wishes to enter the creative territory must make an intellectual and imaginative jump into the mind and world of the poet, and no dictionary will make this easier. In working with the poems of Han-shan, I have several times had a powerful sense of apprehending auras of nonverbal meaning and experiencing the poet's own mind-of-composition.³¹⁰

In a counter argument to such ideas, Wright demonstrates that language not only sets the stage for and gives shape to the enlightenment experience in Zen, but that the most important accounts of the enlightenment experience in Zen are also linguistically articulated.³¹¹ Even

³⁰⁸ Jody Norton, "The Importance of Nothing: Absence and Its Origins in the Poetry of Gary Snyder," *Contemporary Literature* 28, no. 1 (1987): 42.

³⁰⁹ Stalling, 98.

³¹⁰ Gary Snyder, "Reflections on My Translations of the T'ang Poet Han Shan," in *The Poem Behind the Poem: Translating Asian Poetry*, ed. Frank Stewart (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2004), 223. Of course, the idea that enlightenment or "true experience" transcends language also implies that it transcends culture. This view no doubt downplayed the status of Zen as a foreign cultural product and aided its transmission into the West, enabling advocates like Snyder to draw parallels between his "Zen experience" and that of Hanshan (a legendary figure who belonged to a different cultural, linguistic context over one thousand years ago).

³¹¹ Wright, 134.

though the enlightenment experience may be described by practitioners of Zen as an extraordinary state, impossible to describe in language, this does not mean that the enlightenment experience therefore has “no significant relation to language.”³¹² As Wright suggests, “language is always in some way inadequate to experience,” even as it is inseparable from it.³¹³

Rather than an attempt to cast off language altogether, Wright argues that the Zen emphasis on silence serves as an important “other,” allowing practitioners to bring a more distanced and detached perspective to language.³¹⁴ The acute awareness of silence in Zen only complements the acute awareness of language that the tradition also displays.³¹⁵ It is not surprising, then, that a tradition built around silent meditation is also a tradition that encompasses an interesting and complex rhetorical practice.³¹⁶ There is even an extensive and highly nuanced vocabulary in East Asian cultures to describe the “ineffability” of the enlightenment experience.³¹⁷ In other words, silence is not the cause of languagelessness. Wright concludes that the idea that Zen experience transcends language was a naïve interpretation of anti-language rhetoric on the part of Westerners who did not realize that such linguistically articulated denouncements were more important than the message being carried.³¹⁸

Wright goes on to claim that there is a particular kind of rhetoric unique to the Zen school (which might be best encountered in the *kōan* collections). This highly developed rhetorical tradition is characterized by “a persistent refusal to talk about ordinary matters in ordinary ways,” so that “the discursive practice of ‘talking about,’ that is, propositional, representational discourse, was resolutely avoided.”³¹⁹ The effect of Zen rhetoric is one of estrangement and disorientation, which, nevertheless, is designed to lead a listener to a sudden experience of enlightenment.³²⁰ In other words, Zen rhetoric puts significant emphasis on creative and unconventional language use. Those who take up training in Zen are enculturated into using language in surprising and revealing ways.³²¹ The process of

³¹² *Ibid.*, 135.

³¹³ *Ibid.*

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 126-27.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 124-25.

enculturation, Wright argues, does not presume to transcend language in any way but effects a “fundamental reorientation” within language. Zen training consists, in part, of enculturating practitioners to a level of fluency in “distinctive, nonobjectifying, rhetorical practices.”³²²

In the lineages of Zen Buddhism there is indeed a strong history of poet-monks and poet-priests, and Zen masters of medieval China were renowned for their “strange words” as much as their “mysterious deeds.”³²³ While not considering himself as a poet, the Sōtō school founder Dōgen famously used words in unorthodox and creative ways (deliberately misinterpreting established doctrines at times).³²⁴ In his master work the *Shōbōgenzō*, for example, he refers to followers of the Buddha as “a few bags of skin” and monks as “those in cloud robes and mist sleeves,” capturing the teachings of no-self and impermanence, respectively. Religious studies scholar Hee-Jin Kim summarizes Dōgen’s approach in this way: “To Dōgen[,] the manner of expression is as important as the substance of thought; in fact, the experimentation with language is equivalent to the making of reality.”³²⁵ For Dōgen, Kim writes, “language and symbols circumscribe; but as living forces, they are dynamic enough to open up, constantly re-expressing, renewing and casting-off, so as to unfold new horizons of their own life.”³²⁶

In order to understand why such language, and by extension, poetry has been regarded with such scrutiny in Zen Buddhism, it is necessary to elucidate something of the Mahāyāna philosophy of language. While Buddhism is primarily a soteriological path towards liberation from suffering, liberation from suffering can only be achieved by insight into the “ultimate nature of things” – an insight which must be indicated toward through language.³²⁷ Just as Wright points out that a silent practice like meditation would be unintelligible within the Zen tradition unless its purpose and shape was first framed by language, an adherent of Buddhism cannot achieve liberation from suffering without first knowing of the Buddhist path through language. Nevertheless, language is considered to have great capacity to delude a person, and prevent them from achieving insight into the “ultimate nature of things.”³²⁸

³²² Ibid., 133.

³²³ Heine, 16.

³²⁴ David Loy, *Awareness Bound and Unbound: Buddhist Essays* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 32.

³²⁵ Hee-Jin Kim, “‘The Reason of Words and Letters’: Dōgen and Kōan Language,” in *Dōgen Studies*, ed. William LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 60.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Garfield, 298.

³²⁸ Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*, 40-41.

Concern for the “delusional” capacities of language are due to the belief that language has a heavy hand in determining how “reality” appears.³²⁹ That is to say, language produces what one takes to be reality.³³⁰ This becomes a hindrance to the Buddhist path because conventional ways of perceiving reality do not afford one insight into the “ultimate nature of things.”³³¹

According to Buddhist thought, our instinct is to take words and concepts to be reflective of a pre-existing reality, as if the concepts and categories with which we make sense of the world were disclosed to us by the world itself. This happens because we assume that our linguistic categories, our most basic means of apprehending the world, also bear implicit philosophical truths. According to a contemporary philosopher of Buddhism, David Loy, “there is a metaphysics, although an inconsistent one, inherent in our everyday view” which is a product of conventional language patterns.³³² The “common sense metaphysics” identified by Loy includes the ideas that nouns represent discrete, self-existent entities, that objects are passive and inanimate, remaining unchanged unless acted upon by a subject, and that each autonomous and independent entity interacts with others by way of causation.³³³

The Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, writing in the second century CE, was responding to this “common sense metaphysics” when he composed the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.³³⁴ Throughout his masterwork, Nāgārjuna relentlessly deconstructs assertions on the nature of reality, teasing out subject from predicate, motion from spatial-temporal location, trying to understand the exact event that commonplace linguistic constructions claim to refer to.

If motion is in the mover,
There would have to be a twofold motion:
One in virtue of which it is a mover,
And one in virtue of which it moves.³³⁵

³²⁹ Garfield, 307.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*, 40.

³³² *Awareness Bound and Unbound: Buddhist Essays*, 36.

³³³ Ibid., 48; *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*, 74.

³³⁴ *Awareness Bound and Unbound: Buddhist Essays*, 37.

³³⁵ Nāgārjuna quoted in Garfield, 7.

Do substantive objects precede motion? Is the person going really different from the motion of going which is also different from the place of going to? His conclusion is that many of our conventional linguistic constructions are philosophically unintelligible.³³⁶

Nāgārjuna proceeds to propose that there are two truths: a conventional reality and an ultimate reality. Conventional reality is that which is created by a culture's linguistic categories and conceptual understandings, and is the agreed-upon consensus of "the way things are" that makes daily life intelligible. Conventional reality can be seen as equivalent to "common sense metaphysics," a nominal reality produced by and dependent on the functions of language. Ultimate reality, on the other hand, is free from all concepts and categories. It is not the characteristics we impute to things of the world, but "the nature they have from their own side."³³⁷ However, conventional and ultimate reality are not two different ontological realms but mutually reinforcing:

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
Liberation is not achieved.³³⁸

Conventional reality is thus not to be disparaged as it is a necessary part of human life, even if it is a "lower" truth. Moreover, conventional reality is not insignificant, "as it determines the character of the phenomenal world"³³⁹ – that is to say, it determines what counts as real for us.³⁴⁰ In this way, language is a direct and powerful force in shaping what we consider reality. Nāgārjuna argues, however, that conventional reality is ultimately characterized by *śūnyatā*: emptiness. That is to say, conventional reality does not correspond to ultimate reality; language does not truly refer to an external reality which it assumes to describe. It is ultimately groundless. In its dualizing of substance and attribute, subject and predicate, permanence and change, it deludes us as to the true nature of things.³⁴¹

Von Sturmer shows his awareness of Nāgārjuna's two truths in the poem "Haryo and a Blown Hair Against a Sword:"

³³⁶ Loy, *Awareness Bound and Unbound: Buddhist Essays*, 35.

³³⁷ Garfield, 298.

³³⁸ Nāgārjuna quoted in *ibid.*

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 307.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁴¹ Loy, *Awareness Bound and Unbound: Buddhist Essays*, 37.

In this dream world
of trucks and pigeons
and income tax,
reality becomes
the beeping of a horn
the fluttering of wings
the adding up of figures ...³⁴²

In this poem, von Sturmer equates pigeons, trucks and income tax. It is clear that income tax is a human conceptual framework, but one might have thought that pigeons were self-existing beings that inhabit a realm independent of language and thus pre-exist human conceptual categories. By equating them, von Sturmer suggests that “pigeons” do not exist independently of our conceptual framework of them, and thus like “income tax,” they are merely nominal. Von Sturmer then asserts that the empty concepts of pigeons, trucks and income tax shape what is real for us, dictating our interpretation of sound and movement (“the beeping of a horn,” “the fluttering of wings”). Finally, he asserts that the provisional reality of pigeons, trucks, and income tax is ultimately illusory: “In this dream world...” From the nirvāṇic perspective, dichotomizing thought operates as if a dream.

However, Buddhist soteriology does affirm the possibility of experiencing ultimate reality. Part of the path to liberation is coming to apprehend “things-in-themselves” without the overlay of distorting dualistic fictions. Buddhist soteriology promises that one can deconstruct or “de-automatize” the perceptual process which operates via conventional reality, leading one toward an altered perception of self and environment. *Nirvāṇa* itself, it has been suggested, is “the cessation and non-functioning of perceptions as signs of named things.”³⁴³ That is to say, the highest point on the Buddhist path is one in which “perceptions do not refer to any hypostatized object ‘behind’ the percept.”³⁴⁴ It is our common sense

³⁴² Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 35.

³⁴³ Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*, 54.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

understanding that “makes the world *saṃsāra*³⁴⁵ for us, and it is this *saṃsāra* that Nāgārjuna is concerned to deconstruct.”³⁴⁶

So although language inherently produces dualisms, separating subject from predicate, motion from locale, and hypostatizing processes into discrete self-existing objects, particular uses of language can overcome this tendency. Rather than obscuring the truth, language in Zen might be better understood as “the truth that we need to realize.”³⁴⁷ If concepts, metaphors and parables are not just instrumental, if they do not just communicate or manifest the truth, then it is those word-objects themselves that practitioners of Buddhism need to awaken to.³⁴⁸ Thus for Wright and for the contemporary philosopher of Buddhism David Loy, “awakening” in the Buddhist tradition is not a movement away from language but *towards* it.

The idea that language can be a source of delusion (or enlightenment) puts a unique demand on the contemporary Zen poet. How can one be sure to use language in a way that has soteriological value, rather than swamping one in further delusion? How can one use poetry and other practices of Zen (such as meditation) in mutually affirming ways? How can one navigate the legacy of tensions between Zen and poetry including the “warnings within [contemporary] Buddhist discourse about mere scholasticism and the futility of fingers pointing to the moon”?³⁴⁹ Philip Whalen, one of the most well-known writers of Zen-influenced poetry in the West, wrote less and less the further he became involved in Zen training, eventually stopping writing altogether.³⁵⁰

Ernest Fenollosa may be considered the first Westerner to forge a new poetics in response to the demands of Buddhist philosophy. While living in Japan, Fenollosa had studied Buddhism and converted under a Tendai teacher.³⁵¹ His essay “The Chinese Written

³⁴⁵ *Saṃsāra* denotes the experience of unliberated existence which is characterized by unsatisfactoriness and suffering. Meaning “rebirth,” *saṃsāra* refers to the cycle of death and rebirth which all unenlightened beings are subject to. Olson, 202.

³⁴⁶ Loy, *Awareness Bound and Unbound: Buddhist Essays*, 36. Nāgārjuna’s translator and commentator Jay Garfield supports this idea when he writes that “the difference – such as it is – between the conventional and the ultimate is a difference in the way that phenomena are conceived/perceived.” Garfield, 320.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff, 15. The “finger pointing at the moon” is an idea introduced in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* which suggests that language can never be the ultimate truth but can only gesture towards it.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁵¹ “Fenollosa, Ernest Francisco, 1853-1908,” in *Literature Online biography* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 2006).

Character as a Medium for Poetry” is underpinned by Tendai and Kegon Buddhism, even though his most clear allusions to Buddhist thought were subsequently edited out by Ezra Pound.³⁵² He proposed that the ideogram demonstrated the concept of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), being “incapable of hypostatization” as it was composed of other pictograms.³⁵³ As an aggregate, the ideogram would demonstrate the interrelatedness of signification and negate the idea of an autonomous monadic word. Fenollosa also idealized “vivid, strong, transitive verbs,”³⁵⁴ for their capacity to embody *antiya* (impermanence). For Fenollosa, these particular poetic techniques would actually “mimic” nature’s own “infinitely interpenetrating flux.”³⁵⁵

Later in the twentieth century, there would develop a group of Western Buddhist writers who would forge poetic projects based on an interrogation of conventional language use. Often taking inspiration from Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, these poets deconstruct the sense-making properties of everyday language. The editors of *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry* refer to Leslie Scalapino, Alan Davies, Charles Stein, Norman Fischer and Armand Schwerner forming a category of poets who demonstrated similar deconstructive techniques in their dissolution of conventional distinctions (noumena/phenomena, reading/writing, language/world).³⁵⁶ By breaking through the “temporal and spatial hegemonies of narrative,” these writers beckon the reader toward the ultimate emptiness of language: a realm of “open possibility.”³⁵⁷

The avant-garde does seem to hold a particular significance in Zen, as transcending established poetic forms supposedly displays a freedom of spirit which results from subtle enlightenment.³⁵⁸ Sinologist Halvor Eifring notes that innovation of poetic form is a primary

³⁵² Ezra Pound’s editorial influence on Fenollosa’s poetics has been so extensive that Jonathan Stalling’s 2009 essay “The Emptiness of Patterned Flux: Ernest Fenollosa’s Buddhist Essay ‘The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry’” was the first to read Fenollosa’s essay in relation to his Buddhist studies and practice.

³⁵³ Stalling, 52.

³⁵⁴ Laszlo Géfin, *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 19.

³⁵⁵ Stalling, 48. Fenollosa was motivated in this endeavour by a modernist drive to find an ideal poetic form “that would adequately depict the isomorphic nature of reality,” which Pound saw as the creation of a “scientific” poetry (Gefin, xvi). It should be noted that, “scientific” or religiously-informed, the poetic movement initiated by Fenollosa’s essay and Pound’s editorial and promotional work owed a great debt to the T’ang Dynasty poetic forms which also embodied Buddhist elements. Imagism’s omission of the egoic “I,” for example, can be seen as corresponding to the doctrine of *anātman* (no-self), the mimicry of the perceiving act as corresponding to meditative clarity, and the phenomenal world being a focus of attention for both.

³⁵⁶ Johnson and Paulenich, xix.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Eifring, 243.

reason that Wang Wei's (699-761) poetry has been regarded as Zennist, despite his poetry displaying no explicit links to Zen or even Buddhism.³⁵⁹ We also hear about this avant-garde "freedom of spirit" in Lucien Stryk's translations of Zen poetry for Western audiences. In his collected essays, *Encounter with Zen*, Stryk suggests that technique and form have very little to do with Zen poetry, because those who "did not think of themselves as 'poets' at all" could produce the poems which possessed the most "Zen spirit."³⁶⁰ Wright, for his part, suggests that the "strange words and mysterious deeds" of Zen masters, while a radical break from normal language use and behaviour, itself became a tradition within Zen institutions which novice monks would be required to imitate.³⁶¹

Bringing the discussion to Richard von Sturmer, one does not find the radical experimentation with language that would deconstruct it in a Nāgārjunian fashion or riddle it with paradox, oxymoron and tautology in the manner of a kōan. However, I see his poetry as exemplifying Nāgārjuna's insistence that conventional truth is not to be disfavoured in relation to ultimate truth,³⁶² since even the enlightened require conventional reality of everyday language if they are to move about in the world. The "daily consciousness" of *samsāra* is not to be rejected, von Sturmer affirms, but neither is his poetry simply an expression of *samsāra*, as that would not address the Zen poet's imperative to write soteriological literature.

What von Sturmer does do is include apophatic markers which alert the reader of her need to relinquish belief in the efficacy of discriminatory thinking. As a rhetorical device, apophasis works by suggestion in von Sturmer's poetry to assert the ineffability of the absolute. Similar to the use of apophasis by Dōgen and earlier Buddhist thinkers, von Sturmer's apophasis suggests that in order to apprehend the ultimate, one must abandon dualistic thought processes. As I will argue, the repeated use of the referential function in von Sturmer's poetry to affirm the phenomenal world invites the reader to commune with phenomena in a non-thinking meditative way, thereby relegating discriminatory thinking to a provisional role. Since according to religious studies scholar J. P. Williams, meditation is itself an apophatic activity,³⁶³ it becomes the basis for von Sturmer's demonstration of how the reader can undertake their own inquiry into the "true nature of things."

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 237-43.

³⁶⁰ Stryk, 22.

³⁶¹ Wright, 125.

³⁶² Garfield, 299.

³⁶³ Williams, 44.

Zen Apophasis

As we have seen, the way that Zen literature guards itself against the possibility of confining reality to the limits of language has been interpreted by some as constituting an “anti-language doctrine,” and perhaps, some of the more extreme acts such as burning of sūtras do fit this characterization. However, this same tradition, extremists notwithstanding, might be more positively viewed as a type of Zen apophasis.³⁶⁴ A common rhetorical device in poems, kōans, writings of masters and other forms of Zen literature, apophasis functions to assert the ineffability of ultimate reality. It enables one to speak of spiritual experience at the same time that it questions the circumscription of reality by language. Zen apophasis suggests that linguistic patterns are necessarily restricted in scope and that the unenlightened are thus not “wrong” in their perceptions, but excessively limited.³⁶⁵ What is to be cast-off is not language itself but an attachment to artificial limitations.³⁶⁶ If it is by our attempts to make ultimate reality conform to language and logic that we mystify it,³⁶⁷ then apophasis is the rhetorical tool to show that whatever we have just said, ultimate reality is *not that*.

We have already encountered Nāgārjuna’s radical deconstruction, which is a mode of apophasis. His technique of repeatedly denying each new statement in the manner of the “Four Negations” or *catuṣkoṭi*³⁶⁸ suggests that there are no words that can describe the absolute. However, in von Sturmer’s kind of apophasis, it is not that there are no words which can describe the absolute, but there are no words that can describe the absolute completely. Von Sturmer’s kind of apophasis, like those of the examples which follow this paragraph, is a Sinitised version of apophasis. According to Williams, this Sinitic apophasis developed in opposition to Nāgārjuna’s by way of two main influences: firstly, Yogācāra³⁶⁹

³⁶⁴ My suggestion that the Zen’s school’s “anti-language doctrine” might better be viewed as a type of apophasis does not mean to discredit the very real fears that poets have faced when their particular Zen communities have expounded something closer to an anti-language doctrine. Some contemporary teachers may still advocate an “anti-language” view, and Wright’s assertion that as of 1991 nearly all English-language texts on Zen propose a duality between language and experience certainly suggests this possibility. It is only with an overview of history that one can survey the range of Zen interpretations on the ineffability of enlightenment, and claim a distinction between “anti-language” attitudes and apophatic modes.

³⁶⁵ Wawrytko, 350-52.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 366.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 354.

³⁶⁸ A dialectical apparatus that has been important in the Madhyamaka school. For example: All things exist. All things do not exist. All things both exist and do not exist. All things neither exist nor do not exist.

³⁶⁹ One of the two principal philosophical schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the other being Madhyamaka.

scholars who were concerned to counter overly-negative readings of Nāgārjuna’s position, and secondly, the Taoist “reverence for Nature’s Way” and meditative practices.³⁷⁰ These influences, combined with the strong tradition of Taoist apophasis, helped to develop a more “positive” apophasis in which kataphasis has a role.

This “positive” Sinitic apophasis became a popular mode of poetry for Ch’an practitioners, possibly due to the “inherent suitability” of poetry for communicating the ineffable.³⁷¹ Apophatic gestures were especially prominent in “enlightenment poems,” such as in the following poem by Su Shi (1036–1101)³⁷² which was said to have been presented to his master Tung-lin Ch’ang-tsung (1025-1091) following his enlightenment:³⁷³

The voices of the river valley are the [Buddha’s] wide and long tongue,
The form of the mountains is nothing other than his pure body.
Through the night, eighty-four thousand verses.
On another day, how can I tell them to others?³⁷⁴

Another example of a poem which culminates in an apophatic gesture comes from Six Dynasties³⁷⁵ poet T’ao Yüan-ming (365-427), a “transitional figure” between early Ch’an Buddhism and Taoism:³⁷⁶

The mountain air is lovely in the setting sun,
With flocks of birds returning together.
Though here there is a fundamental truth,
When I try to explain it the words disappear.³⁷⁷

Both poems exhibit a classic apophatic structure: the first two (or three) lines describe the poet’s sense of communion with the absolute, and the last line (or two lines) deny the

³⁷⁰ Williams, 48-49.

³⁷¹ Wawrytko, 341.

³⁷² Also commonly called by his Buddhist name, Su Tungpo.

³⁷³ According to Dōgen in his essay *Keisei Sanshoku* (*The Sounds of Valley Streams, the Forms of Mountains*) within the *Shōbōgenzō*.

³⁷⁴ Gudo Nishijima and Chodo Cross, *Shōbōgenzō: The True Dharma-Eye Treasury*, vol. 1 (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007), 110.

³⁷⁵ c. 220 - 589 CE

³⁷⁶ Wawrytko, 356. That is to say, he kept close companies with members of both religious groups.

³⁷⁷ Quoted in Yoshitaka, 54. According to Yoshitaka (55), his poem below is read as an example of Zen apophasis by Sung writer Shih Tê-ts’ao in his work *Po-ch’uang chih-kuo lu*.

efficacy of that first statement. There is an assertion, and then a claim for the impossibility of assertion. The tension between the assertion and the impossibility of its efficacy creates a middle way between complete silence and the proliferation of language, not attempting to reject literature but neither promising it total soteriological capacity. As we shall see, von Sturmer's type of apophasis is similar in that it takes a middle path between total negation and radical kataphasis.

Von Sturmer's apophasis first presents itself as a silence in the face of the phenomenal world:

cu-ru-cu cu-cu
the mourning dove calls
out of the darkness
I can think of no response –
all my words have gone away³⁷⁸

In this excerpt, he suggests that no linguistically-formulated response will be an adequate answer to the call of the dove. Like the two poems above, the inadequacy of words comes in the last one-two lines. Of course, von Sturmer's words do formulate a response, and in the manner of apophasis, they undermine themselves. In contrast to the declarative statements of "just-is-ness" quoted in the previous chapter, there are fewer normative rhetorical guiding structures in this excerpt, which gives the writing a more tentative and unassuming tone. Like Su Shih and T'ao Yüan-ming, the conventions of poetic humility mean that von Sturmer frames the impossibility of articulating the ineffable as a personal lapse: "all my words have gone away"; "When I try to explain it the words disappear"; "On another day, how can I tell them to others?"

That von Sturmer's poet's answer is not comparable to the dove's call exemplifies the Zen belief in the salvific power of the phenomenal world.³⁷⁹ The Buddhature that is commonly attributed to plants, animals, rocks, and other non-human beings in the Zen tradition is often interpreted to mean that they are spiritually superior to humans.³⁸⁰ Natural entities such as trees and rivers are often thought to already possess what humans only

³⁷⁸ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 19.

³⁷⁹ This is also a common thread in von Sturmer's Zen-influenced poetry, usually pertaining to animals: "curled up/the cat is always/at the centre/of herself" (*Suchness*, 78).

³⁸⁰ James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*, 66.

partially possess, so while humans must actualize their own Buddhature through activities such as Zen meditation, natural entities are already instantiating the way of the Buddha by their very being.³⁸¹ In this way, contemplation of the natural world becomes a way of following the Buddhist path.³⁸² Since the dove already exemplifies Buddhahood, the poet's apophatic response suggests that his own human, languaged-voice would not be an adequate response, and that he would do best to meet the dove in meditative silence. Since meditation is, for Zen, the primary way that humans must realize their inherently awakened nature, the poet's resolve toward a meditative silence signifies an appropriate response.

However, meditative contact with the phenomenal world in Zen also has a salvific power in that it can "undo" one's "common sense metaphysics." While one's perceptions of the phenomenal world can be a potential source of delusion if one regards the world as a series of discrete self-existing objects operating causally in time and space, the Zen Buddhist tradition also claims that the phenomenal world is a means to liberation. More particularly, it is through meditation on the phenomenal world that it can become "ultimate reality," the "object" of one's enlightened perception.

According to J. P. Williams in her book *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*, meditation is an inherently apophatic activity because it supposes "a movement beyond the realms which may be described with more or less accuracy within our conceptual/linguistic frameworks, towards a direct experience of the deepest Reality."³⁸³ Meditation is a mode of inquiry into the ultimate nature of things, but a negative one, in that conventional thought processes must be made provisional if one is to discover the nature of things "from their own side." If we take Jay Garfield's definition of "ultimate truth" as "the way things turn out to be when we subject them to analysis with the intention of discovering the nature they have from their own side,"³⁸⁴ the kind of "analysis" that meditation makes possible is not a rigorous linguistic deconstruction but a not-knowing and non-thinking.

Williams suggests that apophasis can be defined by a movement in which

knowledge is transformed into ignorance, the theology of concepts into contemplation, dogmas into experience of ineffable mysteries. It is, moreover, an existential theology

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² This explains why so many apophatic poems are written from the perspective of a poet contemplating the natural world.

³⁸³ Williams, 44.

³⁸⁴ Garfield, 298.

involving man's entire being, which sets him upon the way of union, which obliges him to be changed...³⁸⁵

Likewise, meditation might be described as a movement from knowledge to ignorance, and a practice and mode of inquiry which requires one's entire being. As an experiential mode of inquiry, meditation resists the temptation "to limit oneself to the intellect," and thereby, the notion that intellectual comprehension is the "beginning and end of the Buddhist Dharma."³⁸⁶

Advocates of meditation would often convey the importance of this experiential mode of inquiry by referring to it through apophatic gestures. "It is almost impossible to talk about Buddhism," writes Shunryu Suzuki. "So not say anything, just to practice it, is the best way."³⁸⁷ He prefaces his lectures with phrases such as "I do not feel like speaking after zazen. I feel the practice is enough."³⁸⁸ Meditation, in his view, is a more secure way than speech of affirming the vastness and impenetrableness of the absolute. Such apophatic gestures serve to address the "linguistic and conceptual liabilities of discussing enlightenment," a difficult task which those who sought to propagate the Dharma had to continually be mindful of.³⁸⁹ The tendency for adherents of Zen to privilege the intellectual over the experiential seems to be a constant problem, with the limitations of abstract learning customarily being referred to as a "painted rice cake." The "painted rice cake" cannot satisfy one's pervasive, bodily "hunger" for enlightenment since it is only food painted in a picture.³⁹⁰ Contemporary writers continue to emphasize the necessity of experiential enquiry: "for the realisation of Zen, practice is absolutely necessary;"³⁹¹ "Buddhism is not merely an intellectual experience, it is first and foremost an existential experience."³⁹²

Von Sturmer's way of addressing the "linguistic and conceptual liabilities of discussing enlightenment" is by re-directing the reader's attention away from intellectual abstractions

³⁸⁵ Lossky quoted in Williams, 10.

³⁸⁶ Wawrytko, 363.

³⁸⁷ Suzuki, 90.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 46.

³⁸⁹ Wawrytko, 345-46.

³⁹⁰ Gudo Nishijima and Chodo Cross, *Shōbōgenzō: The True Dharma-Eye Treasury*, vol. 2 (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2008), 343. The painted rice cake as representative of abstract theories and concepts was first formulated by Ch'an master Hsiang-yen Chih-hsien (circa 820-898) who, upon realizing the futility of his bookish learning, burns all of his notes. Dōgen, however, reclaims the meaning of the painted rice cake from something that served no purpose to half of the universe: the conceptual or mental side of reality. Much like Nāgārjuna's formulation of the Two Truths, Dōgen insists that without the concept of the rice cake one could never find "the real existence of rice cakes." (Nishijima and Cross vol. 1, 111; vol. 2, 343)

³⁹¹ Abe, 4.

³⁹² Wawrytko, 363.

and toward a meditative communion with the phenomenal world. He resolutely avoids any abstract and overarching statements about the world, and demonstrates the pointlessness of over-intellectualizing in the manner of kōan case 37 from the *Gateless Gate*:

A monk asked Jōshū [Chao-chou]³⁹³ why Bodhidharma came to China.
Jōshū said: “An oak tree in the garden.”³⁹⁴

In the kōan, the referential function of language is used to bring the novice monk out of speculation and invite him to commune with the oak tree in a non-thinking meditative state. Jōshū’s deictic statement³⁹⁵ encourages the monk to relinquish myriad thoughts about the meaning of Zen, and the indirection between the question and the answer implicitly suggests the futility of logical reasoning. In a similar way, von Sturmer takes abstract concepts of Buddhism and turns them into referential statements with concrete nouns and active verbs:

Animal Realm

increasing cold:
throughout the afternoon
a wasp keeps walking
around the rim of a cup [...]

Human Realm

on the ceiling
of a rented room
blue light flickers
from a black and white T.V.

Deva Realm [...]

³⁹³ Chao-chou Ts'ung-shen (778–897) was a Ch’an master famous for his paradoxical statements and strange gestures. In Reps’ translation of the *Gateless Gate*, his name is rendered in the Japanese transliteration “Jōshū.”

³⁹⁴ Reps, 123.

³⁹⁵ In other translations, the deictic mode is more clearly expressed. For example, Jōshū’s reply is sometimes figured as “the oak tree there in the garden,” or “the cypress tree there in the courtyard.”

black swan:
its eyes as red
as its beak³⁹⁶

The affirmation of phenomena in “The Six Realms” functions in much the same way as Jōshū’s oak tree. That is to say, von Sturmer’s sentences answer the intricate and abstract cosmological imaginary of *saṃsāra* with simple referential statements of commonplace events. In redirecting the reader’s attention to the phenomenal world, von Sturmer’s referential gesture suggests by way of implication that speculative thinking is futile because despite what one can say about it, ultimate reality is simply “not that”: all there is is a black swan or a TV in a rented room or a wasp traversing a cup. At the same time, since the state of enlightenment is an experiential mode, one’s “knowledge” of ultimate reality is only as good as can be actualized, so the ultimate “answer” can only be a swan or a TV or a wasp. And yet neither the swan, the TV or the wasp can capture ultimate reality in its entirety.

However, von Sturmer’s and Jōshū’s concise redirection of their reader or listener’s attention also brings under scrutiny the very words themselves. Since Zen rhetoric incorporates a range of non-linguistic gestures, it is significant that Jōshū chooses to use words to answer the monk’s question. Rather than leading the monk to the tree or pointing to the tree (which might be equally typical Zen responses), Jōshū’s statement says as much about language itself than it does about the “oak tree.” His words draw attention to themselves in order to show their own emptiness: they are *not* the oak tree itself and neither does the oak tree exist *as such*.

To explain this in a little more detail, we turn to Jay Garfield’s commentary on Nāgārjuna’s two truths again. Using the example of a table, Garfield explains that the table does not exist as such independently of our conceptualization of it, because apart from our culture’s particular use of a table, it may not appear as a unitary object at all. For example, it could be correctly seen as four sticks of wood and a flat slab waiting to be cut.³⁹⁷ Or, the arrangement of four sticks and a slab could be simply the intersection of the histories of some trees: an entirely temporary arrangement of matter.³⁹⁸ The table, then, “is a purely arbitrary slice of space-time chosen by us as the referent of a single name and not an entity demanding,

³⁹⁶ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 18-19.

³⁹⁷ Garfield, 89-90.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

on its own, recognition and a philosophical analysis to reveal its essence.”³⁹⁹ In other words, the table, just like the oak tree, lacks an independent character outside of our conceptualization of them; they have no inherent essence as an object without the human attribution of a bounded entity.

In the same way, von Sturmer’s repeated referential statements show themselves to be ultimately empty: the sentence itself is not a swan, a TV, or a wasp, and neither do swans, TVs or wasps exist as such independently of von Sturmer’s sentences. The title of von Sturmer’s book, “Suchness,” is a synonym for the Buddhist “ultimate reality,” so one might expect to find descriptions of ultimate truth inside. However, the book is largely populated by affirmations of phenomena, like this:

dry stones, wet stones
the eaves cast
a pale shadow⁴⁰⁰

red dragonflies
joined together
in the autumn wind⁴⁰¹

By affirming the conventional categories with which we understand the world to be populated by dragonflies, stones, plants, and so on, von Sturmer simultaneously draws the reader’s attention to those statements, concentrating the reader’s attention at the very place where phenomena are reified through language. This mode of negation depends on the saṃsāric language of conventional reality reflexively indicating the point at which it is merely nominal: the word itself is not a dragonfly or a stone, and neither are there any real “dragonflies” or “stones” that exist as such. Since the positing of phenomena is dependent on language, the constant affirmation of phenomena that we see in von Sturmer’s poetry amounts to a series of self-empty statements. In sum, von Sturmer’s poetry exhibits what Williams calls the “Chinese preference for expressing the radical negation through a radical affirmation of phenomena.”⁴⁰²

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 89-90.

⁴⁰⁰ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 40.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 59.

⁴⁰² Williams, 139.

Until now, my descriptions of the anti-language doctrine and Zen apophysis have roughly been operating with an instrumental notion of language: a delusional “screen,” which according to Nāgārjuna’s commentator Candrakīrti, must be stripped away.⁴⁰³ However, the instrumental view of language, by which language is “merely means” to ultimate reality, does not sit well with von Sturmer’s poetry. Although von Sturmer’s affirmation of phenomena does indeed intend to lead a reader towards a meditative communion with objects and animals, he does not suggest that words – although empty – are an arbitrary, human overlay that needs to be transcended. Instead, the pervasive sense of equanimity in his writing suggests that language exists in profound harmony with the world.

Von Sturmer’s approach to language mirrors his vision of the phenomenal world. More accurately, language, for von Sturmer, *is* a phenomenon like any other. In an interview, von Sturmer tells me that words are “living things,” which suggests that for him they exist as part of the infinite whole symbolized by Indra’s Net.⁴⁰⁴ In this, he follows a line of thought exemplified by Shingon school founder, Kūkai (779-835), who claims that the universe is a boundless text. Existing “spontaneously and permanently,” it is the ultimate text to which all other texts (sūtras, poems) refer.⁴⁰⁵ Language, in Kūkai’s imaginary, is thus not confined to spoken or written characters; it is also material things and events; the *dharma maṇḍala*⁴⁰⁶ is both the cosmic text of the world (the totality of all phenomena/events) and the teachings of Buddhism.⁴⁰⁷ These ideas are carried forward in Dōgen, for whom “every *dharma* is an expression of the Dharma.”⁴⁰⁸ For Dōgen, “observing the world around us is like reading a sutra...grass, trees, mountains, the moon, the sun, and so forth [are] all Buddhist sutras.”⁴⁰⁹ Translators Nishijima and Cross summarize Dōgen’s equation of language and phenomena thus: “In Buddhism, this world is the truth itself, so nature is a face of the truth. Nature is...manifesting the law of the universe every day.”⁴¹⁰

Von Sturmer’s vision of language as a phenomenon like any other is evident in the way he ascribes language to the non-human. In his encounter with the dove which I had

⁴⁰³ Hee-Jin Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking* (Ithaca: SUNY Press, 2006), 59.

⁴⁰⁴ Von Sturmer, “Personal Interview with Richard Von Sturmer.”

⁴⁰⁵ Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 275.

⁴⁰⁶ A *maṇḍala* is a visual representation of the entire universe; *dharma maṇḍala* is the ultimate scripture consisting of all things of the world as its letters.

⁴⁰⁷ Abé, 278-79.

⁴⁰⁸ Williams, 129. In other words, every phenomenon is an expression of the Buddhist truth

⁴⁰⁹ Nishijima and Cross, *Shōbōgenzō: The True Dharma-Eye Treasury*, 1, 341.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

quoted earlier in this section, the poet expects that he should respond to the dove's call. This shows that the poet acknowledges the dove's own embodied linguistic-expressive mode; it is an interlocutor. And since the dove is already instantiating its own Buddhature through its very being, the Zen practitioner knows that its vocalization is potentially a pedagogical moment that he or she should be attentive to. Von Sturmer's appreciation of the dove's linguistic-expressive gesture reflects Dōgen's "de-anthropocentricization" of language: since each being interprets the world through its own capacity for understanding, there are myriad perspectives of the infinite universe, and human language is only one of these.⁴¹¹

Dōgen's belief that sentient and insentient beings are constantly expressing themselves is what gives rise to the idea that the myriad dharmas are continuously expressing the Buddhist Dharma (since the Dharma is thought to be a true reflection of the workings of the universe). This is also what leads von Sturmer to say that the "way [of the Buddha] is everywhere; it's in a flight of geese passing overhead, in the motes of dust sparkling in a beam of sunlight, in the exclamations of two old friends who have not seen each other for many years."⁴¹² As well as actualizing the way of the Buddha through their very being, sentient and insentient non-human beings are "boundlessly selfless in their efforts to communicate [the Dharma] with us" and that we can only notice and understand their gestures if we ourselves become selfless.⁴¹³

Since, according to Dōgen's perspective, verbalization or writing is an authentically human expression of the Dharma,⁴¹⁴ language cannot be seen as a means to an end. In this very way, von Sturmer's affirmations of phenomena are not subordinate to the "end" of realizing ultimate reality. Even though words, like all other phenomena, are empty, this does not mean that they are transcended as one enters into a non-thinking communion with phenomena. They merely become provisional within the meditative mode of inquiry. In fact, it is exactly because words are just like any other phenomenon that they cannot become merely means: all phenomena are on equal footing in the jewel net of Indra.

Von Sturmer's affirmation of phenomena, then, constitutes a poetry not of instrumentalism but of "phenomenological exposition of the present moment."⁴¹⁵ That is to say, his poetry arises as an expression of his human way of being in the world: dry stones,

⁴¹¹ Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking*, 61-62.

⁴¹² Von Sturmer and Sorrentino.

⁴¹³ Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking*, 61.

⁴¹⁴ Williams, 162.

⁴¹⁵ Wawrytko, 371.

wet stones, shadows, dragonflies, autumn winds. The autobiographical framing of *Suchness*, combined with its realist affirmation of phenomena in identified locales (Rochester, Pakiri, Great Barrier Island), confirms that the poetry arises concomitantly with von Sturmer's embodied being in the world. His words, however socially constructed, are alive and active in his very body. Just as Kūkai locates the arising of language in the body as the voice,⁴¹⁶ and Dōgen sees language as flowing through the human existential bloodstream,⁴¹⁷ the language of von Sturmer's poetry is profoundly internal to his spiritual life even as it opens onto a collective space.

Perhaps the most important way in which von Sturmer asserts that language is coextensive with the harmonious whole is in his confirmation that the enlightened do not cast off language. Since *nirvāṇa* does not entail entering into another ontological realm, the enlightened still need to be able to operate as part of a human social world and thus still depend on language. As per our definition of *nirvāṇa* in the context of this thesis, those who have achieved enlightenment remain in the world, albeit with a radically altered perspective. Moreover, in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, the enlightened are required to aid the liberation of all other sentient beings, so continuing to participate in human social life is imperative. Dōgen emphasizes, therefore, that the true activities of Buddhas are the everyday ones of sleeping, eating, and drinking tea.⁴¹⁸ Or, as the Ten Oxherding Pictures show,⁴¹⁹ the enlightened go back to whatever they were doing before: "I go to the market with my wine bottle and return home with my staff."⁴²⁰

Von Sturmer's poem "Ummon's Staff Turns into a Dragon," humorously shows the nonduality between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*:

Ummon's staff is no less than
a magic wand.

With a single tap a toaster
turns into a toaster
and a teacup

⁴¹⁶ Abé, 278.

⁴¹⁷ Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking*, 64.

⁴¹⁸ Williams, 138.

⁴¹⁹ The Ten Oxherding Pictures, also called the Ten Bulls, is a twelfth-century Chinese commentary on the stages of enlightenment.

⁴²⁰ Reys, 147.

becomes a teacup.

Through the power of the staff
you can see in broad daylight
and receive the sounds
of insects
and small birds.⁴²¹

The nirvāṇic perspective, this poem suggests, is indistinguishable from the saṃsāric. What is to reveal the difference between a toaster and a toaster? A teacup and a teacup? The commentator of the tenth Oxherding Picture, “Into the World,” confirms that from the outside, his enlightenment is imperceptible: “the beauty of my garden is invisible.”⁴²² There is no special language to demonstrate one’s apprehension of ultimate reality because the definition of ultimate reality is itself “the cessation and non-functioning of perceptions as signs of named things.”⁴²³ It is impossible to tell from the outside whether a person is seeing a toaster as a substantive object with its own inherent essence or an empty category through which one particular manifestation of the world becomes reified.

In other words, saṃsāric discourse does not preclude the apprehension of ultimate reality. Rather, those who do see the world from an enlightened perspective use language with the full knowledge that its way of hypostatizing the world is shot through by emptiness, that such categorizations and conceptualization are merely provisional. As the Ch’an master Ch’ing-yüan (1067-1120) wrote in his famous enlightenment poem:

Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen, I said, “Mountains are mountains; water is water.” After I got an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, I said, “Mountains are not mountains; water is not water.” But now, having attained the abode of final rest [that is, Awakening], I say, “Mountains are really mountains; water is really water.”⁴²⁴

Ch’ing-yüan’s declarative statements of is-ness first issue from the standpoint of a discrete subject encountering a discrete object, to the declaration that phenomena are empty

⁴²¹ Von Sturmer, *Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose*, 32.

⁴²² Reps, 147.

⁴²³ Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*, 54.

⁴²⁴ Abe, 4.

of inherent existence, to the declaration that emptiness is itself empty.⁴²⁵ The double negative of the last declaration, in which emptiness is not reified as an absolute state of being but is seen as a property relative to the form of phenomena, allows for positive proliferation of form. In the manner of the Heart Sutra, which states the “form is emptiness and emptiness is form,”⁴²⁶ emptiness empties itself into the fullness of form. The third declaration is a radical affirmation of phenomena which is possible exactly because they are simultaneously fleeting, dependently arisen, empty. For the (unenlightened) reader, though, the third declaration looks nearly identical to the first: mountains are mountains, rivers are rivers.

In much the same way, it would be easy to overlook the soteriological capacity of von Sturmer’s poetry since it appears to be operating within a one-to-one relation with the saṃsāric social real: toasters are toasters, teacups are teacups. However, it is my conviction that von Sturmer uses the saṃsāric language of everyday reality to present a nirvāṇic perspective. Making no claim to awakening, his poetry quietly presents animals and objects with the clarity of “right seeing.”⁴²⁷ Von Sturmer’s simple declarative statements of is-ness, his phenomenological exposition of the present moment, confirm the nirvāṇic perspective: having no need to enter into abstract speculation about the true nature of the world, the poet simply observes stones, dragonflies, toasters and teacups in all their fullness and all their emptiness.

Apophysis, however, still plays a necessary role. Just as Su Shi’s enlightenment poem ends with an expression of the poet’s impossible task, von Sturmer’s task of presenting the world from the nirvāṇic perspective is an ongoing poetic challenge. In von Sturmer’s work, the silence that encircles the declarative statements of is-ness casts doubt over the possibility for each “fact” to completely articulate ultimate reality. With the fragment being the primary poetic unit of *Suchness*, each phenomenological exposition is part of a larger interplay between sound and silence. The fragment’s affirmation of phenomena in the present moment is simultaneously complete-in-itself but ultimately incomplete. If “apophysis is in some sense a validation of the soteriological need to speak of the divine, coupled with a repeated recognition that each attempt so to speak is not entirely successful,” then the fragment demonstrates this perfectly.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁵ Wawrytko, 372-74.

⁴²⁶ Edward Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), 162-63.

⁴²⁷ Here, I make reference to the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path. Although “Right Seeing” is not strictly one of the eight practices, the aspiration toward right seeing is certainly necessary in Buddhist soteriology in light of the delusional capabilities of mind and language.

⁴²⁸ Williams, 5.

Moreover, if von Sturmer's poetry is more than a series of beautiful images but an evocation of "preexisting correspondences" between poet and world,⁴²⁹ as I have suggested it is, then the silence that surrounds the fragments draws the reader towards meditation. The apophatic silence and semantic open-endedness operate as a blank space of meditation for the reader, allowing them to "resonate" with the nirvāṇic perspective of the poet. Writing within the Zen literary tradition which saw the worth of a poem as intimately bound up with the level of spiritual attainment achieved by its author, von Sturmer's poetry is a reflection its author's relationship with the world, a "metaphysics made concrete."⁴³⁰ The role of the reader in this tradition is conflated with that of the Zen student: artistic appreciation of a work written from the nirvāṇic perspective becomes meditation. Reading von Sturmer's poetry becomes a practice in one's own soteriological path to liberation.

⁴²⁹ Wawrytko, 347.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

Appendix

Below is a list of Richard von Sturmer's published literary works, in chronological order. It should be noted, however, that von Sturmer's poetry has also been published in many New Zealand journals and widely anthologized.

Songs of the Plague. Auckland, NZ: The Plague, 1978.

We Xerox Your Zebras. Auckland, NZ: Modern House, 1988.

A Network of Dissolving Threads. Auckland, NZ: Auckland University Press, 1991.

Images from the Center: Daily Life at an American Zen Center. Rochester, New York:
Rochester Zen Centre, 1998.

Suchness: Zen Poetry and Prose. Wellington, NZ: Headworx, 2005.

On the Eve of Never Departing. Auckland, NZ: Titus Books, 2009.

Book of Equanimity Verses. Auckland, NZ: Puriri Press, 2013.

This Explains Everything. Pokeno, NZ: Atanui Press, 2016.

Glossary

<i>anātman</i>	A fundamental tenet of Buddhism, translated from the Sanskrit as “no-self.” The conviction that there is no underlying essence to a person, no unchanging or autonomous substance. One of the three marks of existence, along with suffering and impermanence.
<i>anitya</i>	A basic tenet of Buddhism, one of the three marks of existence. Translated from the Sanskrit as impermanence, the doctrine holds that all things arise, change and pass away from one moment to the next.
Buddha	A Sanskrit epithet usually applied to the historical Siddhārtha Gautama, but attributable to any enlightened person.
Buddhahood	Similar to Buddhature, the potentiality for a person to become a Buddha.
Buddhanature	A term which denotes the potentiality for a person to become a Buddha. Dōgen, drawing off Chinese thinkers before him, famously universalized the concept of Buddhature to claim that beings as diverse as animals, plants, and rocks possessed Buddhature and thus were capable of enlightenment.
Ch’an	A distinctly Chinese school of Buddhism which has its roots in the Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. It developed during the Later Han dynasty (25-220 CE) and flourished in Six Dynasties (222-589).
<i>dhāraṇī</i>	Similar to a mantra, a magic formula which consists of syllables which have no immediate meaning. Believed to confer supernatural powers on the reciter.
<i>Dharma</i>	The teachings of the Buddha and the universal law that governs all things, the centrepiece of Buddhist soteriology. Usually, there is no capitalization to distinguish between Dharma and dharma; however, I use it in this thesis for clarity’s sake.
<i>dharma(s)</i>	The elements of existence, roughly equivalent to “phenomena” in the context of this thesis.

<i>dharma maṇḍala</i>	<i>Maṇḍala</i> is a visual representation of the entire universe; <i>dharma maṇḍala</i> is the ultimate scripture consisting of all things of the world as its letters.
Dōgen, Eihei (1200-1253)	Also called Dōgen Kigen Zenji, credited as the founder of Sōtō Zen. One of the most important thinkers of Zen Buddhism, he also sought to democratize Zen practice by abolishing the separation between laity and monks.
<i>dokusan</i>	Private meeting between a Zen student and teacher. Formal and ritualized, the brief meeting would allow the teacher to ascertain the extent of the student's enlightenment.
<i>gāthā</i>	Sometimes translated as "hymn," a short verse used to summarize the prose teachings of sūtras.
<i>haibun</i>	A Japanese literary form which employs a combination of prose and haiku.
Hua-yen	A Chinese school of Buddhism (Kegon in Japanese) which took the <i>Avataṃsaka Sūtra</i> as its core text. The school developed detailed theories of interdependence and interpenetration.
kōan	A literary genre particular to Zen Buddhism, a kōan is a paradoxical anecdote or riddle often presented as a record between a Zen master and an interlocutor.
Madhyamaka	Also called Mādhyamika, translated from the Sanskrit as "middle way." The school of Mahāyāna Buddhism founded by Nāgārjuna based on his <i>Mūlamadhyamakakārikā</i> (the Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way).
Mahāyāna Buddhism	Translated from the Sanskrit as "great vehicle," a school of Indian Buddhism which developed between 150 BCE and 100 CE. All schools of Buddhism in East Asian countries including China, Japan, and Tibet are loosely considered as Mahāyāna schools. Often considered alongside the other major school, Theravāda Buddhism, which is based on a canon of Pali scriptures and is spread through South-East Asian countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Laos.
mantra	A sacred sound or syllable thought to effect transformative power on the reciter.

medieval Japan	Height of Buddhist cultural power in Japan, approx. from end of Nara period (784) to beginning of Tokugawa Period (1600). According to Japanologist William LaFleur, an episteme in which the basic intellectual problems, authoritative texts and resources, and central symbols were all Buddhist.
Nāgārjuna (circa 150-250 CE)	Founder of the influential Madhyamaka school of Buddhism and the author of the <i>Mūlamadhyamakakārikā</i> (the Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way). His philosophy supposes itself as a middle way between eternalism and nihilism.
<i>nirvāṇa</i>	A Sanskrit term which, in Buddhism, means the end of suffering, desire, causation and rebirth.
<i>pratītya-samutpāda</i>	The doctrine of dependent origination, a middle way between self-causation and external causation. The doctrine holds that all phenomena are fundamentally interconnected, and thus nothing has an autonomous self-nature.
Rinzai	Japanese name for Ch'an master Lin-chi (died 866), one of the three major schools of Zen in Japan (the others being Sōtō and Ōbaku). Said to have greater emphasis on kōan training than other schools of Buddhism.
<i>saṃsāra</i>	A Sanskrit term which Buddhists equate with the pain and suffering of all non-liberated beings. Meaning "rebirth," it represents the karmic cycle that all non-liberated beings are subjected to.
<i>sangha</i>	The monastic order, and more generally the Buddhist community. One of the three refuges, the others being the Buddha and the Dharma.
<i>shih</i>	A generalized Chinese term for poetry. In the context of this thesis, it refers to a more specific poetic tradition which flourished in the T'ang Dynasty, modelled after the <i>Shih Ching (Book of Songs)</i> and <i>Ch'u Tz'u (Songs of the South)</i> .
<i>shikantaza</i>	A technique of meditation developed by the founder of Sōtō Zen Eihei Dōgen described as "just sitting."
Shingon	A school of esoteric Buddhism in Japan, founded by Kūkai (774-835)

Son	Korean translation of Ch’an/Zen, school of Buddhism brought to Korea during the Silla Dynasty (668-935).
Sōtō	Founded by Dōgen, one of three main schools of Zen in Japan (the others being Rinzai and Ōbaku). Often perceived as having a greater emphasis on meditation than other Zen schools.
Sung Dynasty	Following after the “Golden Age” of Buddhism in China, the Sung Dynasty 960-1279 was a period of intense literary production in which many works from the T’ang Dynasty were compiled, published, and written about.
<i>śūnyatā</i>	A Sanskrit term commonly translated as “emptiness” or “voidness” and a fundamental tenet in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The doctrine proposes that all entities lack inherent existence or essence. Madhyamaka philosophy equates <i>śūnyatā</i> with <i>tathatā</i> .
T’ang Dynasty	A period of great prosperity in China from 618-907, the “Golden Age” of Chinese Buddhist philosophy and art.
tanka	A Japanese poetic form of five lines which follows the syllabic pattern of 5-7-5-7-7. Also known as <i>waka</i> .
<i>tathatā</i>	A Sanskrit term used in Mahāyāna Buddhism, translated as “suchness” or “thusness.” It denotes the true nature of ultimate reality.
<i>teisho</i>	A Japanese term for a lecture or dharma talk given by a Zen master.
<i>upāya</i>	A Sanskrit term usually translated as “skilful means” or “skill-in-means” which aids an adherent of Buddhism along the Buddhist path. In pedagogical situations, it is the ability to teach to the needs of others.
<i>waka</i>	A Japanese poetic form of five lines which follows the syllabic pattern of 5-7-5-7-7. Also known as <i>tanka</i> .
Yogācāra	One of the two main schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the other being Madhyamaka. Yogācāra encompasses a sophisticated philosophical examination of the mind as well as an elaborate system of practice.

<i>zazen</i>	A Japanese term for seated meditation. A non-thinking mode of consciousness, it can involve staring at a wall or silently working on a kōan.
<i>Zen</i>	A Japanese translation of Ch’an, a school of Buddhism which foregrounds meditation. Promoting itself as a way of directly seeing one’s own inherent Buddhature, Zen Buddhism’s emphasis on meditation and kōan practice made the role of the teacher paramount.
<i>zendo</i>	A Japanese term for a meditation hall at a Zen monastery.
<i>zuihitsu</i>	A genre of Japanese literature which consists of personal, fragmentary essays.

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