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Esperanza U. Ramirez-Christensen. *Emptiness and Temporality: Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Poetics.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. x + 208 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4888-9.

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Linking Poetry and Liberation: The Practice of Renga in Medieval Japanese Buddhism

In *Emptiness and Temporality: Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Poetics*, Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen mirrors the linking of verses in Japanese *renga* poetry by fashioning her own links between poetry and the spiritual life, between postmodernism and Buddhist thought, and between the humanities and the responsibility for global justice. As is the case with the practice of *renga*, these links made by the author result in varying levels of success for revealing new insight and meaning. The most notable contribution Ramirez-Christensen makes for Western audiences is her introduction and illumination of *renga* verses as an expression of Buddhist awakening. This is clearly her main purpose and she offers readers a much-needed study in Japanese literature, examining what can be a rather inaccessible poetic form with great skill and clarity. However, the links made between Western thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer as well as her insights into the linguistic structure of *renga* are generally less developed and in the end, contribute little to the overall impact of the book. Ultimately, it is the third link that seems to be of greatest importance to Ramirez-Christensen, presenting her work on Japanese aesthetics as an overturning of the dualisms dividing East and West, thus contributing to a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity and the possibilities of global justice. Although the latter link is not discussed to any great extent beyond her introduction, the author makes clear that this is her underlying goal from the beginning, and so it functions tacitly beneath the remainder of the work. But to what extent was it necessary, or even beneficial, to include the work of Western thinkers in order to link the poetry of medieval Japanese Buddhists with the sensibilities of the contemporary Western reader?

Ramirez-Christensen's immersion in the world of medieval Japanese poetics is evident in the body of her published work, including *Heart's Flower: The Life and Poetry of Shinkei* (1994), *The Father-Daughter Plot: Japanese Literary Women and the Law of the Father* (2001), and a companion volume with the present text, an annotated translation of Shinkei's *Sasamegoto* entitled, *Murmured Conversations: A Treatise on Poetry and Buddhism by the Poet-Monk Shinkei* (2008). So the main subject matter in *Emptiness and Temporality* is in quite able hands. Throughout the text Ramirez-Christensen examines a number of *renga* and *waka* verses, showing the original Japanese in *romanji* alongside her translations, with interpretive and contextual explanations that are both illuminating and a pleasure to read. As she explains in part 1, "The Poetics of Renga," the main skill necessary for this system of Japanese poetry is not simply in the composition of meaningful or aesthetically pleasing verse, but rather it is in the unspoken links (*tsukeai*) created *between* verses where the medieval Buddhist Shinkei claims the art of *renga* is realized. This is all the more astounding considering the fact that *renga* is composed extemporaneously as a vocal performance among a small group of poets, each taking turns adding new verses to ones composed by other participants, until a total of one hundred verses (*hyakuin*) has been completed. What one attempts to reveal in the spontaneous composition of one's linking verse (*tsukeku*) is only made possible through the previous verse (*maeku*) just offered by a fellow poet. The next poet in the series will then link with one's verse by treating it as a *maeku*. For the untrained reader of *renga* it is difficult to realize where the link lies exactly, when contiguous verses seem on the surface to have little if any meaningful relation. But such a hermenutical approach limits one's reading to a merely syntactic meaning, when the link is not to be found in the language of the individual verses, but rather in the "invisible field" (p. 27) between verses. It is here that Ramirez-Christensen's expertise proves indispensible, providing a number of satisfying discoveries for the reader as she reveals how *renga*

poets use language in such a skillful and profound way that we are taken from the limits of linguistic signs to the very heart of human experience. *Renga* is, in this sense, a Mahāyāna Buddhist practice where one recognizes the lack of self-existence of any single verse, since each is dependent upon related verses, and where poetic constructions are grounded in the realization of the three levels of truths. Such a hermeneutical approach uses the conventionalities of language to reveal the Middle Way, which cannot explicitly be given in language. Liberative realization is thus made possible through the relational interdependency of dialogical poetry.

In part 1 Ramirez-Christensen structures much of her examination of *renga* in the style of *renga*, writing short chapters that move back and forth in a dialogue between Buddhist and postmodern thought. In doing so she shows how the theory of language particular to *renga* allows us to recognize links between medieval Japanese Buddhism and a philosophy of deconstruction. This practice is not continued to any great extent in part 2, "Kokoro, or the Emptiness of the Sign," where she remains primarily within the realm of medieval Japan, relating *renga* to traditional Buddhist philosophy, *Nō* dramas, and Shinkei's *Sasamegoto*. In the introduction Ramirez-Christensen asserts that her purpose in making these initial comparisons is "wholly heuristic" (p. 3), introducing a medieval Asian system of linked poetry as a cross-cultural example that also recognized the absence of logos and the traces left by linguistic signs. She acknowledges the current debates concerning the legitimacy of making comparisons between Mahāyāna Buddhism and deconstruction, a comparison never really endorsed by Derrida, but suggested by contemporary thinkers like David Loy among others. Although she asserts that she is not attempting to clarify or resolve these issues (p. 4), it is not clear, however, whether it is possible for Ramirez-Christensen to make these comparisons without, in the end, arguing the views of David Loy's camp. She intimates early in her introduction for example, "the affinities between Buddhist emptiness and deconstruction" (p. 2), and in her third chapter, "Emptiness or Linking as *Différance,*" she claims, "The extent to which contemporary Western thinking on language and meaning has come to resemble the basic concepts of Buddhist philosophy is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable intellectual developments of our time" (p. 31). Ramirez-Christensen does not develop these comparisons beyond the observation of general affinities, and they do not continue to function with much thematic relevance beyond part 1. Consequently, the comparative elements of the work seem tacked on, serving more as a distraction than a necessary linkage to an Eastern literary tradition. Just as medieval practitioners of *renga* would often rely on available *renga* dictionaries of the time, reproducing commonly recognized links between words and phrases, it is as if Ramirez-Christensen added the links between postmodern and Buddhist thought because they were already widely circulated in contemporary academia, not because she had a great commitment to these notions herself. Even on a purely heuristic level, it is not apparent whether these comparisons are necessary for facilitating cross-cultural linking since both the aesthetics of Japan and the philosophical offerings of Buddhism have already established a wide global reach, particularly in the West. Regard for distant cultural expressions of human meaning can now occur directly, without the need for proximal intermediaries. One surprising absence in Ramirez-Christensen's exploration of medieval Japanese *renga*, is the extent of its literary relation to the practices associated with Zen *kōans*, including the composition of verses and capping phrases. These kinds of internal comparisons may have, in fact, facilitated a deeper appreciation for *renga* than cross-cultural comparisons.

The most interesting comparative observations made by Ramirez-Christensen are in fact, concerned with differences, rather than resemblances. For example, she argues that Mikhail Bakhtin's categorization of poetry as monologic, opposed to the dialogic structure of the novel, does not hold true for certain examples of Japanese verse like *renga*, *haikai*, or even *waka*, because of the recognized necessity for dialogical meaning in these poetic traditions (p. 125). She also cites *renga* performance as one example where meaning making does not concur with Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of meaning intention and meaning fulfillment, since the meaning fulfillment expressed in the *tsukeku* occurs without the ability to fully recognize the meaning intention in the *maeku* (p. 41). Although not pursued at length, Ramirez-Christensen raises questions about the contrasts between deconstruction and Buddhist thought as well. She concludes that the main aim of Buddhism is ultimately soteriological and its critical assessments of language-based truth claims are only meant to serve this ultimate purpose. She explains that "poststructuralism exposed the error inherent in dualistic thinking by turning its logic against itself, that is, by privileging the opposite term who's suppression enabled the claim to validity to begin with" (p. 34), and then goes on to conclude that "it is not clear what the value of the deconstructive practice would be, apart from revealing the solipsistic hall of mirrors that is language" (p. 35). This discussion relates to what Ramirez-Christensen proposed in her introduction

as one of the main goals of her work, namely, "to suggest how deconstruction might be turned toward the ethical ends pursued by Buddhism as a way of mental liberation" (p. 5). One might suggest that "privileging the opposite term who's suppression enabled the claim to validity" is itself an ethical act, and this is in fact, the value of deconstructive practice. If this is the case, then there is no necessity to somehow awaken deconstruction to the ethical practices of Buddhism, since these practices, as Ramirez-Christensen recognizes, are primarily concerned with the cultivation of soteriological freedom, while deconstruction is ultimately concerned with sociopolitical freedom, with justice. It may be that deconstruction has more to offer than Buddhism in the "over-turning of those hierarchically organized dualisms that again and again merely confirm the system of oppression" (p. 7). One of the major ethical issues facing contemporary Buddhologists is explaining how the traditions of Buddhist philosophy could have been construed to support the Japanese oppression of its Asian others in China and Korea during the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps deconstruction could help to reveal the ethical shortcomings of Buddhism in this, as well as other, historically documented examples.

How ever one might measure the level of success achieved by Ramirez-Christensen in her comparative observations, *Emptiness and Temporality: Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Poetics,* is well worth adding to this year's reading list. One cannot come away from this text without a sense of gratitude for the author's labors, having been introduced to a world of poetic power, where the discipline of verse reveals new possibilities of freedom. Although many undergraduates might find the material difficult, graduate courses in Asian studies, Buddhism, or literary theory would be well served by including this study in the required reading.

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