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A BUDDHIST READING

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Abstract

How do you study texts as a Buddhist? How do you reconcile Buddhist notions of a text's impermanence (*anitya*), insubstantiality (*nihsvabhava, sunyata*), and dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*) – notions that destabilize any conviction that a text is an entity capable of supporting predication – with literary study, which operates under the assumption that not only are texts entities (objects of study) but also that discovering new predicates about them is one of the most valuable and significant things you can do with them? Moreover, how do you reconcile the goal of Buddhist practice – the cessation of suffering (*duhkha*) – with a form of study that, from a Buddhist view, clings to metaphysical notions that perpetuate the conditions for suffering?

In short, you don't.

Instead of reconciling Buddhist and critical practices, this thesis explores and enacts a kind of Buddhist reading practice, which, in theoretical and methodological terms, grows out of an encounter with Madhyamika Buddhist analyses of reality, Dogen's Zen Buddhist conception of texts as provisional and instrumental, Richard Rorty's notion of "strong textualism," and Gary Snyder's rip rap juxtaposition practice.

I construct the thesis out of interconnected meditations on Snyder's works, Mahayana Buddhism, the psychology of elegies, Monet's aesthetic practice, and a jumble of secondary topics. What links this rip rap of topics together is an emerging Buddhist reading practice that reveals and engages with the insubstantial nature of phenomenal objects of study.

What the thesis discovers is that the objects of traditional literary study – texts, authors, national literatures, genres – are all dependently originated, impermanent, and ultimately empty of substance or self-presence. These phenomena, it argues, are not stable enough to support our scholarly desires for predicative knowledge about them. They do not exist in and of themselves, separate from the contingencies of any particular reading performance.

The thesis is significant from a Buddhist soteriological point of view. In effect, the work proposes that studying phenomena as inherently existing objects is an activity of *tanha* (desire, grasping) that inevitably sustains the conditions for suffering. Buddhist

reading seeks to dissolve those conditions by revealing the emptiness of our objects of knowledge.

Keywords: Mahayana, Madhyamika, Buddhism, Gary Snyder, ecological criticism, elegy, Freud, Monet, Rouen Cathedral series

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PREAMBLE #

Things change.

There used to be a Buddhist university built on the Gangetic plain in north-eastern India. The place was known as Nalanda. These days, however, where the great halls and libraries stood, it's all ruins and rubble.

The university was founded sometime in the 5th century (between 420 and 500 C.E.). Great teachers, such as Nagarjuna, had been expounding the *dharma* (the Buddhist teachings) in the Nalanda area since the second century, so the site was well-positioned to attract the best scholars and students (Robinson and Johnson 121). Consequently, the university flourished and became the centre of Buddhist study in India. Here, the Mahayana school of Buddhism refined its philosophies of emptiness (*sunyata*) and experimented with its meditative practices for achieving *nirvana*. In fact, it is reputed that, at Nalanda, a monk named Dharmapala wrote one of the classic sutras of *Prajnaparamitra* literature – the *Surangama Sutra*. This sutra, known colloquially as the "sky-flower doctrine," taught a vision of existence as completely insubstantial: "all phenomena are only like sky-flowers, unreal, and vanishing" (Sankalia 79). The unreality and impermanence of all phenomena was central to the curriculum and pedagogy of the university.

According to H.D. Sankalia, for over 700 years, Buddhist students flocked to Nalanda. They came from all over Asia to struggle with and debate complex questions of philosophy, logic, and ethics. Perhaps more importantly, they were also instructed in various meditation practices – students were expected to sit daily, to work with Buddhist teachings on levels of experience beyond the merely conceptual and theoretical. Coupling the teachings with meditation practice, students could transform their basic assumptions about self and reality, their basic orientation in the world – and thus they could transform the way they acted and reacted in their daily lives. Combining wisdom studies and meditation practice was crucial in pursuing what the *Prajnaparamitasastra* envisioned as the main goal of Buddhist study: "the aim of Buddhism is only one, the destruction of suffering and [the consequent] attainment of *Nirvana*" (Sankalia 17). Every class,

whether it was on logic or literature, was taught with this soteriological goal in mind: the main purpose of education was the spiritual advancement of students (Sankalia 8). Education didn't just fill students' heads with knowledge; it guided them towards an experience of the Buddha's awakening.

As a result of this soteriological motivation, students and teachers related to texts a bit differently than they do in modern Western universities. In my experience as a student and teacher in various Canadian universities, literary texts have served primarily as objects of study in and of themselves, and knowledge about these texts or their authors or the historical context of their production has served as the goal of study. Not so at Nalanda. According to Sankalia, texts and knowledge of texts were considered instrumental or provisional; that is, they served the Buddhist goal of liberation from suffering (2). At Nalanda, students did seek knowledge, but the knowledge they sought was soteriological, not just textual – it was a lived or experiential knowledge.

The pedagogy at Nalanda had its roots in the Upanishadic model of education, even though what was taught at Nalanda was quite different. For centuries, Indian students had been seeking out gurus in order to learn what the *Mundaka Upanishad* distinguishes as two kinds of knowledge: *Para* (higher knowledge) and *Apara* (lower or inferior knowledge) (Sankalia 198). *Apara* refers to knowledge derived from the texts of the four *Vedas* (*Rg, Yajur, Sama,* and *Atharva*) – in other words, textual knowledge. *Para*, however, refers to experiential knowledge of *Brahma*: "the realization of *Brahma* or *Aksara*, of the Immortal Self was the true knowledge" (Sankalia 198). *Apara* and *Vedic* study were necessary as part of the pedagogical process, but any student who got hung up on *Apara* was a failure. Similarly, for Buddhists at Nalanda, sutra study was a means to a higher end: liberation from suffering – direct experience of *nirvana*.

In his study of Nalanda, however, Sankalia laments the eventual fall of the school. What he sees as the beginning of the end for the university, though, is not the invasion of Turkish Muslims. Well before the early thirteenth century, when invading Turks reduced the halls of learning and meditation to rubble, dispersing or putting to the sword the monks studying there, Nalanda was losing its way. Over time, the focus of study had shifted from "true knowledge" to mere knowledge of rituals and texts: the means to true

knowledge became the end of study (199). By the time of Nalanda's physical destruction, Buddhist study there had devolved into a kind of textual idolatry.

Things change.

The story of Nalanda inspires and encourages me in the following exploration of the challenges Buddhism poses to the practices of literary criticism. Studies have traced the influence of Buddhist ideas on various literary figures or works, but no study that I've read has self-consciously grappled with what appears to me to be a fundamental problem when you mix Buddhism and literary study: where literary study generally assumes the existence of texts, authors, and readers, and assumes the value of gathering predicative knowledge about them, Buddhism seeks to reveal that all phenomena, including these objects of study, are "like sky-flowers, unreal, and vanishing" (Sankalia 79). From a Buddhist point of view, then, seeking knowledge of phenomena in and of themselves is a questionable pursuit – one that not only aims too low but one that also perpetuates a false view of reality, a view that causes suffering.

As a practicing Buddhist, then, I've tried to write this dissertation in the idealistic spirit of early Nalanda, attempting to unearth from the rubble its original pedagogical motivations and goals. Consequently, this work is less *about* something and more an *attempt to do* something. Every section, every discussion, aims at the ideal of Buddhist education: liberation from suffering. That's my guiding motivation – that's the logic behind the unconventional form, content, style, and methodology of this project.

Things change.

When folks discover that I'm writing my dissertation, their first question always stumps me: "what is your dissertation on?" It's the same question that a traditional introduction is meant to answer. But I haven't given a satisfactory answer to anybody yet, and I'm not going to give one here either. My problem with the question is twofold. First of all, for reasons that become clearer as the work proceeds, I explore a whole rip rap of texts and art objects – no one topic or discussion dominates. Second, the question

assumes that there should or could be some object occupying the centre of my work, some author or text or genre or historical period or national literature – some thing to sit in the subject position of a thesis statement, some thing to anchor a newly forged chain of predicates. But my dissertation has no such thing: it is adrift on shifting tides.

After all, what can a dissertation be *on* when everything is like sky flowers?

Asking a more productive (even if provisional) opening question, then, involves some tweaking to remove the spatial prepositions that imply a core or centre. Instead, one might ask, "what does your dissertation *do*?"

The short answer is probably the best one: the dissertation tries to engage in the work of liberation from suffering. How does it do this? It follows Malcolm David Eckel's advice on the beginning of Buddhist practice – you must "show that someone's ordinary conception of reality is mistaken" (*See* 85). That's what my dissertation tries to do: it tries to destabilize the ordinary conception of reality that I see operating not only in my own perceptions and analyses of texts, paintings, and the natural world but also in the practices of conventional literary study (as I've internalized them). Each section or episode, then, is an exploratory meditation on reality – an attempt to reveal and destabilize the ordinary conception of reality that I think underwrites scholarship.

What, then, is this "ordinary conception of reality?" Again, the short answer is the best one with which to begin: that things possess substance. I spend a lot of time in the dissertation exploring and defining "substance," but, basically, it refers to an idea or belief we have about the given nature or inherent existence of selves and things (including texts): that they stay the same despite secondary changes. Substance refers to a thing's core or essence, which seems to exist independently of the shifting particularities of the thing's spatio-temporal and perceptual context. Substance is what makes a thing *that* particular thing and not something else. It's the feeling and belief that the mountain is the same mountain year after year, that you are the same person from cradle to grave – and maybe even beyond. It's the stability that makes study and predicative knowledge seem so important. In the Buddhist tradition, though, substance is ignorance (*avidya*), the root

of suffering (*duhkha*). It's this basic ontological belief, then, that my dissertation tries to dismantle.

Things change.

Buddha awoke to this realization: *sabbe dhamma anatta* – "all things are non-substantial" (Kalupahana 84). That's the ball game. That's the insight I'm trying to explore in an English dissertation: what does literary study look like if texts, readers, authors, genres, art objects, literary movements, national literatures, historical contexts are "non-substantial"? What do we lose? What do we gain? What do we do?

Everything changes.

QUESTIONS # In the evening calm of Savatthi, Malunkyaputta rose quietly from a day of contemplation, his mind agitated with metaphysical questions. Stepping through the crowd of meditating monks gathered at Jetavana monastery in Anathapindika's Park, Malunkyaputta made his way towards the Buddha: he craved answers from The Blessed One. As the faint ember glow of the setting sun faded and the park's shadows deepened, Malunkyaputta drew near the Buddha, greeted him, and sat down respectfully to one side. Malunkyaputta could no longer contain his frustration:

> These theories which The Blessed One has left unelucidated, has set aside and rejected, -- that the world is eternal, that the world is not eternal, [...] that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death, -- these The Blessed One does not elucidate to me. And the fact that The Blessed One does not elucidate them to me does not please me nor suit me. ("Sutta 63" 144)

Malunkyaputta demanded answers and threatened to leave the *sangha* (Buddhist community) if his desires were not satisfied. He wanted the Buddha either to answer his metaphysical questions or to admit ignorance: Is the world eternal or not? Are the soul and the body identical? Does the "saint" (*arhat*) exist after death?

By the time Malunkyaputta had finished angrily asking his questions, darkness had fallen completely in Jetavana. The Buddha, however, remained undisturbed. In the cool of the night, he maintained his "noble silence" against metaphysical speculation and explained to Malunkyaputta with a vivid parable that craving metaphysical views tends not to edification:

> It is as if, Malunkyaputta, a man had been wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his relatives and kinsfolk, were to procure for him a physician or surgeon; and the sick man were to say, "I will not have this arrow taken out until I have learnt whether the man who wounded me belonged to the warrior caste, or to the Brahman caste, or to the agricultural caste, or to the menial caste."
>
> Or again he were to say, "I will not have this arrow taken out until I have learnt the name of the man who wounded me, and to what clan he belongs."

> Or again he were to say, "I will not have this arrow taken out until I have learnt whether the man who wounded me was tall, or short, or of middle height." ("Sutta 63" 146-47)

In the darkness, Buddha illustrated the absurdity of Malunkyaputta's questions from a spiritual point of view. Buddha's message was clear: "That man would die, Malunkyaputta, without ever having learnt [the answers]" ("Sutta 63" 147). Malunkyaputta's queries were diverting him off the path to liberation from suffering, putting him in spiritual jeopardy. In effect, he was asking the wrong questions:

> The religious life, Malunkyaputta, does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does the religious life, Malunkyaputta, depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether the dogma obtain, Malunkyaputta, that the world is eternal, or that the world is not eternal, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair, for the extinction of which in the present life I am prescribing. ("Sutta 63" 148)

According to the Buddha, asking metaphysical questions does little to elucidate the problem of suffering. Buddha's advice to Malunkyaputta that night was to focus on questions that matter to the religious life: What is suffering? What is the origin of suffering? Is there an end to suffering? What is the path that leads to the cessation of suffering?

Finally, Malunkyaputta saw that his initial questions were irrelevant. He saw that craving metaphysical views was creating the conditions for suffering, not relieving them. And under the bright stars of Savatthi, Malunkyaputta's frustration gave way to delight.

#

Reading for this dissertation, I often encountered the story of Malunkyaputta and the parable of the poison arrow from "Sutta 63" of the *Majjhima-nikaya*, but I did not think much of it at first. The point of the story seems obvious enough: you need to ask the right questions to progress along the spiritual path – the wrong questions are a waste of time. However, the story's relevance to my own work emerged only as I tried to

formulate my research questions and to define my objects of study. I felt Malunkyaputta's frustration when my research seemed to falter under one false start after another.

I began my work asking questions about Buddhism and elegy. I surmised that splicing these two traditions together would prove fruitful because I saw the two traditions as sprouting from a common concern: impermanence and death. According to the Dalai Lama, the beginning of Buddhist practice is mindfulness of impermanence (*Advice* 51). Some Tibetan Buddhists will even "institute a continuous practice of reflection on the process of death" (*Advice* 59). Monks confront the fact of their mortality, contemplating how their lives arise and pass away like the rise and fall of their own breath. They invite the anxiety of impermanence and seek out what Judith Lief calls death's "threat to everything we hold dear" (9). Lief's phrase captures the heart of mortality meditation: what impermanence really threatens is desire. In a Buddhist analysis, suffering (*duhkha)* is the result of a clash between desire (*tanha*), which holds things dear, and impermanence (*anitya*), which makes those things slip through our clutches like dust. For a Buddhist, meditation on impermanence is a way to understand and dissolve *tanha*.

Like Buddhist mortality meditation, elegies confront the fact of death and the experience of impermanence. Broadly defined, elegies are "poetic expressions of loss" (Sacks 38); they depict the way the poet copes or fails to cope with loss, charting how he or she deals with the threat death poses to desire. Reading studies on the history of the elegy, what struck me most were the tradition's various compensatory strategies for relieving suffering and the metaphysical assumptions on which those strategies depend. For example, Jeffrey Hammond's study of the American Puritan elegy identifies the consolation in that tradition as belief in resurrection (xiv). He argues that elegies performed an important cultural function for the Puritans, that they employed "the power of a cultural myth" about eternal life (xiv), often by invoking the image of Ezekiel's valley of dry bones (Ezek 37:3): "Speaking resurrections for the dry bones of the Puritan dead was central to a verbal ritual that early New England's elegists repeatedly and tirelessly performed" (xiv). The need for this verbal ritual, as Hammond explains it, was to relieve, through ritual speech, the anxiety that loss causes (4). For Hammond, the

"sense of impotence in the face of death" is universal (4): for Buddhists, Puritans, and ourselves, death is a threat to everything we hold dear. For the Puritans, however, that threat was met through a ritual enactment of metaphysical belief. Death lost its sting in the face of a strong faith in resurrection and heaven. Puritan elegies tried to shift the focus of desire and affection from the phenomenal realm to the spiritual one. Faith in the unseen, in the permanent, in the metaphysical, provided comfort.

What I found particularly attractive in the comparison of the Buddhist and elegiac traditions was that Buddhism deals with death and desire so differently. Buddhism's doctrines of *anatman* (no-soul or no-self) and of *sunyata* (emptiness) or *nihsvabhava* (no-nature) seemed so radically different from the notions about the soul and the afterlife that underlie the traditional English and American elegy. I hypothesized that Buddhist-influenced poets must surely have retooled the elegy in light of Buddhist views of death. The Buddhist doctrine of *anatman*, as David Loy explained it, was particularly enticing: "We cannot die because we were never born. Anatman is thus a middle way between the extremes of eternalism (the self survives death) and annihilationism (the self is destroyed at death)" (*Lack* 22). According to Buddhist philosophy, the notion of a soul that survives death and the notion of a self that is born, persists through time, and dies are both metaphysical views that do not refer to any actual entities. English and American elegies, however, all seemed anchored to a belief in an eternal soul or a mortal self. In fact, the history of the elegy could be understood as an oscillation between views of eternalism (like the Puritan elegies) and annihilationism (like modern elegies). Buddhism, however, could provide a wedge to break apart the metaphysical dualism that limits the elegy, opening up new territory for the genre to explore.

DUHKHA # Of all the world's wonders, which is the most wonderful?
That no man, though he sees others dying all around him, believes
that he himself will die. (*Mahabharata* qtd. in Dillard, *Being* 20)

In Hubbards, Nova Scotia, a church bell chimes the hours. You can hear it from anywhere around the cove. The bell's hourly interjections into sea cove quiet

contemplations still startles me. I haven't been here long enough to get used to them. Every time the mechanical vibrations interrupt, I pause in my work and glance out over the cove: sunlight dancing on breezy ripples, tide moving waters imperceptibly, sailboats arriving and departing. The world is constantly flickering like a web of mingling wavelets reflecting pieces of the sun. Perhaps I'm too much a product of literary clichés, perhaps I'm even a bit dramatic, but that damn bell often makes me think about impermanence and death.

The thought that we and our loved ones will someday die can seem paralyzing. It can catch your breath if you stay with it too long. But for Buddha, knowledge of mortality was what got him moving: it was the impetus for his search for wisdom and enlightenment.

According to the legendary story of the Buddha recorded in Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita*, the Buddha's father shielded his son from any knowledge or experience of old age, sickness, and death. But at the age of 29, the future Buddha snuck out of his father's palace and encountered the brutal facts of suffering. It was a revelation: "how could a man of intelligence be heedless here in the hour of calamity, when once he knows of destruction?" (III.62). Buddha's awakening to the fact of death spoiled his princely life of leisure. He found no more joy in idle sensual pleasures: "For what rational being would stand or sit or lie at ease, still less laugh, when he knows of old age, disease and death?" (IV.59). He became obsessed with the question of suffering.

Reading the *Buddhacarita*, one could argue that the beginning of Buddha's wisdom was the realization that life sucks. But unlike a self-indulgent teenager reveling in the incoherence of life, Buddha did not find perverse pleasure in dissatisfaction; rather, he longed for spiritual peace. Every other pursuit seemed vain and trivial because the normal objects of desire (money, power, fame, sex, career, etc.) were all transitory. Everything the Buddha analyzed turned out to be impermanent: it all seemed to arise and pass away like foam bubbles on the water (*Buddhacarita* XX.36).

But so what? The fact that things are impermanent is nothing new. We've all heard the "bell toll," but we don't get hung up on it: we ignore gloomy graveyard contemplations and continue on with the work of the day. Of course, when our loved ones die, we mourn, but we don't mourn forever. And, yes, the thought of our own death is

terrifying – all the more reason to ignore thoughts of mortality and continue with the business of living.

But Buddha was not content with the usual consolations and "healthy-minded" self-deceptions. He wanted to find an end to suffering, so he set out to explore its psychology and to discover the conditions that cause it. One of his basic discoveries – which he formulated as his second noble truth, the truth of *tanha* (desire, thirst, grasping) – was that suffering arises because human desire is out of joint with reality. On the one hand, desire craves permanence. Our desire tends to cling and to possess; we don't want to lose the things we love. On the other, however, all our objects of desire are impermanent; loss is inevitable. Buddha saw that because the things of this world are impermanent, desire can never find peace through full satisfaction; impermanence constantly severs desire's attachments. An object of desire may seem to satisfy as long as it persists, but when that object inevitably slips away, the result is suffering. And since the world is not about to change its impermanent nature, the key to the problem of suffering must reside in desire (*tanha*). Suffering arises because desire demands permanence from a world as impermanent as the sea foam on Hubbards cove.

ANITYA # In February 1892, Claude Monet was in Rouen. He had an idea. For the previous two years, he had experimented with painting a motif (haystacks) at different times under different atmospheric conditions. The result – prosaic stacks of grain dissolved into "spectral apparitions" (Howard 119). As you look at the series of haystack paintings, the objects' solidity seems to waver (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Monet, *Wheatstack (Sun in Mist)*, 1891, Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Encouraged, Monet decided to try the same kind of experiment on an architectural subject. So he took up residence in Rouen across the street from the west façade of the town's great cathedral. The situation was convenient. Monet was suffering from rheumatism contracted from all his painting in *pleine air.* His attempts to explore the effects of winter tempests on light weakened his health, so painting what he saw through a window would allow him to recover as he continued his experiments. The room with a view also gave him a static perspective on his object through which to analyze the changes due to light and atmosphere. Thus, without the distractions of trying to paint in inclement weather and without a worry about his object moving (as had happened over time with the haystacks), Monet painted his series of Rouen Cathedral. The result was even more compelling than the haystacks. The cathedral, a monument whose solidity and grandeur were meant to signify the transcendence of the divine, dissolved into flickering light, shedding its appearance of solidity and permanence (see fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Monet, *Rouen Cathedral*, 1894,
Private Collection, France

Monet's method in Rouen was a little unusual: he would paint at prearranged hours only (Keller 55). It seems he was less interested in the intricate façade as a marvel of Gothic architecture and masonry and more interested in how the façade's appearance changed intricately at various times of the day. In terms of architecture, once you've seen one of the canvasses, none of the other 30 has anything more to teach: "Instead, the emphasis is on atmospheric variations, on the way in which every successive light-effect modifies and transforms the appearance of the forms" (House 11). Monet's experiment in Rouen was to paint the cathedral in a raw perceptual moment, to paint what he saw from his particular angle at a particular point in time. He refused to abstract the form of the façade from its appearance.

What Monet tried to convey in his paintings was "the immediate perception of the eye" (Pool 20). He made time crucial to his artistic practice and tried to submit to the particularities of his visual field:

> Monet wrote in 1890 that in the Haystack paintings he was trying to capture "'instantaneity', above all the enveloping atmosphere, the same light diffused over everything", and commented the next year: "For me, a landscape does not exist in its own right, since its appearance changes at every moment; but the surrounding atmosphere brings it to life – the air and the light, which vary continually. For me, it is only the surrounding atmosphere which gives subjects their true value." (House 11)

Monet's statement is somewhat shocking. What he is saying is that appearance is everything, that there is no stable form underlying the changes of the moment. There is no landscape-in-itself that exists in its "own right," no landscape to abstract from the "surrounding atmosphere"; all the artist has to work with is what is already present to the eye. Aesthetically, then, the subject of a painting must be the moment of visual perception, the particular configuration of air, light, visual object, and observing mind in time. There is nothing else.

To the traditionalists of the French Academy, this kind of painting was outrageous. Art had to reveal the timeless, the permanent. The Salon art of the 1870s, when Monet first began experimenting with technique and subject-matter, "favoured meticulous technique and subjects from history and mythology" (House 4). But where

traditional artists saw the timeless and permanent, Monet saw only time and flux: "The traditionalists thought that nature in the raw lacked that sense of permanence and nobility which could only be imparted to it if its elements were rearranged to form an idealized whole" (Pool 19). Monet was on the unfavourable side of a few dualities: permanence versus impermanence, idealized nature versus "nature in the raw," the timeless versus the temporal. He turned the hierarchy of aesthetic value of his day on its head.

Monet found value in what other painters ignored as valueless or what they never saw at all. Traditional art ignores those aspects of the visual field that are in flux, preferring to focus on what seems stable through time. But that perceived stability is a kind of idealization of or abstraction from the particularities of the scene. For example, engravings of Rouen Cathedral done before Monet's time depict it in isolation from the accidents of place and time (see fig. 3). What is important to the engravers is not how the Cathedral looked at a specific time but how it looks in general (notice the verb tense shift), regardless of particular conditions. But Monet saw that the "permanent" aspects of the Cathedral are not primary; they depend on light and air, which is always changing. Théodore Duret, in his 1878 work *The Impressionist Painters*, describes the method Monet developed for his art:

Fig. 3. Engraving of Rouen Cathedral, 1816, after A.P.M. Gilbert, *Description historique de la cathedral de Rouen*

> Claude Monet has succeeded in setting down the fleeting impressions which his predecessors had neglected or considered impossible to render with the brush. The thousand nuances that the water of the sea and rivers takes on, the play of light in the clouds, the vibrant coloring of flowers, and the checkered reflections of foliage in the rays of a burning sun have been seized by him in all their truth. No longer painting merely the immobile and permanent aspect of the landscape, but also the fleeting appearances which the accidents of the atmosphere present to him, Monet transmits a singularly lively and striking sensation of the observed scene. (qtd. in Nochlin 29-30)

The language of this translation is revealing: Monet paints "fleeting appearances," not just "immobile and permanent" things; he paints the "accidents" of time and place; and he transmits a "sensation" of the scene. While Duret is praising Monet, the negative connotations of such words as "appearance" and "accident" and "sensation" are inescapable. Monet dallies at the surface of things. As Cezanne said of him, Monet is "but an eye, but what an eye" (qtd. in Mauclair 57).

ANATMAN # On the banks of the North Thames River near Gibbons Park, there is a small grove of trees tucked between the embankment and the water's edge. Here, the river bends south towards Oxford Street. On summer evenings, I often find my way to these trees to sit and watch the river pass beneath the long shadows of the far bank. The water moves quickly over the shallows further up, but this bend receives that energy, slows the current, and sends the water calmly on its way south.

River water never just sits; it ceaselessly follows gravitational bends and curves, and it takes anything near it along for the ride. Bits of bank erode constantly and tumble into the water's pull while interesting bits of flotsam and jetsam continually float by in the current. In contrast, large smoothed rocks, carried south by ancient glacial ice and dropped here as the ice retreated, sit silently on the river bottom. Unable to push these rocks, the water parts as it rushes around them, eroding a stony molecule here and there.

During my evening sits, staring at the water's motion, I feel the current tug at my own stillness. The river's constant change makes me keenly aware of the solidity I carry

at all times. I'm like a rock sitting in the shallows – static, constant, closed. The water's flux flows around me like I'm some glacial erratic, but it never flows through me.

Perhaps to a Christian mystic or to a transcendentalist this stillness at the core of my being would seem the door to eternity beyond the fleeting shadows of the phenomenal world, but to me, the solidity of identity prevents supramundane experience. This quotidian world is riddled with solid objects that won't change, won't transform – ever-new – with each flowing moment. The mundane world is filled with the staleness of eternity.

My sits by the water's edge are meant to erode the rock-like identity that pervades experience, to send it down the river. The ceaseless motion of water makes it more difficult to maintain the illusion of stable identity. In my perception of the river, its general form seems constant from moment to moment, but that perceived continuity and stability is simply a series of analogous moments. There is nothing in the content of two perceived river moments that is the same. The river is always new, always refreshed. It is my notion of "sameness" that stagnates perception, my notion of "river."

The same holds true for my perception of self. I, like most people, carry a rock-like identity that remains stable as my thoughts and feelings and cells change and flow by. In my river sits, I've searched myself for the foundation of this sense of sameness. The logic I follow is simple – because my sense of self is marked by a sense of sameness, there must be something in me that remains the same. But my body constantly changes. My feelings constantly change. My thoughts constantly change. The only thing that remains the same is a general and vague notion of identity. My physical and mental content changes like a river, but I still have a notion that my bodily and mental states always belong to me – they are mine. But if my self is not identical with my bodily or mental states, then what is it?

Buddhists call this notion of self – of something unchanging that possesses changing bodily and mental states – *atman*. According to Edward Conze, *atman* is the view "that in man there is a permanent, everlasting and absolute entity, which is the unchanging substance behind the changing phenomenal world" (*India* 38-39). *Atman* is the stone in the river, the sense of "me" that abides wherever I go. But according to Buddhists, these very notions of "I" and "mine" do not refer to any really existing

entities. The self is merely conceptual, a false interpretation of the nature of body and mind, a projection of the desire for ontological stability and comfort. There is nothing that actually remains the same.

According to Buddhism, not only do we superimpose a self onto our perceptions of body and mind, but we also ascribe a kind of selfhood to things. The notion that the Thames River is the same river from moment to moment and the notion that the trees in the grove are the same from day to day depend on a notion of self or inherent existence (*svabhava*). The water moves and sparkles in the evening light, the banks shift and erode as they absorb the flowing kinetic energy, the trees grow and drop leaves, the whole sensory field dazzles with motion and change, but the objects of perception seem the same. The purpose of watching the river is to separate the impermanent and permanent aspects of the scene, to separate "the form sensed and the postulated external object" (Guenther, *Philosophy* 154). The river teaches that, empirically speaking, everything external is impermanent. The river changes – only our concept of it doesn't. The "sameness" that we experience is not a given in experience; rather, it is an assumption about the nature of experience – an ontological interpretation of sensory data.

Buddhism's radical move is to isolate in mental experience our ontological interpretation of epistemological experience and to dissolve it – to show that, ontologically speaking, nothing carries over from one moment to the next. As Conze notes, "The task is to bring the process [of perception] back to the initial point, before any 'superimpositions' have distorted the actual and initial datum" (*India* 65). *The Heart Sutra* (*Prajnaparamita-hrdaya-sutra*) calls these "superimpositions" *cittavarana*, which Conze translates as "thought-coverings" (*Wisdom* 101). The image here is suggestive: the mind uses concepts and symbols to shrink-wrap the objects of perception in order to preserve identity in the midst of change. The result is, to Buddhists, an impediment to enlightened perception – it is "belief in the real existence of separate objects" (Conze, *Wisdom* 104). Imposing ontological identity on perceptual objects has two effects: one, it makes us think that the object remains essentially the same over time; and two, it makes us think the object is essentially different from all other objects. For Buddhists, this

sameness and difference of things is just one way of looking at the world, and not a particularly good one if you think things actually exist that way.

Much of Buddhist literature and practice, then, is devoted to "uncovering" the objects of perception – to allowing the river to flow on all levels of experience. In fact, "uncovering" is a metaphoric connotation of the word *nirvana*, the stated goal of Buddhism. According to Conze, "Many Buddhist authors have derived the word 'Nirvana' from the root *vri*, 'to cover,' interpreting it as that which is quite 'unobstructed,' or 'free'" (*Wisdom* 107). This is the same root from which *cittavarana* is derived, where *citta* means "thoughts" or "Thought" and *avarana* (from the root *vri*) means "'obstruction,' 'obstacle,' 'impediment,' 'covering'" (*Wisdom* 104). In my perception of the river, there is a thought (*cittavarana* or *atman*) that obstructs the river's flow on the level of ontological identity and that covers over the river, making it appear as a separate object; it is this thought I need to remove in order to experience the unobstructed free flow of *nirvana*. The river that appears behind the thought-veil of everyday perception is not some eternal, transcendent river; it is just this – just river freedom and openness.

So what is it that blocks the river's flow on the level of ontological identity? The full answer to this question requires meditation experience: you need to feel *atman* working in your own experience of the world. But one way Buddhists try to get at *cittavarana* and *atman* conceptually is to look at the relationship between language and experience. Buddhism points out that one basic assumption we hold about words is that they refer to real entities, things that are separate and remain the same through time. For Buddhists, this close relationship between words and entity existence is a problem:

> The problem with words and concepts is that instead of understanding that they have a purely provisional status and a purely utilitarian value, human beings tend to believe that there is a really existing entity to which the word or concept corresponds. It is the fundamental teaching of Buddhism that there is only incessant change, or flux, and that there is no thing which undergoes this change. (Cook 40)

We know that the river is constantly changing, but our concept "river" is abstract and static. While naming the river can be useful, we tend to write the conceptual or symbolic

stasis of "river" onto our fluctuating experience of the particular river. That conceptually stable identity allows for an entity that has historical being, an entity that can serve as the subject of propositional statements. We feel that this is the same Thames River that has flowed since the retreat of the last glaciers and that we can know things about it. The river changes, yes, but there is always a river that is the site of those changes. We always assume "that there is really an object (or complex of objects) which undergoes successive states – i.e., birth, subsistence, and cessation – but which itself is a real entity serving as the locus for the change" (Cook 40). For us, the river has an unseen substance that shares the stability of its name. But for the Buddhists, "nothing anywhere [...] lasts in one form for two moments in a row" (Cook 40). There is only emptiness of change and permanence.

#

As the evening shadows lengthen across the river's surface, the remaining light, sharp-angled, mostly reflects off the water, failing to penetrate to the bottom. In the approaching darkness, the river becomes a source of mystery and imagination – anything could be swimming down there.

Leaning over the bank, my reflection appears over the blackness, distorted this way and that by the fading light's dance on the river's current. But I am no Narcissus (I hope). I've read enough Plato and Plotinus, enough Shakespeare and Blake to distrust appearance – the reality you really want is always behind the veil of phenomena in the dark unseen mystery. There you'll find an eternity to satisfy desire. The river reflection only offers change and death. Try to possess the image, and you'll end up at the bottom of the river. It occurs to me, though, that you'll end up in the same place if you try to pierce through the appearance to possess the unseen reality – it all leads straight to the bottom.

According to the narrator in Ovid's telling of the Narcissus tale, Narcissus's problem initially isn't self-love but ontological confusion: "He fell in love with a hope insubstantial, believing what was only an image to be real and corporeal" (Morford and Lenardon 247). Where there is only reflection, Narcissus believes he sees a substantial being. The narrator pleads, "why do you grasp at your fleeting reflection to no avail?

What you seek is not real [...]. What you perceive is but the reflection of your own image; it has no substance of its own" (248). The narrator does not expand on this notion of substance, but it is clear that a "real" thing must possess its own substance and not be so "fleeting." What really gets Narcissus into trouble, though, is his desire to possess the insubstantial. He complains to the trees, "I behold my beloved, but what I see and love I cannot have; such is the frustration of my unrequited passion" (248). Desire here implies possession, but possession requires substance – something to have and hold – preferably corporeal solidity. Narcissus' insatiable desire consumes him completely: he suffers and dies. The lesson – desire needs substance. Passion feeds off a myth of possession.

I interpret the Narcissus story as a Buddhist parable. From the Buddhist point of view, we're all caught in Narcissus' fantasy world. Just as Narcissus interprets his watery appearance as a real being (whom he names "my beloved"), we interpret the fleeting objects of perception as real, substantial, and nameable things. In Buddhist terms, Narcissus attributes *atman* to his reflection just as we attribute *atman* to, well, everything, including ourselves. For us, the fantasy world is mostly symbolic, bound up with our abstract concepts and our language. The ontological stability that naming seems to support leads us, like Narcissus, into a belief in a myth of possession: "The trouble with using words the way we do is that in believing that there is *really* an objective referent for the word, I can also believe that it is possible to possess it" (Cook 41). Narcissus believes there really is a "beloved," and his desire to possess him is fatal. The same might be said of our objects of desire – they are the source of suffering because they are falsely imagined.

Of course, the Narcissus story does not fully support a Buddhist reading: Ovid nowhere questions the substantial reality of corporeal beings in general or the possibility of possession and desire fulfillment (as long as the object of desire is not a reflection). But to Buddhists, all belief in substance – in enduring objects – leads to the suffering of frustrated insatiable desire. For the Buddhist, "We cannot really possess (or lose) because there is no enduring object to possess" (Cook 41). Every object slips through our grasp as Narcissus' beloved slipped through his.

#

As darkness envelopes my sitting grove and forms retreat, I can still hear the river's motion against the bank and against the rocks. Under the cover of night and under the cover of its name, the river slips by, flowing.

PRATITYASAMUTPADA # 5000 feet above sea level in the Appalachian Mountains of New Hampshire, there is a place named Edmands' Col that dips saddle-like between the peaks of Mt. Adams and Mt. Jefferson. The Col is one of my favourite places. I have sat there in late June sunlight on the grassy banks of a quiet mountain spring, wondering at the brief, implausible bloom of alpine wildflowers and staring into Castle Ravine, my back to the Great Gulf Wilderness.

The place takes its name from J. Rayner Edmands, an engineer, a star-gazer, who loved the White Mountains. He was born in 1850 in Boston and grew up in the long shadow cast by the Civil War. In the Col there is a large brass plaque dedicated to Edmands' memory. It turns out that he was "the first to build continuous uniformly graded paths on the Presidential Range" ("Edmands Col"). He would hike above the tree line each summer and, one stone at a time, transform a treacherous jumble of eroded granite into a smooth trail. The complete task was enormous – too big for one man – but he did what he could to open the way for more people to experience the grandeur of the Presidentials.

The way I see it, each stone he placed, flat-face up, was an invitation to climb upwards out of the war-stained valleys towards a panoramic vision of beauty and peace. Edmands' stones lead the way to perspectives that can transform the way you see the world.

The kind of work that Edmands did on the East Coast, Gary Snyder did on the West. For Snyder, working on trail crews high in the Sierras in the early 1950s, the work was called riprapping. In his first published book of poetry, called *Riprap*, Snyder defines a riprap as "a cobble of stone laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in the

mountains" (*No Nature* 3). Snyder's and Edmands' labours share a similar spirit: stones set in place to aid ascent to mountain vistas.

For Snyder, this kind of back-breaking labour serves as a metaphor for the form and function of his poetry. In the title poem to his first volume, he writes,

> Lay down these words
> Before your mind like rocks.
> placed solid, by hands
> In choice of place, set
> Before the body of the mind
> in space and time:
> Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall
> riprap of things:
> Cobble of milky way,
> straying planets,
> These poems, people,
> lost ponies with
> Dragging saddles
> and rocky sure-foot trails. ("Riprap" 30)

Snyder owes a debt here to Williams' objectivist injunction to form poems out of object nouns, not abstract nouns. Consequently, the poem's images range from things close (rocks, bark, leaf, wall) to things far (milky way, planets) in space and time, but the images never reach beyond the finite and the physical. In fact, the poem is resolutely non-transcendent, non-metaphysical. Its opening word is an imperative verb that calls poet and reader (the text does not specify which) to physical labour, and the first few lines build an analogy between the life of the mind and the life of the hands. Snyder's poem does not build a trail to timeless truths – this is not that kind of mountain; it simply places words before us "lost ponies" to serve as "rocky sure-foot trails" that lead us up into the mountains.

But why climb mountains at all? Sir Edmund Hillary's famous reply doesn't quite capture it for me. I climb to *see* what's there, to gain perspective. When you cross the tree line on Adams or Jefferson thousands of feet above the valley, you hike on lichen and tundra found only at elevation or in the Arctic. Life struggles here, grows by millimeters, not meters. But in this inhospitable realm, once the clouds have blown through – cold grey vanishing wisps – your vision expands. Breathless on rough, eroded granite, staring

down through an empty *cirque* – ancient glacier's abandoned nest – the land reveals its secret. From up here, you can see its connections more clearly, can understand how it lays.

Snyder's poem does not reveal the riprapped path's final destination. The linear image of a trail, which you might expect in a poem about trail building, never emerges. What does emerge is a vision of the world from altitude as endlessly interconnected: "The worlds like an endless / four-dimensional / Game of *Go*." (30). *Go* is an ancient game of East Asian origin played on a board of 19 vertical and 19 horizontal lines where pieces slide between the 361 intersections. It is an odd image for Snyder to use because it is abstract and geometrical, and because the game's goal is domination, but the point of the image is clear: the worlds are endlessly linked. Snyder emphasizes this part of the poem in his afterword to the 1990 edition of *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*: "The title *Riprap* celebrates the work of hands, the placing of rock, and my first glimpse of the image of the whole universe as interconnected, interpenetrating, mutually reflecting, and mutually embracing" (Afterword 65-66). Objects and beings that seem separate from a valley perspective reveal their connections when seen from above. This expansive alpine perspective is a reason to build trails and to climb them.

Snyder's poem "Bubbs Creek Haircut" from *Mountains and Rivers Without End* also sketches this vision of things from altitude:

> the winding rock-braced switchbacks
> dive in snowbanks, we climb on where
> pack trains have to dig or wait.
> A half-iced-over lake, twelve thousand feet
> its sterile boulder bank
> but filled with leaping trout:
> reflections wobble in the
> mingling circles always spreading out
> the crazy web of wavelets makes sense
> seen from high above.
> A deva world of sorts—it's high
> -- a view that few men see, a point
> bare sunlight
> on the spaces
> empty sky (35)

From altitude, the mystery of this "crazy" life of ever-shifting wobbling reflections "makes sense" to Snyder. From altitude, the chaotic lake surface agitations appear as a "web of wavelets," a crucial image that encapsulates Snyder's vision of the world. This image of a web of wavelets alludes both to modern physics' view of the equivalence of matter and energy and to the Buddhist image of Indra's net or web, taken from one of Snyder's favourite sutras, the *Avatamsakasutra*. In the sutra, Indra's net is an image of *pratityasamutpada* (dependent origination), an image of "mutual identity" and "mutual inter-causality" (Cook 2). It is a cosmic net where each intersection contains a jewel that reflects every other jewel in the net. Each jewel exists in dependence on every other jewel and each jewel contains all the others within it; no one jewel exists independently. In Snyder's poem, leaping trout (inexplicably existing 12,000 feet above the sea), cause ripples that reflect everything around them with each rise and fall and that mingle with each other over the surface of the lake. It is an image of interconnection, where each wave represents the wave-like existence of objects. The vision of the world that emerges above the tree line, then, is one where objects exist not as isolated solid things but as interconnected waves of energy that spread out and interact.

At first glance, though, there seems to be a contradiction between Snyder's riprap poetics, which values a riprap of solid particular things, and his wavelet web ontology, which envisions things as spread out and interconnected. But Snyder unifies this particle-wave duality in his poetry through juxtaposition. The poet places words on the page, leaving out many of the grammatical and syntactical trail markers that usually direct and limit interpretation. The result is a cobble or constellation of words (particles) whose meanings arise from the interconnections (waves) of denotation, connotation, and allusion. The images seem solid, particular, and independent, but their meaning depends on context. Alone, the words or "things" do not contain the meaning we ascribe to them: they require other words and the perceiving mind for meaning. The full range of meaning, then, is wave-like, spread out between particular words and things and minds, which have no meaningful content of their own. Words drop into the mind like pebbles into a mountain tarn, and the ripples spread outward and interact, forming a web of meaning seen from above.

For Snyder, then, the poet is not like a sculptor chipping away irrelevant bits of marble to reveal the timeless form imprisoned in the formless stone; rather, the poet does collage, cobbling bits and pieces together, allowing them to resonate and interact with each other in non-linear ways.

Furthermore, the poet does not look to the heavenly muses for his materials; he digs them out of glacial till and leaf litter: "ants and pebbles / In the thin loam, each rock a word / a creek-washed stone / Granite" ("Riprap" 30). Here, Snyder equates words with rock, seemingly an image of unchanging solidity. But Snyder goes on to invest that image of rock with dynamic energy:

> Granite: ingrained
> with torment of fire and weight
> Crystal and sediment linked hot
> all change, in thoughts,
> As well as things. (30)

Snyder reminds his reader that granite is the product of temporal geological processes, of enormous amounts of energy. Granite is by no means an image of permanence. By extension, words too ("each rock a word") are the products of temporal forces; they too are not timeless. The point is that the ground we stand on, physically, conceptually, and linguistically, is not solid or static. Climbing a mountain does not lead one to eternity; nor does reading a poem lead one to timeless truths. All the materials of the phenomenal world and all the materials of thought are impermanent: "all change, in thoughts, / As well as things." The poem is not a window on eternity; it is a bit of trail on steep slick rock whose cobbled form gains strength and meaning from interconnection and juxtaposition and whose function is to lead you to an alpine perspective of the impermanent and relational nature of things, your feet planted firmly on granite.

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The last time I was in Edmand's Col, I spent a few hours placing flat stones to help smooth the trail. The work was physically demanding, the rough granite hard on the hands. But as I took a water break at Spaulding spring and as my eyes traced the descent of Israel ridge down to the valley floor, I felt the satisfaction of the work: this riprap of rock leads to an alpine vision of boundless delight.

NIHSVABHAVA # Eyes opening. Unfamiliar light pours in, a spring flood carrying fast-moving, shifting colour debris – visual field a flood-plain spreading wide. Amid the torrent, mind rises like a standing wave and looks, discerns, identifies. Waves become familiar, currents collect in grooves: out of the flood, the Halifax skyline rises shimmering in cool morning air.

The visual field of Halifax Harbour stabilizes everywhere I gaze with recognition. Shifting colour patterns snap into shape: here a building, there an island. The mind simplifies the flood in perception, ignores inconstant, ephemeral aspects – tosses them away as useless or lets them stream by, unattended. A slew of visual detritus slides out to sea and floats there, out of sight. To a mind interpreting a world of familiar objects, most of what flows by in the visual field is useless junk: a steady stream of perceptual flotsam and jetsam, ignored and forgotten.

One of the things I like best about living in Dartmouth is taking the ferry. Every Saturday morning, my wife and I ride across the harbour to shop for locally-grown organic foods at the Halifax Farmer's Market. Often we pull away from the terminal at sunrise: red-hued dawn light rises like a lava pool brimming at the horizon, spills over the Pleasant Street ridge, flows to the water, ignites the harbour with rose quartz refracting brilliance.

We like to ride top-side in all seasons, enmeshed in long-wave reflected Atlantic sights. Condensation often covers the faded cream-coloured plastic seats in the morning, so my wife spreads a plastic bag and sits, watching the light rush back across the harbour and back across the open sea beyond. I prefer to lean against the railing next to her, gazing down at the harbour's surface where light and water waves interact in the awakening day.

What I watch for in particular are pieces of scattered debris emerging from the night, floating noiselessly on the tide. Bits of wood, some cut and shaped – boards and plywood – some natural – branches and deadheads with curling roots; pieces of plastic: margarine containers, bailers, tampon applicators; chunks of styrofoam from buoys and construction sites; clothes; paper; leaves; even the occasional glass bottle, although I've never seen a note inside. All manner of detritus finds its way onto the harbour's surface

from origins mysterious. Careless sailors and fishermen must have thrown some overboard – jetsam. The sea itself must have claimed some from shorelines or the wind must have blown some aloft over the water – flotsam. And much must come from the untreated municipal effluent that pours into the harbour – flushsam. It's all lost, forgotten, useless garbage – junk exfoliated from the world's rosy face.

The thing that interests me about this harbour flotsam is not the mystery of its origins, nor the romance of each item's possible future journey to unknown shores – it's difficult to get romantic about a used condom floating flaccid on the brine. What intrigues me is how much of our world we ignore, forget, throw away as worthless trash – how much we let sink out of sight. We maintain our world's order and stability by flushing away the miasma of disorder, the accidents and leftovers of living. The same holds true of the world we construct in perception: our minds jettison the accidents of appearance, attend only to what seems constant in the visual field. The stable world we see is the result of continuous perceptual flushing. Much of the visual world floats away on an unseen tide.

Watching for flotsam on a Saturday morning, staring down intently at the dark blue harbour surface: soft waves rise and fall in light and shadow, move in cacophonous directions, collide, interfere, create unreadable patterns. It's easy to feel a bit giddy in this shifting visual field, easy to lose a sense of solid ground. Nothing appears stable: the flotsam pitches and rolls, gleams in the rising sun for a moment, then plunges into shadow – boat movement and water movement keep sight angles shifting, make identification difficult, like a multi-angled Cubist image. A glistening dark bit of flotsam fluctuates protean in a surge of unrecognized perceptual possibility: it takes a few seconds to distinguish log from harbour seal.

I've noticed on these ferry rides that I get a bit frustrated when I can't identify or categorize a piece of flotsam. I will stare and stare, even move my body around to look from different angles, gathering more images until an interpretation clicks. From the point of view of Gestalt psychology, my agitation is not surprising. Gestalt studies of perception found that the mind craves meaning or "closure" (Bloomer 16); that is, the

mind needs to identify an unfamiliar stimulus in order to achieve a sense of relief. Part of this activity of closure involves categorizing and naming the stimulus: "naming often gives a powerful sense of relief and closure" (Bloomer 16). I've felt the frustration an unidentified piece of flotsam evokes; I've felt my mind's thirst for meaning as I shift around on deck, trying to get a fix on the object; and I've felt the relief as the stimulus's form snaps into a recognizable category: that's a log, not a seal or anything else.

When the snap of "closure" occurs, the shifting series of irregular images collapses into a stable image, as if a blurred and jumpy film strip were finally adjusted to the correct speed or the final few obscuring bits of a sculpture were chipped away. Once identified, the ambiguous image that captured my attention suddenly seems prosaic, familiar – it's just a log: "After you have classified and identified something, your mind usually turns off that stimulus and goes on to something else. [...] the mind will see only as much as is necessary to obtain meaning or closure. Once closure has occurred, the stimulus becomes boring, the viewer uninterested" (Bloomer 16). Much of our visual experience gets discarded this way. The uniqueness of each moment slips unseen under the film of familiarity that closure stretches over experience.

However, closure or meaning-making does more than obscure the perpetual freshness of the visual field with the scum of inattention. When closure occurs, the mind partially lifts a perceptual object out of time and context, lifts the figure out of its ground. Before identification, the mind attends carefully to variations in colour illumination and to fluctuations in form due to shifting angles: the figure is nothing more than the presently perceived image. Without recognition or closure, the mind cannot infer anything about the hidden parts of an object, cannot infer anything conclusive about its size or use or value. The object changes with the rise and fall of harbour waves. But once closure occurs, the figure gains a dimension beyond the present, gains a satisfying and familiar wholeness that stands behind and unifies each changing perception of the object. The object acquires a feeling of depth beyond surface irregularities.

The identified object we perceive floating on the brine is not the figure as it appears in context in the moment from a particular angle; rather, it is a stabilized or normalized object that we feel is the same object from any angle, at any moment, in any context: the mind devalues those aspects of the object that change rapidly, perceiving

them as accidents, ignoring them. Our mind lifts the perceptual figure out of its ground, and the ground sinks into visual obscurity – we assume that we can eliminate the ground elements without altering meaning (Bloomer 38). Thus, the identified figure *stands forth*; it *exists* as an independent object, cradling its identity against "superficial" changes in visual angle and figure-ground relationships. The object floats just outside of time and context, untangled from the jungle-chaos of retinal experience – it is abstracted, transcendent.

QUESTIONS # I searched for Buddhist-inspired elegies, looking especially at Beat poets who experimented with Buddhist ideas: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Lew Welch, and Philip Whalen. Perhaps their poems about death and impermanence would fulfill my hypothesis. My first experiment seemed encouraging. I read Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* as a Buddhist-influenced elegy to his father, to himself, and to jazz great Charlie Parker (I'll come back to this reading near the end of the dissertation), but there was a problem. Kerouac's "Buddhism" did not always match what I thought of as Buddhism. His ideas seemed to waffle between mystical Catholicism and nihilism rather than to conform to Buddhism proper.

The lack of elegies that neatly fit my hypothesis, however, was only the start of my trouble. My major problem flowed from what seemed like a very simple – or at least unmetaphysical – question: What is Buddhism? In order to trace the influence of Buddhism on Beat poets, I needed a basic definition of Buddhism. To use the word "Buddhism" with any meaningful authority, I had to know what it was. However, many books I read on Buddhism were frustratingly cagey when it came to defining it. I looked to authoritative scholars, hoping that they wrote a few phrases to encapsulate the essence of Buddhism. They didn't. I found, instead, a series of testimonials to the difficulty and even the impossibility of defining "Buddhism." For example, Lama Govinda argues that there is no stable referent for the word "Buddhism," no set of ideas that define the limits of Buddhist belief. For Buddhists, there is "no dogmatical form of truth, but only an indication of the direction and the method by which truth could be realized" (38). Thomas and J.C. Cleary echo Lama Govinda's conclusion that there is no set of fixed principles –

no collection of true propositions – labeled "Buddhism." According to the Clearys, Buddha was like a physician who used any method he could to cure students of their intellectual, emotional, and metaphysical sicknesses. The Buddha "invented and adapted various teachings and techniques to liberate people; he was likened to a skilled physician giving specific medicines to cure certain diseases. It is said, therefore, that there is no fixed teaching" (xiii). The form of the cures was irrelevant; only the result mattered. Apparently, Buddha gladly contradicted himself when it was in the best interests of the student seeking liberation, which makes it difficult to sort out which teachings are the "real" ones.

All of the Buddha's teachings (the *dharma*) and all of the texts that record those teachings (the *sutras*) are provisional. Buddha possessed *upaya* (skill-in-means), which means that he fitted his teaching to his hearer; face-to-face, he did what was necessary to effect liberation from suffering. Buddha left no systematic theoretical writings of his own. What the sutras record are his teachings to specific students and his sermons to specific audiences. No particular teaching is meant to serve as absolute truth or law. The Clearys emphasize that Buddhism is not "an external body of knowledge or information to be possessed as an acquisition or believed or revered as inflexible dogma" (xiv); rather, Buddhist texts are there to vivify the seeker's quest for liberation: "Buddhism is not and never has pretended to be a 'theory,' an explanation of the universe; it is a way to salvation, a way of life" (Zürcher qtd. in Huntington 3). Any attempt to systematize Buddha's teachings is at best a misdirected effort and at worst a kind of "intellectual idolatry" (Cleary and Cleary xiv). What is Buddhism? My demand for an answer was meeting stubborn opposition.

The literature about Buddhism is suffused with disclaimers cautioning readers against conceptualizing Buddhism as a system of beliefs or philosophical views. In fact, studies of Madhyamika Buddhism, a school of Indian Buddhism that originated in the 2nd and 3rd centuries C.E., describe the practices of that school as methods for abandoning systems of belief altogether. For example, according to C.W. Huntington's study of Candrakirti's *Madhyamakavatara* (*The Entry into the Middle Way*), a 7th-century Madhyamika text, the goal of Buddhist philosophy is soteriological, not dogmatic. And the way to salvation is not through belief in a particular set of views about the nature of

reality; rather, it is through relinquishing all views about the nature of reality: "Early Madhyamika explicitly claims to operate as a rejection, or deconstruction, of all attempts to create a value-free, objective view of truth or reality" (xii). The goal of Madhyamika Buddhist philosophizing, then, is the "total rejection of all fixed views and beliefs" (xii). For the Madhyamika, the view that truth or reality is something "out there" that we can discover if we are smart enough or if we meditate enough produces the kind of ignorance (*avidya*) about reality that causes suffering.

The Madhyamika claim is that Buddhism has nothing to sell. I started my research assuming that the doctrine of *anatman* (no-self or no-soul), which gets described in most studies of Buddhism (both in general studies and studies of particular traditions or schools), is something that Buddhists believe to be true about reality, something they are selling. But the studies on Madhyamika were telling me that even the doctrine of *anatman* must be abandoned as a fixed view. The problem with views about the nature of reality is that they all assume that there is a "value-free, objective" reality that exists independently of our attempts to discover it. So if you are like Malunkyaputta asking questions about the nature of self (*atman*), your questions are misdirected because they are built upon the desire for a stable notion of reality. Even if you deny the existence of a self, your assertion "there is no self" has two problems with it. For one, the view is only meaningful in relation to the concept "self," so your denial conjures up the concept of self whether you like it or not. And second, feeling confident in the truthfulness of a view implicitly binds you to a belief in a stable reality that exists independently of your beliefs and is accessible to all. However, according to the Madhyamika, this kind of desire for views, which is based on the assumption that you can, in fact, "discover or define an objective, value free view of truth or reality" (Huntington xiii), is exactly the desire that you need to extinguish.

One must be careful here not to fall into the trap of assuming that Madhyamika is replacing the view that there is "an objective, value-free" reality with the view that there is not. Madhyamika Buddhism is not that easy. Accepting the negative view does not release you from your gut feeling about the nature of reality as something that corresponds to your concepts about it. You must abandon all views. The goal of this deconstructive practice is not knowledge about reality; it is liberation:

> The critical distinction here is between systematic philosophy, concerned with the presentation of a particular view or belief (*drsti*), and edifying philosophy, engaged in strictly deconstructive activity (the Madhyamika *prasangavakya*). The central concepts of an edifying philosophy must ultimately be abandoned when they have served the purpose for which they were designed. Such concepts are not used to express a view but *to achieve an effect*: They are a means (*upaya*). (Huntington xiii)

For the Madhyamika, Buddha's "noble silence" against metaphysical speculation and his tendency to use whatever works from a pedagogical and soteriological point of view both stem from a desire to move away from any system of belief about reality or truth. Buddha's goal is not to convey information; it is to edify.

Ah ha, I thought: If I can't define Buddhism as belief in the *anatman* doctrine, or any other doctrine, I could define it as an "edifying philosophy" so that any text that sought to deconstruct notions of objective reality could be categorized as Buddhist. That way I could salvage a Buddhist tradition. But here Huntington had more words of caution. Constructing a Buddhist tradition would still assume "an objectively present tradition, that is, a tradition which stands apart from the researcher as the object of all attempts to understand or define it" (7). Defining Buddhism was exactly what I wanted to do, but my desire was in conflict with the goal of Buddhism. The goal of Buddhism is liberation, and liberation is not won through the kind of intellectual analysis I was attempting.

But I was writing a dissertation, not achieving enlightenment. Even if Buddhists argued that focusing on Buddhism's teachings as objects of study did not bear spiritual fruit, surely there was a core set of ideas that would bear academic fruit by serving as a meaningful definition for arguments about Buddhist influences on American poetry. But the stable definition of "Buddhism" that I sought in academic studies claiming to be about "Buddhism" never materialized. The studies did more than simply describe Buddhist resistance to defining Buddhism; they all participated in that resistance as well. The Clearys did go so far as to propose that, while there is no fixed teaching, there is a kind of unity that binds all Buddhist works together. Perhaps this unifying quality could serve as a definition. It couldn't. All Buddhist teachings, they argued, possess "one uniform

flavor, the flavor of liberation" (xiii). The flavour of liberation? This Ben and Jerry's definition was not much better than the one I found in Paul Williams' study of Mahayana Buddhism. For Williams, "All teachings are exactly appropriate to the level of those for whom they were intended. Any adaptation whatsoever, provided it is animated by the Bodhisattva's compassion and wisdom, and is suitable to the recipient, is a part of Buddhism" (144). Basically, if it looks like Buddhism, smells like Buddhism, tastes like Buddhism, then it very well might be Buddhism. But what the heck *is* Buddhism?

I kept running into brick walls with this simple but crucial question. Scholars were not willing to commit to an answer. Ian Harris argued that "Statements of the kind 'Buddhism is…' are problematic in that they very often fail to take account of the historical, doctrinal, and cultural diversity of the tradition" (381). Here, Harris suggests that defining Buddhism is difficult because of the tradition's range and complexity, but he doesn't say it's impossible. I figured that, out of the various incarnations of Buddhism through time and across cultures, there had to be a set of concepts that all Buddhists would agree are Buddhist. Without this set of core concepts, the word Buddhism would be useless; it would simply be an arbitrary term applied to anything that anyone felt "tasted" like Buddhism.

To make an argument about Buddhism influencing a Kerouac or Snyder text, I would need to be able to say authoritatively what was and was not Buddhist. If I were going to call an idea "Buddhist" and mean something by it, I would need a categorical definition of Buddhism. My undergraduate textbook on logic informed me that for an argument to proceed, I would need to provide a "description of the essential nature of [the] thing" I was arguing about (Barker 258). I would need to discover the necessary attributes of Buddhism – those concepts that set Buddhism apart. Scholars were using the word "Buddhism" a lot, so I figured there must be a definable essence, a stable core, a central teaching to which the word refers.

Buddha's *upaya*, though, presents an insurmountable challenge to defining Buddhism. A study that attempted to abstract a set of indispensable teachings from the data of the sutras would be doomed to failure because the teachings are simply a means to an indefinable end. Any idea whatsoever can serve as a Buddhist teaching as long as it is used to liberate a student from belief in "objective, value-free" notions of truth and

reality. There is nothing inherently Buddhist in any particular phrase or teaching. For example, to the student who believes in the existence of *atman*, Buddha teaches *anatman*. And to the student who believes in *anatman*, Buddha teaches *atman*. Nagarjuna, the father of Madhyamika, wrote, "The buddhas have indicated that there is a self, they taught that there is no self, and they also taught that there is neither any self nor any no-self" (qtd. in Huntington 37). Nagarjuna denies any assertions and makes assertions to counter any denials in order to short-circuit the desire for a fixed view.

There's just no way to solidify a conceptual category called "Buddhism" without arbitrarily choosing some sutras and ignoring others. The contradictions run too deep. One cannot argue that *anatman* is an essential teaching any more than *atman*, although *anatman* receives more attention because belief in *atman* is more pervasive. There is no way to refine Buddha's teachings, no way to separate the gold from the dross because all the teachings are provisional, so all are equal in relation to truth. No teaching can be discarded as so much jetsam or jealously guarded as the essence of Buddhism. In fact, *The Diamond Sutra* (*Vajracchedika-prajnaparmita-sutra*) reveals that it is unproductive to think that there is a common attribute abstractable from the teachings (the *dharma*). In the sutra, Buddha asks, "What do you think, Subhuti, is there any dharma which the Tathagata has taught? – Subhuti replied: No indeed, O Lord, there is not" (Trans. Conze, *Wisdom* 50). Apparently, Buddhism has nothing to teach at all.

If the teachings themselves do not contain a few essential concepts that could serve as a definition of Buddhism, then the essence of Buddhism must be what all the teachings point to – Buddha's enlightenment. Buddha may not have been in the business of making propositional truth claims about the nature of reality, but he was trying to point to something. Surely the content of Buddha's awakening is the essence of Buddhism, the causal origin of the various teachings. But in the *Diamond Sutra*, Buddha admits that his enlightenment (the *raison d'être* of Buddhism) has no knowable essence at all:

> The Lord [Buddha] asked: What do you think, Subhuti, is there any dharma which the Tathagata has fully known as "the utmost, right and perfect enlightenment," or is there any dharma which the Tathagata has demonstrated? – Subhuti replied: No, not as I understand what the Lord has said. And why? This dharma which the

> Tathagata has fully known or demonstrated – it cannot be grasped, it cannot be talked about, it is neither a dharma nor a no-dharma. (Conze 30)

The passage makes little conceptual sense because it takes pains to contradict any truth claims. Has the Buddha fully known his enlightenment? No and yes. In terms of knowledge that can be grasped and talked about (propositional knowledge), Buddha has not gained any knowledge by his enlightenment. Yet "the Tathagata has fully known" his enlightenment on some level.

Buddha is here stressing that there is no essential teaching, no stable core of meaning that one can formulate into declarative sentences. Williams picks up on this aspect of "Buddhism" in the conclusion to his study: "There is probably no clear-cut, unchanging core to Buddhist doctrine. Buddhism as a religion in history has no essence" (275-76). What Buddha and Williams seem to be saying is that you cannot create a stable and meaningful category labeled "Buddhism." There is nothing inherently Buddhist in the sutras and no knowable conceptual experience to which they refer.

DUHKHA # In August, 1913, Sigmund Freud was walking with two friends "through a smiling countryside" in the Dolomites ("Transience" 305). Freud felt so moved by the scenery that he commented exuberantly to his fellow ramblers on its beauty. In reply, one of his companions, a dour poet, likewise expressed an aesthetic appreciation for nature's beauty. The poet, however, also confessed that nature's splendor no longer moved him. Freud observes that "[he] felt no joy in it" (305). The poet's sighing explanation was that all the beauty spread out before him would vanish like foam on the water as winter inevitably approached: "All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom" (305). Like young Prince Siddhartha, the future Buddha, Freud's poet-friend instinctively found no lasting satisfaction in the things of this floating world.

Freud records this episode in his 1916 essay "On Transience" and goes on to argue that contemplation of transience results in two mental impulses. One, like Freud's poet-friend, is an "aching despondency" (305) – the world and its objects are stripped of worth. The second is rebellion against impermanence:

> No! it is impossible that all this loveliness of Nature and Art, of the world of our sensations and of the world outside, will really fade away into nothing. It would be too senseless and too presumptuous to believe it. Somehow or other this loveliness must be able to persist and to escape all the powers of destruction. (305)

Freud calls this desire for permanence a "demand for immortality" (305). Although he does not refer directly to religion in "On Transience," it is evident that "immortality," which is Christ's gift to those who believe, can be read as a reference to the Christian consolation: the things of this world will perish, but those who believe will have immortal life. Freud, however, dismisses this mental impulse as wish fulfillment: "this demand for immortality is a product of our wishes too unmistakable to lay claim to reality: what is painful may none the less be true" (305). Freud has no time for metaphysical and transcendent desires. The fact is that things are transient: they arise and pass away into nothing.

As Freud was strolling with his two companions in the Dolomites, he contemplated his poet-friend's despondency. It seemed to Freud that his companion was, essentially, in a state of mourning. In "On Transience," Freud notes that "The idea that all this beauty was transient was giving these two sensitive minds a foretaste of mourning over its decease" (306). Freud here links the psychology of transience with that of loss: the sadness and anxiety that can arise from contemplation of impermanence is the same in kind (although not in degree) as that felt in loss. It is this underlying psychology of loss that I think links an elegy like Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," which deals generally with death and transience, with an elegy like Ben Jonson's "On My First Son," which deals with a specific, personal, and traumatic loss. Elegy explores the full spectrum of mourning; it charts the variety of human responses to transience and death. Incidentally, the experience of transience and death is exactly what motivated the future Buddha to abandon his parents' sensual pleasure dome and to wander the forest looking for spiritual peace. Freud, elegies, and Buddha – all confront the problem of impermanence and develop their own strategies of consolation to ease suffering.

What puzzles me, though, is the fact that we need consolation at all. We seem so unsuited to this life, constantly struggling against the basic facts of our existence: life changes constantly, possessions slip through our fingers, loved ones die, everything falls apart sooner or later, but we are not content with the world we find ourselves in. We rage impotently, but heroically, against the dying of the light. It is as if we are dislocated from or out-of-step with the impermanent nature of things. In fact, the Pali word *dukkha* (*duhkha* in Sanskrit), which Buddha used to express his first noble truth (the truth of suffering), refers to "a bone which has slipped out of its socket" or "an axle which is off-center with respect to its wheel" (Smith 150). The world we desire and the world we get are dislocated – they are fundamentally different. The psychological result of this dislocation is suffering.

For Freud, mourning and its suffering are the result of a dislocation of libido. In "On Transience," he gives a brief sketch of his theory of mourning:

> We possess, as it seems, a certain amount of capacity for love – what we call libido – which in the earliest stages of development is directed towards our own ego. Later, though still at a very early time, this libido is diverted from the ego on to objects, which are thus in a sense taken into our ego. If the objects are destroyed or if they are lost to us, our capacity for love (our libido) is once more liberated [one might say dislocated]; and it can then either take other objects instead or can temporarily return to the ego. But why it is that this detachment of libido from its objects should be such a painful process is a mystery to us [...]. We only see that libido clings to its objects and will not renounce those that are lost even when a substitute lies ready to hand. Such then is mourning. (306-07)

In abstract general terms, the very concrete pain of mourning is the result of a detachment of libido from a lost loved object. What interests me here is Freud's emphasis on objects and the implied ontology that underwrites his theory. Freud's metaphor for libido's relationship to its loved object is ontologically revealing: libido attaches to and "clings" to its objects. Images of clinging and attachment evoke ideas of sturdiness, solidity, and substance. In mourning, we are dealing with substantial objects, not mere reflections.

Freud's metaphor indicates that libido needs some kind of ontological stability in its chosen objects. This fact is borne out by commonsense experience. We think of

ourselves as essentially the same person through inward and outward changes over time, and we think of other people and external objects as remaining essentially the same too. This feeling of identity stability in self and objects is basic to the way we make sense of our world. Without this basic stability, every change in a loved object would create the conditions for mourning. The question is, though, what exactly must be lost for mourning to occur? Here again I look to Freud's metaphor of attachment. There must be something solid in an object, something that remains fixed through the "superficial" or "accidental" changes of time that libido can cling to. It is the loss of this solidity that precipitates mourning.

I am content here to remain conceptually vague about the locus of libido attachment. I think metaphor is more revealing when dealing with our unconscious or "natural" ontological commitments because we do not necessarily choose these commitments – we feel them out. Our basic notion of reality is bound up with ideas of solidity, and something that is solidly real or essential persists through time. It is this kernel of solidity in objects that serves as a fixed pier for libido attachment, and it is this solidity that breaks apart in death, leaving us tempest-tossed on an ocean of loss.

From a Buddhist point of view, libido's need for objects puts it in a perpetually perilous position. Compare Freud's world of lovable objects to the world according to Buddha: "O monks, all karmically constituted things are impermanent; they are not fixed, not comforting, and are characterized by constant change. … For all beings, all creatures, all living things, life is limited by death; for them there is no termination of death and rebirth" (*Anityatasutra*, qtd. in Strong 90). This kind of world is hostile to libido. For Buddha, there is no fixed pier to attach to. Objects provide no comfort because there is no solid core that remains untouched by change, no real locus for libido attachment. Every object we grasp is nothing more than churning water.

Whether or not you like Buddha's pessimistic-sounding view of impermanence, the libido does seem to lose its external point of attachment in death. On that much, Buddha and Freud appear to agree (although Buddha would protest that mourning is not inevitable because there never really is a point of attachment in the first place). This, then, is the basic dislocation in mourning: the fixed pier gives way, and the libidinal attachment

slips. Nothing in this world possesses the kind of permanence that libido desires, so libido is perpetually out of joint with reality. Such then is mourning.

A MEMORABLE FANCY # When I was an adolescent, my father and I loved to hike in the Presidential Range of the White Mountains. This was our trip. Every year, we would drive from Kingston to New Hampshire in late June – the perfect time of year. The snow was gone above the tree line; the weather was always hospitable (which was especially important in an area that claimed to have the worst weather in America); and the hordes of summer hikers, like the mosquitoes, would not arrive for another couple of weeks. We would hike up the side of Mt. Adams to Grey Knob and stay in the Randolph Mountain Club cabin there for about a week. Except for the weekend, we pretty much had the place to ourselves.

To a kid who'd grown up on the shores of Lake Ontario in a landscape of limestone flats – the orderly sediment of an ancient inland sea – and of lumpy till-filled eskers and moraines – the footprints of mile-thick glacial advances and retreats – the high treeless peaks and ridges of the Appalachians seemed like another world entirely, like a different ontological space. Up there, when I first passed beyond the timber line and the breathless vistas opened out – forest canopy topography rolling away like a silent emerald sea – a bit of the familiar eroded from my perception of the world.

Memories of those visionary trips are surfacing now as I sit, quietly reflecting, trying to rewire neglected synaptic grooves. I'm in my Hubbards trailer overlooking the cove, finishing up a cheap bottle of Canadian Port. And I'm feeling a bit nostalgic about early-morning hikes to Edmands' Col, remembering how we watched the long beams of dawn light slant over the valleys as the heavy night mist rose in the warming air above still lakes thousands of feet below. We were alone up there, scrambling our way across lichen-covered rocks raised and eroded over millions of years, and the solitude always made me meditative and quietly observant.

I remember one trip in particular: sitting atop Mt. Jefferson, my favourite peak, watching the landscape in all directions. I gazed mesmerized as shadows of small wind-hurry nimbus clouds scurried across the valley canopy and up over ridges and peaks.

During my silent observation, a strange thought arose: this landscape that seems so ancient and permanent might actually be fluid. Everything I could see flickered constantly in shifting patterns of shadow and illumination – everything I could see appeared to flow in time. I wondered which mountain was the real mountain. Was it the mountain in June under a clear blue sky at noon? Was it the mountain shrouded in mist, the mountain under a leaden overcast sky? Are the real rocks warm or cool to the touch? Does the mountain change if I move this stone?

I felt for the first time that there was a division in my perception of the mountains. On the one hand, there was what I saw, felt, heard, and smelled: this sensory landscape was constantly changing. But there was also an impression that underneath all of these sensory changes, the mountains were the same mountains as last year. They were solid, permanent, unchanging. The changes in light and the details of form were not essential changes. However, there was something that bugged me: this "essential" mountain was a ghost; it was not something I could see or touch. The landscape I could see and touch flowed like an alpine brook over jagged rocks. And the more I focused on the flux, the more I felt like the unseen rock beneath the brook was eroding – like it might not be there at all.

For me, the epistemological mountains and the ontological mountains had been identical. But now I wasn't so sure about the ontological mountains. Things seemed a little less solid.

Once I became aware of the two mountains, the seen and the unseen, this duality appeared everywhere. In the drive home from the mountains, my father and I played the same few tapes over and over. One of my favourites (aside from The Eagles' *Greatest Hits*, of course) was an Emmylou Harris album called *Angel Band*, a selection of traditional hymns from Appalachia. In these hymns, there was a strong sense of a division between two worlds – one that was always subject to change and death and one that was solid, permanent, unchanging. In fact, each person was made up of these two aspects: a mortal body and an immortal soul.

We both knew the words to all the songs. So as the bent highway grass blurred by and the shifting yellow highway line trailed behind, we'd fill the van with a horrendous nasal-twang noise:

All my days of sorrow
And tears for my loved ones
I wish I could tell them the door that I feel
Though my body is weary
My soul is uplifted
My sins are forgiven and my Jesus is real

Praise God I feel like singing
I'm on the other side of life now ("The Other Side of Life" 3-10)

The old tunes of Appalachian faith and elegiac consolation laid plain the basic dualistic Christian view of life and salvation. This corporeal world of dust and sorrow, of weariness, constant change, and death is not the only world. There are two sides of life, and "the other side of life" is the life eternal for souls cleansed of sin. As the body dies, the soul shares in Jesus' redemptive victory over death – it walks freely through the door between seen and unseen, between impermanent and permanent. Here are the first two lines of "When They Ring Those Golden Bells":

There's a land beyond the river that we call the sweet forever
And we only reach that shore by faith, you see

With faith, you can cross the Heraclitean river of flux – on the other side is a wish-fulfilling permanence. In a nutshell, this desire for and confidence in the eternal is the basic consolatory gesture of traditional elegies.

Those hymns are in my head and so are the mountains as I tip a glass of sickly sweet port and stare past my notebook computer at a small sailing boat slowly leaving the cove, the water motor-churning quietly behind it. The Anglican church's bell chimes the hour – when they ring those golden bells. That phrase "sweet forever" resonates – it captures the basic gesture I'm trying to understand in elegy and perception: desire craves/creates permanence, resurrection. In elegy, this permanence manifests as "the other side of life," "a land beyond the river," where our immortal soul rises to consummate its inherent yearning for eternal life:

There's eternity before me
Just beyond the dark'ning veil

O my spirit hollers to go on
Someday my ship will sail

But I will walk this road awhile
And I will walk it with a smile
I will take it in my stride
Someday I'll be satisfied
Someday I'll be satisfied ("Someday My Ship Will Sail" 9-17)

It seems that desire can only find satisfaction in permanence – impermanence leads almost inevitably to suffering. In Emmylou's hymns, the permanence desired is purely metaphysical; it's clearly an object of belief, one that provides consolation and hope on this side of "the dark'ning veil." Here you find death – there you find eternal life.

But what I'm thinking is that this desire for permanence pervades all aspects of our life, including our basic commonsense perceptions of the world. Maybe it's the port talking, but I think my Appalachian notion of the two mountains mirrors the notion of the two worlds in those rusty old hymns. The fluid mountain of the senses corresponds to the river of "When They Ring Those Golden Bells," while the unseen mountain, where I locate the mountain's persistent identity, is the land beyond the river. There's a little piece of heaven in every object we perceive. Is it possible, then, that we are at heart on a day-to-day perceptual level neo-platonic idealists and not simple materialists? Actually, is there really much difference between idealism and materialism after all?

Faith in the unseen works its way into our basic perceptions of the world. My conviction that Mt. Jefferson is the same mountain year after year depends on a belief in some unseen quality lurking behind my sensory experience of the mountain. Without that non-empirical quality, Jefferson would be nothing more to me than a constantly flickering show of sensations, a meaningless mass of experience – a chaos of Hubbards cove evening ripple reflections.

What keeps the world from sliding off in all directions, what keeps experience meaningful, is something we've never actually seen. No two trips to Jefferson, no two impressions of the mountain, have ever been exactly the same – but I'm positive it is the same mountain every time I come back.

Sameness. You know, I'm not so sure those mountains were ever the same; in fact, I'm not so sure I was ever the same walking through those landscapes. Sameness is

such a strange concept; it's a conclusion without evidence – but it is the very notion that makes things appear familiar. And belief in sameness stands behind the suffering and the hope that Emmylou sings about: there must be something within us that stays the same throughout our lives, something that death threatens with extinction, something that Jesus can save and preserve in eternal bliss. Without this unseen sameness, can the world make any sense?

One last taste of port before the sun sinks completely behind the spruce horizon. There.

ANITYA # Monet enjoyed success and fame in his lifetime, but critics of the post-Impressionistic art world rebelled against his obsession with appearances and light. They were vicious. And they all seemed to have a similar complaint: Monet is too formless. For example, in his 1932 *Characteristics of French Art*, Roger Fry criticizes Monet's aesthetic emphasis on light over form:

> [in putting] the accent so strongly on the atmospheric effects… [his paintings lost] all possibility of any definite formal design. Monet, indeed, had no interest in that. He cared only to reproduce on his canvas the actual visual sensation as far as that was possible. Perhaps if one had objected to him that this was equivalent to abandoning art, which has always been an interpretation of appearances in relation to certain human values, he would have been unmoved because he aimed almost exclusively at a scientific documentation of appearances. (qtd. in Hamilton 6)

What Monet produced was not art; it was documentary – worse, it was science. This is an odd sentiment given that Monet's cathedrals look a bit fuzzier than science generally likes its objects. Nevertheless, what I find interesting about Fry's scathing attack is what it says about form. For Fry, Monet reproduced "the actual visual sensation," which, as it turns out, prevented "all possibility of any definite formal design." Definite form, it seems, is unavailable to raw sensation. The artist produces form (and consequently meaningful art) by shaping (interpreting) mere appearance in relation to "human values," whatever those are. For Fry, appearances without interpretation are meaningless. His discomfort seems to

stem from an assumption that the accidents of appearance in time are worthless compared to the timeless form underneath the appearance.

J. Rewald shares Fry's discomfort with appearances. In *The History of Impressionism* (1946), Rewald argues that "In his attempt to observe methodically and with almost scientific exactness the uninterrupted changes of light, Monet lost the spontaneity of his perception... Carrying to the extreme his disregard for the actual subject, Monet abandoned form completely and sought to retain in a uniform tissue of subtle nuances the single miracle of light" (qtd. in Hamilton 7). Curiously, in focusing on light, the very medium of visual perception, Monet gives up form. The "actual subject," here Rouen Cathedral, is something over and above, or maybe under and behind, the very light that reveals the subject. The "actual" is more than the appearance. Rewald seems to suggest that an artist should ignore the accidental changes in appearance that light and atmosphere cause and focus on the "actual subject" that remains constant, untouched by the whims of the "miracle of light."

Critics steeped in modernist art just can't forgive Monet's lack of solid form. Lionello Venturi in his 1950 *Impressionists and Symbolists* also expresses discomfort with Monet's privileging of light over form as the subject of art and calls it "creative decadence": "in the 'Haystacks' there was no question of form, but the Rouen cathedral possesses a very definite form, and Monet's painting tries to preserve it and fails" (qtd. in Hamilton 7). Venturi seems uncomfortable with the insubstantial quality of Monet's cathedrals. It is almost inconceivable that Monet would ignore form: he must have simply been a crappy artist. Even the Museum of Modern Art in New York once described Monet's painting as "too boneless" (qtd. in Hamilton 9). A painting without definite, substantial form is just not art.

Obviously, these art critics think something is missing from Monet's art, and it pisses them off. The word they keep using is "form," and they use it in opposition to "appearance," which is an odd pairing. Normally, appearance is paired with reality, and I suspect that this is the implication here as well. "Form" does not get at the heart of their discomfort. When you look at the Rouen series, you can see the basic form of the façade. Yes, the paintings obscure the intricate details of design, but you can hardly call the paintings formless. What the paintings do seem to lack, though, is substance. The

Cathedral seems unreal, a mere reflection. Monet does not give us enough definite formal lines to convince us of Rouen Cathedral's solidity. It is, indeed, "boneless." What I think is happening is that in exaggerating the empirical Cathedral, Monet loses the ontological Cathedral and reveals that the two are not equivalent. What angers the critics is that not only does Monet value the empirical Cathedral, but he also denies the ontological.

In talking about his Haystack series, Monet observed that "a landscape does not exist in its own right, since its appearance changes at every moment" (qtd. in House 11). For Monet, landscapes, haystacks, and cathedrals do not possess own-being, that is, they do not exist independently from their appearances. There is nothing in a landscape that remains the same, nothing that supports the art critics' desire for stable form. All Monet did was focus on "the immediate perception of the eye" (Pool 20), and what he discovered is that the world is less a collection of discrete, definite objects standing firm in the river of time and more a series of analogous moments, a constantly shifting dance of colour – a windy fire.

Monet, though, never bothered to speculate on the philosophical implications of his work. He merely stuck to his method. Lilla Cabot Perry, an American artist who visited Monet late in his life, offers insight into Monet's project in her memoirs. She quotes Monet's advice to her about painting methodology:

> When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you – a tree, a house, a field, or whatever. Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact color and shape, until it gives your own naïve impression of the scene before you. (qtd. in Nochlin 35)

Monet turns the value hierarchy in perception upside-down here. What he is saying is that objects are not primary in visual experience and that if you focus on the objects instead of the colours, then you are not remaining true to your "naïve impression" of any visual experience. As Perry further notes: "Monet's philosophy of painting was to paint what you really see, not what you think you ought to see; not the object isolated as in a test tube, but the object enveloped in sunlight and atmosphere, with the blue dome of Heaven reflected in the shadows" (qtd. in Nochlin 35). Monet's contention, then, is that what you

"really see" is colours in flux and what you "ought to see" is a world of idealized or "isolated" objects.

For Monet, the "fleeting" or "accidental" appearances of things are not so much perceptual flotsam and jetsam to be discarded in pursuit of some timeless form; they are what is true in visual experience. What happens when an artist pursues the empirical experience instead of the ontological object is magical: the world appears open and insubstantial. Objects do not exist apart from the conditions of time and place; they are not abstractable or isolatable "as in a test tube"; rather, they depend on present conditions, as fleeting and ephemeral as they are. Contrary to what the art critics say, Monet's Rouen Cathedral is not formless. It has form, but that form is empty of substance. Horst Keller, a more sympathetic art critic, observes the same phenomenon: "This is in fact the most consequential contribution of Impressionism as a whole: the study of the perpetually changing appearance of things as the source of an ever-different pictorial interpretation. In such a series of views [as in the Cathedral series], the solid, three-dimensional aspect of the content is lost in the play of surface colour" (55). Keller's use of the word "surface" betrays a bias towards a surface-depth duality, but his sentiment is clear: solidity, substance, permanence are all lost in Monet's play of light. Likewise, in describing *La Grenouillère* (1869), Michael Howard notes that "with his brush fully charged with paint, Monet, instead of vainly trying to imitate an external reality made up of 'things,' has described the effect of light falling upon the scene" (14). For Monet, there was something truthful in this more fluid reality.

When you look at a painting like *Rouen Cathedral (End of the Day, Sunlight Effect)* (1894), the solid stone walls of the façade shimmer, as if they were made of flame, not rock, or as if rock were flame (see fig. 4). Monet's cathedral is a tribute not to the unchanging divine but to the impermanent nature of reality, the value of the moment, the no-nature of the cathedral. And when you consider the paintings as a series, you begin to see that these paintings are not simply 31 different views of one static object. There is no Rouen Cathedral that stands apart from each instance of Rouen Cathedral. There is only this series of moments and all the fluctuating conditions that make these appearances possible.

Fig. 4. Monet, *Rouen Cathedral (End of the Day, Sunlight Effect),* 1894, Musée Marmottan, Paris

DUHKHA # Freud's description of mourning has had a significant impact on studies of the elegy. For example, Peter Sacks argues in his influential 1985 study that elegies from Spencer's time to Yeats' follow the same essential schema: grief caused by loss gives way to figurative or symbolic compensation. For Sacks, Freud's description of the work of mourning provides a rough conceptual map for tracking and understanding the route elegists take from grief to consolation. Sacks argues that the real psychological drama of elegies operates on the level of libido. To put it inelegantly, elegists work through the painful grief of libido detachment and eventually find a substitute (often symbolic) for libido reattachment.

In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud suggests that normal or successful mourning follows a pattern of detachment, substitution, and reattachment. The work of mourning, significantly, involves a process of reality-testing: "Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object" (244). But this process of detachment is not clean or quick because the fixed point the libido had attached to is not wholly located in the external object. The empirical object may be gone, but it leaves behind a number of phantom psychological traces – like a word surviving its referent.

Freud notes that the painful process of detachment and the consequent realignment with reality takes time. Detachment is "carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected" (245). What Freud is saying here is that libidinal attachment is not entirely external. Much of what we love about someone or something is bound up in our internal associations with that loved object. And those associations seem to be as important to our notion of reality as external objects. In fact, bare external reality does not always serve as the foundation of perceived reality. Freud notes that in some cases of traumatic loss, mourners may not accept reality at all: "This opposition [to reality] can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory wishful psychosis" ("Mourning" 244). The fact that we must convince ourselves of an object's non-existence shows how much internal baggage we bring to our basic perception of reality. We don't simply love an external person; we love an internal image of them as well. You might say, then, that the libidinal object is dual in nature: we love the empirical (external) person and our symbolic or conceptual (internal) construction of her or him. And the real work of mourning is detaching libido from the symbolic person, which the lost external referent no longer supports.

For Freud, success in mourning involves this lengthy detachment of affection from the lost object and the subsequent reattachment of affection to another object. In "Mourning and Melancholia," he argues that "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (245), although libido does not really ever

exist in this detached state. The whole process is "one of a withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one" ("Mourning" 249) and it occurs "bit by bit" ("Mourning" 256). So for Freud, the healthy course in mourning, which is a substitutive process of detachment and reattachment, leads directly back into the round of birth and death. The only salvation is reattachment to another object, never mind that it too will inevitably perish. For Freud, the business of meaningful living requires externalized libidinal attachments. If libido fails to reattach to a new object – if it retreats from the external world and attaches itself to the ego – the result is melancholia.

According to Sacks, elegists from Spencer to Yeats accomplish the object substitution and libido reattachment required for "successful" mourning not through a reattachment to another worldly object but to transcendent metaphors. The lost mortal object is troped or turned into a spiritual symbol. Love for an impermanent object stabilizes as love for a permanent symbol. For example, in Spenser's elegy for Sidney ("Astrophel"), the poet finds solace in creating a figure for Sidney's immortal soul: "Ah no: it is not dead, ne can it die / But lives for aie, in blissful Paradise / Where like a new-borne babe it soft doth lie" (283-85). Here Spenser makes a neo-platonic ascent up from the world of shadows and mortality to the world of Paradise, where souls liberated from their bodily emanations live forever. Spenser mourns "successfully" by spiritualizing rather than internalizing his love. The poet substitutes the word or image for the thing (Sacks 14) and finds consolation in the stable order of signs and poetic conventions (Sacks 8). The permanence of poetry points to the permanence of the metaphysical realm: Sacks' elegists share a faith that words can refer beyond the transitory world.

Jonson, Milton, Shelley, and Tennyson, like Spenser, all employ transcendent figures in their elegies as compensation for loss: "From Spenser to Swinburne, as Peter Sacks and other critics have shown, most canonical English elegists had depicted mourning as compensatory" (Ramazani 3). Jonson's first son escapes the "flesh's rage" (7), achieving immortality as Jonson's "best piece of poetry" (10). Lycidas, like the sun and like a Christianized vegetation god, sinks low but mounts high, driven up by the force of Christ's victory over death. Adonais' immortal spark flees the material world and reunites with its source, the light of the Platonic One. And although Tennyson takes longer to achieve his transcendent consolation, wading through bogs of religious

skepticism and empirical doubts about the unseen realm, he too finds solace in a belief in Arthur Hallam's essential identity behind the veil.

The "successful" elegy's consolation, then, rests on a dualistic metaphysical belief, the same one professed in Puritan elegies and in Emmylou's hymns of Appalachia: belief that a person is comprised of a mortal body and an immortal soul. The elegist's initial grief betrays an attachment to the sensual or impermanent aspect of the beloved, but through the poetic exploration of mortality (reality testing) the elegist detaches from the lost object and finds the soul a more stable object of attachment. The "successful" elegy depends on an act of faith in an unseen reality that transcends space and time.

Sacks sees the original type of this elegiac formula in the vegetation god myths of ancient mythology. Vegetation gods like Adonis are the "predecessor of almost every elegized subject and [provide] a fundamental trope by which mortals create their images of immortality" (Sacks 26). In psychological terms, the seasons mirror the process of mourning. In winter, nature's energies are frozen within, but in spring, those energies are directed outwards again in a radiant display of fertility. So too the mourner's desires initially become frozen, attached to the psychic traces of the deceased beloved or even to the ego itself, but over time the libido detaches from the old and discovers the freedom to reattach outwardly. In nature's self-regenerative power, poets find an image for immortality (Sacks 27) and for the rebirth of their desire and joy. In the elegies that Sacks examines, the poet links images of fertility to images of apotheosis. While nature regenerates bodily, people regenerate spiritually. Just as nature's fertility never fails, human desire never fails when spiritualized.

Sacks's reading of the Christian consolation in elegies as following a Freudian process is ironic in a metaphysically revealing way. Remember that, for Freud, the "demand for immortality is a product of our wishes too unmistakable to lay claim to reality" ("On Transience" 305). Despite Freud's distaste for notions of immortality, the Christian consolation of resurrection fits his pattern of successful mourning nicely. The difference is that where the Christian mourner moves from a seen to an unseen object of attachment, Freud's mourner moves from a seen to another seen object of attachment. But what desire craves in both cases is exactly the same: a stable object of attachment – the resurrection of substance.

What Freud does not see is that every perception that constructs an object contains a little piece of immortality, a quality that transcends the ever-shifting flux of the object's empirically available secondary qualities. It is this little immortality that desire craves. So even though Freud discards the idea that his objects of attachment contain a metaphysical seed that survives death and sprouts eternally, he nevertheless retains a belief in a kind of finite metaphysical permanence. Nothing lives forever, but things do live for a while; they do have identity duration. Freud's objects, then, retain a metaphysical seed so long as they are empirically available – there is still an ontological duality of seen and unseen underlying his psychology; he has not escaped mundane transcendence.

Sacks can fit Christian elegiac mourning into Freud's seemingly secular schema for mourning so easily because the underlying ontology has not changed fundamentally. From a Buddhist point of view, the conditions for *tanha* are present in both cases, so neither can work as a solution to *duhkha*. As long as we sow seeds of substance in the field of our experience, as long as we believe that things really do exist substantially, then we will crave and suffer and mourn over and over again. It does not matter if we exalt substance as an abstract, spiritual reality or limit its duration to the rise and fall of quotidian objects: where there is substance there is suffering.

ANATMAN # In the mountains, when the sky is clear and the moon is full, enough light falls on the paths above the tree line for a midnight hike. But climbing in moon-reflected light feels strange. The trees and rocks are well-lit, but their hues are alien. Spaces visited only hours earlier in familiar afternoon sunlight reveal dimensions unfamiliar. Clothes and skin too appear odd, distant. Boots and hands, the things you most identify with while hiking, don't seem fully yours anymore.

Moving through moon-soaked alpine landscapes feels like moving through the liquid landscapes of dream. Shadows could easily be or become creatures; even squinting and staring won't reveal what the shadow really is. Forms do not settle easily into concrete identities. Everything is strange and unsettling this close to the full moon – like the discomfort of trespassing. Things not only feel like a dream; they feel like someone else's dream.

From the top of Jefferson, the moon seems a bit closer than usual but still unreachable. Mt. Jefferson is no Mount of Purgatory, and I am alone, without a Beatrice to lead me higher. Still, I think of Dante in the *Paradiso* ascending to the first planetary heaven and entering the substance of the moon: "Meseemed a cloud enveloped us, shining, dense, firm and polished, like diamond smitten by the sun. / Within itself the eternal pearl received us, as water doth receive a ray of light, though still itself uncleft" (ii, 11-12). It is a strange landscape that Dante enters but one that reveals more of the truth than the familiar sublunary realm of solid matter.

Within the moon, Dante comes face to face with human souls, but he does not recognize them as such at first:

> In such guise as, from glasses transparent and polished, or from waters clear and tranquil, not so deep that the bottom is darkened,
> come back the notes of our faces, so faint that a pearl on a white brow cometh not slowlier upon our pupils;
> so did I behold many a countenance, eager to speak, wherefore I fell into the counter error of that which kindled love between the man and fountain. (iii, 4-6)

The souls appear to Dante like faint reflections, and (to Beatrice's amusement) he looks behind him for their source. But Beatrice reveals to Dante that these seemingly insubstantial forms exist in and of themselves and that they are actually more real than material bodies: "True substances are they which thou beholdest" (iii, 29). Dante has made an ontological error: he has confused substance for reflection – just the opposite of Narcissus, who confused reflection for substance.

Dante's mistake makes me wonder about our commonsense or gut notions about substance ontology. What marks things as substantially existent? What characteristics must things possess in order to seem substantially real? The drama of Dante's lunar episode hinges on an association of substance with material solidity, and the connotations of the word "substance" indicate that this association is not unique to him. In fact, one of the definitions in the *OED* states that "substance" refers to "A solid or real thing, as opposed to an appearance or shadow. Also, reality." Our notion of reality is intimately bound up with the notion of touch and material solidity. Because of the faintness and transparency of the lunar souls Dante observes, he has trouble ascribing substantial existence to the images. To him, they are no more than shadows or reflections.

In this lunar heaven, however, Dante must refine his notion of substance. He learns that true substance has nothing to do with material solidity. Matter is perishable, but spiritual substance is eternal. In heaven, then, Dante must break the association of solidity with substance: opacity and solidity are not true indicators of substantial reality.

What distinguishes a true substance from mere appearance is independence and permanence. When Dante mistakes the souls for reflections, he instinctively turns his head to look for the source of the images. Reflections do not exist independently in and of themselves; rather, they depend for their existence on a source object, some light, and a reflective medium. Because of this dependence, reflections are ontologically unstable – they disappear instantly when any of their conditions for existence is removed. The notes to Canto iii in the Carlyle-Wicksteed translation of *The Divine Comedy* emphasize independence as a necessary aspect of substance: "A *substance* is anything that exists in itself, *e.g.*, a man, a tree, a sword. It is opposed to *accident*, that which exists only as an experience or an attribute of some 'substance,' *e.g.*, love, greenness, brightness" (footnote 2, 418). Reflections are accidental because they do not exist in and of themselves – they depend on the existence of some substantial object. For example, to commonsense, Narcissus exists in and of himself, but his watery reflection does not. Narcissus' ontological confusion depends on his mistaken attribution of independence where there is only dependence, and his subsequent desire for the image depends on this attribution of independence. Dante, however, confuses dependence with independence, but Beatrice assures him that the souls are in fact true substances existing in themselves, fully independent and permanent.

In Dante's Christian context, substance is not material solidity – it is independent, permanent (spiritual) existence. However, these two attributes of substance are not unique to Dante's Christianity; they are embedded in our commonsense, gut notion of substantial reality. In the *OED*, a substance is "A being that subsists by itself; a separate or distinct thing; hence *gen.* a thing, being." Independence is a necessary mark of substantial existence. The *OED* expands on this definition, observing that substance is "That which underlies phenomena; the permanent substratum of things; that which receives modifications and is not itself a mode; that in which accidents or attributes inhere." Substance is the permanent, unchanging aspect of a distinct, independent thing. Add

solidity back into the equation, and you have a pretty good description of our commonsense notion of a substantial thing.

Real substances are solid, independent, and permanent. Taken together, these attributes are the foundation of any object's stable identity. From a psychological point of view, the substance of a thing is the feeling that objects stay the same through the changes of time and space. Roll a marble across the floor and observe how its position in space and time changes and how its appearance changes. Observe too how your notion of the marble's identity does not waver. It is the same marble from your hand to the other end of the room. That feeling of solidity, independence, and permanence that remains stable despite superficial changes is what I mean by our commonsense, gut notion of substance. It hides in our perceptions of objects like a kernel or core.

So much depends on this notion of substance. Dante's universe would fall apart without it. Reward and punishment would mean little without individual, permanent identity. Without the notion of spiritual substance, Dante's world would be meaningless. His *Divine Comedy* affirms the existence and necessity of the soul, and his ascent into heaven brings him closer and closer to pure spiritual substance and the divine essence of the universe.

But it isn't only Dante's Christian world that hangs together on this notion of substance. Our own world does too. Where would we be without the notion that we have an independent self that stays the same through time? What kind of world would it be if everything changed every moment? High in the mountains, wandering on moonlit trails, I wonder about the stability of our substance-based reality. According to the Buddha, there is no self, no soul, no substance to be found anywhere. For the Buddha, we are all like Narcissus, seeing substance where there is none and falling deeply and perilously in love with this mistaken reality.

PRATITYASAMUTPADA # An Ecological Commentary on Snyder's "Burning the Small Dead":

Burning the small dead
branches
broke from beneath
thick spreading
whitebark pine.

a hundred summers
snowmelt rock and air

hiss in a twisted bough.

sierra granite;
mt. Ritter—
black rock twice as old.

Deneb, Altair

windy fire

We always pitched our tents on the same grassy site in Moose Brook State Park the day before climbing up into the mountains. An open field, mowed, a water tap, an ashy fire pit. In the evening cool, we'd kick a soccer ball around, talk about Blake – the voice of the ancient Bard. At night, fireflies and star-filled skies, a hush. Preparing to hike the White Mountains, we instinctively reoriented ourselves to the earth, renewed a deeply buried elemental wonder and humility, simplified our thoughts. The less you carry up the mountain, the better.

Break of day. Early-morning picnic table breakfast. Dew. Damp tent bottoms tilted to the rising sun like satellite dishes. Thick, heavy boot leather creaking. Mountain stream-fed water spray cold on hands, water bottles filled to overflowing. Out along highway 2, a first look at Mt. Adams, sun and shade. Tattered clouds tangled in needle canopy, dissolving in spreading light. Clear, cool morning for hiking. Van parked at Lowe's store, few bucks per night. Gravel boot crunch. His grandfather blazed the trail that starts across the road – Lowe's path – reaches straight up Adams 4.7 miles. We're taking it to Grey Knob cabin.

Moss-covered slow log decay, old forests too high and steep to cut – nutrients and energy clutched tight and rationed in this forbidding ecosystem. It only gets harder to live the higher you go – lactic acid pack weight strain. My favourite game on rock crumble creek stone climbs: try to guess how far you still have to go by observing diminishing tree heights. As you climb higher, the air temperature drops – a process called adiabatic cooling – growing seasons shorten. As elevation increases, air pressure decreases. Wind blown up over these mountains expands in the reduced pressure – as air expands it cools. Temperatures drop 10°C every 1000m: just 600m of vertical ascent is like making a trek north about 1000 km (Stiling 267). There's timberline above. And beyond – tundra.

Elna Bakker, writing about the Sierras, notes that there are five main conditions that control tree growth and distribution: soil type, moisture, temperature, wind, and sunlight (189). Forests may seem like random collections of trees, but tree growth follows its own kind of syntax. The land can only say "whitebark" or "black spruce" if certain conditions obtain. For example, long cold seasons limit what can grow in a specific location and how much it grows per year: when water freezes, it's tough to photosynthesize, tough to reach higher, best to wait dormant for short-lived summer sun. You won't find deciduous trees high in the mountains; they use too much time and energy making leaves each spring. In short subalpine growing seasons, you'd better have your leaves ready for photosynthesis as soon as conditions align, you'd better clutch those needles firmly through fall and winter. The less energy you waste on the mountain, the better.

Bakker's conditions not only define general distribution, they also shape individual growth. For instance, cold muscular winds dehydrate, stunt – windshear. I know I'm close to high alpine vistas when trees grow laterally, thick-spreading: "compaction," life adjusting to severe conditions, huddling in "densely crowded masses" (Bakker 216).

My failing quadriceps pull hard against gravity, push up through subalpine life into an ecotone of wicked witch gnarled and prostrated shrub-like trees. Only the small and humble survive here in the krummholz, the zone of "crooked wood." This is the far

edge of timber, the last frontier for tree settlement, and the "copses of stunted, contorted trees at timberline" (Bakker 217) stand hushed and broken, a vague warning of danger. Proceed with caution.

Burning the small dead
branches
broke from beneath

I found this tidbit of practical wisdom in a 1955 handbook called *How to Know the Western Trees*: "One good thing to remember is that the small dead branches on the lower part of a fir or spruce are practically always dry, can be broken without an axe, and are easily started with a match even if you haven't any wax paper from sandwich wrappings" (Baerg 14). I can picture the book's author, Harry J. Baerg, suddenly realizing that he's lost, disoriented. The familiar trees he was studying so objectively a moment earlier now seem menacing and alien, seem to press in. Breathing heavily, turning around and around, he looks for familiar landmarks. None. He remembers that it's best to stay put, at least until the panic subsides. He takes stock, opens his rucksack. Damn. His lovely and dutiful wife forgot to pack him a couple of waxpaper-wrapped sandwiches. Things look grim.

As the sun sets and cold shadow air sucks his body heat greedily, Harry realizes that he's going to have to make a fire to survive the night. But Harry J. knows a thing or two about the woods. He remembers that he can convert tree growth energy into heat energy through combustion. His science has taught him that a tree derives all its energy from the sun. Through photosynthesis, leaf cells create starch and sugar from water, carbon dioxide, chlorophyll, and sunlight. The tree uses that food to grow new cells for more branches and leaves, and so forth. In effect, branches are nodes of solidified solar energy. As the tree grows higher and new expanding branches block sunlight from reaching lower ones, those old branches die. In their death is Harry J.'s life. Fallen dead branches tend to absorb moisture – unseen creatures lay claim to that energy through decay and decomposition, a slow organic combustion. But the attached dead branches

work well as fuel for Harry's fire. The dry snap of twigs – one match ignites a new sun – ember energy transfer survival.

thick spreading
whitebark pine.

Snyder's poem evokes forbidding Sierra krummholz. Whitebark pines (*pinus albicaulis* or scrub pine) only grow in west coast subalpine ecosystems above 1000m (3,280 feet) (Benvie 157). In moisture- and nutrient-rich soils under congenial growing conditions, a whitebark can grow as tall as 10m, but for those pines that tough it out in the krummholz, some clinging impossibly to rocky ledge fissures, the open exposure to wind and cold reduces their stature to thick shrub: "In the exposed areas at timberline, the whitebark pine forms a low, spreading tree, sometimes reduced to a prostrate, gnarled mat" (Elias 40). Even so, a gnarled and twisted whitebark pine existing as a "windswept shrub at high altitudes" can live as long as 500 years (Benvie 157).

There are no whitebark pines on the east coast, no whitebarks where I climb on White Mountain subalpine slopes. But on the few ancient eroded Appalachian peaks like Adams that still reach beyond 4000 feet, the wind and cold does create a krummholz zone – only here it is black spruce that grows hovering like springy mats between rough granite boulders covered with bright yellow lichen. Whitebarks and black spruce trees test the limits of tree growth; they mark the line between conditions that support tree life and conditions that do not. They live on the knife edge of a harsh binary.

Snyder's poem is from his 1968 collection *The Back Country*. Fitting title. The only way you can see and touch a stunted, twisted whitebark is to enter the back country yourself. You must strap a pack to your back and climb up into the krummholz because whitebarks won't grow "thick spreading" except on the timberline. The tree's shape, its very existence, depends on fierce timberline conditions. Remove it and the tree will die. Plant one at a lower elevation, and it will grow tall. To see Snyder's whitebark, you must become a piligrim – make a pilgrimage to the back country.

In a way, the whitebark is itself a pilgrim. Few trees can survive where the whitebark thrives. This pine is an ascetic, its growth rooted in poverty: "Pines are

essentially trees with meager requirements and this alone will reserve them a place on many of the sites too poor for other growth" (Hosie 34). Whitebarks go in where other trees fear to grow. They are symbols of a spiritual life earned through poverty, of wisdom won by looking across the edge of life and death.

To approach this poem as sacred wisdom, you must have a mind like a whitebark. Here's how it works. Think of words, black ink patterns, as humus – black earth that contains the nutrients of linguistic detritus. Snyder's poem contains only 13 lines of text, 37 words. That's not a lot of soil for thought growth. The soil is not rich in figurative language, the kind of Miracle Grow input that feeds lush beds of flowery critical thought. So only a mind that thrives on meager conditions, that can eke out moisture and nutrients from dark corners and use them efficiently will grow on this poetic soil. Your mind must become like a whitebark pine, like a cold mountain pilgrim building a small fire against the night, in order to stay with this poem long enough to grow thoughts.

Thoughts and ideas, like trees, are not random manifestations; they are the products of myriad seen and unseen causes and conditions. Pilgrims go to sacred places in order to access sacred thoughts, in order to enmesh themselves in the conditions that give rise to sacred sites and experiences. And the thoughts that grow from Snyder's poetic soil are krummholz thoughts, thoughts that straddle conceptual binaries and thoughts that reveal interdependence. Tree-line whitebarks themselves thrive on ambiguity, grow somewhere between the notions of individual and group, of tree and shrub:

> On their hard-won castelations [whitebark pines] do battle with an extremely severe climate. In growth habit they resemble no other western pines in that they often form multi-trunked thickets no taller than large shrubs. No one seems to know for sure whether several individuals group together in this fashion or if one trunk separates into a cluster of smaller stems. Though often curving together in lyrelike poses, their great flexibility bends them over in prostration where they are exposed to high wind. (Bakker 210)

As stark lyrical prostrations bending in the west wind, whitebarks are not only physically flexible, they are also categorically flexible. Whitebarks that grow in the krummholz, an ambiguous zone between subalpine and alpine ecosystems, pay little attention to conceptual boundaries.

For Sam Benvie, the author of *The Encyclopedia of Trees: Canada and the United States*, beings such as whitebark pines make defining what is and is not a tree – a task one might assume to be simple and objective – a "subjective exercise" (13). In his confessionally-toned "tell-all" introduction, Benvie admits that "defining what is meant by 'tree' and what constitutes a species" is not as easy "as the layperson might think or wish" (13). So Benvie draws a line in the sand: "Generally, as presented here, a tree is any primarily woody plant of one to several perennial stems arising from the ground and living for 20 or more years, and attaining a height of at least 10 feet (3m)" (13). But Benvie acknowledges that even this almost comically arbitrary definition doesn't fully cut it: "some species of shrubs are preferentially pruned into tree-like forms; and in nature, many woody plants straddle the conceptual boundary between shrub and tree" (13). The whitebark is one such tree-shrub. Under "easy" conditions, whitebark pines assume tree-like proportions, but in nutrient- and moisture-deficient soils, whitebarks exhibit shrub-like growth and features (Benvie 157). In the harsh windy krummholz, the edges of conceptual categories fray.

In the biologist's game of tree or bush, everything depends. In order to do the work of selection for his encyclopedia, Benvie has to assume a set of "optimal" growth conditions: "This book deals primarily with those woody plants that assume at maturity a tree form on optimal sites in their natural habitats. Such a distinction cannot hope to please everyone" (13). This rubric may not please everyone because it is unbearably arbitrary, while pretending to be "natural." Why should I consider a 30 foot whitebark as more "optimal" or desirable than a shrub-like individual? Isn't the krummholz as natural a habitat for whitebarks as further down in the subalpine zone? I wonder if our capitalist-consumerist assumption about the desirability of uninhibited growth stands behind Benvie's concept of "optimal." Surely Science can do better than this.

It seems to me that Benvie's definition troubles stem from the fact that there is nothing inherent in a particular tree that lends itself to categorization. A tree's growth and all its knowable qualities depend on conditions external to the tree. Change the conditions, change the tree. Change the conditions even more, and the tree becomes a shrub. The biologist's categories do not correspond to anything stable in nature. In fact, there is nothing in nature to which categories can be adequate. Benvie acknowledges

nature's slipperiness in his discussion of the ambiguities of species definition: "All life forms ultimately defy human attempts at categorization, and plants particularly so" (15). In the end, Benvie admits that a scientific authority, not nature, "delineates the boundaries" of categories and that "These boundaries are not always universally agreed to" (15). Thinking about nature in terms of a collection of delineated "things" only gives you rough approximations that never fully correspond to specific experiences of nature. Like a map, categories are not the territory. We need to tear up the conceptual map if we are to complete our pilgrimage to Snyder's whitebark pine.

> Snyder, in the preface to *No Nature*, his volume of selected poems:
>
> But we do not easily *know* nature, or even know ourselves. Whatever it actually is, it will not fulfil our conceptions or assumptions. It will dodge our expectations and theoretical models. There is no single or set "nature" either as "the natural world" or "the nature of things." The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional. (v)

"Fluid, open, and conditional" – this is Snyder's description of a non-conceptual, nondualistic experience of nature. Concepts cast a dim circle of campfire light: the life of nature, of ourselves, slips, moves around, just outside. Watching.

NIHSVABHAVA # According to E.H. Gombrich, what the mind settles on in perception are "constancies," which he defines as "those stabilizing tendencies that prevent us from getting giddy in a world of fluctuating appearances" (18). Carolyn Bloomer also emphasizes the importance of constancy in perception: "The mind is able to maintain *constant* or unchanged perceptions of objects in spite of continual changes and ambiguities in the retinal pattern" (50). For example, the retinal image of a person walking from 20 to 10 yards away doubles in size, but we don't interpret that change as balloon-like inflation; we barely notice the fact that the retinal image size changes. Nor do we interpret changes in the walking person's hair colour due to shifting light and reflection as Oz-like colour changes (Gombrich 18). Real horses are of the same colour. In fact, we generally don't attend to superficial changes in familiar objects at all – what's

important to us in perception are those aspects of the visual field that remain more-or-less constant – the primary qualities.

According to Bloomer, the mind constructs a constant form in perception, chipping away any inconstant bits; it does not stick to the retinal data alone: "the mind maintains an unchanging idea about the form of an object in spite of changes in the retinal-image shape caused by changing viewpoints" (56). In its perception of form, the mind fills in unseen parts of the object; it assumes a whole from a series of partial images. The mind creates the impression of a stable object based as much on expectation and assumption as on visual stimuli.

The same construction of constancy occurs in our perceptions of colour. For example, in early-morning light, the sun illuminates the high-rises of the Halifax skyline on one side only, giving the impression that one plane is golden yellow while another is shadowy grey. But I don't experience either of those two colours as the "true" colour of a particular building: "The mind maintains a stable perception of the colors of objects in spite of changes in the retinal image" (Bloomer 62). We perceive the colour of familiar objects in a normalized or simplified way, "independent of the effects of illumination and shadow" (Bloomer 110). Gombrich calls this normalized perception, this assumption about an object's "true" colour, "memory colour" (34). His term, here, emphasizes the mind's tendency to remove perceptual objects from the flow of time. The present is a bit too shifty, so the mind stabilizes things. As Bloomer points out, "A blue wall looks blue in spite of a pattern of dappled sun and shadow" (62). That perceived "blue" is not necessarily present in the retinal image; it exists partly outside of present seeing. The mind clings to a general colour and tosses all the ambiguities overboard, ignoring and forgetting them.

The point here is that the world we perceive and the world our retinas experience are not equivalent. The world we recognize as real and stable does not correspond exactly to the world our senses alone reveal, which tends to be quite unstable if you look at it with an eye like Monet's. In fact, it is a wonder that we can recognize anything at all in visual perception: "For in fact, the stimuli can hardly ever be identical with those received before. A different angle of vision, a change in illumination, transforms the stimuli – and yet the impression of familiarity is not necessarily affected" (Gombrich 28). For

Gombrich, this experience of familiarity is most striking in our identification of human faces. For us, every tiny shift in facial expression can signify something different, "And yet, we also establish a framework of identity in change that is recognized through all the transformations of expression. [...] It remains the same face even throughout the relentless transformations wrought on it by time and age" (28). There is something in our perception of a face or of any object floating out to sea that resists erosion from time and age.

For Gombrich, recognition and sameness are the result of the "constancies," those stabilizing mechanisms in perception (28). Gombrich locates these constancies in the perceiving mind, not in the retinal stimuli themselves: "What we 'see' is not simply given, but is the product of past experience and future expectations" (28). What is given is "a world of fluctuating appearances" (18) and what perceived is a world of stable, identifiable, even predictable objects. Gombrich notes that in order to stabilize perception, in order to recognize faces and objects, the mind bifurcates experience, separating accidents from essentials: "we feel that there is some general dominant expression of which the individual expressions are merely modifications. In Aristotelian terms it is his substance, of which all modifications are mere accidents" (109). It's curious to me: there is a contrast between the world of constant, substantial generalities we perceive and the world of shifting, accidental particulars we experience.

On those Saturday morning ferry rides, I've felt that contrast directly. I experience an unidentified bit of flotsam as protean, with an unsettlingly shifty identity. But once I identify and categorize the figure as, say, a margarine container, a host of expectations about solidity, size, shape, and so forth flood my perception, giving the figure depth as an object. Rather than experiencing a series of changing images, I experience a margarine container bobbing among the waves: a solid substance-accident relationship has been established. It's a real shock, though, if my identification gets overturned: that margarine container is really a dead seagull. Out on the water, your sense of reality can change in a second.

The issue that dogs me in all of this is the ontological status of the perceived object relative to the retinal image. Are the accidents of appearance less real than the constancies we perceive? Do the constancies of form and colour and so forth reveal the

way the world really is? When we recognize, identify, and categorize an object, are we discovering something real about the object or are we adding something to our perception not inherent in experience? The issue is even more complicated because it operates on the assumption that the perceiving mind is separate from an external world that supplies it with sense impressions, which may not be true.

Nevertheless, these questions about perception seem crucial to me because I am currently in the business of "study," which assumes the existence of stable, predicable objects. But are my objects of study publicly accessible, or do I shape my objects out of an inherently chaotic universe? Is there something stable underlying my perception of a text and somebody else's? Is it meaningful to think of a particular text as existing separately from its spatial, temporal, and mental context? It seems to me that if my objects of study are not publicly accessible, if their existence depends completely on momentary context, then there is little point in making statements about them – I'd simply be making truth statements about fictional transcendent entities. Isn't knowledge of things only useful if others really have access to them?

QUESTIONS # In trying (and failing) to define the essential nature of Buddhism, I stumbled into what might paradoxically be called the essence of Buddhism – that there are no essences at all. The *Astasahasrika prajnaparamita-sutra* expresses this paradox through a question about "dharmas," which in this context refers not to Buddha's teachings but to the Abhidharmic concept of things that cannot be analyzed into component parts. However, one can profitably read the passage by substituting the catch-all word "thing" for "dharma" because what the text says holds true for all composite things such as cars, poems, and people as well. Subhuti asks Buddha, "All dharmas have therefore really not been fully known by the Tathagata?" And Buddha replies,

> It is just through their own essential nature that those dharmas are not something definite. Their true nature is a no-nature, and their no-nature is their true nature; for all dharmas have one mark only, i.e., no mark. It is for this reason that all dharmas have really not been fully known by the Tathagata. For there are not two natures of dharma, but just one single is the nature of all dharmas. And the true

> nature of all dharmas is a no-nature, and their no-nature is their true nature. It is thus that all points of possible attachment are abandoned. (qtd. in Conze, *Wisdom* 30-31).

Buddha here denies the existence of any stable essence that might support a definition of any thing or concept. And more than this, Buddha declares that the act of defining is itself somehow related to attachment. And attachment is, according to Buddha's second noble truth, the cause of suffering. So desiring stable definitions perpetuates suffering by creating "points of possible attachment."

Like Malunkyaputta sitting before the Buddha in Anathapindika's park, my mind was becoming more and more agitated. From a Buddhist perspective, I was asking the wrong questions. Questions like, "What is Buddhism?" presuppose that there is some definable essence of "Buddhism." It presupposes that nouns labeling conceptual entities have stable, universal referents. In my reading, I came across King Milinda, a Greek king of Bactria (125-95 BCE), who ran into the same kind of problem with a question he posed to the monk Nagasena. The question arises in an imaginary dialogue on Buddhism preserved in a Chinese text called *Tsa pao tsang ching* :

> When asked by Milinda whether the Self is permanent or impermanent, Nagasena counters by asking the king whether the fruit of the mango tree in his garden is sweet or sour. Milinda replies that he does not have a mango tree in his garden, so how can he possibly answer the question. "Exactly," retorts Nagasena. (Strong 95)

Apparently, Buddhism (like Self) does not exist in the way that I thought it did, in the way that I needed it to. I was bringing to my reading a set of assumptions about the nature of reality that Buddhist texts were trying hard to subvert. I assumed Buddhist texts were simply different interpretations of the same original thing, that all Buddhist texts were held together in orbit by the gravity of some central "Buddhism." I had faith that all the texts were talking about the same thing. But there was no "thing" linking these texts together. The centre could not hold because there was never any centre to begin with. Buddhism was nothing apart from the specific texts that we arbitrarily call "Buddhist." But those texts, as the scholars pointed out, were all so contradictory that no study of all the instances of Buddhist teaching could ever abstract a universal set of principles that would define the limits of the concept "Buddhism." One could not discover Buddhism;

one could only create it. A scholar could draw lines in the sand and formulate a working definition, but of what use would that definition be? That arbitrary concept would not refer to anything beyond itself; it would simply reflect the biases and desires of the definer.

My struggle to define Buddhism reminded me of Terry Eagleton's struggle to define "literature" in the introductory chapter to *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. What he discovered is that there is no constant set of inherent features that define works as literature. The category has no independent "essence": "one can think of literature less as some inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing all the way from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf, than as a number of ways in which people *relate themselves* to writing" (9). It seems to me that the same conclusion is true of the term "Buddhism." Any text or practice that one feels will lead to liberation is Buddhist. There is nothing in the text itself that guarantees its inclusion in the category "Buddhism." Eagleton calls terms like this "functional" as opposed to "ontological": "they tell us about what we do, not about the fixed being of things" (9) Just as a weed is simply any plant a gardener does not want around (Eagleton 9), literature is simply a text readers do want around. As a functional term, then, Buddhism does not refer to something that exists independently in the phenomenal world; rather, it is a term that refers to a way of relating to phenomena. If I say a certain text is Buddhist, I am not referring to some set of properties I have discovered in the text; I am simply saying that I or someone else has interpreted this text as Buddhist. But nothing fixes or guarantees that interpretation. Any "Buddhism is..." statement can only be true or false conventionally (functionally), not ultimately (ontologically).

Buddhism's conventional existence posed a problem for my proposal to examine the influence of Buddhism on poets like Snyder and Kerouac. The only "Buddhism" I had access to was my own interpretation of it; there was no independently existing, trans-cultural, trans-historical tradition that Snyder and I had equal access to. So any general argument I made about Buddhism's influence on Snyder would, in fact, be an argument about the influence of my interpretation of Buddhism on Snyder, which was impossible. I had to refocus my research away from Buddhism in general, which did not really exist, to particular interpretations of Buddhism. I could look at the concepts that Beat poets

labeled "Buddhist," then examine how those concepts shaped their aesthetic practices, especially in poems about death. Then I could situate that body of work within the context of the history of the elegy. Whether or not these poets were faithful to an original "Buddhism" would not matter. All that would matter is that new ideas and practices were expanding the aesthetic potential of the elegy genre. I would be saying new things about Beat poets and about the elegy.

But this research plan did not solve the problem at all. It merely shifted the burden of existence from "Buddhism" to "Snyder's Buddhism," "Beat poets," and "elegy." It seems to me that to be a meaningful object of study, an object or concept must exist apart from the researcher. An object that is worthy of study is one that other people have access to. If I say something about "Snyder's Buddhism," then someone should be able to go to the texts and verify my claims. Yes, my claims will all be interpretations, but they will be interpretations of texts that anyone who reads English has access to. The texts exist apart from me. I may not have access to some original or final interpretation of the texts, but there is something causing my interpretation, which is the same something that causes someone else's interpretation of the texts. We can all read the same texts even if we interpret them differently. The texts exist out there for all to see.

Literary criticism needs this assumption of independent existence. Literary journals publish articles that respond to various interpretations of the same texts. A critic makes his or her reputation on a unique new reading of a text that overturns a past reading or expands on it. We assume that we are all studying the same texts. If we all did not have access to the same texts, then it would make no sense to build critical traditions around them. If objects of study existed only conventionally or contingently, then they would not serve as stable objects of knowledge. Objects would never be the same thing twice. We pride ourselves on our knowledge of texts; we strive to add a piece of knowledge to the pile, but all of this knowledge production and research is based on the assumption that texts exist independently of the reader, even if interpretations do not.

Buddhism rejects this view. It says that there is nothing behind all the interpretations of "a text." Read a poem and then pass it to a friend: you are not reading the same poem. You can say that you are reading the same poem, but that claim will only be true functionally, not ontologically. If you are happy making truth claims about

conventional objects, then you and your friend can proceed to build a critical tradition of interpretation around the poem, but from a Buddhist point of view, you are – like Malunkyaputta – just wasting your time while the poison from the arrow of suffering works its way through your blood stream. At this point, the critic needs to make a choice. Do I choose conventional existence? Do I join the critics of the past and say something new about entities like "Beat poetry" and "the elegy"? Or do I drop the pretension to research objectivity and open myself to Buddhist and Beat texts as transformative? Perhaps I've already chosen.

DUHKHA # It's a warm June night. The trailer I'm staying in sits perched on a small hill overlooking Hubbards Cove. Night has snuffed out twilight's final flickering, and calm has settled the water. I turn on my desk lamp to read my way towards sleep. It is a pleasant evening, and as I float down through surface layers of consciousness, eyelids no wider than a line of text, I'm startled to attention by a whack against the window. And then another: whack. June bugs. I can see their large glistening thoraxes pulse as they cling to the window screen. My desk light has attracted them from all around the cove. I'm the lone light on the hill tonight, and they're desperate.

The whole scene strikes me as a bit silly, and I'm not sure whether to laugh at these poor insects relentlessly hammering their exoskeletons against an incomprehensible barrier or to pity them their frustration. And if they succeeded in smashing through the window, what then? I can only imagine there would be more painful frustration. The seductive incandescence of my lamp has misled these bugs: their desires will find no satisfaction here. I shut off the light, and leave them to find a new object of desire.

From Buddha's perspective, we are not much brighter than these June bugs. We too relentlessly desire objects that cannot satisfy our craving, objects that cause us suffering whether we can or cannot attain them, objects that disappear in an instant. We call it heroic to strive after our objects of desire, but we are just bugs, knocking against windows in the night.

The problem is desire, what Buddha called *tanha*. But desire may not be the best translation of *tanha*, although it is the traditional one. This translation misleads because it

gives the impression that the cessation of suffering, achieved through relinquishing *tanha*, is something akin to etherization. Enlightenment is not an emotionless, vegetative state. You might more profitably translate *tanha* as "grasping" or "attachment," as does E.H. Johnston in his translation of Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita*: "Attachment is the roosting-tree of suffering" (XXVI.59). The kind of desire that leads to suffering is the kind that needs an object to attach or cling to. You might, then, think of *tanha* as "object-desire," not as desire in general.

For Freud, though, attachment to objects is the normal, desired state. What I find interesting here is that Freud's metaphor for healthy mourning and healthy loving (libido attachment) is the same one Buddhist translators and commentators use to describe the cause of suffering. Buddha's second Noble Truth, the truth of *tanha* (grasping, attachment, and also thirst and craving), argues that suffering arises only when *tanha* arises; consequently, suffering ceases and one attains *nirvana* when *tanha* ceases.

So what does one do with these two opposing pictures of desire? First of all, I do not mean to suggest that libido and *tanha* are conceptually equivalent. That kind of argument would only lead to aggravating and unproductive textual disputes over definition and translation. I don't want to get sidetracked like Malunkyaputta. My goal here is to suggest that there may be a different way to understand the role of desire in our lives than the one that Freud articulates. For me, the fact that translations of Freud and of Buddha employ the same metaphor for describing the actions of both libido and *tanha* suggests that the two terms refer to some of the same experiential ground, so we might be able to better understand *tanha* if discussed in relation to libido. And if I happen to stray from the original intended technical meanings (if those are even recoverable) of both terms in the process, then so be it. As long as I say something that might help relieve suffering, then I have fulfilled my intellectual duty from a Buddhist point of view. My primary goal here is not conceptual knowledge – I'm struggling for soteriological wisdom.

In Buddha's analysis of life, suffering is at root a metaphysical ailment – a problem with our everyday notions about the nature of reality. Our gut-feeling that the things of this world (including ourselves) possess some kind of substance that remains the

same over time and serves as the locus of attachment is an ontological interpretation of experience that does not fit the data comfortably. What Buddha saw was that the things of this world are insubstantial and impermanent. In the *Buddhacarita* he memorably describes his vision of impermanence:

> And as the clouds come together and depart asunder again, so I deem the meeting and severance of creatures that draw breath.
>
> And since this world is in a state of continuous separating, therefore the feeling that "this is mine" is improper with regard to a coming together that is transitory as a dream. (VI.47-48)

Things are like clouds, like dreams. They possess form, but they are insubstantial – the ground is constantly shifting. Consequently, desire and possession, which require some stable basis for attachment, are improper ways of relating to this world that is continuously falling apart. But we do not give up on desire; it is the only meaning we've ever known. Instead, we keep smashing into incomprehensible barriers.

When Buddha says that things are impermanent, though, he is not simply saying that our objects of desire (especially our own self) have a finite existence. For Buddha, the observation that things fall apart is a clue to a more thorough impermanence: it is not that things arise, persevere for awhile, and then pass away; no, things as we know and desire them never arise at all.

Buddha's simile of the dream provides a way into this idea that objects aren't exactly what they seem to our desire. Buddha says that things are as "transitory as a dream." In dreams, objects and people can seem real, but they tend to dissolve or transform easily and rapidly. What they lack is substance, something that keeps their forms and identities stable through time and space. Dream people and things make very poor objects of desire because their identities are always flickering. Object-desire requires identity stability; it requires substance. To achieve satisfaction, object-desire needs an object to grasp.

This object stability is exactly what Buddha says does not really exist anywhere: "Inasmuch as the states of being are impermanent and compounds, they are ephemeral, subject to change, without substance and not to be relied on; they do not remain stable in the least degree" (*Buddhacarita* XXIV.37). Desire craves stability, even if it is finite, and

desire craves permanence, even if it isn't forever. In Buddha's picture of a world without substance and stable identity, *tanha* fails.

ANITYA # One of the critiques modernist critics leveled at Monet was that his work was too "scientific". He "aimed almost exclusively at a scientific documentation of appearances" (Hamilton 6), and his work was an "attempt to observe methodically and with almost scientific exactness the uninterrupted changes of light" (Hamilton 7). What these critiques seem to suggest is that Monet was too empirical, too interested in surface sensory impressions, and not interested enough in "human values." He could have painted the Cathedral as a dark, menacing, towering structure that filled the canvas in order to convey a deep sense of spiritual terror or dread. Or he could have painted it as a sanctuary in a storm to signify faith or as an eroding structure to signify loss of faith – anything so long as the painting revealed the Cathedral's form and aesthetic meaning. Instead, Monet tried to paint the colours he happened to see in front of him.

From an empirical standpoint, though, you could argue that Monet was not really painting the Cathedral at all. All he was painting was colour. And according to John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, colour is a secondary quality of an object, which means that it is not a quality inherent in the object. For Locke, to qualify as a primary quality, that quality has to be "utterly inseparable from the Body" (2.8.9) of the object no matter what state it is in. That is, the primary qualities are those that an object keeps despite "all the alterations and changes it suffers" (2.8.9). In contrast, the secondary qualities "are nothing in the Objects themselves, but Powers to produce various Sensations in us by their *primary Qualities*, i.e. by the Bulk, Figure, Texture, and Motion of their insensible parts, as Colours, Sounds, Tasts [sic], etc." (2.8.10). So an object does not possess a certain colour; rather, it possesses a power to produce the sensation of colour in us given certain circumstances.

We commonly feel that an object's colour is intimately related to its being. We often use colour to identify objects and to distinguish between them. But, if you consider an object independently of the particularities of place and time, an object possesses no colour at all. An object's colour is conditional; that is, it depends on conditions. Monet's

Cathedral paintings are a dramatic reminder of this conditionality. The colour of the Cathedral in early morning is strikingly different from its colour, in full sunlight (see figs. 5 and 6). But neither appearance of the Cathedral has a stronger claim as the "real" colour of the Cathedral. Rouen Cathedral has no colour of its own; its colour depends on the light, the atmosphere, the stone, and the perspective of the observer – all the peculiarities of place and time.

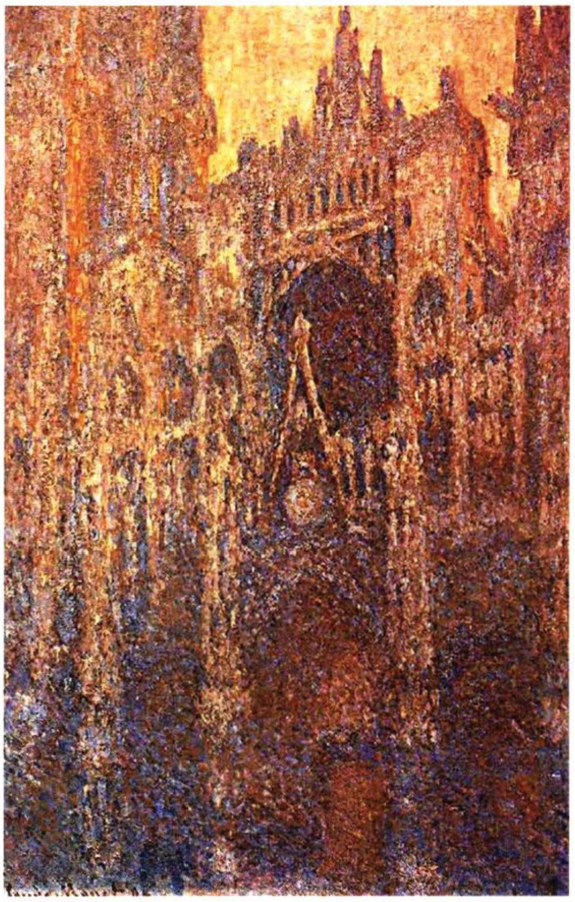

Fig 5. *Rouen Cathedral (The Portal, Morning)*, 1894, Fujikawa Gallery, Tokyo

Fig. 6. *Rouen Cathedral (The Portal and the Tour d'Albane in the Sunlight)*, 1894, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

From Locke's point of view, then, there is on the one hand the secondary sensible Rouen Cathedral and on the other the primary Cathedral-in-itself that causes those sensations but is itself insensible. The object is the cause and the appearance to us is the effect: "let not the Eyes see Light, or Colours, nor the Ears hear Sounds; let the Palate not Taste, nor the Nose Smell, and all Colours, Tastes, Odors, and Sounds, as they are such particular Ideas, vanish and cease, and are reduced to their Causes, *i.e.* Bulk, Figure, and Motion of Parts" (2.8.17) – (notice, though, how he does not mention touch in his

separation of sensible qualities from their causes). Locke takes pains to distinguish between the primary and secondary qualities. And for good reason: if the appearance of an object were equivalent to its essential identity, then the world would be a very unstable place. For one, if a sensible quality like colour were tied to the essential being of an object, then that object's existence would depend on external conditions. If Rouen Cathedral were, in fact, red, then Rouen Cathedral would only exist when the conditions for redness (the right light, an observer) converged. Look away and the Cathedral ceases to exist. But, thankfully, red is not really in the Cathedral itself; it is the effect of the Cathedral's "insensible parts" (2.8.18) on us in the presence of light. The colour of the Cathedral depends on conditions, but (we hope) the existence of the Cathedral does not.

The other problem with appearances is that they are impermanent. If appearance and reality were equivalent, then reality would be in a state of continual flux. But we don't experience the world that way:

> Let us consider the red and white colours in *Porphyre* [a variety of rock]: Hinder light but from striking on it, and its Colours Vanish; it no longer produces any such *Ideas* in us: Upon the return of Light, it produces these appearances on us again. Can any one think any real alterations are made in the *Porphyre*, by the presence or absence of Light; and that those *Ideas* of whiteness and redness, are really in *Porphyre* in the light, when 'tis plain *it has no colour in the dark*? It has, indeed, such a Configuration of Particles, both Night and Day, as are apt by the Rays of Light rebounding from some parts of that hard Stone, to produce in us the *Idea* of redness, and from others the *Idea* of whiteness: But whiteness and redness are not in it at any time, but such a texture, that hath the power to produce such a sensation in us. (Locke 2.8.19)

For Locke, sensible qualities such as "redness" exist in dependence on certain conditions. When conditions change, the ideas produced also change. But Locke clings to the notion that there is a stable object underlying and causing all the changes in an object's appearance, that there is an object that exists apart from conditions. Locke's philosophy, then, holds that changes in sensible qualities are secondary, not essential. If the object's being were equivalent to the object's appearance, then its identity would be constantly shifting and proliferating: it would never be the same object from moment to moment.

Appearances don't make stable objects because they depend on conditions and because they are in constant flux.

Thus, from the point of view of Locke's empiricism, Monet focuses entirely on secondary qualities, qualities that exist in relation to the object but outside the object proper. What Monet fails to convey, then, is the bulk and figure of the Cathedral, which are primary qualities that are (for Locke) inherent in the object.

Fig. 7. Monet, *Rouen Cathedral (The Portal, Morning Fog)*, 1894, Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany

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Monet would have loved this: fog has settled in thick. I can just barely trace the form of tall spruce crowns across the cove. Boats on still water merge with and emerge out of the mist: sometimes only a mast appears, the bulk dissolved in white. It's on translucent evenings such as this, according to local legend, that ghost ships ply the waters off the South Shore of Nova Scotia. And no wonder. Objects in the fog seem

unfamiliar: they shed their crisp noonday solidity and appear phantom-like, full of mystery. You can get lost in a fog like this.

What I share with Monet is an interest in the misty and the ephemeral (see fig. 7). His paintings feel to me elegiac: their lack of hard lines accentuates the mutability of all things. Rouen Cathedral looms almost menacingly on the canvas, but it looks as if you could walk right through the façade, as if it were made of mist, as if it might dissolve at any moment. His aesthetic world is a world without substance, which to most might sound like a criticism (the Museum of Modern Art did call his work "boneless"), but in my mind, Monet's world is revealing.

The lack of substance in Monet's paintings seems to flow from his methodology as he described it to Lilla Cabot Perry. Monet forgets the objects in front of him and paints only spots of colour as they appear to him. What Monet attempts to do is to record only the sensations his eye receives, his "naïve impression." It is odd, though, that the sum of the spots of colour or sensations does not equal an impression of a substantial object. It seems substantial objects are not given in visual perception. Something is added to the sensations our eye receives, and much is subtracted as well.

This result of Monet's experiment would not surprise an empiricist like Locke. For Locke, the impression of the world as a collection of independently existing substantial objects is something the mind constructs; it is not given in the sensible ideas we receive:

> The *Ideas* of *Substances* are such combinations of simple *Ideas*, as are taken to represent distinct particular things subsisting by themselves; in which the supposed, or confused *Idea* of Substance, such as it is, is always the first and chief. Thus if to Substance be joined the simple *Idea* of a certain dull whitish colour, with certain degrees of Weight, Hardness, Ductility, and Fusibility, we have the *Idea* of *Lead.* (2.12.6)

In Locke's view, substance is a convenient hypothesis by which we glue together certain simple ideas into stable, independent objects. The mind receives simple ideas from sense and reflection; it notices that some of these simple ideas "go constantly together" (2.23.1); and from this observation concludes that the simple ideas must belong to the same thing: "not imagining how these simple *Ideas* can subsist by themselves, we

accustom our selves, to suppose some *Substratum*, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *Substance*" (2.23.1). The world that makes sense to our understanding is a world of substantial objects.

But Locke reminds us over and over in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that our notion of substance, the very glue that holds our sensory perceptions together as stable objects, is only a hypothesis (even if it is one he seems to believe in). Substance is not a sensible quality, so we can have no knowledge of it: "if any one will examine himself concerning his *Notion of pure Substance in general*, he will find he has no other *Idea* of it at all, but only a Supposition of he knows not what support of such Qualities, which are capable of producing simple *Ideas* in us; which Qualities are commonly called Accidents" (2.23.2). Here is the duality emerging again of permanence versus impermanence, reality versus appearance, primary versus secondary qualities, and form versus accident. Monet's Cathedral paintings exaggerate the accidental and confound our desire to infuse the visual field with substantial objects, to under-stand it. The art critics want form; they want objects that are more than simply conglomerated perceptual accidents. For them, Monet's Cathedrals are less valuable because they are bound to a particular moment in time and space. But it is quite possible that particular moments in time and space are all we have.

ANATMAN # When I was a kid, my family was one of the first on the block to own a personal computer – a Zenith something or other. The machine captivated me with its whirring "thinking" noises, blinking lights, and its RGB (mostly G) monitor. While other kids ran around and rode their bikes, I would sit in our bare-bulb musty basement, tune out the muffled shouts and laughs from outside, and peer through the dark glass of the monitor into a world of (I thought) virtually limitless creative possibility. Don't get me wrong, I still played a lot of soccer and road hockey – still loved the woods on a bright Sunday morning, but I also spent time on that old wicker chair in the basement with its thin, uncomfortable cushion teaching myself to write programs in BASIC.

BASIC was a no-nonsense language, all imperatives: GO, DRAW, PLAY, RUN. There was no politesse mediating the programmer's relationship to the computer, no

negotiation between competing interests. You told the computer what you desired, and if you had the numbers and the command forms right, then your wish became the computer's command. The computer was a blessing for a younger brother used to performing commands under threat of power.

Down there in the basement, I became Prospero, conjuring green shapes and tinny noises, commanding the airy silicon spirit to do my bidding. The BASIC manual was my book of magic: the more command structures I learned, the more power I gained to make things appear on screen. I conjured my own masques of Ceres, which all inevitably unfolded to a metallic-sounding William Tell Overture (it took a lot of code to make music). I must admit, I never got very good. Floating geometric shapes riding through the blackness like the Lone Ranger was about the extent of my programming powers. But playing Prospero – conjuring or programming a world – taught me something about perception that has stayed with me, something related to what Prospero tells Ferdinand after the masque of Ceres vanishes into nothingness:

> Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
> As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
> Are melted into air, into thin air;
> And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
> The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind. (*Tempest* 4.1.148-56)

Prospero does not go so far as to argue for the insubstantiality of all phenomena, but his comparison – the world is like magical illusion – suggests that what we take for real, abiding entities are subject to dissolution: things aren't exactly how they seem. Prospero here comes dangerously close to admitting that everything is impermanent. Perhaps he simply means that fictional characters and places are woven from baseless fabric, but the moving green circles of my childhood make me wonder if we mould all our perceptions of reality out of such stuff as dreams are made on.

To draw a circle in BASIC, all you need to do is give the (x,y) coordinates of the pixel that will serve as the circle's centre and give a specific value for the radius of the circle. You give commands, and the computer lights up the appropriate pixels on screen – presto, a circle. From there you can write a little program that will generate a series of numbers to use as (x,y) coordinates. The program will then draw a series of same-sized circles, locating them according to the changing (x,y) values for the circle's centre. Run the program, and you get a blur of green circles across the screen. Now comes the magic. In the same program, you can generate a second series of circles with (x,y) location values one step behind the first set. All you have to do is set the colour of the second set of circles to black. Run the program: a single green circle floats across the black screen. All the previous green circles in the first set get swallowed by the second set of following black circles – only the new green circle appears to the eye.

What was in reality a series of different green circles – the coordinates and the lit pixels were constantly changing – actually looked like the same circle. Magic. In its perception of the program results, the mind interpreted the circle image as having persistent identity. But the sameness was an illusion. It was a trick. What the program demanded from the computer was two series of discrete circles, but the brain identified only one circle cruising across the screen, as if all the instances of circle inhered in one meta-circle, as if the circle had substance.

The brain has a curious ability to see composite things as unities. It's easier – more natural – to interpret the series of circles on-screen as the same circle, as a unified singularity moving through space, than it is to interpret the scene as a proliferation of different circles. Our attachment to "sameness" is deep. It is the root of our reflex ontology of beings and things. But ontological sameness is quite possibly all a trick.

As a kid, I instinctively felt there was something mysterious going on in the whole circle movement illusion, but my interest soon floated, like the phantom green circle(s), from computers to other kid pursuits. I never felt like the world was generating a series of "me"s and second set of shadow "me"s in order to propel me across the soccer pitch, so I figured the mystery was confined to the basement and the dark world of the computer. But now I'm not so sure.

In Buddhist terms, what the mind is doing in the circle illusion is projecting a self (*atman*) or essence or substance (*svabhava*) onto the image. For Buddhists, though, the *atman* illusion is pervasive, not confined to the eerie glow of computer screens and their illusions of movement.

In order to root out the *atman* illusion, Buddhism uses a number of analytic methods. One method is to analyze unified things and events as composites. Early Buddhists in India called this kind of analysis Abhidharma. According to Conze, Abhidharma analysis is "the philosophical analysis of reality into its factors, or 'dharmas'" (*India* 92). In the Buddhist context, the word *dharma* has multiple meanings and connotations that change from text to text, so it is very hard to pin down a simple definition. But in the context of Abhidarmic analysis, *dharma* generally refers to the "ultimate constituents" of things. Conze explains that the word is derived from the root *dhr*, "to uphold" (92), so its connotation is something like the English word substance. A *dharma* upholds a thing's appearance just as substance stands under phenomena. A *dharma* is a factor that cannot be further analyzed; it is what stands at the essential core of a thing. The trick is to analyze objects into their constituent *dharmas* in order to show that objects are merely collections of *dharmas*, not inherently existent unified entities.

Take my floating green circle as an example. As I've shown, what seems like a unified circle in motion can also be understood as a series of different circles. One circle after another arises and vanishes (the "black circles" simply turn the pixels off), but no circle passes ontological content or substance to the next circle. Yes, one can express a mathematical relationship between the circles in terms of a formula, but that formula does not constitute a substantial link between each circle. Any two circles in the world are mathematically related, but we don't experience all circles as the same circle. So by analyzing the motion of a circle through (virtual) space as a series of separate circles, you can see how the perceiving mind superimposes an interpretation on the data of experience and takes that interpretation as reality. If someone were to exclaim, "Look! The circle is moving!" the Buddhist would understand "the circle" to be "a convenient and conventional term for grouping a variety of events in a unity" (Guenther, *Philosophy* 144). Rather than interpret reality as a bewildering array of separate events, the mind chooses to simplify by grouping together analogous events as the same thing. "Fine," says

the Buddhist, "but remember that 'things' are not really real, only conventionally (or functionally) real."

But the Buddhist analysis does not stop there. Interpreting events as discrete moments is a good first step to dissolving the *atman* illusion – the illusion that things have a substance that persists through space – but the new interpretation of events still gives the impression that each moment or instance constitutes a real substantial thing. In my computer example, each particular circle must itself be analyzed as a composite thing. Each circle is composed of a certain number of pixels lit up by electricity. Each one of those pixels bears no necessary or underlying formal link to any of the others; it is the mind that links them together as necessary parts of a whole. On top of this, the light (photons) that allows the mind to form the circle perception is constantly changing, and the electricity that brings energy to the pixel flows constantly. The seemingly static circle is simply a constantly fluctuating pattern of pixels and light that the mind conventionally interprets as a specific form – a circle. The seemingly static circle is a superimposed form on a constellation of lights, and the whole visual image flows like a river. To the Abhidharmists, this is how everything works: "the elements and events in a structure change ceaselessly, and though the structure seems to persist even this is gradually changed by the changing structuralizing events" (Guenther, *Philosophy* 215, note 3). There is nothing in the circle that stays the same, and there is no necessary link between its parts – its reality as circle is purely conventional, something the mind inscribes on experience. Look for it. Poof. The independent circle isn't there.

You can analyze each part of the whole into smaller and smaller parts looking for some external ontological substance on which to ground the feeling that things really are the same from moment to moment and that they aren't simply arbitrary or conventional interpretations of experience. But there isn't any ground. Once you get into the subatomic realm, the idea of "thing" dissolves completely into energy. Like Wile E. Coyote, you finally notice that you're walking on air – thin air.

We seed our everyday perceptions of things with a kernel of eternity. We know full-well that phenomena are in flux, but we take for granted that something in our selves and in the things of the world does not change essentially from moment to moment, except at death (and maybe not even then). But where is this still point at the heart of

things where time does not flow? What part of things transcends change? According to Buddhists, our perception of "things" is merely a process of "'reification' (or hypostasization), which is the tendency of natural man to superimpose on the concrete flux of events, conditions, activities and sense-data by abstraction a superstructure of relatively independent and more or less permanent 'things,' which he endows with a variety of properties" (Conze, *India* 99). Our objects of knowledge are fictions – convenient, yes – but fictions.

The Abhidharma even went so far as to argue that the continuity of objects can be analyzed as a series of short-lived perceptions (Conze, *India* 100). It is easy for us to acknowledge that no two perceptions of an object are ever the same, but it is much more difficult to imagine that the object of perception changes essentially from one look to the next. Conze uses the perception of a candle as an illustration. Stare at a candle. At some point – after a moment – perception is refreshed. Or look for a moment, look away, and then look back. What is the relationship between your two candle perceptions? To us it naturally feels that the candle is the same from moment to moment, but to the Abhidharma nothing really spills over from one perception to the next. Like the series of green circles or like a roll of motion picture film, each perception of candle is discrete, part of a series of different candles. Conze argues,

> I may well recognize [the second perception] as the same "candle," but dharmically speaking the object is different if only because the act of perceiving is a new one. There is a tendency to believe that, because the second object "candle" is very similar to the first one, a permanent, abiding, continuous "thing" has persisted from one "exposure" to the next. This "thing" is, however, merely inferred, and never actually "given." (*India* 100)

Each perception is *practically* the same, but from the Abhidharmist point of view, it is not *really* the same (nor *really* different). Like two photographs, any two perceptions of the candle can be understood separately. However, we can use the candle as if it were a stable object and do fine, just as physicists can use Newtonian equations instead of Einsteinian ones for everyday objects and do fine. But for Buddhists, the difference between understanding the basic reality of the candle as a continuous thing and as a composite is

the difference between ignorance and wisdom – the difference between suffering and enlightenment.

The real heart of Abhidharma analysis, though, is its analysis of the self (*atman*). The Abhidharma analyze the self into five *dharmas* known as the five *skandhas* (heaps or bundles). These five factors define the limits of what Buddhists generally think of as a self or of what people generally refer to when they use the pronoun "I." Buddhists perform the *skandha* analysis in order to rid themselves of the sensation that the personality or "I" is more than a conventional or nominal constellation of parts: "What appears to our untrained vision and ignorant conception as a seemingly unified being or thing, as one apparently solid lump (*ghana*), is broken up into five heaps (*rasi*), or clusters, a mere conglomeration of pieces plus a label, a mass made up of five diverse constituents" (Conze, *India* 107). These five constituents are *rupa* (form), *vedana* (feelings: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral), *samjna* (perceptions corresponding to the six sense organs – mind being the sixth), *samskara* (impulses or karmic constituents), and *vijnana* (consciousness). The self-image is simply an arbitrary constellation of these parts. But these parts too are arbitrary constellations of parts (or moments at least). Through contemplation and analysis, one gains the habit of seeing "things" in their three aspects: as nominal whole, as part of a larger nominal whole, and as analyzed into parts (where the aura of wholeness dissolves). The personality too can be viewed in this three-part manner, but *skandha* analysis focuses on the self as "a mere conventional grouping of disparate elements" (Conze, *India* 107). Under the microscope of meditation, one finds no force holding the parts of the self together, no essential glue that binds the five *skandhas* together as one definite thing apart from the world, protecting them from change and impermanence. The only thing binding these parts together as a stable ontological being is desire and fear.

PRATITYASAMUTPADA #

a hundred summers

Summers are short in Sierra high altitudes. Winter conditions reign for a good chunk of the year. As a result, timberline whitebark pines spend much of their lives in dormancy. They've adapted to short growing seasons and freezing temperatures. In fall, whitebark pine sap hardens in anticipation of sub-zero conditions (Bakker 217). When frost creeps across midnight rocks, watery sap would freeze, expand, and damage cells. Hardened sap, however, protects the living pith, provides shelter while the tree sits, waits through long frozen nights.

When spring thaw arrives, whitebarks need not waste time or energy growing leaves for photosynthesis. Their five-needle bunches stay green under thick snows. As soil moisture melts, long searching roots absorb it quickly, send it to the needles where solar manna becomes starch and sugar, the staff of life. With such short growing seasons, though, growth progress is slow. A hundred summers only result in small hard-won branches.

Krummholz whitebarks survive the harsh climate year after year because of their efficient use of energy and their meager needs. They also survive year after year because, as so many tree books emphasize, they have no commercial use (Elias 40; Benvie 158; Baerg 35). According to Baerg, whitebarks dodge the axe because of their inaccessibility and their "stunted nature" (35). The pine's uselessness is a key to its longevity, a point Chuang Tzu made about a huge tree that Tzu-ch'i of Nan-po saw around the Hill of Shang:

> Tzu-ch'i said, "What tree is this? It must certainly have some extraordinary usefulness!" But, looking up, he saw that the smaller limbs were gnarled and twisted, unfit for beams and rafters, and looking down, he saw that the trunk was pitted and rotten and could not be used for coffins. He licked one of the leaves and it blistered his mouth and made it sore. He sniffed the odor and it was enough to make a man drunk for three days. "It turns out to be a completely unusable tree," said Tzu-ch'i, "and so it has been able to grow this big. Aha!—it is this unusableness that the Holy Man makes use of!" (61)

The whitebark may not grow large, but in the krummholz, it can grow for 500 years or more unmolested by human desires.

According to Benvie, whitebarks also avoid consumerist fetishization because their aesthetic magic depends on a particular growing environment: "[The whitebark] has a rugged aesthetic that suits its habitat, but this does not carry over into commercial landscape applications" (158). The whitebark is what it is *in situ*, nowhere else. Rich mansion gardens cannot reproduce krummholz conditions. The whitebark's habitat embeddedness is so apparent that nobody bothers to attempt abstraction. The tree is desirable not as an object in itself but as part of a larger whole. In this way, the whitebark teaches its own inherent emptiness through its inseparablilty, its dependence on conditions that seem external to it.

For Snyder, however, the whitebark is useful, but not commercially, not as an independent object that one can exchange for capital. In fact, the whitebark's embeddedness demonstrates the absurdity of commodification: the things exchanged are nothing in themselves. Thus, the whitebark in Snyder's poem emerges as a nexus of forces, a node of energy that the mountain pilgrim can access without depriving the tree of life. Snyder's burning of the small dead branches is an ecologically sustainable energy exchange: he uses only what he needs to survive. His desires do not demand depletion of the already limited energy supply – he acts like a whitebark. Snyder's economic relationship with the whitebark, then, ensures that there will be a hundred more summers of growth: others will also be able to make the pilgrimage up the mountain to experience vast star-filled visions of interconnection within the warm windy glow of whitebark combustion.

snowmelt

Cold crystallized soil, hard as rock – roots draw no water from frozen stone. Sun and warm air miracle: solid ice and snow rigidity relaxes; stone becomes water. In rising temperate breath, bound hydrogen and oxygen lattices tumble, slip through fissures in solid conceptual categories. For Hakuin (1685-1768), Japanese Rinzai Zen master (and

the source for Snyder's anthology title *No Nature*), ice-water transformations teach dharma – ice is to water what ordinary beings are to Buddha:

> All beings by nature are Buddha,
> As ice by nature is water.
> Apart from water there is no ice;
> Apart from beings, no Buddha.
> How sad that people ignore the near
> And search for truth afar. (1-6)

These first six lines of Hakuin's "Song of Meditation (*Zazen*)" argue that Buddha and ordinary beings are not ontologically or ultimately different; rather, they are only conditionally so. Here's how it works. On a conditional level, water and ice are quite different. They manifest different properties and thus have different uses. To a whitebark pine, ice is unusable, even a threat, but liquid water is necessary for growth and life. However, while the difference between ice and water is crucial, that difference is only conditional, not ultimate or absolute. As seasons change in the high Sierras, as atmospheric and environmental conditions shift, ice and snow melt or water freezes up. Neither ice nor water stays the same ultimately, regardless of conditions. Ice and water have no permanent nature, no substance that stands outside of conditions.

Hakuin argues that the same is true of the difference between ordinary people and Buddha. Under the right conditions, an ordinary person is Buddha. The difference is only conditional. But a change in temperature is not enough here. According to Hakuin, the condition that separates ordinary people from Buddha is ignorance (*avidya*). In a Buddhist context, *avidya* generally refers to a habitual misinterpretation of the nature of reality. Ignorant beings, Buddhists say, mistake conditional differences for ultimate ones; that is, they think of ice and water as substantially different. Or worse, they think water and ice possess some quality that does not depend on or change with conditions. Simply put, then, the only thing that separates you from being a Buddha is a false notion about substantial reality. For Buddhists, it is ignorant to think that Buddha is somehow ultimately different ("afar") from ordinary people ("near").

It is important to keep in mind here that neither of the two states (ice/water, ordinary being/Buddha) is more fundamental than the other. Water is not the underlying

or inherent reality of ice any more than ice is the underlying or inherent reality of water. The reality is that if certain conditions prevail, then there is ice or water – or whitebark pines or people for that matter. The same holds true for ordinary beings and Buddhas, except in this case the Buddha state is more desirable because it entails the cessation of suffering. But it would be a mistake to think that Buddha represents an ultimate state that transcends conditions. Hakuin stresses this later in his "Song" when he calls self-nature, which he has already established as Buddha-nature in line one, "no-nature" or *nihsvabhava* (30). Self-nature of ordinary beings and of Buddha seem like separate things, but they share the same empty nature.

The sun of illumination warms the solidity of conditional entities – snowmelt.

Whitebark pine roots – semi-permeable membranes – swell with thirst for snowmelt. When waters begin to trickle, trees take deep breaths, respirate through pores in stem bark called lenticels (Jaques 6). Just as ice and water depend on conditions for existence, trees too are wholly dependent on conditions. We think of things as independent entities, but the rule of survival is interdependence – open systems in relationships of mutual need:

> the roots of pines form mutually advantageous and physically intimate relationships with soil fungi, called microrrhyzae, which greatly extend the absorptive capacity of the pines' root system in nutrient-poor and moisture-deficient soils. In exchange the fungi receive organic nutrients from the tree. (Benvie 157)

Krummholz whitebark pines can't go it alone. In fact, nothing can go it alone, physically or metaphysically. In the intimacy of fungi and pine lies the great insight of ecology and Buddhism: nothing exists independently.

rock

Geologists speculate that the Appalachian mountain range may have soared as high as the Himalayas in the Paleozoic Era as a series of continental plates, including Europe and

Africa, rammed into what is now North America, pushing up the Appalachians and forming the Pangean supercontinent (USGS). Looking up as I climb towards the peak of Adams: Holocene blue sky and fast floating wisps of torn cloud. 300 million years ago, that sky was solid rock.

The conditions that help life flourish on tumbling slopes – sun and wind and water and ice – also consume mountains, eroding them one crystal granite grain at a time. Sitting at the peak, in my mind I watch a time-lapse film of alpine decay: Mt. Adams is made of crumbling sand; it's washing away beneath my boots. Where I sit will someday be sky.

Mechanical weathering reduces thick rock to soil. Deep earth gravitational pull draws moisture into tiny secret stone fissures – freezing temperatures build expanding lattice structures – rock cracks from the pressure. Gazing hot sun splits rocks too – wind exfoliates. Breeze-blown and water-drawn bits and pieces settle on ledges, in crannies. Organic detritus finds its way into the same dark places (Bakker 206-07). When enough material collects to hold moisture, hidden dormant seeds send out tentative shoots. Life springs from the barren stone.

Above the timberline on Adams, the rocks are anything but bare. Indecipherable hieroglyphic lichen patterns cover the rough granite in countless shades and hues, from white to brown to bright yellow. The timberline marks the edge of tree life, but not of life altogether. Beyond the krummholz there is symbiotic interdependence: "A lichen is actually a community of organisms so tightly interwoven that they act as one" (Campbell 52-53). The coloured frills you see and touch are strands of fungus that wrap and protect algal cells: "The fungus provides structure and protection; the photosynthesizing algae provide food" (Campbell 53). Neither fungus nor algae could survive the worst weather in America alone. As Sue Ellen Campbell says, they function as one. You can separate algae from fungus conceptually, but if you do it actually, you are left with dead nothing.

Lichens grow in the Sierras as well, where they are crucial to whitebark survival. Lichens release corrosive chemicals that dissolve minerals from granite (Bakker 207). Ancient cooled magma nutrients become soluable, pool in ledges and cracks where sand and organic detritus absorb the rich runoff. Whitebark roots use lichen-freed granite

minerals to build branches, sustain life. To lichens and whitebark root fungus, inert mountain stillness is a never-ending supply of nutrients.

The point here is that whitebark existence depends on lichen existence and rock existence. Mechanical and chemical erosion are necessary in order to sustain whitebark life. By extension, then, Snyder's poem about whitebark branches also depends on lichens, rocks, and erosion. The poem's content cannot be separated from its home ecosystem.

and air

Look closely at pine needles, and you'll notice that there are small pores called stomata on the surface, where inside and outside meet. Through these tiny mouths, the needle inhales air, taking in the carbon dioxide necessary for photosynthesis, and exhales oxygen, a by-product of food production (Jaques 7). In growing season, trees breathe – in and out. From the outside, whitebarks may look like they are hermetically sealed, but this woody independence is impossible. The pines continuously interact with their environment. The whole whitebark scene is a marketplace of exchange: energy, nutrients, moisture, gases.

Snowmelt, rock, and air – these are valuable trade items in the krummholz; they are also among the main ingredients of soil: "soil is a mixture of air, water, and its solutes, mineral particles from the parent bedrock, decaying organic matter, and organisms responsible for this decay" (Bakker 189). They are also major players in the processes of erosion. And they are among the necessary materials needed to create whitebark pine branches:

> a hundred summers
> snowmelt rock and air
>
> hiss in a twisted bough.

Snyder's branches are temporary nodes of matter-energy, whorls in the energy grain, with connections that reach out into the krummholz and beyond. Investigating the poem's nominal referents and how they relate to each other is an exercise in ecological study. In

the hiss of burning whitebark branches you can hear the intimate whispers of mountain ecosystem interdependence. But there is more to interdependence than these nouns convey. In the ordinary ecological observation that Snyder's poem articulates – that whitebarks depend on numerous external factors for their existence – lies the central insight of Buddhism: because the whitebark is dependently originated, it is empty of substance or inherent existence – it is boundless. All time and space is contained and expressed in that hiss.

NIHSVABHAVA # For Locke, the division of mind and world is essential. Our senses supply our minds with ideas, and these ideas "depend on something exterior to the Mind" (2.9.6). And although what our senses supply is unstable, the external world itself is not. Our minds are able to take sensory data and shape the accidents of appearance with the faculty of judgment into the stable forms that underlie and cause those appearances:

> When we set before our Eyes a round Globe of any uniform colour, *v.g.* Gold, Alabaster, or Jet, 'tis certain, that the *Idea* thereby imprinted in our Mind, is of a flat Circle, variously shadow'd, with several degrees of Light and Brightness coming to our Eyes. But we having by use been accustomed to perceive, what kind of appearance convex Bodies are wont to make in us; what alterations are made in the reflections of Light, by the difference of the sensible Figures of Bodies, the Judgment presently, by an habitual custom, alters the Appearances into their Causes: So that from that, which truly is variety of shadow or colour, collecting the Figure, it makes it pass for a mark of Figure, and frames to it self the perception of a convex Figure, and an uniform Colour; when the *Idea* we receive from thence, is only a Plain variously colour'd, as is evident in Painting. (2.9.8)

Locke admits here that all that our retinas have access to "truly is variety of shadow or colour," but he is quick to assert that judgment, with the help of assumptions gained through "habitual custom," "alters the Appearances into their Causes." For Locke, the mind does not create an ordered world; no, the external world is already an orderly place. It's just that our senses are imperfect tools, almost like meat grinders: objects pass through the holes of the sensory grinder and the mind reshapes the elongated bits back

into their original forms. Our senses detect the accidents of appearance (secondary qualities), which serve as clues to or marks of the more permanent causes (primary qualities). The catch is that we have no direct experience of primary qualities: like substance, our stable perceptual objects are all "habitual custom."

This is where Monet and the impressionists become interesting. Their project sought to "look at colors, shadows, and reflections and to paint them as they appeared on the retina, not in terms of traditional color constancies" (Bloomer 63). In Lockean terms, Monet sought the idea before the alterations of judgment, the "Plain variously colour'd" (2.9.8). Whether or not this unaltered retinal image is accessible to consciousness is a matter of some debate, and for Gombrich, the impressionist program was doomed to failure theoretically – an eye is never innocent, even Monet's (35). Nevertheless, impressionism did succeed in focusing attention on the "instability of the visible world" (Gombrich 35). It's this instability that fascinates me. Monet's paintings are invitations to question the validity of our basic commonsense interpretations of visual data, our "habitual custom[s]" in perception. What Locke calls causes, what Aristotle calls substance, what perceptual psychologists call constancies do make sense out of our sense perceptions, but are they real, and should we act as if they were real?

Here's what I don't like about Lockean perception, what I think is dangerous about it: it discards as useless jetsam a large portion of everyday sensory experience. For Locke, the alteration of "Appearances into their Causes" is selective and value-laden. For example, the reduction of a complex visual pattern to a "uniform colour" discards retinally-registered variety in favour of an interpretation guided by "habitual custom." In perceiving what Gombrich calls the "memory colour" instead of the present colour, our mind partially abstracts itself and its perceptions from the flow of experience. In this process of selection, we forget and ignore much of the visual world. On top of this, we value the stable perceptual object, which seems to stand partially outside the flow of time, much more than the changing retinal image. We desire the constants – they reveal substance, essence, cause; we discard the inconstants as accidents, as forgettable pieces of garbage, because they reveal an ungraspable, complicated, and (most importantly) undesirable world.

Locke's description of perception as altering appearances into their causes and the Gestalt description of perception as attending to formal constants remind me of Edward Sapir's description of concept formation. Sapir, a linguist, points out that the real communicative power of language resides in its reference not to particulars of experience but to general concepts: "The world of our experiences must be enormously simplified and generalized before it is possible to make a symbolic inventory of all our experiences of things and relations and this inventory is imperative before we can convey ideas" (12). For Sapir, communication operates on a level just outside of direct experience, a simplified level. Words "ticket off experience" (12) in much the same way as perception tickets off a figure from its ground and an object from its accidents. We associate words with "whole groups, delimited classes, of experience rather than with the single experiences themselves" (12). If each changing experience of an object required a new word to name it, communication would be impossible – there must be a "reduction of the infinity of experience" (13). And the reduction happens on a number of levels of generality. First, the mind gathers together the series of altering experiences of a figure to form an object with a persistent identity. Sapir uses the example of a house: "the single impression which I have had of a particular house must be identified with all my other impressions of it" (Sapir 13). This is what happens in closure: the mind lifts the figure from its ground, attending to the constants in experience. But that perceptual object can be generalized even further from a particular house to the category "house." The formation of any such category, though, requires the mind to ignore vast amounts of detail and difference:

> We must cut to the bone of things, we must more or less arbitrarily throw whole masses of experience together as similar enough to warrant their being looked upon – mistakenly, but conveniently – as identical. This house and that house and thousands of other phenomena of like character are thought of as having enough in common, in spite of great and obvious differences of detail, to be classed under the same heading. (13)

The word "house," then, primarily refers to this greatly-simplified notion that ties together all our individual impressions of houses. Sapir calls this notion a concept, "a convenient capsule of thought that embraces thousands of distinct experiences and that is

ready to take in thousands more" (13). By this description, a concept operates the same way as Locke's notion of substance, although a concept is not tied to a particular object: a concept maintains the integrity of identity despite the accidents of detail. A concept remains static. It stands firm in the flood of sensory experience. It takes the perceived constants of figure perception and abstracts them from time and context entirely. Much is lost in concept formation, much is thrown away as unessential. But the conceptual world thus created, as Sapir notes, makes the communication of ideas possible. It is a comfortingly stable world – a world of permanent truths.

By now you can probably sense my discomfort with the mind's tendency to generalize, simplify, and abstract. But don't get me wrong. I'm happy that we can perceive the world in a constant manner. I'm happy that we have concepts that stabilize visual data and enable communication. Like Bloomer says, "Without a way of organizing [sensory] information you would live in a chaos of continually changing sensations. The retinal image would be 'a world of pictures... which disappear and reappear capriciously.' The mind synthesizes and orders these perceptions with a survival program designed for a world of space" (64). The usefulness of interpreting the world as a collection of stable objects is undeniable. My only problem is with our tendency to consider these interpretations to be inherently existing ontological objects, and worse, to act as if they were undeniably real. All the lost and forgotten bits of experience floating around make me wonder about the fit between world and concept: maybe it's not so comfortable. Perhaps there is a danger in discarding so much direct experience in favour of concepts.

I think Sapir and Bloomer share my concerns about hypostatizing conceptual interpretations of experience. For example, Sapir describes conceptual categories as arbitrary collections of different experiences: "we must more or less arbitrarily throw whole masses of experience together as similar enough to warrant their being looked upon – mistakenly, but conveniently – as identical" (13). For Sapir, concepts are convenient, but they are not fundamental aspects of the world – they are useful mistakes written in a kind of paraphrasing shorthand. Each particular experience of a house is real, but the concept "house" is a kind of statistical norm or generalization that we patch together out of a wealth of particular experiences. The mind creates concepts and

identities; it does not discover them – and the world does not operate according to their rules. Experience tends to squirm free of conceptual shackles.

Bloomer too conceives of perception as a mental organization of experience. In describing the findings of Gestalt studies of perception, Bloomer notes that we tend to perceive the simplest, "best," or most "correct" form in experience (15). But she also adds that desire plays a large role in the perception of form: "you tend to see things not as they are – but as your mind thinks they ought to be" (15). The mind overlooks irregularities, corrects stimuli in order to facilitate categorization: "The process of perception seems endlessly involved in correcting disparities between what we *do* see and what we *want* to see" (78). In other words, we tend to perceive the concept as much as or more than the retinal image. In Gombrich's words, "The feeling of constancy completely predominates over the changing appearance" (107).

But where Locke argues that we alter appearances into their stable causes, Bloomer argues that the mind adds concepts to stabilize perception, that our concepts are not inherent in the external world:

> The early Gestalt psychologists thought that characteristics inherent in the stimulus imposed certain closure patterns on the mind. Current research in perception, however, tends to shift emphasis from the structure of the stimulus to the structure of the mind itself. According to this newer view, closure demonstrates the reverse: that *the mind has succeeded in imposing a pattern on the stimulus*. In other words the stimulus does not determine the closure: instead, a preexisting mental category programs how the stimulus will be perceived. (49)

The picture of perception that emerges here and in Locke is a dualistic one – the difference is only a matter of emphasis. In Locke, the external world is inherently stable, sensory experience is inherently unstable, but the mind can discover through judgment the stability behind unstable sensory experience. In Bloomer's description of later Gestalt theory, nothing much has changed, except there is no claim made for the stability of the external world. Stimuli are still unstable, and the mind still alters experience. All that is missing is Locke's confidence that the altered experience corresponds to an external reality. Instead, Bloomer emphasizes (with italics no less) that the mind *imposes* stability

in perception. I take it, though, that her use of the image of imposition is a dramatic way of implying that perceptual stability has nothing to do with given reality.

I think this lack of faith in the stability of the external world, this lack of faith in the correspondence of concepts or closed perceptions to reality marks the beginning of the end of the metaphysical foundation that supports our commonsense notion that there are stable objects in the world to grasp and to study.

QUESTIONS # In the Ch'an Buddhist tradition, the question of how to read texts is crucial, and the answer is not favourable to literary critics. In a Ch'an work called *The Transmission of the Lamp*, Ch'an Master Mu-chou rebuffs a learned scholar for valuing texts as external objects:

> When the Master (Mu-chou) was reading the sutras, the Minister Chen Tsao asked him, "Master, what sutra are you reading?" The Master said, "The *Diamond sutra*!" The Minister said, "The *Diamond sutra* was translated in the Sixth Dynasty; which edition are you using?" The Master lifted up the book and said, "All things produced by causation are simply an illusive dream and the shadow of a bubble." (qtd. in Wright 32)

Like a careful scholar, Chen Tsao worried about the issues of translation and of textual variations. But these concerns are only meaningful if there is some independently existing original meaning that might become obscured if one tampers with the text. For Mu-chou, the words of the text are not important in and of themselves; they are only provisional, a skillful means to achieve liberation – in fact, the text itself is "produced by causation" and thus "simply an illusive dream." Consequently, the texts are open to revision and rewriting: "The texts themselves were to be regarded as 'empty' of 'own-being,' and, therefore, not something worthy of knowledge in and of themselves. This was true of everything, however" (Wright 30). Every text, "Buddhist" or otherwise, embodies the same "truth." So Mu-chou advises Chen Tsao not to get entangled in scholarship but to deconstruct his notion of texts as sacred and substantial objects. From a Buddhist perspective, it would be absurd to relate to the text as a substantial object when the text itself tells you that all things produced by causation (the text included) are insubstantial.

In a striking passage, Huang Po, a ninth-century Ch'an monk, delivers a strong caution against studying Buddhist texts as independently existing objects of knowledge:

> In these days people only seek to stuff themselves with knowledge and deductions, seeking everywhere for book-knowledge and calling this "Dharma-practice." They do not know that so much knowledge and deduction have just the contrary effect of piling up obstacles. Merely acquiring a lot of knowledge makes you like a child who gives himself indigestion by gobbling too much curds... When so-called knowledge and deductions are not digested, they become poisons. (qtd. in Wright 31).

Approaching texts as objects of knowledge and (like Malunkyaputta) asking them to answer metaphysical questions is dangerous from the Buddhist point of view. What Huang Po is criticizing here is the kind of scholarly study that passed for Buddhism in his day: "To know the origins of a sutra, its setting, narrative emplotment, primary concepts, and overall position on Buddhist issues was the primary point of their [Buddhist monks' and scholars'] study" (Wright 30). But for Huang Po, this kind of study is unhelpful. Acquiring knowledge about texts and using texts as the basis for deductions about the nature of Buddhism reinforces the assumptions that cause suffering. This kind of scholarly activity is the poison on the arrow.

A more spiritually effective way of approaching texts from the Buddhist point of view is to use the texts to challenge convictions about the nature of reality. A scholar who approaches a text hoping to remain invisible, hoping to decode what the text says about reality or about what people in a specific time and place thought about their reality, has already made up his or her mind about the independent reality of the text. Study of this kind can only reinforce assumptions. But the reader who approaches the text as an opportunity for self-transformation (Wright xiii) remains open to a kind of learning beyond object knowledge. This kind of researcher will not just question what the text says but will also allow the text to question him or her. This kind of engagement with texts recognizes that the text's existence is contingent on the reader and that the reader's existence is contingent on the text. Neither exists independently; they are always enmeshed in a particular context. While historicists do recognize that a text is produced in a cultural and historical context, Buddhist readers can go one step further; they can

recognize that this cultural and historical context is not recoverable as something independent of present reading. The reader's mind appears, rather than disappears, in the act of reading. So instead of asking questions that demand the invisibility of the reader, the Buddhist reader becomes visible, using texts for the purpose of edification. Texts don't contain Truth; they are not objects to venerate. Rather, the goal in reading is to find out in what manner texts and readers exist.

This Buddhist approach to "Truth" and to texts is reminiscent of Richard Rorty's pragmatism and his notion of pragmatist readers or "strong textualists" ("Textualism" 151). Rorty, like Buddha, tends to maintain a noble or pragmatic silence in the face of metaphysical questions about the nature of Truth and reality. For Rorty, the problem with metaphysical questions is that they tend to spring from a desire for "metaphysical comfort" (150), which a notion of fixed "Philosophical truth" ("Introduction" xxxvii) makes possible. Literary researchers are not immune to these kinds of desires, and we tend to hope that "there is something which is not just one more text but that to which various texts are trying to be 'adequate'" (xxxvii). This notion of Philosophical truth and of a stable object behind texts and interpretations of texts is much like what Huntington, in his study of the Madhyamika, calls "objective, value-free" truth and reality. In the previous discussion of Madhyamika, I said that the goal of Madhyamika is to root out any concept of and desire for stable Philosophical views, and the same holds true for Rorty's pragmatism. For Rorty, pragmatists "insist that we can never compare human thought or language with bare, unmediated reality" ("Textualism" 139). So what we have access to in reading is not some unmediated textual object; rather, we create and are created by some kind of reading event. We do not discover things about the world or about texts; rather, we create readings: "For the textualists, the literary artist's awareness that he is making rather than finding, and more specifically the ironic modernist's awareness that he is responding to texts rather than to things, puts him one up on the scientist" (140). But the common assumption that operates in day-to-day literary study is not far from the scientific notion of independent reality. Even though literary critics are experienced enough to realize that texts are created in contexts and that interpretations are always mediated, we tend to assume that something about the text is permanent, that we can ask questions of the text, compare it to other texts, and thus create more-or-less true

propositions about it. We have "critical conversations" about texts, assuming that we are all on the same page, so to speak.

For the Buddhist reader, however, the text is not permanent, so there is nothing that a reading must remain true to, nothing, as the pragmatist asserts, to which a text must be "adequate." In a sense, then, a reading is immediate because there is no space between text and reader to mediate; there is only reading.

This idea that there is no independently existing textual entity is not something that Rorty is claiming is true about the world; rather, he is saying that deconstructing notions of texts as objects is a better way to think about the world:

> When philosophers like Derrida say things like "there is nothing outside the text" they are not making theoretical remarks, remarks backed up by epistemological or semantical arguments. Rather, they are saying, cryptically and aphoristically, that a certain framework of interconnected ideas – truth as correspondence, language as picture, literature as imitation – ought to be abandoned. They are not, however, claiming to have discovered the *real* nature of truth or language or literature. Rather, they say that the very notion of discovering the *nature* of such things is part of the intellectual framework which we must abandon – part of what Heidegger calls 'the metaphysics of presence,' or 'the onto-theological tradition.' (140)

In my opinion, the Rorty, Derrida, and Heidegger of this quotation are on the same team as the Buddhists I have so far been constructing. These notions that we can define objects of study, that these objects can serve as stable subjects for true propositions, that we can research and discover knowledge about texts, are all notions we ought to abandon.

For Rorty, though, the drive to abandon is vague. It is not that deconstructing notions of independently existing truth gets one closer to some kind of independently existing truth. It is just that talking this way "*seem*[s] clearly better" ("Introduction" xxxvii). And to Rorty, better means more free. The notion that there is a fixed truth that we must be adequate to is restrictive; it binds our desires: "Instead of saying that the discovery of vocabularies could bring hidden secrets to light, [pragmatists] said that new ways of speaking could help get us what we want" ("Textualism" 150). Remaining true to

some notion of a Truth that is inherently inaccessible seems silly. It's better to find a way of thinking about and living in the world that fulfills our desires.

From a Buddhist point of view, though, our desires are the fuel for the fire of suffering, so we have to be very careful about "what we want." In fact, desire is the very thing that leads us to believe that there is a true nature of things out there, a comforting Philosophical truth. Desire needs objects that stick around; it needs permanence. Rorty intuits the dangerous connection of desire and permanence in some of his comments. For example, he describes what he thinks drives the careers of "scientists and scholars": the "hope that their work has 'philosophical implications' and 'universal human significance'" ("Introduction" xl). For many scholars, research is meaningful only if it says something that lasts; otherwise it is just so much intellectual flotsam and jetsam:

> The life of [...] inhabitants of Snow's "literary culture," whose highest hope is to grasp their time in thought, appears to the Platonist and the positivist as a life not worth living – because it is a life which leaves nothing permanent behind. In contrast, the positivist and the Platonist hope to leave behind true propositions, propositions which have been shown true once and for all – inheritances for the human race unto all generations. The fear and distrust inspired by "historicism" – the emphasis on the mortality of the vocabularies in which such supposedly immortal truths are expressed – is the reason why Hegel (and more recently Khun and Foucault) are *bêtes noires* for Philosophers, and especially for spokesmen for Snow's "scientific culture." (xli)

Literary critics are not immune to this desire for permanence, although they express it more subtly. For the contemporary critic, versed in the theory of "historicism," the text is still a permanent object, even if it is one shaped by cultural and historical forces. The text is still something to which we must remain true, something to which we have a responsibility. Again and again we tell our students to "stick to the text." We may be one step ahead of the Platonists and positivists because we believe in "mortal vocabularies" instead of "immortal propositions" (xli), but we still think that our texts are immortal.

For Buddhists, it is this desire for permanence that causes suffering. Buddha's second noble truth observes that *tanha* is the cause of suffering, and *tanha* arises only when we have the notion that there are stable, independent objects and truths to grasp.

Tanha needs a world of true propositions; it needs to believe that there is a real text supporting all our interpretations of it; it needs things that survive through time, that stay the same. In literary criticism, the need to stay true to the text is a manifestation of *tanha*, and the activity of research, of reading through the stacks of books for new propositions about a text, is an activity of *tanha*. From a Buddhist point of view, then, the critic should abandon any practice based on the notion of a text's stability because these practices perpetuate suffering.

DUHKHA # *As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp,*
A mock show, dew drops, or a bubble,
A dream, a lightning flash, or cloud,
So should one view what is conditioned.
The Diamond Sutra (Conze, *Wisdom* 69)

During the violence and uncertainty of the An Lu-shan rebellion in T'ang China, the poet Tu Fu wrote in exile "The state goes to ruin / mountains and rivers survive" ("Spring Scene" 89). For Tu Fu, the human drama, with all its pain and anxiety, unfolds against the backdrop of a permanent landscape. Our lives, our desires and ambitions, our getting and spending, all the things that seem so important day-to-day appear absurdly transitory from the peace and tranquility of the alpine point of view. Our human world can turn upside-down in an instant, and what we once took for granted can become rare and valuable: "a letter from home / is worth a fortune" (90). There is little in life that is not subject to change, little that we can rely on. In fact, even the permanence of the mountains and rivers offers Tu Fu no relief: "this white hair / is getting so sparse / from scratching" (90). Tu Fu's exile is total: not only has he lost his home, but he has also lost the social structure and the system of values that gave his life meaning and direction. Now there is nothing to cling to.

Often it takes a sudden and traumatic event like the An Lu-shan rebellion, or the Depression, or the World Trade Centre attack for us to realize that value is not inherent in our objects of desire; rather, value is contextual – it depends on a system that is vulnerable to dissolution. Tu Fu's desire for "royal favor and government office" (Young

80) and his preoccupation with "his career and lack of advancement" (78) dissolved when the rebels drove the court into exile. Of what value is royal favour when the court no longer rules? Tu Fu's ambitions depended on certain conditions (the existence of the court and its system of government), and when "the state [went] to ruin," the conditions that supported those ambitions went to ruin as well. The realization must have been devastating: all that time he had thirsted for a mirage.

All the objects of our ambitions are unstable and vulnerable to change because their value and existence depend on external conditions. At the entrance to Hubbards Cove, an old, dilapidated fish plant sits abandoned – a monument to conditionality. Once the teeming schools of cod and tuna disappeared and the fishery collapsed off the shores of Nova Scotia, the conditions for the fish plant's use vanished. Now it sits empty on its sagging pier, paint peeling, windows smashed, doors boarded shut. Even the smell of rotting fish that I remember so vividly from childhood visits has vanished. The fishery goes to ruin, but the mountains and rivers remain.

In our own time, though, Tu Fu's observation is almost reversible. Snyder quotes Nanao Sakaki: "The mountains and rivers are destroyed, but the State survives" ("Survival" 175). The technological products of our desires and ambitions have advanced to the point where we can dam and divert great rivers like the Colorado so that they no longer reach the sea, and we can dismember small mountains in our thirst for ore. Our ambition has undermined the vehicles for our metaphors of permanence. Nothing survives, not even mountains and rivers – and, as Tu Fu reminds us, certainly not states.

I began this section with a stanza from *The Diamond Sutra* (*Vajracchedika-prajnaparamitasutra*) where the Buddha enumerates nine similes to help Subhuti understand the nature of conditioned things. By "conditioned things," Buddha means all things that arise due to causes and conditions, which is everything in *samsara* (realm of birth and death). The court and government of T'ang China, the fish plant at Hubbards, the high Sierra whitebarks, even ourselves – everything arises in dependence on certain causes and conditions, and everything exists only in dependence on conditions. But the sad fact about conditioned things is that they are impermanent, insubstantial, and thus unsatisfying.

From Buddha's point of view, we are locked in a dream. And just as a dreamer believes in the substantial reality of his dream objects, so we believe in the reality of our perceptual objects. In his commentary on the simile stanza, Nagarjuna writes, "A dreamer, by the force of his dream, sees a thing where there is nothing. Just so a man, by the force of the dreamy state which results from ignorance, believes in the existence of all sorts of things which do not exist, such as I and mine, male and female, etc." (qtd. in Conze, *Wisdom* 72). But when the dreamer awakes, that feeling of reality projected onto the dream dissolves. Similarly, when the Buddha awoke and freed himself from the superimposition of ontological stability onto experience, substance dissolved. Where we see substantial objects, Buddha sees objects that are open, fluid, and conditional – empty of substantial existence.

What I find particularly interesting about the famous *Diamond Sutra* stanza (or at least Conze's translation of it) is that its last line suggests provisionality: "So should one view what is conditioned." The line suggests that the previous nine similes serve as interpretive lenses, not as ontological propositions or certainties. Buddha is not suggesting that we replace our substance ontology with one of insubstantiality. Rather, he is suggesting that, to reach the goal of enlightenment (the cessation of suffering), one is better off rooting out the feeling that things possess substance. Buddha's suggestion makes sense because the things of our world don't really behave as if they had substance. Like a lightning flash, they disappear in an instant; like dew drops, they do not survive the afternoon sun; and like a bubble in the churning river, they are liable to vanish in an instant.

The evanescence of the phenomenal world is the central problem with which elegies grapple. For example, Tennyson's elegy for his friend Arthur Hallam *In Memoriam* struggles not only with Hallam's tragic death but also with Charles Lyell and other geologists' discovery that mountains and seas – Tu Fu's images of permanence and stability – also die:

> There rolls the deep where grew the tree.
> O earth, what changes hast thou seen!
> There where the long street roars, hath been
> The stillness of the central sea.
>
> The hills are shadows, and they flow

> From form to form, and nothing stands;
> They melt like mist, the solid lands,
> Like clouds they shape themselves and go. (CXXIII 1-8)

It is not just the play of light on mountains and waters that is accidental and transient; every form is constantly in flux from the point of view of geological time. Tennyson dissolves an image of solidity (hills), revealing the liquid nature of all phenomenal things. The imagery is not that far from the similes of *The Diamond Sutra*. All conditioned things, no matter how solid they appear, flow like water, melt like mist, and shift like cumulus clouds in a June sky. Tennyson here even seems to undermine the Platonic opposition of form and shadow. "The hills," he says, "are shadows," indicating the instability of phenomenal appearances. But more than this, there does not seem to be a stable form underlying the appearances: the hills "shape themselves and go." The phenomenal hills are not shaped by permanent forms; they do all the shaping "From form to form." This formal instability hints at a fundamental problem for knowledge. If form and appearance are constantly shifting and unreliable, that is, if "nothing stands," then knowledge or under*stand*ing about phenomenal things becomes unreliable.

The threat that impermanence poses to knowledge was not unknown to Plato himself, according to Rex Warner. In fact, Warner argues, the problem of impermanence was one of the major impetuses to the formulation of Plato's doctrine of the forms:

> It seems that Plato in his youth had been much impressed by the Heraclitean doctrine of "the flux," the view that in this world nothing is permanent or stable or at different times the same, and he asked himself how, if this were so, knowledge was possible. What could be known to be true, if all things were perpetually changing? But now, it seemed, he was able to say that, though perhaps our ordinary world was a fleeting Heraclitean "river," yet there were Forms that did not change but existed in timeless perfection. Would these, then, not be the objects of true knowledge? (74)

If conditioned things all flow like a river and dissolve like mist, then these things are not stable enough to serve as the subjects of propositional statements: predicates attached to conditioned things would sink as in quicksand. For predicative knowledge (knowledge about things) to have any meaning, the objects of knowledge must stay the same through

time. For Plato, even if things were in flux empirically, their fundamental nature remained constant. It is to this ontological object that predicates could be anchored.

Perhaps few people in today's post-Nietzschean world believe in "a realm of timeless, 'intelligible' things of which 'sensible' phenomena are merely the transitory instances" (Warner 73-74), but a rough Platonic duality still holds. Instead of dividing the world into eternal Forms and transient copies, we unconsciously divide the world into primary and secondary qualities: qualities that are essential to the identity of a thing and qualities that are accidental. Our gut instincts tell us that transformations in the empirical object make no difference to the ontological object. Rouen Cathedral is the same church in the morning and in the evening. And I am the same person from birth to death despite the fact that all my cells are constantly being replaced, that all my thoughts and feelings are constantly shifting. There is a still point within my turning self that does not move until death – and maybe not even then.

Tennyson, like Plato, saw impermanence as a threat to everything he held dear. Hallam and every other thing in this sublunary world would eventually disappear. Like Freud's poet-friend, Tennyson mourned transience. Against time's threat, though, Tennyson built a wall of faith in spiritual substance. Worldly things may come and go,

> But in my spirit will I dwell,
> And dream my dream, and hold it true;
> For though my lips may breathe adieu,
> I cannot think the thing farewell. (CXXIII 9-12)

Tennyson can find no evidence of the soul or eternity – they are beyond the reach of the senses – but he cannot imagine that his life will simply end. For him, the only way he can understand life is if something remains standing. He cannot dwell in an ever-shifting reality, so he dwells in a fantasy of spiritual stability. His resolution here is pragmatic: in the absence of truth, he feels free to create his own, to "dream my dream, and hold it true." He does what Richard Rorty suggests: he "simply cast[s] around for a vocabulary which lets [him] get what [he] want[s]" ("Textualism" 152). The resolution is also, ironically, Freudian. Tennyson substitutes a symbol of eternity for his lost love object in order to stabilize and reattach his detached libido.

For the Buddha, however, Tennyson's solution – dwelling in spirit – only reinforces the conditions for suffering. In *The Diamond Sutra*, Buddha is saying (like

Tennyson) that no evidence of a stable ontological or spiritual object can be found in conditioned things. But unlike Tennyson, Buddha is saying that life is better when we cease projecting this ontological stability onto our experience of the world. The nine similes are meant to subvert our desire for ontological security and for predicative knowledge. They are meant to dissolve any metaphysical ground on which to dwell. For the Buddha, one "who dwell[s] in Peace, does not dwell anywhere; that is why he is called 'a dweller in Peace'" (Conze, *Wisdom* 40). While Tennyson sees impermanence as the gateway to nihilism, Buddha sees impermanence as the gateway to spiritual peace. The difference lies in the interpretation of impermanence.

The sutra's images – clouds, lightning flashes, dreams, bubbles, dewdrops, magic illusions, lamp flames, and meteors (an alternate translation of the first simile) – all point to the impermanence of conditioned things. One might summarize the stanza by saying "things are impermanent." But the problem with this summary is that it does not necessarily convey the full deconstructive power of the impermanence teaching. A superficial reading of the statement "things are impermanent" tells us nothing new about the world. We all know that things come into existence, stay awhile, then fall out of existence. Death and dissolution aren't news. But Buddhist impermanence is not simply a restatement of the obvious. In describing things as impermanent, Buddha is trying to subvert our belief in "things." Things do not arise; things do not persist; things do not die. Our experience needs to be cleansed of "thing-ness" altogether.

The problem is that our general concept of "thing" carries with it the gut-feeling of substantial existence. To my mind, a "thing" is simply a vague notion equivalent to "ontological object." A thing has being, solidity, separate identity – even if that being is ephemeral. Each "thing" contains a seed or core of permanence. For example, a dewdrop may evaporate quickly in the morning sun, but we feel that it is a dewdrop, a thing, for the duration of its existence. It is that feeling of being, of sameness and duration – that feeling of permanence – that Buddha's impermanence teaching tries to dissolve completely.

Tennyson's problem with impermanence is really a clash between the desire for permanence and the experience of impermanence. Tennyson still perceives Hallam and the hills of England as things, as objects that arise, persist, then (sadly) pass away. This

notion of birth and death carries with it a notion of permanence hidden in the feeling that an object stays the same from birth until death. Tennyson does not experience Hallam's death as simply one more change in a series of transformations; rather, something that had persisted through time, something Tennyson had loved continuously, is now gone. While Hallam was alive, Tennyson perceived in him a core of permanence. But in death, that feeling of permanence, so closely linked to desire, vanished. The contradiction – permanence becoming impermanent – produces a feeling of meaninglessness. But rather than give up entirely on the notion of permanence, Tennyson clings to the idea of a soul. Thus, he does not really resolve the fundamental contradiction between his desire for permanence and his experience of impermanence. He tries to retreat from flux into a dream of eternity.

But what if Tennyson had given up on the idea of soul and permanence entirely? Would the result really be nihilism? From the Buddhist perspective, the answer is no. Nihilism depends on the desire for permanence; it depends on belief in substance. Impermanence is only a problem if you think permanence is a possibility. Dissolve the desire for permanence and things change radically. Dissolve the desire for permanence and the thing-ness of things dissolves entirely, leaving a situation where there are no things to be either permanent or impermanent.

Let me try to clarify. The propositional statement "things are impermanent" is, in the Buddhist analysis, contradictory. You can't have a "thing" devoid of permanence because one of the definitive marks of thing-ness is permanence or persistence. More than this, you can't use a thing devoid of permanence in a propositional statement. The problem here is that the copular verb (also the verb of being) is meant to bond or attach the quality of impermanence to the subject "thing." In Locke, however, we saw that in order to bind qualities together as a stable thing, we must use the supposition of substance, a substratum in which several qualities can inhere. The subject-copular verb pair serves as the grammatical equivalent of this ontological glue. A statement such as "I am" conveys a sense of solid and stable being, a sense of permanence. To that pair, any number of qualities can be attached: "I am tall" or "I am confused." But the statement "things are impermanent" comes unglued because, like an ant carrying Raid poison back to the nest, the copular verb carries to the subject the very quality that undermines the

subject's substantial existence. If a thing really is impermanent, never the same thing twice, then there is no point of attachment that the copular verb can cling to. "I am" falls apart. "Things are" falls apart. Our basic ontological understanding of the world falls apart. There is no-thing that can possess the quality of impermanence.

Ultimately, Tu Fu's mountains and rivers will provide no shelter – they will dissolve like Tennyson's elegiac landscape. Ultimately, there is no safe ground for our metaphysical desires to stand on. Ultimately, we are exiled from everything we know, everything we hold dear.

ANITYA # A cathedral is an emblem of faith in the unseen. It encloses a space where Christians can express and strengthen that faith. My meditations on Monet's paintings of Rouen Cathedral, though, have made me realize that corporeal substance is as much a matter of belief as spiritual substance. Monet's paintings reveal that you can't trust the Cathedral's visual aspect. And I'm not so sure about the tactile Cathedral either. I've touched the stones of the Church across from my condo at various times, and while it seems the same generally (it is solid), the specifics of temperature and texture are subject to change. I imagine Rouen is similar. Furthermore, if you consider touch (contact between two solid bodies) from the point of view of quantum physics, you never really touch anything at all – the solidity I feel in the stones of the church is the result of electromagnetic repulsion between electrons, not my hand hitting something "solid" and unchanging all the way through. In fact, the Cathedral and my hand are mostly empty space: to radio waves and neutrinos, which pass through the walls, the cathedral is hardly there at all. And the subatomic particles that are "in" the Cathedral aren't really the solid balls that classical physics proposed; they defy simple description, sometimes behaving as "particle" and sometimes as "wave."

In fact, interpretations of quantum theory point to the possibility that all we have access to are descriptions, not things. Although it is outside the scope even of this study to debate the intricate details of subatomic theory, I want to quote some quantum interpretations of reality in order to suggest that science too (particle physics, at least) has

discovered the inadequacy of our commonsense ontological commitments. First from the text used in my first-year non-specialist physics course:

> One of the principal ideas of classical physics was that underlying the subjective appearances of familiar things there is a real objective world which is independent of how we observe it, and that we can get to know about the properties of that real world through scientific observation. We now realize that science tells us, not about the intrinsic nature of things in that real, objective, world but it tells us about their extrinsic 'relations' to other things. In other words, modern physics does not tell us what atoms, electrons and photons are *really like in themselves*; it is content to tell us how they *behave* when we observe them. Apparently we must learn to think of a photon or an electron more as a particular form of behaviour than as a thing. (Brown 78)

This interpretation of the particle-wave duality suggests that an "independent" reality "underlying" "appearances" is not available to science: all we get are surfaces and relations. The passage does not go so far as to suggest that things lack an "intrinsic nature" altogether or that there is no "real, objective, world," but it does imply that if such a world does exist, science has no way of accessing it in an unmediated way.

John Gribbin is much more adventurous in his interpretation of quantum reality. In describing Bohr's "Copenhagen interpretation" of quantum physics, Gribbin emphasizes that, in an experiment, physicists cannot consider observer and observed as independent systems; the two are interconnected. As well, Gribbin emphasizes the strict limits of our knowledge about the physical world:

> First, we have to accept that the very act of observing a thing changes it, and that we, the observers, are in a very real sense part of the experiment – there is no clockwork that ticks away regardless of whether we look at it or not. Secondly, all we know about are the results of experiments. We can look at an atom and see an electron in energy state A, then look again and see an electron in energy state B. We guess that the electron jumped from A to B, perhaps because we looked at it. In fact, we cannot even say for sure that this is the same electron, and we cannot make any statement about what it was doing when we were not looking at it. (*Search* 160-61)

Gribbin goes in for the sensational interpretation of quantum reality here, but that does not mean his interpretation isn't reasonable. If experiments reveal no evidence of an ontologically stable, independent reality – no clockwork world – then it is as reasonable to suppose that reality is entirely contingent as it is to suppose that it has unseen substance. If we have no way of concluding for certain that two separate observations of an electron are actually of the same electron, then it is as reasonable to assume that "sameness" is a false interpretation of the data as it is to suppose that it is true.

Gribbin advances the interpretation that experiments may in fact create reality rather than discover or observe it. Citing an analogy from Sir Arthur Eddington's *The Philosophy of Physical Science*, Gribbin suggests that experiments may have "discovered" the atomic nucleus in the same way a sculptor "discovers" a human form "hidden" in a block of marble: "All we see are the results of experiments, which we interpret in terms of the nucleus. [...] Is it possible that the nucleus, the positron and the neutrino did *not* exist until experimenters discovered the right sort of chisel with which to reveal their form?" (*Search* 161-62). Scientists did not stumble onto the neutrino; rather, they went looking for it after their equations suggested that something behaving like a neutrino should exist. Eventually, experiments created the conditions for neutrinos to be "observed."

Gribbin's question about experiments creating subatomic particles is, of course, unanswerable because there is no safe, objective location from which physicists can observe the physical world. It might be better, then, to consider terms like "neutrino" and "atomic nucleus" as a functional rather than ontological terms. The hypothesis of atomic nuclei does gets results, but it may not describe an independent reality.

At the subatomic level, Rouen Cathedral dissolves (possibly) into an interconnected web of energy and force, where particles blink in and out of existence, and where solidity is conditional – merely what happens when mysterious nodes of force are proximate. From this quantum perspective, then, we cannot know if Rouen Cathedral is the same from moment to moment or from canvas to canvas.

In addition, although the Cathedral looks stationary, it is constantly moving through space and time. From a point of view beyond the planet, the Cathedral spins with the earth around earth's axis; it moves with the earth in orbit around the Sun; and it

moves with the Galaxy as the Milky Way rushes away from the original locus of the Big Bang. The Cathedral's immobility is not absolute; it is relative to an observer's frame of reference. Additionally, time does not stop at the Cathedral. In fact, time runs a tiny bit slower at the top of the Cathedral than it does at the bottom where there is a minutely stronger gravitational pull. The temporal aspect of any visual field is a composite of times as well as distances: we don't see everything in the field at exactly the same point in time. Everything about the Cathedral is in flux, everything except our notion of the Cathedral. We experience the Cathedral as a static object that maintains its identity like a rock in a stream as all the changes in appearance through time and space rush by.

Our notion of identity, of the object's stability, is contestable. Even Locke observes that "substance" is simply a convenient supposition for understanding our world:

> The *Idea* then we have, to which we give the general name Substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those Qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist, *sine re subtante*, without something to support them, we call that Support *Substantia*; which, according to the true import of the Word, is in plain *English*, *standing under*, or *upholding*. (2.23.2)

The ground under our feet is hypothesis. As Locke points out, we simply "imagine" that qualities inhere in a substantial object. But it is quite reasonable to suppose that this notion of substance is something we superimpose on our experience of the world, not something that is, in fact, inherent in the world. It may be that our impression of ontological stability is simply a useful habitual fiction that we insert unconsciously into our perception of form. But the weird thing about our notion of substance is that it transcends space and time. In every object of perception, we insert a core of eternity. Our world of substantial objects is a world of metaphysical belief.

Take, for example, a lighter flame. We somehow feel that it is the same flame when, moment by moment, its entire molecular content changes. Gas moves up through the nozzle, burns, and the products of the combustion are dispersed: "The flame itself looks the same all the time it is burning, but actually all the atoms and molecules that are in the flame are constantly being replaced as they stream through it" (Gribbin, *Stardust* 160). It is this notion of "sameness" that we add to the flux of experience. It is reasonable

to think, then, that Rouen Cathedral "burns" the same way. Indeed, in Monet's canvasses, the solid Cathedral walls do seem to dissolve into windy fire.

#

When it comes down to it, according to Locke, substance is a matter of faith in the unseen. It is belief, desire-driven, that holds together our commonsense perception of a world of stable, independent objects and selves. The whole thing is grounded in supposition – a hunch. For Locke, however, this lack of knowledge about the "true" nature of things is not a crisis. It is reasonable to assume that the world is composed of individual objects and selves, and the assumption has solid practical results. We seem to function pretty well with a substance-ontology superimposed on our experience. But the point here is that there is a choice:

> 'Tis plain then, that the *Idea* of corporeal *Substance* in Matter is as remote from our Conceptions, and Apprehensions, as that of Spiritual *Substance*, or *Spirit*; and therefore from our not having any notion of the *Substance* of Spirit, we can no more conclude its non-Existence, than we can, for the same reason, deny the Existence of Body: It being as rational to affirm, there is no Body, because we have no clear and distinct *Idea* of the *Substance* of Matter; as to say, there is no Spirit, because we have no clear and distinct *Idea* of the *Substance* of a Spirit. (2.23.5)

Locke is here reminding us of the strict limits of our knowledge. It is no more reasonable to assume the existence of substantial objects (hard particulars) than it is to assume the existence of a spiritual substance that holds together our thoughts, feelings, and so forth. In fact, you might as well throw in an immortal soul. Just because you can't see it, doesn't mean it doesn't actually exist.

But what if you dissolve these notions of substance and spirit? What if you cut the fat and assume that they don't exist? This is how I read Monet's aesthetic experiments. His Cathedrals demonstrate that all we have access to in experience is an unstable sensory field. Substantial objects, substantial selves, are fictions we impose on our experience; they are not ontological givens. Substance ontology is only one kind of interpretation of the data, and it may not be the best one.

Fig. 8. Rouen Cathedral, *Nota Quadrata*

If you look at a picture of the west façade of Rouen Cathedral (fig. 8), you'll notice that a cross stands on top of the central pinnacle. Most of Monet's canvasses end where that cross begins. Monet chose to omit the most potent symbol of transcendence and immortality in our culture. The symbol that promises eternal life beyond the passion of this vale of tears, the symbol that reassures us that there is something permanent behind this veil of phenomena – there was no room for it on Monet's canvasses. Monet simply focused on the colours present, and the little kernels of eternity dissolved. The world lost its footing.

DUHKHA # The elegists in Sacks' study do seem to achieve success in mourning according to Freud's model; however, in "On Transience," Freud himself wants nothing to do with transcendent consolations and hopes for eternal life, which he calls "a product of our wishes too unmistakable to lay claim to reality" (305). Instead, Freud celebrates

object transience (although, in my view, he ignores the fact that identity and object persistence is a kind of transcendent or metaphysical interpretation of phenomena). For him, mortality does not negate value and libidinal enjoyment: "On the contrary, an increase! Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment" (305). Here Freud values "the beauty of Nature" as a kind of commodity: the combination of demand and scarcity (in this case temporal) increases value – beauty is pleasurable because of its evanescence, not in spite of it. In fact, the impermanence of human beauty, for example, "only lends [that beauty] a fresh charm" (306). Freud cherishes a beautiful face more because he knows its beauty will fade forever.

What Freud tries to do in "On Transience" is separate notions of worth from a need for "absolute duration" (306), and he does this in order to find a middle ground between the two "impulses in the mind" that result from the experience or contemplation of transience: "demand for immortality" and "aching despondency" (305). Both reactions seem to depend on the notion that worth requires permanence. In the former impulse, one maintains a sense of worth through a wish, and in the latter, one loses the sense of worth altogether. So Freud turns the notion of value on its head, arguing (somewhat unconvincingly, I think) that worth can increase with transience. And if that doesn't sway us, Freud further argues that worth is relative to the individual: "since the value of all this beauty and perfection is determined only by its significance for our own emotional lives, it has no need to survive us and is therefore independent of absolute duration" (306). Who cares if one day our greatest cultural and artistic works will "crumble to dust" (306)? Who cares if one day millions of years from now all animate life will disappear from the earth? Freud doesn't. Relative to his lifespan, many objects of beauty are as good as permanent. So why the fuss? Freud's libido in a world of objects is like a kid in a candy store.

To be fair, though, Freud does admit that a lot is at stake in the question of worth and transience, especially in the devastating wake of the First World War, where the losses – both in terms of lives and faith in civilization – were enormous. However, he still claims that the despondency many feel because of the War's destruction must resolve itself through the work of mourning. For Freud, just because what we took to be

permanent has turned out to be perishable, it does not mean that Western civilization has lost its worth. We need to work patiently through the loss in order to find new objects of attachment: "When [mourning] has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free [...] to replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious. [...] When once the mourning is over, it will be found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility" (307). Freud does not need vain hopes of eternity to resolve his mourning. In fact, Freud's hope is that mourning will take care of itself – new objects of desire will inevitably appear given time, and libido will emerge from hiding to find joy in the world once more.

But many elegists of the modern era don't share Freud's optimism in substitutive mourning, nor do they find solace in traditional elegiac consolations. According to Jahan Ramazani in his 1994 study of the modern elegy, "the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss" (xi). For example, Ramazani argues that in Wilfred Owen's war elegies, "Life reverts neither to the mystic One of Shelley nor to the benevolent deity of Milton and Tennyson but to the inert earth" (Ramazani 75). Images of resurrection and immortality that once comforted, that once eased the violent feelings of guilt and anger that accompany loss, become trite and impotent in the face of modern grief. Elegists like Owen, Thomas Hardy, Wallace Stevens, Langston Hughes, W.H. Auden, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath, "refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself" (4); in fact, they "[compel] us to reconsider the assumption that the basic economy of elegy is compensation for loss" (xii). Rather than serving as "facile poetic therapy" (7), the modern elegy becomes a kind of "art of losing" – "not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it" (4). The modern elegist mourns with continuously open wounds.

Now, the socio-historical explanations for this shift in the elegy are complex, and they are not the focus of my discussion here. Rather, what I'm interested in is Ramazani's discussion of how changing metaphysical beliefs accompany this shift he notices in the psychology of modern elegies; that is, I want to look at what happens to elegies when

elegists lose faith in immortality and spiritual substance after the nineteenth century. What I find most interesting is not just what changes but also what stays the same.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the religious doubt that Tennyson overcomes in *In Memoriam* asserts itself over and above metaphysical consolations in the elegies of Thomas Hardy. For Ramazani, Hardy is a transitional elegist who drags the elegy through the mud of modern skepticism and "sets in motion the familiar dynamics of the genre while aborting its traditional consolatory promise" (37). For example, in "God's Funeral" (1912), Hardy depicts a wandering funeral procession carrying God's phantasmal corpse aimlessly across a darkening desolate plain. The very figure that guaranteed fulfillment of the elegy's consolatory promise is lost – the promise of eternal life, of a rejuvenation of desire, is broken. Here, Hardy mourns his loss of faith in myths of transcendence and apotheosis – a loss shared by a "slowly-stepping train / [...] growing in bulk and numbers as they went" (326-27). Where elegies had once buried gods in order to ensure rebirth, Hardy's funeral procession simply carries God with no mention or hope of resurrection. In the new century, God has "quavered, sank; and now has ceased to be" (327). Even the sun – standard elegiac symbol of rebirth – has set, unable to "lift the general night" (328).

For Hardy, God is dead simply because people no longer believe – the metaphysical winds have changed direction. Modern skepticism has "rediscovered" that the Creator is a creation of human imagination, a "man-projected Figure" (327) wishfully superimposed on the universe:

> And, tricked by our own early dream
> And need of solace, we grew self-deceived,
> Our making soon our maker did we deem,
> And what we had imagined we believed. (327)

God was a reflection of our desire, a useful fiction for redirecting our energies out into a dark universe – useful for giving our actions some meaning within the context of a promised permanence. But like Narcissus, we made an ontological error in ascribing independent Being and substance to a reflection, and now that God's contingency is revealed, the reflection has vanished – one of the conditions for God's existence (belief) is lost. What Hardy calls "rude reality" (327) shatters the desired promise of eternal life. And in the darkness, without the "sweet" feeling of "blest assurance" (328) – without the

belief that the world somehow responds to our desires – desire can find no stable external point of attachment. Without "some fixed star to stimulate their pace / Towards the goal of their enterprise" (328) the despondent funeral procession wanders lost through life, unable to direct their actions and desires with the illusion of purpose.

For Ramazani, "God's Funeral" and Hardy's other elegies represent a shift in the psychology of the elegy away from the compensatory mourning of Sacks' traditional elegists towards the "melancholic mourning" of the moderns – "mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent" (Ramazani 4). The loss of faith in spiritual and symbolic consolations seems to correspond with a descent into the "aching despondency" that Freud says can result from the experience of transience and loss. Modern elegists refuse to trope or turn away from the dead, refuse to efface the dead with substitutional sleight-of-hand – the result, in Freud's terminology, is melancholia.

ANATMAN # Most hikers in the Presidential Range of the White Mountains don't get to experience what the mountains feel like at night. For the few who stay overnight in tent or cabin, the hushed alpine terrain offers a magnified sense of scale and mystery. The peaks tower silently – massive gathering night-black waves – their outlines uncertain against the starry horizon. Not much lives at the boundary between tree and bare rock, and the region's sparse human population is all collected in the valleys, clustered around dots of light scattered here and there. It's difficult to feel completely comfortable here – the cold summer breeze and the rough granite boulders serve as constant reminders that life depends on a certain balance of the elements. Just a few minutes hike up the side of Adams from Grey Knob cabin, only lichen grows.

Inside the cabin, it's easier to keep the conditions for life in balance: a few logs in the wood stove keep the chill out, a few old thin mattresses on the floor make sleep easier, and the roof keeps the night sky infinity from engulfing the tightly bound sense of self. Out of the breeze, it's possible to light a candle and eat some dinner. Life, like fire, needs fuel to burn, and it needs the right conditions to stay lit. Many have died in these mountains from exposure, even in summer. At night, the alpine terrain is inhospitable –

the conditions unfavourable for life. The looming peaks and the cold night sky are reminders that most of the universe is inhospitable too.

It's easy to interpret the harsh mountain landscape as hostile. And from that thought it's easy to stare up at the night sky and see the whole universe as hostile. To use a trite but telling metaphor, the tiny flame of our contingent life is easily snuffed out by the inexorably encroaching darkness. Basic survival seems to necessitate an "us versus them" or "me versus the universe" attitude. To protect life, we enclose spaces, hunker down, and try to control the conditions for existence. In short, we create a home. At home, where the hearth fire stays lit, it's easy to feel comfortable in the world. But up in the mountains, the thin cabin walls make things uneasy. The cold night easily creeps in.

It seems to me that the desire to survive leads by analogy to a metaphysics of enclosure. Perhaps because the conditions of the world – like the alpine climate – are often unfavourable to life, we tend to think of our life as something separate from and a bit alien to the physical world. Wherever it comes from, we all develop a sense of self as something enclosed, as something essentially separate from the world: this body, these thoughts and memories, these feelings are all part of "me" – everything else is "not-me." The home or dwelling is an extension of the self enclosure. It too creates boundaries, and it serves to make the self comfortable in a world that does not always respond to its desire for survival.

But the self's desire for survival extends beyond the physical needs of warmth and fuel; the self desires metaphysical survival as well. I use the word "metaphysical" here because the self concept seems to transcend the physical even though it depends on the physical for survival. The body changes over time, but the self concept remains constant: "Most people still have a deep faith in solid substances and believe that their feelings, ideas, and even their own bodies belong to, or inhere in, some mysterious but seemingly irrefutable substance called a self" (Cook 4). Feelings, ideas, the body itself are constantly in flux, but they all get enclosed in and possessed by a stable notion of self.

Here again is *atman*, whose desire for metaphysical comfort and survival is the source of all sorts of suffering. The first problem with *atman* is that its desire for survival is doomed by the facts of old age, disease, and death. The body does not survive forever, so if the self's existence depends on the physical body, then the *atman* will not survive.

This basic fact of mortality is what drove Buddha from his father's comfortable palace into the wilderness. For Buddha, the clash between the desire to survive and the observed fact of physical death created so much anxiety that – as a drowning man needs air – he needed to seek an end to the suffering that death-anxiety caused. Home no longer provided metaphysical comfort. His path began in dissatisfaction (Asvaghosa IV 97-98).

Eventually, Buddha located the source of anxiety and suffering in the self concept and its desire for metaphysical survival. Harvey Aronson imagines that Buddha's guiding question in the wilderness was "What is the fuel of human suffering? His response was that attachment to a misguided belief in an enduring self fuels it" (66). The self's desire for survival clashes with the fact that everything is impermanent. What is odd, though, is that although we feel that the self persists from moment to moment, there is nothing in our experience that actually does persist. The self cannot be the same as the body because the body changes. The self cannot be feelings and emotions because those constantly change. The self cannot be memories because those are liable to change and disappearance. And the self cannot be thoughts or the contents of consciousness because those too change. All the bits that the self is supposed to gather together, all the bits that feel like "I" and "mine" arise and pass away (Asvaghosa XVI 75). Buddha saw that if the parts of the self do not endure, then an enduring self cannot be identical with its parts or it too would not endure. An enduring self, then, must be separate from its impermanent parts. But if the self is not the body, not feelings, not consciousness, then it is beyond our ability to experience it and unrelated to those things that we feel are, in fact, our self. For Buddha, "'self' is merely a concept (*pannatti*) with no actual correlative, no ultimate existence" (Aronson 74). Self is a fervently held belief.

Meditating under a giant ficus tree far from home in the foothills of the Himalayas, Buddha realized that the fires of suffering burn with only one fuel – *atman*. Remove the fuel, and the fire vanishes in the darkness: "The best of men saw no self anywhere from the summit of existence downwards and came to tranquility, like a fire whose fuel is burnt out" (Asvaghosa XIV 84). Buddha found rest and salvation not in redemptive resurrection but in metaphysical homelessness.

High in the mountains at night, the physical body needs its enclosure, needs its fuel to keep the organism alive. But the cold and the rocks are not enemies of the self. As

Snyder reminds us, nature cannot be wholly hostile to human life: we are here because of nature. We are not alien to this world: "I have a friend who feels sometimes that the world is hostile to human life – he says it chills us and kills us. But how could we *be* were it not for this planet that provided our very shape?" ("The Place" 28-29). Nature is harsh; it kills. But our life is not foreign to these rocky uplifted peaks. Even inside the cabin there are no essential divisions between man and mountain. In the high country of the mind, there are no walls anywhere.

#

But the thought really is terrifying: *anatman*. David Loy expresses the deep fear that contemplating Buddhist ideas can uncover: "If our sense of self as something autonomous and self-grounded is a fiction, if the ego is in fact mentally constructed and socially internalized, then perhaps our primal repression is not sexual wishes (as Freud thought) nor fear of death (as many existential psychologists think) but the quite valid suspicion that '*I' am not real*" (*Lack* xi). Under the scrutinizing gaze of Buddhist meditation and analysis, the substantial self vanishes. Buddhism ruins the magic show illusion of substance, sees through the abracadabra of permanence that the show's audience desires. And with the self's disappearance, things return to the way they were before the show began. The lights go up, the seats are empty.

When Buddha turns on the lights, the Great Ontological Deception packs up its mirrors and its boxes for sawing people in half and scurries to the next river town. Things you could have sworn were real, things that seemed distinct and persistent, stable even, now appear devoid of substance. The very stuff of reality turns out to be the stuff of illusion: "all aspects of everyday experience, both subjective and objective, are emptied of any ontological content, whether defined as 'self' (*atman*), or as 'intrinsic being' or 'essence' (*svabhava*)" (Huntington 17-18). Turns out that none of it is real the way we thought – hoped – it was. Now things are out of control, uncertain. The crowd wants its money back.

But when the ontological illusion folds, nothing really changes. The world of sensory and mental experience does not disappear; it just empties of that deep-seeded feeling of substance. Things open on the level of identity, bursting through concepts of

"sameness" and "separateness" like a swollen river through a dam. Everything gets soaked.

Keep this in mind: the empirical world does not disappear through Buddhist analysis. To Buddhists, there is nothing wrong with the world of sensory and mental experience. The problem is with our interpretation of it. Buddhist meditation, then, is meant to reveal that some of what we assume is simply part of experience is really interpretation. Our feeling that we persist as singular beings and our feeling that the things of the world exist that way too is purely interpretation – dangerous interpretation. The notions of *atman* and *svabhava* (independent, persistent, inherent existence) are at the heart of *avidya* (ignorance about reality) and *tanha* (desire, grasping), which are the origins of suffering: "One's grief arises from positing an enduring self where no self endures, from seeking to protect it from change, when one's very law is change" (Macy qtd. in Dockett and North-Schulte 227). And what protects the self illusion is fear, fear of the "absence of a persisting personality or individuality" (Guenther, *Philosophy* 69-70). But for Buddhists, beyond that fear is salvation: there is nothing to fear because there is no self that is born, grows old, and dies. Death has no sting; it dies. Here is victory over death without resurrection.

> But again, Blessed One, a conception of a self will not occur to [Bodhisattvas], nor a conception of a living being, nor a conception of a personal soul, nor a conception of a person. And why is that? Because the Buddhas, the Blessed Ones, have walked away from all conceptions. (*Diamond Sutra*, Schopen 124)

Can I walk away from all conceptions? What would be left to study?

#

So what if it turns out that there is no "continuous separate individual identical with himself at different times" (Conze, *Wisdom* 27)? Well, everything changes. Read as a reasonable ontological statement, Jonathan Clements' off-hand remark in his short introduction to a volume of haiku hints at the problem to literary studies: "On a second reading, the poems will not be the same poems – and you will not be the same reader" (9).

Add to this that the author is never the same and that the universe is never the same, and you've removed all four cornerstones of Abrams' critical "framework," which he argues underlies the four general areas of art theory (6). Without these four coordinates, the whole critical edifice crumbles to the ground. When the lights go up, we'll see that we've been studying illusions this whole time.

Buddhism leads the literary critic into some tricky territory. The problem is that all the objects of literary study seem to require a basic substance ontology. Our everyday critical activities proceed on an unexamined faith in "sameness" and "separateness" – on faith in self (author and reader) and objects (text and world), a faith in knower and known.

For example, we publish numerous studies about authors. The most recent one I read for this dissertation was Patrick Murphy's 2000 study of Gary Snyder, *A Place for Wayfaring: The Poetry and Prose of Gary Snyder*. In it, he takes a chronological approach to Snyder's work, reading Snyder texts to trace "Snyder's evolving sensibilities and poetics" (63). There are even some pages devoted to Snyder's biography, which I assume are meant to give extra context for textual interpretation. The guiding metaphor here for studying a poet's development is what William Scott McLean refers to in the introduction to his collection of Snyder interviews as "drawing a line" (xi). The critic can situate each work along that line and thus limit the range of possible readings through historical and biographical contextualization, through contextualization in the author's work as a whole. The individual text, then, becomes part of a greater whole, and its meaning must conform to its place within that larger structure. Following this kind of "line" logic, the critic can contextualize Snyder as a whole within the critical tradition of "American poetry." In this context, Snyder finds his place in a genealogy of poets that originates with Thoreau (McLean xi). Once a critic has embedded Snyder in this familiar tradition, the tradition itself limits the kinds of questions he or she asks of the texts. The answers to those questions may be new, but the questions themselves do not change; they are comfortable and familiar. Murphy and MacLean do what many critics do: they use an author to bind a finite number of texts together for study and to limit the range of texts needed and allowed for critical interpretation. They form a circle out of the constellation of pixels and study the line it traces across the screen.

A study of an author and his or her works is comfortable and manageable. For one, it takes away the impression that the choice of texts to study is merely arbitrary. Murphy didn't just randomly choose poems from different corners of the night sky to study; no, the authority for his choices came from the author himself. Only those poems published under Snyder's name find room in the study as objects of knowledge. This way, Murphy can compare and contrast texts and his readers will accept the propositions generated from those observations as meaningful and valuable, as knowledge about the author and his works.

The alternative would be meaningless chaos, right? A study that randomly compared and contrasted poems without authorial, thematic, formal, temporal, cultural, generic, or linguistic similarities would not make it past an academic committee or a publisher's desk. Something substantial must bind the choice of texts together; that is, all the texts must inhere in some concept. In Murphy's case, all the thematically, formally, temporally, and generically different texts of his study find a home in the concept "Gary Snyder." All the texts chosen, then, can be used to generate knowledge about Gary Snyder, and any interpretations of the poems themselves find significance in relation to Snyder. In effect, Snyder stands as the foundation of Murphy's study and guarantees significance; Snyder is the substance of the study.

Placing an author at the centre of a study also makes it easier to limit the number of secondary texts needed for critical interpretation. Again, the point is to dodge the specter of arbitrariness, which is the bane of institutionalized academic knowledge. The rules of text selection seem to form of themselves when an author stands at the centre of a study. For example, in Snyder's case, biographical texts and historical texts depicting Snyder's lifetime and cultural context (1930-present) are fair game. So are snippets from Snyder's journals, which Sherman Paul argues "are significant landmarks in Snyder's development and valuable glosses on the poetry that accompanies it" ("Lookout" 67). The texts that Snyder alludes to in his poems are in as well. But texts that bear no direct relation to Snyder are out. Thankfully, we do not need to read Joyce's shopping list in order to win the game, which for Murphy is to "capture the full range of meaning playing through a poem" (*Wayfaring* 14). Some texts are significant in discovering that meaning and some are insignificant. The concept of Snyder allows us to split the universe of texts

in two. And it allows us to conceive of a poem's meaning as something separate from the reader's context.

What I find interesting about Murphy's statement, though, is how it asserts faith in bounded meaning while employing some post-structuralist language. Murphy acknowledges that the contexts for interpreting Snyder's work are broad, but he implies that they are finite. One needs, he says, to research Snyder's allusions and situate the poems in their original published contexts in order to "capture the full range of meaning playing through a poem" (14). But Murphy here uses the verb "capture" and the participle "playing" in the same sentence. For him, unlike for post-structuralists, "playing" has its limits – while meaning interpretation is playful, the underlying game is capture the flag. Murphy needs to limit meaning in Snyder's texts – which is decidedly un-playful – and he does it by making Snyder the centre and substance of his study.

Literary criticism that focuses on an author and his or her works operates on an unexamined faith in substance. For example, in Anthony Hunt's essay on Snyder's "Bubbs Creek Haircut," a poem from early published sections of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, Hunt worries about the inaccessibility of Snyder's many unglossed foreign allusions. For Hunt, one cannot understand the text without seeking help from the full range of Snyder texts. Hunt's discomfort with the text as a "self-informing" whole seems legitimate. No text really exists in isolation – the interpretive experience always depends on the knowledge a reader brings to the reading. The text itself does not invent the language. So Hunt looks beyond the individual text: "In published works such as *Earth House Hold*, *Turtle Island*, *The Old Ways*, interviews, letters, his senior thesis from Reed College, and even in his shorter lyric poems, the poet provides much of the correlative material needed to understand *Mountains and Rivers*" (164). Hunt here uses "understand" as a transitive verb – it is something a reader does to a text. And what he is trying to achieve is a way of limiting the text's possible meanings, a way of calming or settling or stabilizing his experience of it. He wants to feel like he "gets" it, to find a set of signifiers that will give closure to the interpretive process.

To do that, he looks to the idea of an author in order to limit the field of play. The only way Snyder's undergraduate thesis (1951) could have special interpretive power over a poem published a decade and a half later is if one posits the existence of a unified,

singular consciousness that persists through time. So Hunt arranges a set of texts and draws a line through them. The justification for the line is the concept "Snyder," and all the chosen texts seem to inhere in that concept. Hunt thus grounds his selection of interpretive texts in a belief in substance or *atman*. That belief in substance allows him to substantiate his reading of the poem. For Hunt, the process of understanding a poem is the process of giving the poem substance, giving it the feel of solidity, and stopping it from dissolving into a myriad of possible meanings the way that Monet dissolved Rouen Cathedral into a never-ending series of appearances. Comfortably situated in a critical tradition, the poem dodges the nightmare of meaning where poem and reader are never the same twice.

What I find particularly ironic about studies of "Snyder," though, is that certain statements attributed to Snyder destabilize the authorial concept. For example, Snyder's reply to one of Sherman Paul's essays takes a stab at criticism that limits an author's identity. Referring to the identification of Snyder with the character Japhy Ryder from Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, Snyder playfully insists, "I'm not Han Shan, or Japhy Ryder or particularly even Gary Snyder" (Paul, *Search* 298). And in Snyder's 1995 prose work *A Place in Space*, he articulates a Buddhist-flavoured view of self:

> we are all composite beings, not only physically, but intellectually, whose sole individual identifying feature is a particular form or structure changing constantly in time. There is no "self" to be found in that, and yet oddly enough, there is. [...] The Avatamsaka ("Flower Wreath") jeweled-net-interpenetration-ecological-systems-emptiness-consciousness tells us no self-realization without the Whole Self, and the whole self is the whole thing. (189)

Here Snyder tries to avoid a nihilistic reading of *anatman* ("there is no 'self'") by invoking the idea of interdependence (*pratityasamutpada*): self does not exist as a singular, independent, unified consciousness; rather, self is an open system, dependent on and connected to everything. According to Gary Snyder, the "real" Gary Snyder is "the whole thing." The limited authorial concept that critics use to fence off the field of study is at odds with this claim. It is a troubling contradiction: Gary Snyder argues that there is no distinct, persistent Gary Snyder. But critics don't seem to care – they need their object of study. When Murphy traces "Snyder's evolving sensibilities and poetics" (*Wayfaring*

63), his notion of evolution does acknowledge that Snyder changes intellectually over time, but the notion of authorial evolution hangs on the assumption that there is an author or "self," discoverable through texts, that serves as the locus of change, that underlies and unifies all that change. One Snyder is manageable; a proliferation of Snyders is chaos.

The problems with the author concept are, of course, not new. Foucault's famous essay "What is an author?" lamented in the 60s that although a few writers (Foucault names Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka) and theorists had years ago declared the author dead, nobody really changed his or her critical practices. The same is true today. We still operate with perfect faith in "the solid and fundamental unit of the author and the work" (978). Studies like Murphy's and Hunt's are not exceptions. Much of the knowledge we generate in English departments hangs on the stable existence of author and text.

Like Foucault, I think the underlying problem is fear – fear of what he calls "the proliferation of meaning" (988). The notion of author limits the scope of textual interpretation, makes it manageable by suggesting a line between relevant and irrelevant contexts for reading. As Foucault writes, "The author allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations [...] he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction" (987-88). In the practice of literary criticism, the "anything goes" attitude is perilous. The author is a way of ensuring that we read the text responsibly.

Without the author, a text would lose its integrity; the meaning of a text hangs together because we feel there is an author, a singular consciousness lurking behind the words, marking the start and finish. Without an author, what is to stop me from randomly fusing bits of texts together, from cutting up works any way I fancy? Without an author, where do we draw the line between texts? How could we construct Foucault's system of thought if we had no way of deciding which texts belong to Foucault and which don't? If texts were all anonymous, then every word could have been written by the same consciousness or each word could have been written by a different consciousness. What do you do with texts if there is no author by which to organize and interpret them? The proliferation of meaning feels an awful lot like the loss of meaning and of knowledge.

While literary critics may (and do) ignore the problems Foucault raises about the author-function, the Buddhist reader cannot so easily dismiss Foucault's observations. Foucault's author-function sounds suspiciously like a species of *atman* or *svabhava*. He calls the author a "construct" and a "projection" (983) that "permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others" (981). Similarly, in Buddhist terms, *atman* is a conceptual construct that we superimpose on experience that allows us on the one hand to group together a number of separate parts in space as one individually existing thing and on the other hand to group a number of analogous moments together as a singular object persisting through time. Just as *atman* allows one to feel that this body is "mine," that these thoughts, feelings, and memories belong to "me," the author is a concept that allows us to attribute possession to a certain number of texts.

From a Buddhist perspective, then, the construction of the author-function carries the same dangers as belief in *atman*. Reading texts as expressions of an evolving but unified consciousness simply reinforces *avidya* (ignorance). And the propositional knowledge generated about an author through textual study has no ground in reality; it all floats on unstable concepts. Studies of authors and works could be understood as the operation of *tanha* (desire) on texts. What Foucault sees as our desire to stabilize textual contradiction and prevent the proliferation of meaning is part and parcel of our desire for substance, our desire for an entity that transcends impermanence and death. Like Buddha's assault on *atman*, Foucault's assault on the author-function touches that deep-seated fear that Loy talked about – the fear that "I" may not exist at all. The proliferation of meaning is as terrifying as the proliferation of identity.

READING # A cold, clear, mid-September morning. A few high cirrus clouds appear fuzzy like patches of unfocused sky in an otherwise sharpening blue radiance. The sun's image, trailing eight minutes behind its distant origin, has lost some of its summer vigour – each day it mounts lower and lower in the southern sky with long-bent fatiguing rays. The peaks of high hillside fir and spruce glow in the young light that ignites a

chemical reaction to transform visual splendor into nourishment. Crows hop through slow-growing grasses, bending their eyes this way and that, feathers now shimmering like crinkled satin, now shrouded in arching shadow. Their tail feathers draw lines in the dew while the last of the wild rose sweetness hangs in the air.

With my back to the rising sun, I hold a book – Snyder's selected poems – at an angle to catch the light streaming around my shadow. My shoes are wet like the crows' feet from the heavy globes of late-summer early-autumn dew that cover this Nova Scotia hillside. Yesterday's warmth escaped up the chimney of clear night skies, so I wear an extra layer until the sun's fusion can warm this patch of ground again.

Holding the book open, my exposed hands pain slightly as the cool surrounding air slows their molecules beyond comfort. The book's page, though, glows warmly in the fire of orange light that fills the spaces inside and between letters and shimmers on the ink like crow feathers. I can trace the tripping rhythms of the words as they hop around, their meanings and connotations looking this way and that.

The details of morning proliferate; they constantly change with the turning earth. You might wonder why, then, I would bother writing about morning ephemera. The reason is that I'm not entirely convinced these "useless" details should be ignored in my reading of Snyder's text. Sure, I've overwritten the scene, but is it not an essential part of my reading? Is it not the text's true context? The empirical text, the particular text I experience in space and time, depends for its existence on, well, everything. For a start, without the orange glow of the rising sun, I could not read the text at all. And the cold and the world around me influence the state of my emotions and the content of my consciousness at the time of reading. The poem as a physical object exists in relation to the entire physical scene, and the poem as a series of interpretable symbols exists in relation to my consciousness, my ability to link symbols with meaningful connotations. All the bits and pieces present in the reading performance are interdependent.

A red car moves slowly along Shore Club Road. The sun momentarily reflects off the windshield.

But this empirical poem is not the poem of critical analysis. The empirical poem is always changing like the façade of Rouen Cathedral, so it is useless as an object of study, as an object of predicative knowledge. Instead, we abstract the poem from its spatio-temporal context, and we abstract it from the context of our own individual perceptual experience. The poem of critical study exists independently of all instances of the poem, including textual copies and perceptual experiences.

In order to link my reading of a Snyder poem with another critic's reading of the poem, we must divide the poem's qualities into primary and secondary qualities, and then forget the secondary. The world surrounding the poem at the time of reading is all secondary. The quality of light illuminating the page, the temperature of the air, these kinds of particular empirical contextual factors are secondary to the poem. They change, but they don't change the real poem. They slide over the poem like the Thames, but the poem itself is a rock in time.

A cormorant stands on a buoy in the cove and spreads its wings like a cross to dry. Beads of water drip from feathers into mirroring water. Concentric ripples spread out towards the shore.

Most of the content of the reader's consciousness at the time of reading is also secondary. Not all the thoughts that surface during reading are worthy of the title "knowledge about the text." The critic must isolate the text from the flotsam and jetsam of mind and world and produce predicates that ring true for all instances of the poem. Impressionistic statements about the poem bathed in orange light or about the personal memory the words trigger do not count as interesting or valuable knowledge. They are as useless as describing clouds because they will never occur again. The statements must be true for all readings, must be true whether the reader is looking or not. The critic does not approach a poem like Monet approached Rouen Cathedral. He or she reads for the poem behind the poem, the poem in which the series of momentary poems inhere.

The ontological status of this poem behind the poem, then, is crucial. The critic venerates the abstracted poem as the Christian theologian venerates the Gospels. We tend to read poetry like the Bible – interpretation of text must transcend personal opinion, must

ignore the spatio-temporal context of reading. The Word of God is eternal, unchanging. By extension, all texts must be eternal and unchanging, even if our interpretations do change. But who has seen this transcendent text? All I've ever seen are words on a page.

A faraway transatlantic jet momentarily glistens in the sun. The roar of its engines seems to lag behind. Its narrow contrail spreads out into the blue and vanishes.

To access the "text behind the text," we create critical methodologies that limit, as Foucault called it, the proliferation of meaning. We assume that the valuable part of the poem remains the same through time; this allows us to ignore the specificities of time and place in reading. We assume the poem is the creation of an author, a unified consciousness that has produced a number of texts. Comparing and contrasting the poem with those texts will generate valuable propositions. We assume the poem is a product of a certain time and that the texts describing that time grant us access to the forces that shaped the poem in its historical context. We conceive of a poem as something in the past, and by attaching it to an author or a time or a genre, we can locate it in a finite number of contexts and limit the number of texts we use to generate meaning. The point is that the poem is a thing, a historical thing created in the past whose identity transcends the moment of reading, transcends the reader.

But what if there is no poem behind the poem? What if the poem behind the poem is the conceptual creation of the reader in front of the poem? What if that reader also requires the poem for his or her present existence? What if there is only the empirical poem and the empirical reader dependently embedded in the proliferating, ever-changing context of the here and now? What if all the secondary texts we use to ground interpretive arguments are also stained with the present, with the proliferation of identity? Maybe a poem cannot really be abstracted from the ephemera of the moment, and its meaning and identity depend on those fleeting conditions and are themselves fleeting – maybe the poem is as unstable as a cloud, as dew in the morning sun.

PRATITYASAMUTPADA # In a 1973 interview, Snyder articulates a statement of poetics that interweaves ecology and Buddhism. Discussing a poem called "Shark Meat," which evokes the dependencies of food web ecology, Snyder says,

> I find it always exciting to me, beautiful, to experience the interdependencies of things, the complex webs and networks by which everything moves, which I think are the most beautiful awarenesses that we can have of ourselves and of our planet. Let me quote something:
>
> > "The Buddha once said, bhikshus, if you can understand this blade of rice, you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination. If you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination, you can understand the Dharma. If you understand the Dharma, you know the Buddha."
>
> And again, that's one of the worlds that poetry has taken, is these networks, these laws of interdependence – which are not exactly the laws that science points out. They are – although they are related – but imagination, intuition, vision clarify them, manifest them in certain ways – and to be able to transmit that to others is to transmit a certain quality of truth about the world. ("Craft Interview" 35)

Look how Snyder jumps from aesthetics to ecology to Buddhism to poetics. For Snyder, the laws of interdependence govern them all. But he cautions that science's understanding of interdependence is not as full as Buddhism's or poetry's. Here the soteriological aim of Buddhism and the aesthetic aim of poetry align: awareness of interdependence is not only beautiful, it is also the remedy for suffering.

However, the fuzzy similarities and differences between Buddhism and ecology require some discussion to bring them into focus. More specifically, what really needs clarification here is the idea of interdependence, both within the context of ecology and of Buddhism. To start, American ecologist Eugene Odum, who literally wrote the textbook on ecology, argues that interdependence is a fundamental characteristic of nature:

> Because each level in the biosystem spectrum is "integrated" or interdependent with other levels, there can be no sharp lines or breaks in a functional sense, not even between organism and population. The individual organism, for example, cannot survive for long without its population any more than the organ would be

> able to survive for long as a self-perpetuating unit without its organism. Similarly, the community cannot exist without the cycling of materials and the flow of energy in the ecosystem. (5)

Ecology, especially ecosystems ecology, grows from this basic observation that to investigate and understand nature you need to widen the scope of study to include the biotic and abiotic context of any particular organism or species population. You need "to include not only the community of organisms in an environment, but also the whole complex of physical factors around them" (Stiling 324). To the ecologist, then, individual beings are not self-contained entities; they are open systems interacting with myriads of biotic and abiotic conditions. This embeddedness of individuals makes study messy: "Whereas the biologist likes to have as an object of study something discrete, like a cell or cell organelle that can be isolated into a test tube, the ecologist, in studying natural systems, is confronted by the complexities of almost unlimited variables" (Kormondy 17). The problem is that you cannot isolate any ecosystem. There is always an input environment where energy, nutrients, organic material, and other beings enter the ecosystem, and there is always an output environment where material from the ecosystem leaks out:

> The spatial aspect of ecosystems is real, but precise delimitation is arbitrary, for one ecosystem is interrelated with other ecosystems. As no organism is sufficient unto itself, neither is an ecosystem. Ecosystems are not discrete entities delimited sharply from other ecosystems. [...] The existence of contiguity and/or continuousness complicates the study of ecosystems, requiring the investigator to take into account the influences of surrounding and connecting systems. (Kormondy 14-15)

You pick up one ecosystem to study it, and you pick up all of them. Any attempt at fully defining the limits of an ecosystem is doomed to failure because of an infinite regress. The best you can do is to float some buoys on the shifting tides of the biotic-abiotic sea in order to limit the object of study.

For Odum, however, ecosystem interdependence is not an insurmountable obstacle to study. He is perfectly comfortable drawing lines in the sand:

> a conceptually complete ecosystem includes an input and output environment along with the system as delimited, or ecosystem = IE + S + OE. This scheme solves the problem of where to draw lines around an entity that one wishes to consider, because it does not matter very much how the box portion of the ecosystem is delimited. [...] The box is not all there is to the ecosystem, because if the box were an impervious container its living contents (lake or city) would not survive such enclosure. A functional or real-world ecosystem must have an input life line and, in most cases, a means of exporting processed energy and materials. (17)

Odum says that as long as you keep in mind that an ecosystem is not a self-enclosed, independent entity, then things will be fine, proceed with your study. But there is something that worries me here. For one, as Edward Kormondy emphasizes, any system is not given or present in nature in a "naturally" delimited way; rather, any system is "an arbitrary unit of the universe selected for study because it is a construct of the human mind" (5-6). If systems are constructs of the mind that cannot actually survive as delimited, what exactly are we studying when we choose to study an ecosystem or a biotic community or even an individual being? Ecologists are telling us that not only are entities in nature interdependent open systems, but also that those interdependent systems are merely conceptual. Are entities merely abstracted concepts? Perhaps this idea of being enmeshed extends also to the mind doing the studying.

The Buddhist in me reads Odum's and Kormondy's quotations above and hears the contradictions of desire (*tanha*). Here is Kormondy: "A system is thus an arbitrary unit of the universe *selected* for study [...]" (5-6). Here is Odum: "This scheme solves the problem of where to draw lines around an entity that one *wishes* to consider" (17). Kormondy and Odum seem to realize that unit or entity boundaries of interdependent systems exist only conceptually, but this contingency between mind and system does not trouble them deeply. To them, the conceptual lines drawn for study are simply a convenience; the lines do not alter nature. Underneath all the talk of contingency, they maintain a belief in an external, independent world that one can discover through study – they remove themselves from the interdependence. For Kormondy, the "universe" exists independent of the act of selection, that is, there is something "out there" that we can

actively shape or select. In Odum's case, the question of where to draw lines around an entity presupposes that entity's independent existence, that is, its existence independent of his wish to study it.

These ecologists cannot shake the desire to study, to select, to draw lines. The dependent relationship that they seem to miss, though, is that the very process of selection, the very wish to consider, is what creates not only unit or entity boundaries but also the objects of study those boundaries are supposed to enclose. Ecologists could take the notion of interdependence one step further: any object of study is contingent on the one who selects or wishes in space and time – nothing can be abstracted. But even this thought is not quite enough: the one who selects is entirely contingent as well. Where, then, is the ground for "objective" scientific methods and results? It seems to me that these ecologists are still driven by the desire to discover stable predicates about a world that exists "out there," still driven by the assumption that these interdependent entities are independently existing knowable objects. Call me crazy, but aren't Odum and Kormondy simply studying the products and projections of their desires?

It gets worse. Ecologists seem to revel in the impossible messiness of study. They search and search for shining diamonds of stable knowledge in the ever-shifting glimmering sands of interdependence, but in vain. Peter Stiling, for example, echoes Snyder's opinion that concepts and categories cannot capture nature: "Even the simplest ecological statement assumes more about nature than can be concluded from observations alone. There can never be a complete match between theories and data no matter how much empirical evidence is gathered" (12). The shaky status of ecological "facts" is not surprising when you consider that the objects of "even the simplest ecological statement[s]" are the conceptual excretions of particular desires. But that doesn't stop ecologists from making statements. We're back to the problem of predicating the products of conceptualization. What can you really say about something like a whitebark pine when it stands as an ever-fluctuating product of innumerable conditions, of a hundred summers of snowmelt, rock, and air? What is worth saying?

I see the same contradictions that lurk in the shadows of ecological study lurking in the study of Snyder's work. Some critics pick up on Snyder's ecological tendencies and use ecology as a model for their own methods of study. Snyder even invites this kind

of practice when, in "Poetry, Community, Climax," he likens a poem to a mushroom with wide-ranging threads of mycelia that travel through the forest soil, married to the root hairs of all the trees, forming a web of interdependence (174). Texts, like the mushrooms and trees of the forest, only appear as individuals above the soil – on a deeper level, they are all connected and dependent.

Thomas Lyon runs with Snyder's interest in ecology and proclaims that the ecological vision of interrelatedness points the way to a new kind of thinking (35). However, when it comes to literary criticism, his brand of ecology simply serves as an excuse for status quo authorial and even autobiographical study: "his work, thought, and life [are] of a piece. [...] It is almost inevitable that this be true of the ecological vision" (43). Ecology here operates as a rationale for using "Snyder" as the gravitational centre to hold together a number of texts. Lyon simply falls back on the author-function as his study's governing principal. While he appears to privilege ecological relationships between texts, Lyon makes those interconnections support a notion of independent existence, of authorial presence, of *svabhava* (own-being). In the end, Snyder's texts form an "organic" but closed system for meaning-making – Lyon ignores the infinite regress that systems ecology implies.

Likewise, Julia Martin argues that each poem in *Regarding Wave* does not work in isolation; rather, each must be read within the context of the whole collection. She even calls each poem an "open system" ("Pattern" 105) – but she closes the system between the covers of the book. For her, ecology has its limits. For example, she argues that the individual poems "Wave" and "Regarding Wave" must be read together: "it is only when the two poems are considered together [...] that their full sense begins to appear" ("Pattern" 106). However, Martin here conveniently abandons the logic of interdependence even as she embraces it: the "full sense" of any open system depends not on its relation to one other system but to all of the system's dependencies at any given time. The problem is that any open system always depends on everything – including the mind that reads – not just a convenient pairing of two poems.

Martin does not want to see the inherent *ad absurdum* that arises when you try to think of interdependence as the relationship between things. "Thing" always carries with it the notion of independence, so when Martin wants to say something about two poems

(things), she must limit the universe in a convenient way. Otherwise, she would have nothing to talk about, only an infinite regress of relationality. Look back at her quotation above. Her idea of "full sense" depends on the reader, who must "consider together" the two poems. He or she must arbitrarily limit experience to "Wave" and "Regarding Wave" and then compare them. This "considering" amounts to abandoning interdependence in order to isolate two things and then reinstating it to justify an "ecological" reading of two Snyder poems.

The same kind of half-baked "ecological" logic appears in one of Charles Altieri's essays on Snyder. In discussing "A Walk," Altieri makes an argument about the poem's focus on concrete details without self-reflexive metaphorizing: "So much pointing asserts the referential power of language. [...] It is not words but things that are being related to one another" ("Lyric" 51; see also *Enlarging* 132-134). But the very fact that things are relatable, that, in fact, they depend on each other for existence makes the whole substance ontology that supports our notion of "thing" unravel. These critics use ecology's illumination of the secret relations between things to pretty much perpetuate the status quo of literary critical work where texts exist apart from a critic who discovers meaning in the connections between words, phrases, texts, and so forth. The whole critical enterprise ignores the full range of contingency.

Unlike ecologists and literary critics, Buddhists see ecological interdependence as a clue that there is something wrong with interpreting the world as a collection of independent entities, even if you say that those entities are all interconnected. Ecologists and critics want entities to study and to produce predicates about, and they want interdependence too. But for Buddhists, entities and interdependence don't mix; interdependence (*pratityasamutpada*) means emptiness (*sunyata*), and emptiness means the "cessation of predication" (Sprung, "Madhyamika" 45). In her book, *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*, Helena Norberg-Hodge quotes a Ladakhy Buddhist named Tashi Rabgyas, who explains emptiness in ecological terms:

> Take any object, like a tree. When you think of a tree, you tend to think of it as a distinct, clearly defined object, and at a certain level it is. But on a more important level, the tree has no independent existence; rather, it dissolves into a web of relationships. The rain that falls on its leaves, the wind that causes it to sway, the

> soil that supports it – all form a part of the tree. Ultimately, if you think about it, everything in the universe helps make the tree what it is. It cannot be isolated; its nature changes from moment to moment – it is never the same. This is what we mean when we say that things are "empty," that they have no independent existence. (73)

Rabgyas packs a lot of Buddhist theory into this quotation. His two levels ("at a certain level" and "on a more important level") refer to the Madhyamika teaching of the two levels of truth (*satyadvaya*): conventional truth (*samvrtisatya*) and ultimate truth (*paramarthasatya*). His "dissolves into a web of relationships" refers to dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*). His "its nature changes from moment to moment – it is never the same" refers to impermanence (*anitya*). And his "they have no independent existence" refers to emptiness (*sunyata*), no-self (*anatman*), and no-nature (*nihsvabhava*).

All of these teachings dovetail: ultimately, the ecological observation that a tree's existence depends on conditions that we consider external to "the tree" proper means that there really is no stable object or presence that corresponds to our word and concept "tree" – the object is pure convention. Things exist contextually, relationally: "there is always more to something than initially meets the eye; thorough understanding requires seeing the thing outside itself in the other things and contexts which make it what it is" (Wright 52). What Buddhism emphasizes about this radical contingency is the resulting impossibility of "things." If you look for a referent for "tree" by dividing the world into "tree" and "not-tree" and expelling "not-tree," you find nothing at all. It's not just that a tree depends on conditions for survival, not just that it would wither and die apart from them: a tree is nothing apart from conditions; it does not arise – there's no withering and dying apart from conditions. Ultimately, there is no tree at all.

You'll notice that I qualified my dramatic phrase "there is no tree at all" with the adverb "ultimately." This kind of qualification follows from the Madhyamika notion of the two truths, which is a teaching employed to avoid a nihilistic interpretation of an object's emptiness: ultimately there is no tree at all, but conventionally the tree exists just fine.

Tashi Rabgyas says, "When you think of a tree, you tend to think of it as a distinct, clearly defined object, and at a certain level it is." In Madhyamika terms, this

perception of the tree as a stable independent object has a certain truth value that belongs to *samvrtisatya*, the "truth of the screen" (Huntington 38). The screen imagery here refers to the common Buddhist image of superimposing substantial existence on an object's boundless insubstantiality, of defining an object's boundaries and believing that the object's identity covers its parts. In the Dalai Lama's words, *samvrtisatya* "arises because of our tendency to isolate particular aspects of an event or experience and see them as constituting its totality" (*Ethics* 36). Individual things are not what we find in the world; things arise in dependence on our tendency to isolate experience in discrete bundles, ignoring the lines of contingency which make that isolation conceptually and perceptually possible.

The screen, then, is our everyday experience in its "discursive and conceptual" (Sprung, Introduction 3) aspect. It is no accident, too, that Buddhist scholars use terms like "discursive" and "conceptual" or "verbal designation" (Dalai Lama, *Ethics* 38) when describing *samvrti*: the screen that we erect and mistake for reality is intimately bound up with what Williams calls "the falsifying activity of language" (83). *Samvrti* is "the realm of words which attribute inherent existence to things" (Williams 83). And this "inherent existence" is known as *svabhava*, a word – derived from *bhava* ("being") – that means "own-being." *Svabhava* is what we impose on the world in our perceptual interpretation of an object's independence: it is "the fundamental natural interpretation that finds expression in both the conception and the perception of individuality" (Huntington 48). In ecological terms, an object conceived in this conventional way is a closed system, a discrete object – it is the way we normally construct our reality, literary critics included.

But ecology and Buddhism ask us to take another look at the way things really work: a tree cut off from its input and output environments cannot live. In fact, an isolated tree is not only a physical but also a conceptual impossibility: without the blue sky around it, without not-tree, there is no tree. The tree's independence depends on a world or a conceptual ground from which to be independent: "That which exists within a nexus of cause and effect cannot be real in and of itself" (Huntington 48). There is nothing which we think belongs to "tree" that wouldn't disappear in the absence of "not-tree," physically and conceptually. However, although our ability to ignore "not-tree," our ability to construct independent objects in perception, is merely a conventional way of interpreting

experience, it is, nonetheless, rather useful: "Although things do not bear their individual existence within themselves, as they appear to do, they are nevertheless quite real insofar as they are efficacious" (Huntington 58). In "Burning the Small Dead," Snyder finds it quite useful to conceptualize branches as independent objects that can be broken off and ignited for light and warmth. Nobody is looking to negate existence here, just independent substantial existence.

To the Madhyamika, the division of the world into tree and not-tree is not something given in nature that we discover; rather, it depends on the perceiving mind that selects, wishes, or considers – the division is a superimposition on experience that does not exist apart from the mind that performs it. Just as Kormondy notes that any ecological system, including an individual tree, is "an arbitrary unit of the universe selected for study because it is a construct of the human mind" (5-6), so Huntington observes in describing the Madhyamika analysis that "The nature of an object's existence cannot be meaningfully expressed as an independently valid or entirely objective 'fact,' for any object is defined as existent only in dependence on its being conceived and designated in an essentially linguistic act" (52). The suspension of tree from not-tree, the tree's independent existence (its standing forth for study), depends on the mind. But this is not to say that reality depends on the mind, only that *samvrti* or conventional reality depends on mind. The whole subject-object, knower-known dichotomy is only conventionally real, the result of a desired perceptual selection.

The basic observation operating here in ecology and Buddhism is that seemingly individual things exist only in dependence. For ecologists, this observation serves as a corrective to scientific study: you have to include input and output systems in any description of an individual system in order to understand that system better. But Buddhists follow the ecological logic one step further: when you look directly at these nominal "things," when you try to find them, they dissolve entirely – leak out into a web of relations with other things that are always already leaking out into a web of relations. Nagarjuna observes that "Things derive their being and nature by mutual dependence and are nothing in themselves" (qtd. in Sunim 23). A being's ecological dependence, then, is a sign of its non-existence. In T.R.V. Murti's words,

> Any fact of experience, when analysed, reveals the inner rift present in its constitution. It is not a thing in itself; it is what it is in relation to other entities, and these in turn depend on others. This process thus proceeds indefinitely and leads to a regress. Practically minded commonsense does not care to go deep. (15)

You can't really define a tree as independent because it depends at every moment on the entire stream of dependently-arising experiences. The tree is like a reflection in a pool: bring object, water, light, eyes, and mind together and the image appears. Remove one, and the image vanishes. It has no internal power to maintain its existence – it is radically dependent. The image never gains some kind of ontological core to stabilize its identity through time. Likewise, there is nothing that belongs solely to "tree"; its existence is entirely at the mercy of conditions external to it – and these conditions are, in turn, entirely at the mercy of conditions external to them, including the tree!

Round and round we go. Starting from the premise that objects exist individually leads, paradoxically, to a "cosmic ecology" (Cook 2). Any arbitrarily delineated system takes the entire cosmos as its defining input and output environments – any object comes with strings attached to everything else. And more than this, every "object" is nothing more than this arbitrary delineation of interpenetration: it possesses no separate being; its apparent individuality is imputed and metaphysical. Ultimate truth (*paramarthasatya*), then, is nothing more than recognizing the conventional nature of independent "things" in this very moment of enmeshed interdependence: "What is immediately given in everyday experience is indeed all that there is, for the inherently interdependent nature of the components of this experience *is* the truth of the highest meaning" (Huntington 40). Here, "immediately" does not mean "objectively"; rather, it means experiencing internal and external as contingent and enmeshed – this is what is given (without a giver). To realize ultimate truth, you don't rip away the screen of *samvrti* like some tattered veil – you look more closely at the weave of the veil and realize it is not a veil at all, just baseless fabric – it hides nothing. Every object that comes to our attention is, ultimately, ontologically empty and open in the moment, vast as a clear blue sky.

POST-STRUCTURALIST INTERJECTION # One way of talking about Snyder's whitebark is to say that its individual ontological presence is continuously deferred along lines of contingency. Any attempt to differentiate the tree from not-tree results in a slipping out from "tree." In the space where "tree" is sought, there is a groundless absence. Here is what I'm talking about in Buddhist terms:

> The own-being of the thing is [...] dissolved into the conditions of its happening. All the concrete content belongs to the interplay of countless conditions. Any "own-being" that would, by contrast, be something of its own is seen to be no more than an abstraction, an empty spot covered by a word. Neither produced nor maintained by itself, a thing by itself is nothing at all. (Conze, *India* 240)

It is commonsense to think of a tree as an individual entity that has clearly delimited boundaries in space. But when you start looking for those boundaries, either in biological or conceptual terms, things start slipping. For example, we don't think of water as being tree, but at some point we think that the tree possesses water. The tree is composed of a number of parts like this that, on their own, do not constitute a tree, but that, when brought together in a certain pattern, give rise to the tree.

The curious fact about all of this is that the tree is neither the same as, nor different from, its parts. Water alone does not produce a tree; there is nothing tree-like in water. When you look at water, you don't see tree. So tree is not somehow contained in its parts. In fact, when those parts start to separate in, say, a fire, at some point the parts stop producing the notion tree in us – the form crumbles into the breeze as ash.

The cessation of tree when the parts disband, however, is also evidence that the independent tree is not different from its parts. If the tree were somehow separate from water, air, nutrients, and so forth, then it should be able to stand without them. But this is not the case – the tree vanishes when its constituent parts part asunder.

Perhaps, then, the tree is somehow more than the sum of its parts. But what is this "more"? From the Buddhist perspective, the "more" is conceptually or linguistically imputed – it depends on mind. The tree as an independent thing depends on mind. But that thing is, on analysis, incoherent: it cannot be said to be the same as or different from its parts – it disappears into the excluded middle.

The conclusion that Buddhists draw from the curious observation that so-called concrete particulars cannot be found is that "a thing by itself is nothing at all." What we experience as a thing is really "an empty spot covered by a word." From the Buddhist perspective, then, our ability to perceive objects and to name them, that is, our ability to form abstractions and concepts, is not an ability that gives us access to the way things really are. "Tree" (like "self") is "merely a concept with no actual correlative, no ultimate existence. It is often identified as having all of the ontological reality of a snake mistaken for a rope seen in the dark" (Aronson 74). The snake-rope misinterpretation is a useful analogy to show how a fiction mistaken for a reality can affect our expectations and actions. If you think the rope lying across the dark forest path is a venomous snake, then you will proceed no further for no good reason. And if you see a rope where there is really a snake, you will suffer for it. Likewise, if you mistake contingent experience for an independently existing self, then you might grasp that self and try to rescue it from contingency. You will inevitably believe (and fear) that the self is something you can lose.

However, for Buddhists, the world of trees, selves, ropes, and snakes is an illusory world; it is *maya*. The illusory object, though, is not nonexistent. Illusion has to do with interpretation. For example, a stick that looks bent in water is an illusion if we believe that the stick *is* bent when it isn't and act accordingly. But it is not wrong to say that the stick appears bent: "though we don't deny the existence of a perception [...], we do deny the judgment made about that perception (or experience)" (Brooks 102). That certain conditions appear to be an individual tree is real enough, but the tree appearance has no substantial presence of its own – the independent tree is *maya*. Likewise, each condition that produces the tree's appearance is itself an appearance of equally insubstantial conditions. There is no substantial ground anywhere, only the appearance of substance.

As soon as we interpret the world as a collection of things, then we get the circular interdependence of *maya* arising. *Maya*, a Sanskrit word, derives from the root *ma* "to measure" (Arapura 115). While the popular interpretation of *maya* equates illusion with the sensory world and equates "Eastern mysticism" with a rejection of it, in Buddhism, it is not the sensory world that must be rejected as illusion; it is our interpretation of it. The Buddhist does not reject experience, only the way we measure it, the way we draw lines

between things. Those measured things do not really behave as independent things; rather, they behave like dependent things.

Actually, measured things behave like symbols, like words. For the Madhyamika, our notion of independent existence is intimately bound up with our ability to abstract, to conceptualize, and to name: "The nature of an object's existence cannot be meaningfully expressed as an independently valid or entirely objective 'fact,' for any object is defined as existent only in dependence on its being conceived and designated in an essentially linguistic act" (Huntington 52). The infinite deferral of existence that the Madhyamika observe arising from this "essentially linguistic act" is (not surprisingly) the same kind of phenomenon that Saussure and Derrida observe in our linguistic systems. Linguistic meaning, self and things – all arise dependently.

This link between Derrida and Buddhism is not original with me. For example, David Loy uses Derridian language to describe the function of the term *sunyata*, which is "to deconstruct the self-existence/self-presence of things" (*Lack* 89). He further points out that, like the notion of différance, *sunyata* has no semantic or conceptual stability; rather, both terms undercut the desire for stable meanings by gesturing at the "interconditionality of all phenomena" (90). Where one looks for a presence, one finds only "differences and traces of differences" (Loy, "Dead" 34).

You could spend a lot of time elaborating the minute similarities and differences between Buddhist and post-structuralist thought, but this would be a bit pedantic, I think. Moreover, such a study would proceed on the assumption that both schools of thought have definable, dogmatic systems of philosophical assertions or denials that are stable enough to withstand analysis and comparison – an assumption running counter to the deconstructive motives of both.

However, post-structuralism can serve as *upaya*, another gateway to awareness of the teaching of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*) – an awareness that prompted Nagarjuna to write, "Origin through relations is the Buddha's rich profound treasure" (qtd. in Norberg-Hodge 74-75), and moved an unknown author of Buddhist scripture to exclaim: "He who sees interdependent co-origination sees the Buddha" (Eckel, "Nature" 343). The basic ecological and post-structuralist observation of the emptiness of presence and the dependence and relationality of things can be pursued soteriologically: "No

longer dominated by reified concepts of 'I' and 'mine,' the bodhisattva is directly, noninferentially aware of the world as nothing more than a constantly changing pattern of relationships" (Huntington 125). I'm not sure why Huntington needs to say "nothing more" here – the vision of dependent origination dissolves any desire for more. Everything is presently nonpresent.

Derrida's urge to deconstruct notions of "self-presence" as "an economy of differences" (Loy, "Dead" 36), then, can be interpreted as a gesture similar to that of a Buddhist analysis of phenomena for *svabhava* (own-being). Failing to find *svabhava* is precisely what the Madhyamika call *sunyata*. In his essay "Différance," Derrida's failure to locate a referential presence leads to a non-theistic kind of negative theology similar to Madhyamika: "[Différance] has neither existence nor essence. It belongs to no category of being, present or absent" (388). Here Derrida uses différance to collapse conceptuality into the excluded middle of predication. Independent existence depends on non-contradiction and an excluded middle to assert identity, to assert difference. But that difference cannot be final; it cannot transcend its definition via logical opposites. Conceptual boundaries are maintained only by a form of ignorance:

> Everything that exists as an object or a thing, that can be present to our minds and known, is so only in so much as it is different from something else, and to think its identity as what it is (one of the tasks philosophy sets for itself), one must suppress and ignore the differentiating process that constitutes it. (Rivkin and Ryan 339-40)

Ignorance of contingency is the foundation of object-knowledge. All our "is" and "is-not" predications do not reveal a world of substantial being; rather, they merely describe a rope where there is really a snake – describe a thing where there is really everything.

The funny thing is that we really want that rope to be there – and we aren't willing to see the snake no matter how many times we get bitten. "Bad rope," we say: "Nothing we can do about that." As in the Buddhist analysis, Derrida sees desire at work here, desire for substantial existence, for a "realm" instead of "this bottomless chessboard where being is set in play" (402): "Not only is there no realm of differance, but differance is even the subversion of every realm. This is obviously what makes it threatening and necessarily dreaded by everything in us that desires a realm, the past or future presence of

a realm" (401). Where we seek coherence and a place to abide conceptually, we instead get a "play of forms – with no determined or invariable substratum" (396). The whole show is made of the shadows of windy fire – and there is no route to some blinding sunshiny realm of fixed forms.

In order to subvert our desire for fixed forms, in order to pop the illusion of substance, Derrida goes after desire's main tool for establishing independent existence – conceptual categories, what we believe words refer to. Derrida expands Saussure's insight that "in language there are only differences *without positive terms*" (qtd. in Derrida 392) to include all conceptual activity, arguing that

> the signified concept is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself. Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences. Such a play, then – differance – is no longer simply a concept, but the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system and process in general. (392)

The interdependent nature of concepts always defers our desire for independent presences when we analyze for them. The realm of *samvrti* is just so constituted – a flux of dependent arisings. The world outside the thing, then, crosses its imputed conceptual boundaries – in fact, the external, non-thing world is the essential condition for the thing in the first place: thing is nothing more than non-thing. Real independence is impossible – or at least unavailable to conceptuality.

One of the frightening consequences of différance is that self or consciousness does not possess independent existence (*anatman*). Consciousness, like everything else, lacks self-presence; it arises within a system of (unestablishable) differences: "consciousness is the effect of forces whose essence, ways, and modalities are not peculiar to it. Now force itself is never present; it is only a play of differences and quantities" (397). Contemplate that one long enough, and it should scare the crap out of you (the crap of self-illusion, that is). Everything the critic takes for granted – reader, text, world – slips away in a play of differences, a circular deferral. No independent thing ever steps out of this circle – we only ignorantly imagine that it does.

If Derrida and Buddhism don't frighten you, then you haven't gone deep enough – you haven't opened yourself to the transformative opportunities a meditative encounter with Buddhist and Derridian texts offer. In my opinion, interdependence should make literary critics deeply suspicious of their quotidian classroom practices and the motivations and assumptions that underlie them. It seems to me that much of what goes on in English departments relies on an unwavering and unhealthy belief in a theology of presence. All hail the metaphysical text that lays itself bare for our humble study! Aren't we studying ropes where there are snakes? Things where there is only a word covering a shimmering universe dependently originated?

Sadly, Saussure's basic semiotic insight that meaning arises only in dependence and Derrida's insight that meaning, rather than being self-present, is always deferred within a system of differences don't necessarily impress folks like they used to. The poststructuralist magic show fails to fill the house every night. For example, I found this passage in David Richter's introduction to the poststructuralist section of his textbook on literary criticism:

> From the reader's point of view, the usual end product of deconstructive criticism is *aporia*: the intellectual vertigo caused by looking into an apparently endless hall of mirrors. This is an effect that, unfortunately, palls on repetition. Many critics initially struck by the power of deconstructive criticism, find that, no matter how inventive the path, each venture leads to the same vista. (950)

The same vista? Palls on repetition? What for Richter appears to be a carnival house of funny mirrors is, in fact, a glimpse of the groundless path that leads beyond suffering. Coincidentally, "double mirror waver" (38), an image in Snyder's poem "Bubb's Creek Haircut" from *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, is, in Snyder's words, "a key image in *Avatamsaka* philosophy, Buddhist interdependence philosophy. Multiple reflections in multiple mirrors, that's what the universe is like" (qtd. in Hunt 164). Snyder, Buddhism, and Derrida all attempt to pull the rug of substance out from beneath experience, but Sndyer and Buddhism, at least, are not in it just for fun-house thrills.

Perhaps if Richter had looked into those mirrors at the guy holding the text, maybe then he would have been more fundamentally unsettled. It's not only textual meaning that slips away into endless reflection, but also the self concept – indeed,

everything perceived as a thing slips away. I have trouble seeing how this ground-dissolving experience could produce such boredom. Once you know that nothing exists the way you thought it did, how can you return to the status quo? Richter's desire for conceptual proliferation overpowers the potentially soteriological insights of deconstruction. He doesn't see that the experience of *aporia* is not an end but an entrance, so he retreats from groundlessness back into *avidya*.

No doubt, the retreat is seductive. There's something so satisfying about a solid thesis statement concerning a privileged subject, something that titillates. Predicative knowledge is candy, but it makes us obese with delusion, bloated with ego. And the proliferation is never-ending: "The compulsive meanings that fill up our lives are ways of evading a sense of meaninglessness we dread" (Loy, *Lack* 124). Deconstruction threatens us with meaninglessness, a fact Richter himself emphasizes: "if there was freeplay in the signifier-signified relationship, there was no guarantee of even making sense" (945). Making sense is satisfying because it represents a temporary culmination of desire, a momentary abiding. Consequently, the promise of freeplay does not seem sexy enough – an unfulfilled desire is not only meaningless, it is painful.

The fact is that we don't play our language games (or any games) just because – we play them to win, to further solidify self. Our games have ends – that's where the meaning arises: we start the game knowing that it will come to an end; we engage fully, lose ourselves in the game because of what is at stake: the end decides the winners and losers. Literary criticism is also a kind of game: we play the game for a purpose, to produce new meanings, and the production feels good – strengthens the self. Reading texts is only meaningful if it ends in a new thought or text. Negative capability is rare indeed. I can see, then, why Richter says that deconstruction palls on repetition. Desire needs repetition (a renewal of the game), but with novelty – it is never fully satisfied. An experience of aporia, however, undermines the ground of meaning that supports this desire-driven activity – spoils the fun by calming conceptual proliferation, vaporizes predication in a frightening revelation: there is no possible end to the game.

The irony here is that the proliferation of meaning-making is itself a kind of freeplay. Sense is not permanent – there is always another meaning lurking, ready to supplant, a fact that fuels production in the literary critical industry. If meaninglessness is

a situation that has no end, then what is more meaningless than the never-ending production of meaning? The circular proliferation of meaning is *samsara*, the round of suffering and rebirth. This is what a Buddhist seeks to dissolve, what he or she helps others to dissolve.

Richter can be forgiven for his retreat, though, because deconstruction does not cut much trail beyond the first vista of interdependence, does not push beyond the meaning-meaningless duality. In Morny Joy's opinion, deconstruction is dilettantish because it does not do the hard work of self-transformation that could make practical use of the insights into "the unreliability of language and the instability of concepts" (Joy 89). Her advice? "What is needed is a new way of relating to the world: a different sense of self" (97). And the only way to cultivate a "different sense of self" is to sit on the meditation cushion, doing the real work of intellect and imagination – slicing through delusion. Instead, deconstruction simply imports an image of desire (freeplay) into a situation that already runs on desire: we've been freeplaying all along. Freeplay is itself, then, a retreat from the full experience of dependent origination, an experience that dissolves the very ground of grasping desire, dissolves the condition that supports desire's origination – ignorance (*avidya*).

Returning to the solid ground of business-as-usual after losing your footing in groundlessness seems like a failure of will. In Huntington's view, "No matter how compelling the imaginary referents of words and concepts may seem, [the bodhisattva] will turn from them and search for truth and reality not in any particular epistemic act or ontic place, but in a form of life expressing a certain attitude toward the context of relations, the whole of everyday experience" (109). The Buddhist reader follows this bodhisattva path to further vistas. Consequently, we need to reorient literary critical practice within the broader context of everyday living. The interdependence of reader-text-world is not just some fancy concept to be picked up during office hours and dropped after – experience of interdependence compels a personal reorientation to this relational vision, compels you to mind your relations with awareness and compassion. A critical practice that ignores relational responsibilities is reckless.

NIHSVABHAVA # What are the consequences of our tendency to attribute ontological primacy to the stable elements in perception, to think that the world really is made up of independent objects with persistent identities? At what cost do we ignore those aspects of experience that are unstable and ambiguous? On the one hand, it is really useful to perceive, in perceptual psychologist J.J. Gibson's terminology, the "invariant features" of the visual field (Gombrich 196). For example, if you are trying to land an airplane (Gibson's famous study involved pilots), you need to base your judgments about size and distance and solidity on those elements of rapidly shifting experience that remain constant:

> It is not such a static image which gives the pilot the required estimate of the distance and position of the runway but the flow of information he receives, the sequence of transformations all around which show him across these rapid changes the invariants of the lay of the land, invariants he must pick up if he is to survive. (Gombrich 251-52)

In the business of landing aircraft, perceiving the constancies, the invariants, is crucial to survival. And the whole mechanism works. Pilots land planes successfully all the time. But in the process of picking out the invariants, the pilots ignore the shifting aspects of the visual field; large amounts of visual experience get ignored as junk, as perceptual flotsam: "These changing aspects, indeed, serve no purpose in the business of orientation, and thus they rarely obtrude on our awareness" (Gombrich 252). Our perception works much like a map: we mark off the invariant features of the landscape and forget about the pesky details. And it all works great.

Or does it? A cognitive map of the invariant features of our world is a useful tool, but the map is not the territory. We run into problems when we assume that the constant objects we perceive actually exist as constant objects, when we grant ontological primacy to concepts over direct experience. The problem is that when we take our cognitive map for the way things exist, we create the expectation that things really do stay the same through time. We have confidence in this fact, so much so that we cling to objects, rely on them. But the invariants are only relatively so – no invariant remains the same invariably. The illusion of stability in change eventually drowns in the flood of change.

At this point, the Buddhist idea of *maya* or illusion is helpful. Buddhists seem fond of saying that the objects we take for existents are merely illusions. For a pilot trying to land a plane full of people safely, however, this assertion seems absurd and dangerous. He or she needs to assume that the invariants perceived as the ground rushes by are reliably solid – that the runway is not going to dissolve like a mirage just before the wheels touch. And the runway never does dissolve: wheels meet asphalt and everyone survives. All the objects in our world seem reliable in this way. I can return year after year to the White Mountains of New Hampshire, hike the same trails, follow the map, and arrive at the same places. The trailer perched above Hubbards cove has never flickered in and out of existence. And even the flotsam I watch from the Dartmouth ferry never sinks suddenly out of reality. So what gives? Where do Buddhists get off calling this world an illusion?

Well, here's the thing: they don't exactly call the world an illusion. What they say is that the world is *like* an illusion. This difference may seem obnoxiously pedantic at first, but it is crucial in making sense out of Buddhism. Think back to the *Diamond Sutra* similes. The Buddha generated these not as reliable predicates but as provisional teachings. The world isn't a mirage, but it shares an unexpected similarity with mirages. To a man wandering lost and thirsty in the desert (or so the cliché goes), a mirage is not a mirage from a distance: it is a pool of water. In an extreme state of desire, the man interprets the refraction of light in heat waves as indicating the presence of water. His reason tells him that desert mirages are common and that the water is probably refracted light, but his thirst forces him to believe, and the image is convincing. His interpretation of the retinal images, then, creates an ontological expectation (in this direction there is water) and a physical-emotional one too (that water will satisfy my thirst). But when he arrives at the expected oasis, there is only more sand: "Hallucination [or mirage], in this sense, is a misinterpretation of things and events, reading into the phenomenal world meanings which it does not have" (Trungpa 131). The refractive image, the basis of the water interpretation, evaporates, and frustration floods the desert mind.

If the solid objects of our perceptions were all mirages, however, then they would all disappear when we got close to them. But this doesn't happen. The runway doesn't vanish like the hoped-for oasis does; it is much more reliable. Obviously, then, the world

is not a mirage. But it is *like* a mirage in that our ontological interpretation of invariants creates false expectations:

> There is nothing illusory about the world as such. It becomes an illusion when I expect from it more than it can give. And since all my expectations are bound to come to naught if I fail to grasp the given, as it is given, I shall have to suffer in consequence. The expectation in such cases is indeed pure illusion. But the frustration of my expectations can hardly be said to entail the flat statement that the world itself is an illusion. The purpose of Buddhism, and of Tantrism in particular, is to teach man not to expect more than is possible, and to avoid creating the illusion of the illusion of the world. (Guenther, *Naropa* 176)

If Buddha were alive today, he could land a plane, easy. He would not see the world as a completely confused two-dimensional chaos of colour patches. He would perceive the invariants in the visual field, would recognize objects like trees, power lines, runways. He would trust the conditions for landing the plane safely, would not freak out that the runway might suddenly blink out of existence and be replaced by a mountain. But Buddha would not believe for a second that the invariant objects existed as independent, transcendent entities, would not expect them to respond to a clingy desire for sameness. The point here is that you don't need to believe in the independent, substantial existence of the runway in order to land the plane. The ontological interpretation is extra baggage.

For Buddhists, then, the world does exist. And despite all the fuss over the doctrine of *anatman*, Buddhists do not deny the existence of self as a useful conceptual entity. When Buddhists claim that things do not exist, they are referring to the way we normally construct existence, the way we think of objects as independent and persistent, the way we lift them out of time and context. Paul Williams emphasizes the non-nihilism of Buddhist thought in his discussion of the Madhyamika:

> Madhyamika is not saying that we do not exist, or that we should not use the word "I". Rather, we do not exist in the way we think we do, as inherently existent, independent monads. The correct way of understanding our existence is as conceptually created entities superimposed upon our changing mental and bodily states. (67)

Williams' description of experience here sounds like Bloomer's description of perception as "imposing a pattern on the stimulus" (49). It also recalls Sapir's description of concepts as convenient but mistaken generalizations of experience. Monet's interest in the changing states of the visual field is also relevant here, as is Snyder's ecologically and Buddhist-influenced description of self and nature as something that "dodge[s] our expectations and theoretical models," that is "fluid, open, and conditional" (Preface v). Add to these descriptions Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's description of the ground from which *atman* arises: "Fundamentally there is just open space, the *basic ground*, what we really are. Our most fundamental state of mind, before the creation of ego, is such that there is basic openness, basic freedom, a spacious quality" (122). But, he says, we "solidify" this "luminous" openness, make it "static" – we "ignore its flowing, open quality" (124). He even uses images very much like Bloomer's "constancies" or Gombrich's "memory colour" to describe how we alter experience:

> There are tremendous, magnificent displays of color and energy, beautiful and picturesque. But we have ignored them altogether. Instead there is just a solidified version of that color; and the color becomes captured color, and the energy becomes captured energy, because we have solidified the whole space and turned it into "other." (126)

All of these lines of thought move in a similar direction: they all imply that we create stable entities (including self) in perception and mistakenly believe that they exist and persist independently. In the process of conceptualized perception, we jettison, ignore, and forget a whole range of ephemeral experience – a flood of perceptual flotsam and jetsam that continually rises on the periphery of experience, threatening our desired stability. We come to expect stability and persistence; but in the end, life hands us change and death.

According to Buddhism, then, there is a lot at stake in hypostatizing or granting substance to conceptualized perceptual objects. For Buddhists, this hypostatization is, in fact, the origin of suffering. Misinterpreting the nature of existence, "ignor[ing] its flowing, open quality" (Trungpa 124), is called *avidya* (ignorance, bewilderment, confusion). *Avidya*, in turn, is the condition that gives rise to *tanha* (thirst, grasping, desire) by creating the expectation that self and external objects persist. And *tanha*, as

the Buddha's Four Noble Truths declare, is the origin of *duhkha* (suffering). Here's how Williams describes the dynamic elements in perception:

> We have only experiences of colours, shapes, tactile data, and so on. We also do not know that we ourselves are anything other than a further series of experiences. Taken together, there is only an ever-changing flow of perceptions – *vijnaptimatra*. Due to our beginningless ignorance [*avidya*] we construct these perceptions into enduring subjects and objects confronting each other. This is irrational, things are not like that, and it leads to suffering and frustration. (84)

Williams' account starts off sounding much like Locke's empiricism. But where Locke thinks it's rational to believe in a world of subjects and objects, Williams' Madhyamika thinks it's irrational to grant ontological supremacy to perceptual constructions. Why? First, because substantial subjects and objects are not inevitable interpretations of experience, and second, because interpreting the world in terms of persisting subjects and objects creates suffering. Why suffer if you don't have to?

Williams' full account sounds much more like Bloomer's account of perception, but there is a crucial difference here as well. While Williams and Bloomer both use the image of the mind imposing form on the flow of experience, Bloomer suggests that this process works only on external objects. Unlike Williams, Bloomer does not interrogate the imposition of form on "internal" mental experience as well as "external" sensual experience. Bloomer questions the stability of the visual field but not of the mental. As such, her description of perception operates on a basic metaphysical duality: the separation of mind and body. She may express some hesitation about the nature of the external world, but she has full confidence in the mind's stability.

However, this mind-body separation does not arise in the Madhyamika analysis of perception: Williams describes "an ever-changing flow of perceptions" that includes mental experience along with sensory. For the Madhyamika, perception is the result of six rather than five senses. For them, mind makes up the sixth sense, and the idea of an enduring subject in mental experience arises in exactly the same way as an enduring visual object separated from its spatio-temporal matrix does – we abstract and hypostatize:

> The Buddha taught that attributing personal, independent existence to the stream of our experience is central to our addiction to pain. We attribute to the multiple experiences of thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and actions some agent who is experiencing and doing all of this, and we call this ourselves. (Simmer-Brown, 30)

The same perceptual mechanisms that Bloomer and Gombrich describe operating in our interpretations of visual experience apply to our interpretations of mental experience as well. Our self-identity is a conceptual interpretation of an ever-shifting flood of various thoughts, feelings, memories, and so forth: "Confused mind is inclined to view itself as a solid, on-going thing, but it is only a collection of tendencies, events" (Trungpa 123). Self is the result of a bifurcation of mental experience into substance and accident, primary and secondary qualities. In the process, we construct a substantial self (a kind of map of mental invariants) that can seem to pull itself out of the stream of time and persist. But in the Buddhist analysis, this self is a fiction (Simmer-Brown 30).

By not dealing with the insubstantiality of self perceptions, Bloomer's Gestalt analysis of perception ends up depicting the mind as a stable but alien force imposing forms and meanings on an otherwise formless and meaningless external reality – as if mind and world were two different things. But in the Madhyamika view specifically and the Mahayana view generally, mind and world are inseparable: mental and sensory experiences are not fundamentally different. As Dogen said, "Whoever told people that 'Mind' means thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concepts? Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles, and grasses" (qtd. in Snyder, "Etiquette" 20). There is no metaphysical distance between internal and external experience. It's all one current. The point of Madhyamika analysis, of Buddhism really, is to dissolve the metaphysical fictions that support our hypostatization of subjects and objects: "[by] coming to understand that objects and the Self are just a flow of experiences with no enduring elements set in opposition to each other (no duality), we attain enlightenment" (Williams 85). We set the whole wheel of suffering in motion when we commit ontologically to the fiction of subject (*atman*) and object (*svabhava*), but the suffering ceases when the belief dissolves.

QUESTIONS # For a Buddhist, there is much at stake in how one approaches texts. Reading texts, especially ones that attempt to destabilize the notion of independent existence, can become an edifying rather than a systematic activity if one engages in the deconstruction of text and reader as independent entities. This kind of reading does not bother asking what the true meaning of a text is; rather, it asks about the manner of the text's and reader's existence.

Rorty's idea of "strong textualism" is somewhat similar to what I've been calling Buddhist reading. For Rorty, "strong textualism" is based on "the pragmatist refusal to think of truth as correspondence to reality" ("Textualism" 151) and the interpretive freedom that results. In the absence of a real text or true meaning, the critic is free to do what he or she wants:

> The critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose. He makes the text refer to whatever is relevant to that purpose. He does this by imposing a vocabulary – a "grid," in Foucault's terminology – on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens. (151)

Rorty's depiction of textualism here makes it seem like a violation. The critic "beats" the text and "imposes" on it a "grid," which makes it sound like the critic's freedom is won at the expense of the text – the text becomes a mistreated prisoner. The problem here is that Rorty's language makes it sound like the text exists separately from the critic and *vice versa*. And for literary critics who do believe in the separation of text and reader, that independent text demands respect. You can't just use it to suit your own devices. But for Japanese Zen Buddhist Masters like Dogen, manipulating texts is *de rigueur*:

> One characteristic which *Shobogenzo* shares with other Zen writing is the way Dogen draws freely from Buddhist literature without concern for any context but that in which he is presently handling a story, saying, or technical term. This freedom includes the practice of partial quotation, using only so much of a given story or speech as is useful in conveying the intended message or impact of the moment. This practice seems to reflect the general Zen view of literature as being

> instrumental rather than sacred writ, allowing for a flexible exercise of possibilities in association and imagery. (Cleary, Introduction 6)

On one level, Dogen's cavalier use of texts stems from his rhetorical goal, which is "transformation of consciousness" (8). Dogen, like Buddha, employs *upaya*. However, the traditional literary critic (as I've internalized that tradition) has a very different goal and, consequently, employs a very different method. For the critic, the goal is knowledge: knowledge about the text and its content or knowledge about what the text says about its author or about the socio-historical context of its production. Whatever the object of knowledge, the text's integrity must be preserved. Interpretation of a passage is constrained by its context within the text as a whole, within the author's work as a whole, and within the historical context of its production. Dogen, however, is more interested in what a text can do than in what a text might say within a particular interpretive methodology.

Abandoning a methodology that preserves the integrity of the text seems like cheating, or, as Rorty observes, it seems like decadence ("Introduction" xxxix). Like Rorty's Platonists – who need ruling principles, centres, structures – and like his positivists – who need hard facts to separate truth from opinion – literary critics need their texts and their critical methods for accessing them. Really existing texts are what guide literary research; remaining true to texts is what guarantees that the research is more than just self-indulgence, more than just sophism or solipsism. What Rorty says of Platonists and positivists might also be said of literary critics: "For both, decadence is a matter of unwillingness to submit oneself to something 'out there' – to recognize that beyond the languages of men and women there is something to which these languages, and the men and women themselves, must try to be 'adequate'" (xxxix). The Devil himself may quote scripture, but what separates the Devil and the theologian is method. The Devil beats the text into whatever shape serves his diabolical purpose; the theologian (supposedly) reads passages within the context of the whole text and within the context of theological knowledge. Thus he or she preserves the integrity of God's words and comes closer to accessing the truth behind them. The literary critic approaches his or her texts similarly, that is, methodically.

However, from a Buddhist perspective, this textual idolatry, this trying to be adequate to something "out there," is an activity that causes suffering. For Dogen, it is not just that we should use texts to serve the goal of liberation in favor of respecting them as objects of knowledge; rather, according to Cleary, Dogen does not regard texts as entities that exist independently "out there" at all:

> All things are subject to causes and conditions, none are independent. [...] All are born from causes and conditions, and because of this they have no intrinsic nature of their own. Because of having no intrinsic nature, they are ultimately empty. Not clinging to them because they are ultimately empty is called transcendent wisdom. ("Great" 23)

According to Dogen, there is nothing in or behind texts to which we need to be or can be adequate. Texts do not exist independently. Moreover, approaching texts with a methodology that assumes their integrity is a form of clinging, a manifestation of *tanha*. From Dogen's perspective, then, intellectual work would be better off abandoning the desire for adequacy and entity-based knowledge altogether.

When the notion that there is a text or meaning that all critics are trying to access is abandoned, one realizes that critics are merely piling up descriptions. Rorty's pragmatism asserts "that any specification of a referent is going to be in some vocabulary. Thus one is really comparing two descriptions of a thing rather than a description with the thing-in-itself" ("Textualism" 154). One must be careful here not to replace the same old notion of truth with a new word – text. If you think that all we are talking about is texts, then you probably think that texts are things you can talk about, that there are texts "out there" that everyone is talking about. Rorty's language even seems to suggest this reluctance to give up on objectively present things. On the one hand, he argues that we have no access to "the thing-in-itself," but on the other hand, he suggests that there is a "thing" that stands behind our "descriptions." Also implied in his quotation is the notion that we have access to "descriptions," even if we do not have access to the thing-in-itself. But this notion does not get you any further than the notion of eternal Philosophical truth does if you assume that everyone has access to the same "descriptions of a thing" that move unchanged through time and space, independent of the minds that perceive them. Whether you call it the "thing-in-itself" or the "text" or the "description of a thing," any

notion of a thing that stands behind or supports various interpretations only leads to further grasping.

What I am trying to advocate is that we drop this notion that there is, in Rorty's words, an "unmediated vision of things as they are" (153) and that we avoid questions like "What does the text really say" that assume this kind of independent truth, replacing them with questions like "In what way does the text exist?" or "Who is it that reads?" that will challenge that assumption. Attempting to abandon the notion of texts as independent entities is not a simple conceptual acrobatic feat. From the perspective of Buddhist practice, one must look for how the view arises in perception and then challenge it with contrary views that seek not to replace old views with new ones, but to dissolve the need for views about the nature of reality altogether.

Buddhist doctrine is meant to do just that. Notions such as impermanence (*anitya*), no-self (*anatman*), suffering (*duhkha*), no-nature (*nihsvabhava*), emptiness (*sunyata*), and interdependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*) are all views meant to challenge our deeply cherished notions about reality. They are meant to unsettle us, jettison us from our "metaphysical comfort" zone. In the hands of the Madhyamika, language and concepts are employed like antiparticles to annihilate attachment to views of objective, value-free truth and reality. So as a researcher approaching Buddhist-flavoured texts, I have a choice to make about the goal of my research. If, like Malunkyaputta, my goal is knowledge about texts (or other metaphysical entities), then I can proceed with my research asking questions about Buddhism's ontological and epistemological views and about how those views have influenced Beat aesthetic practices. But, like Malunkyaputta, I found that these kinds of questions led only to agitation; they do not recognize that there is much at stake in the kinds of questions we decide to ask: "if we insist on interpreting [Buddhist] texts as a set of answers to epistemological or ontological questions – then we have missed the point. [...] we shall never appreciate [Buddhism's] attempt to release us from our obsession with the search for one Truth and one Reality" (Huntington 15). Buddhist texts invite readers to take out the poison arrow; they invite readers to open their eyes to the fact that there is no detached space for safe observation. The kind of reading we do and the kinds of questions we ask have consequences.

I must admit that it took me two years to get over my desire for ironic detachment from texts. To even consider that I could pursue a soteriological goal in my critical practice made me very uncomfortable. What value could a study have if I lost my objectivity, if I lost faith in the value of propositional knowledge? I felt like an anthropologist "going native." I was becoming a Buddhist, not a professional scholar. Well so be it. Annie Dillard pushed me over the edge:

> Write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality? (*Writing* 68)

If I were dying, would I want to read a study about the influence of Buddhism on Beat elegies? Probably not. But this kind of earnestness seemed laughable in the face of the scholarly ironic detachment that I had cultivated in my long bivouac in various English departments. Literary research was meant to be rigorous, thorough, true to the text. Every bit of knowledge squeezed from texts was inherently and unquestionably valuable and necessary. The problem was that all my research into Buddhism urged me to reexamine my scholarly detachment and the assumptions that supported it, urged me to re-envision myself as a man shot with a poison arrow. The only logical thing to do would be to do whatever it took to remove the arrow and suck out the poison.

So I am going Buddhist. I am confessing that I agree with Buddha's assessment of the world: life is suffering. I have seen the poison arrow. But I also feel Buddha's optimism that the arrow can be removed safely, that life is not inherently suffering: suffering is caused. The goal of my intellectual study, then, becomes understanding and removing the cause of suffering. In the Buddhist analysis, especially as Mahayana texts describe that analysis, the cause of suffering is ignorance (*avidya*) in our views about the nature of reality: "the foremost problem confronting man in his existential plight is his inability to understand the nature of things, including himself" (Cook 99). The cause of suffering lurks somewhere in our interpretation of everyday reality. This is the starting point for Buddhist reading practice, the suspicion that our "ordinary conception of reality is mistaken" (Eckel, *See* 85). The question, then, that will lead to the removal of the poison arrow is "how, or in what manner, [do] things exist?" (Cook 99). My Buddhist

reader is primarily interested in the nature of reality, and texts, like anything else, are part of that reality: "The authentic Zen practitioner would not study texts so much as he or she would study reality, in part by means of the texts that purport to present it in its fullness" (Wright 31). My Buddhist reading, then, formulates a very broad set of research questions that probe our fundamental assumptions about the existence of texts, authors, the referential world, and critics.

The choice of texts to work with is important. While all texts manifest phenomenal reality equally, some texts are more effective than others in challenging our "'commonsense' everyday world, riddled as it is with unconscious ontological commitments" (Loy, Introduction 4). The point is to bring those commitments into conscious analysis, observe how they create the conditions for suffering, and then dissolve them. The result is not new knowledge about the true nature of reality; rather, the desired result is abandonment of the thirst for views about the nature of reality. In that abandonment is the cessation of suffering. The Buddhist analysis of existence, then, is not like a scientific exploration of phenomena in order to discover new facts. The answer to the research question is preordained: we assume that things exist independently, that they have essential natures, but in analysis these essential natures are found to be empty – they are no-natures. Malcolm David Eckel summarizes the Buddhist answer in describing what a Buddha sees:

> [A Buddha sees] the "nature" or "identity" (*svabhava*) of the categories of phenomenal existence (*dharmas*). This nature or identity can be referred to as [...] Thusness (*tathata*) [...]. In the tradition of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, the nature or identity (*svabhava*) of things finally is that they have no nature (*nihsvabhava*), and this lack of nature constitutes their Emptiness (*sunyata*). (*See* 103)

From the point of view of knowledge gathering, Buddhist reading, which tries to reveal the emptiness of text and reader, is reductive. Every text has the same essential nature, which is no nature. It might be argued, then, that Buddhist reading is simply a form of reductive propaganda. And I would not disagree. But the problem is that any critical method that seeks to avoid being mere propaganda must assume that there is some kind of truth or reality "out there" to which one must remain true. What the Buddhist reader does

is try to demonstrate that not only is there is no basis for this onto-theological assumption, not only are there no inherently existing objects to study, but the very assumption of substantial objects and independent truths is the cause of suffering. The Buddhist analysis liberates one from a world of isolated objects: the result is an experience of the world that is more open. The search for knowledge does not open up the world; it reduces it to a prison of objects and selves bound in the chains of alienation. No-nature is the key to release.

READING # It's only quarter after six: already the western sky above MacDonald Bridge is dark. November. As the Earth wheels through solar-curved space and the planet's tilt leans the northern hemisphere further and further from the sun, the weather here in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia turns miserable, all wind and rain and darkness.

I'm standing on Alderney Street, waiting for the #61 bus to take me across the harbour to Halifax. A muscular wind pushes in off the ocean past Devils and McNabs islands, tunnels between office buildings, and pelts my face with chips of rain: at high enough velocities, liquids manifest the same qualities as solids. Headlights smear in my rain-soaked vision, and leaf litter hurries by – meteoric street lamp flashes. I'm happy to step out of the blowing cold into the subliminal fluorescent glow of an aging Metro Transit bus.

On forbidding nights such as this, it's difficult to imagine why Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, founder of the *Vajradhatu* community (now Shambhala International) and lineage holder in an ancient Tibetan Buddhist tradition, decided that Halifax should serve as the spiritual centre for his school. The story – as I've pieced it together from oral and written sources – is that Trungpa was traveling around North America in the 70s, looking for a place where he could relocate his community. It's unclear why Boulder – where he first set up shop after exile in India and the UK – failed to satisfy, but the winds eventually blew him to Nova Scotia for a visit in 1977. Nobody really knows why he finally decided to pull up stakes and move to Halifax in 1986 – in fact, for Shambhala members, "Why Nova Scotia? has been a favorite sangha party game for nearly twenty years" (Swick 19) – but in looking for where Buddhism might best take root in North

America, he settled on this tough, elemental land and this fairly conservative culture. Some say he saw Nova Scotia in a vision (Swick 18); some say he was attracted to the lack of material wealth and the low-key dignity of the people (Swick 12); some say he liked the harsh weather to keep practitioners in touch with basic, elemental realities; and some say he was looking to escape right-wing, conservative, materialistic America for a sane and safe place (Swick 23). Whatever the reason, Trungpa saw Nova Scotia as a sacred space where the *dharma* could thrive (Swick 24), so he moved the home of Shambhala International to Tower Road in the south end of Halifax, on the eastern edge of the continent.

As bus #61 carries me across the sightless waters churning invisibly below the MacDonald Bridge, I look south-east past the glossy lights lining the harbour's lips. Beyond the lighthouse on Georges Island and beyond the flood lights of the HalTerm container port, the continental shelf slopes gently downwards through darkness into unexplored depths. There is only night sea from here all the way to Europe and Africa.

Trungpa's inscrutable decision to settle in Halifax is fortuitous for me. Incredibly, I can take night bus #61 from the unremarkable streets of downtown Dartmouth to a door on Tower Road that opens in on a lineage of Tibetan Buddhism that stretches back through 2500 years of Himalayan illumination to the Buddha himself. Tonight, I'm traveling to the Shambhala Centre for another lesson on *shamatha* meditation, the meditation of "peaceful abiding." From Shambhala teachers, I've been learning the nuts and bolts of stilling the mind – the first practical step on the journey to awakening.

Outwardly, *shamatha* practice is simple: I sit cross-legged on a cushion, spine erect, hands on top of thighs, shoulders loose but not hunched, neck and head held upright, chin slightly tucked, eyelids half open, gaze unfixed. I am the still point of the turning universe as late autumn wind and rain lash the windows of this warm and brightly lit meditation hall.

Inwardly, however, things are anything but simple and peaceful for beginning meditators like me. The practice sounds so easy: place your mind on your breath and keep it there. But so many obstacles arise while trying to maintain this mindfulness. The mind continuously generates and slips away on a torrent of narrative fantasies, emotions, and

discursive thoughts. While the body rests like a mountain, the mind careens like a waterfall (Mipham 61).

In *shamatha*, though, once you realize that wandering thoughts have lured mindfulness away from the breath, you simply acknowledge the thoughts, extract your mindfulness from them, and return to your breath in the present moment. The mind wanders; you gently bring it back. Sakyong Mipham, Trungpa's son and the current head of Shambhala International, likens *shamatha* practice to training a horse (5). Through *shamatha*, you train the mind to move peacefully; you calm its tendency to buck at the present moment, and you keep it from path straying, from searching out fantasized pastures, from grazing every thought and emotion that arises.

I've been sitting every day for a few weeks now, and I must admit that I'm a crappy meditator. I can't abide with my breath for more than a few moments before discovering that my mindfulness has run off – incorrigible truant – with a string of thoughts. Employing a gentle but frustrated movement of mind, I return to my breath, settle in. Suddenly, I'm aware that I've been reminiscing about my trip to Ireland two years ago. Return to the breath. Now I'm worrying about what I need to accomplish on this dissertation tomorrow. Return. Now I'm frustrated with the throbbing pain in my legs. Oops, crap, back to the breath.

According to Mipham, in these beginning stages, *shamatha* practice strengthens awareness as it strengthens present moment mindfulness. Awareness (*sheshin* in Tibetan), which Mipham also translates as "presently knowing" (49), refers to the activity of mind that realizes, "hey, I'm no longer focused on my breath; I've been caught up in discursive thoughts about a Snyder poem for the last while." Once I'm aware of my mind's location, mindfulness (*trenpa*), the activity of placing the mind on an object, can extract itself from discursive thoughts and refocus on the breath. In Mipham's horse training analogy, "Awareness knows when the horse has bolted, and tells mindfulness to bring it back" (49). Even from just a few weeks of sitting, I've noticed that awareness quickly improves its ability to catch a wandering mind: I don't lose breath mindfulness for quite as long before awareness throws its lasso. As my ability to catch a wayward mind improves, so will my mindfulness. What now seems like two separate mind movements will later feel like one: peaceful abiding.

However, on this blustery autumn night, I've been caught up in a line of discursive thought that troubles me. During the day, I work on this dissertation: I write, I read, I think. But tonight, sitting on the cushion, I'm asking my mind to engage in a different kind of activity, one that seems antithetical to the production of critical thoughts and their expression as pages of text. The movements of mind that I cultivate and value most in my dissertation writing practice are the very movements of mind that I seek to devalue through my practice of mindfulness and awareness. On the cushion, if I start to think, say, about the consequences of applying ecology theory to literary criticism, then my awareness kicks in and says, "ok, I've got some pretty interesting thoughts on the go, and following where they lead may produce even more interesting thoughts, but my practice here is breath mindfulness." Once I'm aware of them, my thoughts evaporate like tiny cold exhalations in a spacious winter sky as I return to my breath. This is good meditation practice, but it's counter-productive of dissertation writing. If, like a Buddhist monk on retreat, I spent all day detaching from discursive thoughts, I would never finish this dissertation, would never even wonder for long about the challenges Buddhist theory and practice pose to literary criticism. So what is a Buddhist reader to do?

#

With the evening breeze,
The water laps against
The heron's legs. (Buson qtd. in Blyth, Vol. II, 785)

One of the on-going questions I'm grappling with is what to do with texts as a Buddhist. Buddhists do write and read plenty of texts, so there is more to Buddhism than just sitting in silence. *Haiku*, for example, is a poetic form with roots in Buddhism (Japanese Zen), and the traditional methods of writing and reading *haiku* emerge from Buddhist practice. *Haiku* is one attempt to use and produce texts according to Buddhist principles.

Take Buson's *haiku* above. The text conveys no startling metaphors or similes to unravel, no violent juxtapositions to discuss, no historical references to gloss. The poem's brevity and its avoidance of familiar poetic devices give the critic few footholds for critical commentary. However, this otherwise unremarkable text is, perhaps, remarkable for the vividness of its image. In a few words it evokes a full, if elementary, sensory

experience: the feel of the breeze, the sound of the water, the sight of the heron. But there are no poetic devices that trope or turn the mind away from the image and no concepts disconnected from the sensory experience to spark discursive thoughts. In my attempt to formulate a meaning, the poem forces me back again and again to the simple, insignificant image of a heron standing in water.

While Buson's poem avoids poetic devices familiar to literature in English, it does not avoid device altogether. A reader so inclined can place the text in a Japanese cultural matrix in order to evoke a connotation beyond the literal and the personal. In *haiku* tradition, the word "breeze" functions as a *kigo* or seasonal word. For a reader versed in *haiku* conventions, "breeze" evokes the mood of summer and links Buson's poem to all those *haiku* that contain summer *kigo*. But this conventional knowledge does not lead to an experience of "aha, so that's what Buson meant." All that this conventional knowledge does is either deepen the mood evoked or dull it with wandering thoughts.

With the evening breeze,
The water laps against
The heron's legs.

According to R.H. Blyth, readers should not approach a *haiku* as they would habitually approach a sonnet, a lyric, or an epic. In fact, to emphasize a different kind of reading practice, Blyth takes *haiku* out of the categories of poetry and literature altogether: "A haiku is not a poem, it is not literature; it is a hand beckoning, a door half-opened, a mirror wiped clean. It is a way of returning to nature, to our moon nature, our cherry blossom nature, our falling leaf nature, in short, to our Buddha nature" (Vol I, 243). Blyth's rhetoric here is a kind of proscriptive posturing. From a Buddhist perspective, the categories "poem" and "literature" do not have any inherent nature; they are arbitrary concepts, lines drawn in the sands of utterance. If I want to call *haiku* literature, Mr. Blyth cannot stop me. But what Blyth recognizes is that these categories play a role in how readers orient their minds to a textual object and how they work with a "poem," that is, what kinds of thoughts and emotions they generate and value. So Blyth's attempt to shift *haiku* out of these conventional categories is an attempt to move the poetic text into a

trans-categorical mental space, where the perceived text meets fewer habitual responses and expectations.

What Blyth suggests we do with a haiku is not generate and escape into a waterfall of "ideas, ideals, and abstractions" (Vol I, 4); rather, he suggests we use the poem as "a way of returning [...] to our Buddha nature." For Blyth, *haiku* reading should precipitate a (re)union of perceiver and perceived object, where discursive thoughts do not encumber the mind's experience of moon or cherry blossoms or falling leaves or herons or poems. For Blyth, *haiku* and Zen seek the same experience: "that state of mind in which we are not separated from other things, are indeed identical with them" (Vol I, 5). Blyth's four volumes of *haiku* translations and commentary are filled with mystical mumbo-jumbo phrases like this one about unity and oneness with all things, but what I think he is trying to get at is an experience that is quite ordinary, even if it is quite rare – present moment mindfulness.

> With the evening breeze,
> The water laps against
> The heron's legs.

Matsuo Basho, the seventeenth-century Japanese poet who was instrumental in developing the theory and practice of *haiku*, emphasizes mindfulness in his *haiku* instruction to students. One of his famous aphorisms about *haiku* writing, which his disciple Doho recorded, can be read as mindfulness-awareness instruction: "Learn about pines from pines, and about bamboos from bamboos" (Ueda 38). The instruction at first seems mundane and unhelpful, perhaps even cryptic, but after sitting for hours on a cushion trying to remain mindful of my breath, I can better understand the difficulty and novelty implied in learning about pines directly from pines, not indirectly from discursive thoughts about pines based on concepts and categories. Basho is challenging his students to remain present in their sensory experience of a pine, a challenge Lucien Stryk echoes in his discussion of *haiku* practice:

> In the earliest stage of training the disciple might be asked to point the mind at various objects, continuing until it stops wandering, associating, metaphorizing – in short, wobbling. The mind penetrates the object ever more deeply, until one

> with it; the state of *muga* [non-dual experience] is attained. ("Introduction to *The Dumpling Field*" 246)

Stryk's description of *haiku* training also mirrors the description of *shamatha* that I received at the Shambhala Centre: stay with the breath; don't get caught up in fantasies, emotions, and discursive thoughts. If your mind wobbles – if your mind generates thoughts and emotions – simply let them go and return to the object of mindfulness:

> With the evening breeze,
> The water laps against
> The heron's legs.

But the mind so easily wobbles: evening breeze on my cheek in Frontenac Park – camping in summer – rough granite stones to make a fire ring – breeze is a summer *kigo* – Basho's cicada poem, Issa's snail climbing Mt. Fuji – heron's legs make concentric ripples of their own – sunset cloud light diffused on tiny bay's mirror surface – when herons eat fish you can hear fish bones crack in the heron's long throat – heron eating on a dock near Bon Echo Park – get back to the poem – the lack of metaphor makes this poem anti-transcendent – like modernism, only images are not dry and solid like Hulme's – not like Picasso's cave-drawing bull either and its Platonic essence assumption – the mind does not move from heron to some other meaning; it stays with heron – I'm hungry for lunch – I can't believe how healthy soldier beans are – great poverty food – hey, poverty could work as a kind of Buddhist literary critical stance: you calm the "wealth" of discursive thoughts, experience the poem as the poet experienced the evening heron…

In its relation to the poem, the mind scatters even more than I've portrayed. Discursive thoughts tumble in all directions. The traditional critic's job is to pick through those thoughts like a heron stepping through reeds, hunting for the ideas that sound like conventional criticism. The critic ignores the personal memories and emotions and stalks the more academic-sounding thoughts, expanding them, researching them in other texts. In writing, the full fecundity of thought never finds fulfillment as text. Most of the chatter evaporates forever, but the critic clings to and preserves some. Unlike a meditator, the critic does not abide peacefully with the poem; he or she ropes together a selection of thoughts to create a new text meant to spark even more thought. The critic cultivates

thought, which invariably leads away from the present experience of a poem, instead of returning to the object of mindfulness:

> With the evening breeze,
> The water laps against
> The heron's legs.

The problem with following discursive thoughts is that we lose our way in time. When discursive thoughts knock our attention off its seat in the present, we wander in divisions of past-present-future – grammatical time. When we abide presently experiencing, there is boundless dynamic time, not a determinate long past, an indeterminate long future, and an impossibly short present moment. *Haiku* writing and reading enters that impossibly short present moment and lets the tiger out of its cage. *Haiku* master Teijo Nakamura (1900-1988): "Today's flower is today's flower; today's wind is today's wind" (qtd. in Donegan 202). We are so lost in discursive thought that we only smell yesterday's flower, feel tomorrow's wind.

Haiku challenges writer and reader to locate the present: "When our mind isn't crowded by discursive thoughts, we can write about what is immediately around us" (Donegan 204). How many times during the day do we lose this immediacy? We cross the street without really looking and a car screeches to a halt. We hike through sunny autumn woods but miss seeing it: "Did you see that deer grazing between the smoldering red of that maple and the blazing yellow of that birch?" No, we missed it; we were lost in thought. So why do we as critics, as absent-minded students of literature, desire to escape into discursive thought? What are we missing when we lose the poem in front of us? What do we think we will find "out there" that isn't already and always here?

> With the evening breeze,
> The water laps against
> The heron's legs.

Shamatha and *haiku* reading and writing share the same goal: clarity. Literary criticism too seems to share this goal: make the poem clearer. But two different kinds of clarity are in operation here. In *shamatha*, as breath mindfulness stabilizes, "We can see clearly what is. This clarity is able to perceive phenomena very directly. What usually hides it is the

discursive activity of thoughts and emotions. As the chatter begins to dissipate, clarity has an opportunity to arise" (Mipham 54-55). Clarity sought in meditation and in *haiku* is clarity from a proliferation of conceptual, discursive, and emotional interference. Basho reinforces this in a didactic *haiku*:

> How admirable,
> He who thinks not, "Life is fleeting"
> When he sees the lightning flash! (Blyth III, 702)

For Basho, poetry should not translate experience into abstract conceptual thought. The poet should not seek to ferry the mind from the near shore of phenomena to the far shore of general or universal truths. If the mind wanders from the present experience of lightning to a thought of impermanence, the poet returns to the lightning flash. Basho's *haiku*, then, invites the reader to adopt the poet's mental orientation of peacefully abiding in the present, discouraging the desire to follow discursive thoughts.

> With the evening breeze,
> The water laps against
> The heron's legs.

But for the traditional literary critic, discursive thought is where one discovers a text's significance. A critic continually moves back and forth between a text and thoughts about the text. He or she is a translator, carrying the text into new discursive lands to reduce ambiguity or ferrying the text from its present context to a different textual matrix in order to see what new thoughts arise. A critic does not learn about the text from the text; he or she learns about the text in the process of translation.

Before you conclude that I'm trying somehow to force an unholy marriage between Buddhism and the old New Criticism, let me put your mind at ease. The New Critic is still a translator; he or she always relates to the text discursively and thus dualistically. The New Critic may seem to focus on the present text by reducing the range of meaningful contexts for reading, but the critical activity remains one of generating discursive thoughts about the text. The New Critical text is not "today's" text – the close reader still assumes that meaning resides in the internal structure of a poem and ignores

the dependence of text and interpretation on conditions "external" to the poem, on an embedded reading performance. The Buddhist reader, however, abides in the reading moment and remains mindful of the poem's and the reader's contingent existence even if he or she chooses to jump from thought to thought and text to text. When a Buddhist reader achieves mindfulness in reading, the poem and reader as reified conceptual entities fall out of the experience:

> With the evening breeze,
> The water laps against
> The heron's legs.

The motivation behind this kind of meditative reading is not primarily the generation of new conceptual knowledge; rather, it is liberation from suffering. Abiding with a text, avoiding the temptation to attach ourselves to discursiveness, leads to an experience of selfless union. Abiding with the breath does the same. Mipham notes that meditators "aspire [nice pun] to reach the point where we can say, 'I *am* the breath,' as opposed to 'I know the breath'" (56). As corny as it would be to claim "I am the text," the goal of Buddhist reading is nevertheless an undivided experience something like that. In making knowledge generation the goal ("I know the poem"), we maintain the habitual notion of a substantial knower. We can try to hide ourselves in some kind of critical objectivity, some depersonalizing methodology, but the notion of substance stands under that kind of practice too. Any dualistic thought, according to Buddhists, leads to suffering: "The less duality we experience, the less we will suffer" (Mipham 56). It seems, then, that there is very little we can say as Buddhist critics except, "hey, look":

> With the evening breeze,
> The water laps against
> The heron's legs.

For Buddhists, there is much at stake in what you choose to do with your mind. Unarguably, there is much pleasure in discursive contemplation. I can remember the fiery thirst for knowledge Blake's poems first ignited in me as an adolescent – I still have a weakness for thoughts of eternity; I still wonder if Blake's words hide some redemptive secret. But for Buddhists, there is danger in discursive indulgence:

> Our root fantasy is that "I" am real and that there's a way to make "me" happy. The reason we meditate is to let that fantasy unravel. After a while, we notice that much of what we took to be real and permanent about ourselves isn't so solid – it's a string of thoughts we hold together with tremendous effort. We've built an identity out of a thin web of concepts. (Mipham 68)

Our self concept floats on a continuous stream of discursive thought. Meditation teaches experientially that the "I" is no more than a habitual pattern of thought, a kind of possessive prefix we attach to all our thoughts and emotions. Mipham notes that through the practice of breath mindfulness, we begin to dissolve the substance illusion "just by seeing that the web of thoughts we solidified as 'me' is actually a series of vibrations" (63). The self that we cherish, the self that seems to remain unchanged through space and time, is a standing wave of thought. It is an "ingrained pattern," a "habit" that can be broken (Mipham 94). Mindfulness practice stills the waters of the mind – settles the standing wave of self. And what opens up is nothing special: "It's a moment of freshness, a full involvement in the immediate present. Meditation trains us in the awesome power of the mind to be completely present with what is happening *now*" (Mipham 188). And right now there is no reader, no writer, no text – just this utterance on the edge of silence:

> With the evening breeze,
> The water laps against
> The heron's legs.

DUHKHA # There are two kinds of "descent" that I'm trying to trace in Ramazani's modern elegists. One is metaphysical: notions of an unseen, transcendent, spiritual reality have collapsed under the weight of what Hardy calls "rude reality" – God is no longer a living belief able to shape action and desire; he is merely a "myth." All we have left is the physical, empirical universe – a world of death without rebirth. The other is psychological: the mechanisms of substitutive mourning, which Freud argues redirect the libido outward to new objects of attachment, break down, and the libido collapses in on the self. The result is a narcissistic identification with the lost object and an inability to mourn substitutively: mourning becomes stuck, unable to rise, because in the confusion of

self and lost object, letting go of the lost object becomes tantamount to letting go of the self (Homans 17).

The causal relationship between these changes in metaphysical belief and psychology is not entirely clear. I'm tempted to argue that loss of faith is the cause and melancholia the effect, but I suspect that the two factors fuel each other: the trauma of loss and the violent emotions of grief probably fuel the loss of faith in metaphysical consolations as much as that loss of faith fuels the tendency towards melancholic mourning. Whatever the case, in an elegist like Owen, these two shifts – metaphysical and psychological – go hand-in-hand.

For example, in "Futility," Owen undermines the traditional elegiac trope of the sun as symbol of spiritual and libidinal renewal – in the process, he expresses the kind of violent grief that seems to arise from the raw, inconsolable experience of physical death. At the beginning of the poem, Owen tries to invoke the sun's powers of resurrection, but his call to drag a dead soldier into the light – "Move him into the sun" (58) – in order to wake him from death is, of course, absurdly futile. Owen's elegy reduces the solar trope to its bare physicality, severs vehicle from tenor, and reveals the trope's impotence in the face of the material realities of mass death. The poem's scornfully ironic treatment of traditional forms of consolation betrays a deep grief and anger that compensatory mourning is powerless to ease – the dead stay dead, no matter what "The kind old sun" (58) does.

Owen's elegy is partly the product of a changing metaphysical sensibility. As Ramazani notes, "the elegiac image of a renewing light had come to seem a sentimental evasion of the reality principle" (74). For Owen and other elegists of the twentieth century, what constitutes the "reality principle" becomes much more focused on the material world. As a result, Owen refuses in "Futility" to turn from the physical finality of death, refuses to look away with a trope towards a soothing symbolic or spiritual realm: neither God nor the State nor the elegiac tradition can authentically provide consolation. In the end, a machine-gun burst of angry questions tears to shreds the elegy's first vain hopes of apotheosis – his elegy to an unnamed soldier remains unresolved, questioning the point of life itself. Unlike traditional elegies, "Futility" discovers no higher purpose in death, no easy meaning in the cold clays of World War I trenches: "Was it for this the

clay grew tall? / --O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth's sleep at all?" (58).

For elegists like Hardy and Owen and the moderns that follow them, consolatory mourning no longer works – the old elegiac ritual is impotent to direct libido to new objects of desire. Part of the reason for this is because their basic sense of what is real, their "reality principle," has shifted. Authenticity in mourning – the power to move emotions – depends in part on a poet's and a culture's basic ontology. When God became a myth instead of a reality for certain modern poets, he no longer possessed the power to influence them on the level of desire. To modern elegists, what is real is not spiritual substance but physical substance: Hardy's "rude reality" and Owen's "clay." The elegies that carry emotional resonance within this physical ontology are those that, as Ramazani notes, don't "[betray] terra firma for a heavenly flight" (346): "The dead undergo no spiritual transcendence but remain tenaciously material, bodies bound to the earth" (338). Physical substance offers no hope for permanence or individual continuity – the dead stay dead.

But why should this shift in ontological belief result in melancholic mourning? As Freud's "On Transience" reveals, "aching despondency" is not an inevitable result when the promise of eternal life dissolves, so why is melancholic mourning so pervasive in modern elegies? The answer to this question is complex, and I do not raise it here for the purpose of answering it in an exhaustive way. Rather, I raise the question in order to explore what I see as a metaphysical belief lingering behind the brute physicality of modern melancholic mourning. Wrapped up in the "tenaciously material" view of death in modern elegies is the metaphysical idea of a substantial self. Elegists may have lost faith in the soul, but they have not lost faith in the self – in fact, much of the emotional turmoil and suffering (*duhkha*) of melancholic mourning – its masochism and violence – can be understood in Buddhist terms as the result of clinging to and protecting *atman*. As Lama Govinda observes, "self-mortification [...] is but the aggrandizement of self-importance by inverted means" (82). In grief, the self urgently desires protection because it is confronted not only with the terrifying realization that it may not exist forever but also the more horrifying thought that it may never have existed at all (see Loy, *Lack* xi).

I'm making a big leap here, so before I push my point any further, I want to back up a bit and reinterpret what happens to the belief structure underlying the modern elegy from a Buddhist point of view. What Ramazani portrays as a loss of faith in transcendence, as a return to a primarily physical reality, is for the Buddhist more accurately conceived as a shift from one metaphysical view to another, not a shift away from metaphysical views entirely. For example, in negating the soul (eternal life for the self) and adhering to the physical "fact" of the self's death, elegists have not rid themselves of metaphysical beliefs – they have not discovered solid ontological clay; rather, they've moved from one extreme view to another, from eternalism (immortal soul) to annihilationism (mortal self). What underlies both these views is an unexamined faith in a substantial and transcendent self, in an entity that is born, persists through time and space, and (perhaps) dies. Modern and traditional elegies require faith in this entity, this *atman*, but Buddhism calls its existence into question, pointing out that self (like God) is a useful fiction – a mere functional interpretation of experience, not a real thing.

These views of eternalism and annihilationism are well-known to Buddhists; in fact, they are the very views that Madhyamika (literally, "the middle way") seeks to slip between. The antidote to these views is *anatman*, which Loy summarizes as the view that "We cannot die because we were never born. Anatman is thus a middle way between the extremes of eternalism (the self survives death) and annihilationism (the self is destroyed at death)" (Loy, *Lack* 22). From a Buddhist point of view, then, you can read traditional and modern elegies as dramatizations of the various metaphysical and psychological strategies that *atman* employs to protect its own symbolic or fictional existence. In traditional elegies, various forms of eternalism carry emotional weight: self survives in heaven, in nature, or in the symbolic order of poetry. In modern elegies, however, annihilationism resonates most powerfully: when the heart stops, the self stops forever – but the mourner's sense of self-existence persists in melancholic mourning.

Atman craves being, and it will secure a sense of its own existence in the face of potential non-existence even if it means "profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings" (Freud, "Mourning" 244) – all the symptoms Freud lists for

melancholia. In fact, one of the key features in Freud's description of melancholia involves the ego experiencing part of itself as an object: "in [the melancholic] one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object" ("Mourning" 247). In effect, part of the ego identifies with a lost loved object instead of working through the loss and displacing libido onto a new object. Consequently, the libido is withdrawn into the ego. Any ambiguous feelings for the lost object, then, battle it out within the divided ego: "In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification" ("Mourning" 249). The altered ego becomes the libido's object of desire – and the sense of object permanence that libido craves is maintained internally. One might understand melancholia, then, as a defense mechanism: facing the possibility of non-existence without externalizing consolations, the self protects itself through a "narcissistic identification with the object" ("Mourning" 249). However, the price of melancholia is high – there is tremendous pain and suffering – but that suffering perhaps reinforces the feeling of being, the one possession that self and desire cannot lose. So when external objects betray the self with their impermanence and when all faith in object transcendence is lost, the self turns inward to maintain its sensation of existence and permanence.

The story of the elegy that emerges from Sacks' and Ramazani's influential works, then, can be read as an oscillation between two metaphysical and psychological extremes: eternalism and annihilationism on the one hand and consolatory and melancholic mourning on the other. For Ramazani, these extremes operate both in traditional and modern elegies – the difference is one of emphasis. In traditional elegies, the mourner often authenticates his or her final resolution by passing through moments of doubt and resistance to consolation: "even elegies that end triumphantly, such as Spenser's 'Astrophel' and Milton's 'Lycidas,' mute their resolutions through deliberately artificial reversals and through vacillations between 'normal' and melancholic mourning" (9). Traditional elegies wrest their consolations (more or less self-consciously) from the jaws of despair and annihilation. In more modern elegies like Hardy's and Owen's, however, annihilationism and melancholic mourning become dominant. Modern elegies, then, still operate within the same basic metaphysical and psychological structure as

traditional elegies – they just slide along a continuum towards the opposite extreme: "Despite its melancholic proclivity, the modern elegy continues the ancient interplay between melancholic and consolatory mourning, some poems tending more in one direction, others moving dialectically between the two" (Ramazani 31). The modern elegy also continues the interplay between belief in spiritual (or symbolic) substance as ontologically primary and belief in material substance as primary. Either way, belief in substance underwrites both the traditional and modern elegy: threatened with extinction or enshrined in the stars, the self persists beyond doubt.

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I must admit, talking about death and mourning in these abstract, schematic terms feels more than a little inauthentic. But I think indulging in this kind of theoretical flight is instructive if for no other reason than it reveals that even in our age of doubt and skepticism, we've clung to death as the one thing beyond doubt and metaphysical belief. Systems of truth and philosophy rise and fall; solid notions of right and wrong arise and pass away; desires and meanings come and go; but death remains unchanged for all people in all places in all times. When all else fails, at least we know that there is one inescapable fact. Oddly enough, death is our substance, our ontological ground – the one thing of which we are certain (even if our actions tend not to take it into account).

Ironically, our certainty about death is just as much a certainty about life – it's nice to be sure about the existence of death because it implies the existence of an entity that can die: death is life for the self. In fact, when a guy like Peter Homans says "Death is the primary reality" (2), it feels kind of good on some level – in that certainty about reality, self can find a ground, even if it's temporary. But it's a tragic situation: we seem to need death and all its suffering in order to prop up our belief in a substantial self. Perhaps this system of belief works fine when your belief in self extends beyond physical death, but things get dicey (psychologically speaking) when you eliminate belief in spiritual substance. Death implies life, sure, but it also takes that life away.

I think it's unfortunate that our loss of faith in spiritual substance has not spilled over into a loss of faith in material substance. We've thrown off our certainty about eternal life, but we've retreated into a certainty about eternal death. However, death is not

something that exists on its own, independent of our interpretations of experience; it requires a belief in material substance, requires something that is born and persists. But where is this entity that is born and persists through space and time? Here is where Buddhism pulls the rug out from beneath eternalism and annihilationism – where Buddhism questions the metaphysical assumption that supports our certainty about death as the "primary reality": "We cannot die because we were never born" (Loy, *Lack* 22). Yes, the heart stops pumping blood, the lungs cease to draw breath, and the neurons stop firing – all the conditions for consciousness and bodily action evaporate – but in that body and in that mind there never was an unchanging kernel existing and persisting independently; there never was anything that could die: "'neither the 'I' nor any sentient being or insentient thing ever arises or passes away" (Huntington 90-91). The lost self is a conceptual interpretation, a mirage. In this emptiness of self lies our deepest fear, but also the Buddhist door to liberation – to walk through it, though, is to abandon everything we hold dear.

> Realize that the body is impermanent like a clay vessel. Know that phenomena are without inherent existence, like mirages. Having destroyed the poisonous weapons of attachment – attractive like flowers – you will pass beyond even the sights of death. (Buddha, qtd. in Dalai Lama, *Advice* 159)

ANATMAN # I want to ask a simple question: where does a poem come from?

I'm looking at my copy of Snyder's *No Nature*. I've got the book open to "Burning the Small Dead."

I want to point out something about assumptions before I go any further, though. In order to ask this simple question, I need to assume that I can divide the world into poem and not-poem. I need to be able to find the poem in order to talk about where it came from: something came from somewhere. So my question assumes *a priori* that the poem is findable, that is, that the poem exists independently.

Entity discrimination (i.e., finding the poem) is crucial to any project that wishes to formulate and attach new predicates to an entity. In fact, according to Fenner, entity identification and predication go hand-in-hand: "Thought arises in dependence on entity identification, and entity identification depends on the ascription of predicate(s) to an

entity, such that define it, in the sense of giving it boundaries that mark it off from other entities" (105). Conceptual or categorical thought proceeds on this discriminatory predication, the linking of entity (subject) and features (predicates): "Entity recognition depends on a conceptual (pre-verbal and perhaps frequently unconscious) location and ascription of features to an entity that leads to class inclusion" (Fenner 105). The question about a poem's origination, then, has already (to some extent) done the work of discrimination: "entities are abstracted from the field of experience in dependence on their perceived possession of predicates appropriate to entities comprising different classes of entities" (Fenner 105). Any further predication of an entity depends on an initial set of predicates. There is no pure entity (subject) apart from features (predicates): thought depends on the mutual arising of subject and predicate – one does not arise before the other.

The first move I want to make in pursuing this question, then, is to define what I mean by "a poem." To keep the discussion grounded, I am going to talk about the copy of "Burning the Small Dead" in front of me.

My first instinct is to define this "poem" simply as the collection of words laid out on the page, page 95 to be precise. The words on the left-hand page (94) belong to a poem called "Fire in the Hole," and the words on the reverse (96) belong to "Foxtail Pine." Those too are poems, but their words do not belong to this particular poem. How do I know which words belong to which poems? The only real clue I have is the title, which is set off from the rest of the text, all in capital letters and in a bigger font. The page is not a reliable boundary because "Fire in the Hole" starts on the previous page (93) and spills over onto the next one (94). There is a lot of space between the last word on page 95 and the bottom of the page, but that does not necessarily mean that the poem ends there. However, if I turn the page, there is another title, all in caps and in a bigger font – so I know that "Burning the Small Dead" fits all on one page.

Nobody really thinks about the question of where a poem starts and finishes – we take it for granted. But if this edition of *No Nature* had removed the titles, we would not know where one poem stopped and another began. And in Snyder's "long poem" *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, we are encouraged to read all the individual poems

(they all have titles) as parts of a larger whole. The point is that there is nothing internal to "Burning the Small Dead" that defines its limits, that guarantees its independence.

You can try to define the beginning and end of the poem grammatically or syntactically, but this poem does not even end with a period or a full sentence. In fact, there is only one complete sentence in the poem. On the whole, the poem's grammar and punctuation do not conform to conventional rules: the first participle lacks a subject and an auxiliary verb, the semi-colon does not really function at all, and the last two lines seem to lack a verb. Grammar and syntax provide no help in locating an "objective" set of limits for the poem – they don't even help reduce interpretive ambiguity. We simply read the title, the blank space at the bottom of the page, and the title on the next page as rough boundary markers: start here, finish here.

Ok. So I've more or less divided the world into poem and not-poem. Anything outside of the book is obviously not-poem: computer, desk lamp, coffee mug are definitely not-poem – they aren't even made of words. Anything not on page 95 is also not this particular poem. The boundary lines are not completely firm: I have to turn the page to make sure there is no more poem there, but I can draw a circle around these words, leaving out the blank space below the last line and the page number. There. The poem is an independent entity.

But is the page part of the poem or not? This is trickier. I can't remove the ink of the letters from the page, so I'll have to include the paper as part of the poem. The poem, then, is ink and page, from the title to the last line. I could cut the poem out of the book and I could still call it the same poem: ink and page are the essential elements. If you removed either, the poem in front of me could not exist. Likewise, the poem needs some kind of space to occupy. Oh, and the conditions can't be too wet or too hot, otherwise paper and ink would turn to pulp or ignite.

Back up a bit, though. In order to recognize a title (the poem's boundary line) as a title, I have to possess some basic knowledge of literary conventions and graphic design. A line of text all caps and in a larger font size does not inherently mean "title" or "poem-boundary." As readers, we automatically interpret some text as a title, but that interpretation is a learned one. So a poem as an independent entity depends not just on ink

and paper, but also on my knowledge of basic conventions – where a poem starts and stops.

Here's my problem right now: is the poem the same as or different from all these conditions I've named so far? Is the poem the same as the paper? Not exactly. The paper alone is not the poem. So is the poem the letter-shaped ink? This seems closer – the words are what we interpret to make sense out of the poem. But, like I've said, you can't have the ink without the page, and even if you could find some way to lift the ink off of the page, you still need the space surrounding the letters in order to make sense of them. The ink alone cannot be the poem. So the poem is a composite of conditions. Even ignoring the fact that the paper and ink must occupy a space friendly to the continued existence of paper and ink, there is something strange going on here. The ink alone does not contain the poem, nor does the paper alone, but put these two conditions together, and you have the poem – the whole is something other than the sum of its parts.

What is emerging here is an odd position: the poem depends on its parts, but it only arises if those parts are organized in a certain pattern. The parts can exist apart from the whole (although, if they are not part of a whole, then they cannot be considered parts), but the whole can't exist apart from its parts. So the whole is not the same as its parts, but it is not entirely different either because its existence cannot be found where the parts are absent. In deciding, then, what is poem and what not-poem, I'm led into a strange contradiction concerning the ink and the page. Is the ink poem or not-poem? Well, considered in isolation, ink is not-poem, but in this context ink is part of poem.

So where is the poem? My initial definition ("the words on the page") is not as simple or unproblematic as it first seemed. A poem is not really a locatable thing – it is something that happens when ink and paper come together in a certain way, under certain conditions. You can't consider the poem apart from those conditions, which, ironically enough, are all "not-poem" in a different context.

Things get worse when you consider that all the parts of the poem are composites as well, meaning that if you try to locate the parts, they too slip away into a sea of dependent conditions. A thing's identity as a thing depends on context. Things are nothing in and of themselves – they are impermanent events: when the matrix of conditions shifts, a thing's identity shifts.

For simplicity's sake, I've left mind out of the equation until now, trying to avoid the all-too-easy slip into idealism. It would be simple to say that the poem exists only in the mind. After all, it is the mind that decides where the poem starts and stops; it is the mind that interprets this collection of ink and paper as a poem. The idea that the poem is a thing is a mental event. The poem as thing is a conceptual imputation. But the mind is only one of the conditions required for the poem to arise. Take away the ink or paper and the mind cannot impute the poem – that is, the poem is not the same as mind. The mind does not create the poem alone, but it does give the poem substance – that is, the mind glues the poem's features (predicates) together conceptually, making entity discrimination possible. All the words can only be considered as part of the same thing when the mind is present, bringing with it its conventional (and arbitrary) knowledge about poems. So the poem cannot be located individually and undividedly inside or outside the perceiving mind. Poem is simply the imputed interpretation of a confluence of conditions.

The fact that the poem as independent thing cannot be located when analyzed is what the Buddhists call *sunyata*, emptiness or openness. Things are simply conceptual gestalts.

However, my initial question remains: where did this poem come from? The problem with this question, though, is that it assumes that a poem is unproblematically locatable in the present. If you can't answer "where is the poem?" with any degree of certainty, then how can you figure out where "it" came from? I'm going to try anyway!

The question is really about causation. First, we recognize that the poem did not appear *ex nihilo*, randomly – it came from somewhere. If what we call "poem" is made up of ink, paper, and a reader's mind with knowledge of basic poetic conventions, then we have to trace the origins of these things in order to discover the poem's origins. Looking at the poem's origination in this way is diachronic – it amounts to asking, "what conditions had to occur for this particular poem to arrive at this place at this moment?" The answer is mind-numbingly complex. For example, the book is the product of a system of printing and distribution. The paper is a product of a manufacturing process: people and machines logging, people and machines milling, the selling and buying of rolls of paper. The logged trees are the result of a number of ecological factors, including soil, sun, moisture, seeds, evolution, and so forth. The ink too comes from a long line of

processes, as does the human mind and the development of consciousness, language, literacy, and literary conventions. My mind in particular is the result of parents – growth – education. If any of these conditions were altered, this reading moment, this book and its ink and paper, would not have arisen in just this way… and I haven't even talked about the author yet.

A full causal analysis of the parts of a poem would inevitably lead you to the conclusion that the whole universe had to arise in just this way in order for this poem to arise in this spatio-temporal matrix. Where did the poem come from? Everywhere.

But we tend to operate on the assumption that the author is the primary cause of the poem. He or she may not have cut the trees for the paper or manufactured the ink, but he or she chose the words and put them in this particular order – and, after all, that is the essence of the poem. The ink and paper are secondary – mere vessels that permit access to the real poem. It's not *this* poem, the words on the page, that we're really interested in. We're interested in the poem that arises from any particular copy of "the poem."

But what is this "poem" that stands behind and unites all copies of itself? We can do the same kind of analysis on this meta-poem as we did on the individual poem in order to look for its existence: is this meta-poem the same as its copies or is it different? Remember, entity discrimination depends on coherent predication. If the entity really exists independently, then we should be able to predicate its sameness or difference from its copies. However, if the poem is the same as the copies, then it is subject to the same analysis of a copy that we've already done, and if it is different from the copies, then it is not something we could have access to. All the copies could disappear and the poem would still exist. But that kind of existence is not something we could ever have access to, so it would be meaningless. And, after all, we do seem to have access to something we call "poem" that we think originated from something we call "author."

The strange thing is that, if I examine this particular poem in front of me (which is the only one I have access to right now), then I can only say that the author is one of many necessary causes, not the primary or essential cause. Yes, if the poet had never written, then this poem and this perceptual moment could not have arisen: the ink would not be arranged in this particular way. But the fact is that the man or woman who cut the trees down to make the paper is as essential to this reading moment as the author is. If

that logger had never cut those trees down, then this particular paper would be different – and remember, we found that the paper was an essential component of this poem's identity. A similar reading situation may well have arisen, but it would not be the same.

The point here is that you can't really locate the cause of an object because there are no independent objects that could stand as the cause. Furthermore, considering the "poem" as an effect is problematic in that you can't really locate the poem when you look for it in the first place. It's not just that "things" are dependent on conditions – it's that there are no "things" at all, just interpretations of enmeshed experience.

#

Here's another Buddhist-inspired analysis to complicate things. If things really were independent objects, then cause and effect would not work. And remember, in order to study a poem, we need it to exist independently; we need to be able to draw a line between poem and not-poem – otherwise anything we say about a poem leaks out into the whole universe, a universe we need to consider not-poem.

So where does a poem come from? In schematic terms, it must come either from itself, from something else, from both, or from no cause.

From no cause. If a poem were not caused, then it could arise anywhere, anytime. The world would be completely random, which is not the way it appears to us. Furthermore, if a poem were acausal, then there would be nothing you or a poet could do to bring about the poem's origination. Setting pen to paper would accomplish nothing. Again, this is not how the world seems to work.

From itself. If a poem caused itself, then there would be no point for it to arise – it would simply exist always. No other conditions would need to be present for it to arise: no poet, no paper, no ink. But, as we have seen, without those conditions, the poem does not arise. Furthermore, if a poem were cause as well as effect, then the poem would always be produced. When the cause (the poem) is present, then it would inevitably produce its effect (the poem). As a result, the poem would be present again to cause itself again: effect would become cause and produce the same effect forever. But a poem isn't forever being produced – it is destructible.

From another. This is our commonsense position on causation. Here, poet causes poem. But if poem exists independently of poet, then we cannot discover a necessary relationship between the two. If a poem is inherently different from a poet, that is, if poet is part of not-poem rather than part of poem, then the poem's relationship to poet is identical to anything else not-poem, like spoons and desk lamps. As Fenner notes, if cause and effect are independent, if they are fundamentally different from each other, "then the producer or cause cannot be distinguished from non-causes" (131). Or in Buddhapalita's words, if poem and poet are inherently different, then "it would follow quite logically that everything could arise from everything else" (qtd. in Williams 66). But this situation would be absurd: when spoon is present, poem does not arise, but when poet is present, poem does arise. "Burning the Small Dead" originated from Snyder, not from some random spoon! Cause and effect are related, but they are not the same (because then causation would be from itself – see above) and not different.

From itself and another. This option combines the faults of both positions, so it is twice as absurd.

All the options for explaining an independent poem's origination are exhausted. If you insist on dividing the world into poem and not-poem, which you must in order to locate the poem as a knowable or predicable entity, then you cannot explain where that poem came from! As Nagarjuna concludes in his analysis of causation, "It certainly is not the case that cause and effect are identical, nor, indeed, are they different" (qtd. in Huntington 43). This is to say that "Burning the Small Dead" is neither the same as nor different from Gary Snyder – a clear violation of categorical logic. For Nagarjuna, this violation means that neither "Burning the Small Dead" nor Gary Snyder can exist: "Neither of those things is established (as real) which cannot be conceived either as identical or different from each other" (qtd. in Murti 15). Independent existence cannot gain a foothold.

Yet I'm looking right at the poem as I write this. There's something there. The only way out of this that I can see is to admit that the poem's independence, its separation from "not-poem," is a fiction. As Huntington notes, the incoherence of causation arises because of our "unshakable tacit commitment to the a priori principle that the interaction

between cause and effect is an interaction between two discrete, intrinsically existent entities" (45). The circle I draw around the poem to separate it from the world so that I can study it and predicate about it is radically arbitrary. In talking about a poem, I am talking about a fiction that depends on my mind for its (fictional) existence. I cannot actually, fundamentally isolate it from other poems, or even from spoons and desk lamps.

This is where impermanence comes in. Because there is no real separation of poem from not-poem, any change in not-poem changes poem... fundamentally. You can't ignore the rest of the world as so much secondary flotsam and jetsam. And since not-poem is always on the go, poem hasn't a chance at stability. Poem is contingent not only on my ever-changing mind but on spoons and desk lamps as well (which, as it turns out, are as contingent on the poem). It would be absurd, then, to pretend that anything I said about a poem would be anything but fictionally true.

Taken one step further, though, the logic of impermanence collapses in on itself. In order to predicate an object as "impermanent," that object must be categorically locatable (a real separation of thing and not-thing) and ontologically stable (i.e., permanent). But our analysis found no fundamental separation (or linkage) between things and no ontological stability – only dependence. Our predication comes to an end in what Fenner calls a "bi-negative locution" (39): "Burning the Small Dead" is neither permanent nor not-permanent (impermanent), neither the same nor not-the-same as its conditions. The poem's dependence on conditions disqualifies it from predicable existence.

We as literary critics, then, wander about in a fictional world, talking about entities that have no independent, inherent existence. Isn't it strange that we relate to our objects of study as if they did? Isn't it odd that we desire to study them like objects?

The problem I'm having, though, is that ignoring universal causal contingency seems to work; it works for us to think in terms of a limited number of causes leading to a desired effect. If I want a tree to grow in a certain spot, I can make sure there is nutrient- and moisture-rich soil for the seed. I can make sure there is sun and protection against pests. And the darn seed will probably sprout, and I'll have my tree. The number of conditions that I need to influence in order to bring about the desired result is not infinite

– unless you argue that by changing one condition, I change the universe. And this is exactly the conclusion of Hua-yen Buddhism: "to exist in any sense at all means to exist in dependence on the other, which is infinite in number. Nothing exists truly in and of itself, but requires everything to be what it is" (Cook 9). The result of this universal dependence is instability: "Obviously the universe does not collapse when one individual member dies, but it is no longer *that* particular whole it was when the individual survived" (Cook 13). Any change in a part changes the whole.

But if one condition is as necessary to a tree's existence as the next, then why can't I just smash a lamp and bend a spoon to cause a tree? Why do certain specific conditions have to change in order to get the tree and not others? Are some conditions more essential than others? If so, isn't that asserting fundamental difference or separation and thus independent existence?

The problem with my reasoning here is that while it admits that the effect is conditional, it ignores the fact that those conditions are themselves conditional. There are, ultimately, no lamps or spoons to act as causal agents. You can't locate an independent object anywhere, and even if you could, that independent object could not serve as a cause and could not be considered an effect. In other words, we can't think about causation in terms of a relationship between entities, whether it's between one entity and another or between one entity and a universe full of entities. All our previous analyses were to demonstrate that cause and effect between independent objects is not a coherent view.

So what happens when I plant the tree, then, is that I arrange the universe in a particular way – actually, the nondualistic universe arranges itself in a particular way, and the conditions for "tree" align. There is no independent "I" who plants, no independent "soil" that receives, no independent "tree" that results. You can interpret experience in a substance-ontology way, but substance is only a useful fiction – a fiction that becomes an obstacle to awakening if you believe in it as an accurate interpretation of events.

So where does a poem come from? Well, the question carries too much metaphysical baggage to answer – it is something Malunkyaputta might ask in the still evening at Anathapindika's Park. Asking where a poem comes from implies that a poem's origination is a singular historical event: an author puts pen to paper and the poem

suddenly possesses being of its own. But this independent being is unlocatable – all we find is an arrangement of dependent conditions: the poem is always being born in the perceptual performance but never achieves birth. The poem exists, no doubt about it. But the manner of its existence is not what we might expect – if we had expected the poem's dependent origination, we would not have asked such a foolish question in the first place. The poem, then, does not arise as an object suitable for study and predication. No interpretive history sticks to it. It is nothing "apart from the situation in which it finds itself" (Guenther, *Philosophy* 218). So we must read "Burning the Small Dead" not simply as an opportunity to formulate new interpretive statements, but as an opportunity to burn away *avidya* – to realize our empty, impermanent, dependent origination.

READING # I try to sit in meditation every day. I lay out a yellow and blue fleece blanket folded twice on the bird's eye laminate floor and put a cushion on top. I sit in the middle of the living room, facing a large sliding glass door that opens onto a Juliet balcony (hardly a balcony – just a twelve-inch strip of jutting concrete where visitors who smoke can light up and watch the traffic climb Victoria towards the bridge). In front of me, maybe three feet away, I place my Buddha on the floor, a kind of impromptu shrine. He's not much of a Buddha. In fact, he's just a two and a half-inch figure seated on the back end of an incense burner – there's a hole in his navel where the incense stick goes. I think my mom ordered it from Avon years ago. He's my mass-produced kitchy Buddha, and I bow to him before each sitting.

I find sitting difficult. It hurts my inflexible marathoner's legs, puts them to sleep. It's also frustrating – my mind refuses to sit still, flits from one thought to the next like a monkey swinging from branch to branch through New Guinean rain forest canopy. But sometimes cool things happen. Sometimes the floor will seem to rise and stretch and undulate, as if it were almost fluid. Sometimes I'm filled with a deep sense of peace and wakefulness. And sometimes Buddha disappears. If I stare at him long enough without twitching my eyeballs, if I relax my gaze and wait, he'll vanish. Poof. As soon as I shift my retinas, though, he reappears. For some reason, the mind stops processing a perfectly static image. Where the Buddha sits, I see only unfocused laminate floor. But if I shift my

gaze away slightly, there he is. To maintain that Buddha image, I must keep my eyes moving this side, that side, away, back – tiny movements to sustain the invariants in the perceptual field.

The same phenomenon occurs when I stare at a poem too long. I'm sure any student prone to procrastination and last-minute essay writing has had this happen: when fatigued two a.m. eyes try unsuccessfully to focus on the text being analyzed, the words swim out of focus. If you don't close your eyes, if you space out with your eyes wide open, the poem might just disappear entirely – white background floods the visual field. Any eye movement, however, will snap the poem back in place.

There's another way to make a poem disappear while staring right at it, but this trick is much more unsettling if you can make it work. All you have to do is analyze a poem without looking away – search for meaning in the poem itself. Simply put, just ask the basic critical question, "What does it mean?" But focus entirely on "it."

Keep in mind what an analysis is. Etymologically, the word comes from the Greek meaning "a breaking up" or an unloosening. An analysis breaks apart a whole in order to examine the nature and relationship of the parts. In reading poetry, we try to break up the poem in order to reveal what and how the poem means.

Let's start with four lines from the final poem of Snyder's *Myths and Texts* and try to look at them directly:

> All afternoon and into night
> Digging the fire line
> Falling the burning snag
> It fanned sparks down like shooting stars (53)

So what does it mean? Poetry analysis usually starts with a literal reading of the text: what do the words mean? Here, we seem to have a scene of firefighting. Although the present participle "digging" lacks a subject and auxiliary verb, we infer that someone or some group is spending half a day digging a trench in an effort to keep the blaze from spreading. At some point, he, she, or they bring down a lit branch, and bits of burning wood fly into the air as it falls.

Easy enough. But analyze what the mind is doing in a literal reading. At this basic level of meaning, you need knowledge of syntax and lexicon. Your mind instantly moves from, say, "afternoon" (the word on the page) to a corresponding set of ideas or concepts. You move from the visual experience to an associated mental experience. This literal level of interpretation requires a whole series of shifts from one part of the text to another or away from the poem entirely. For example, interpreting the pronoun "it" requires a shift from the word to the previous line: what does "it" mean? "It" means "the burning snag." And what does "snag" mean? It means a broken tree branch. But this concept "tree branch" is not in the poem itself – you bring it to the reading performance. Meaning, it seems, involves a shift away from the figure being analyzed.

The snippet of text seems to invite this shiftiness, especially with its simile. In reading the simile, we get a slightly different kind of mental movement, though. On the literal level, building the image of a burning snag fanning sparks does not really capture our attention. All the words there are familiar, and the word order is fairly familiar too. It's easy for the mind to achieve closure and move on. But when you add the simile, things change. Here the mind moves from its image of a burning stick to one of space and shooting stars and back. In the association of these images, the otherwise familiar image of sparks and the otherwise familiar image of shooting stars co-mingle. The associated spaciousness and cosmic scale of shooting stars gets injected into the familiar image of a branch and sparks, resulting in a broadening or deepening of the spark image. And what results is a feeling that the sparks might be more meaningful than we first assumed.

By combining two familiar images, the poem precipitates an experience of defamiliarization. In a careful reading, the simile works like a snag in the perceptual flow. The mind catches, eddies or circles back on this image: there is something more to the sparks than we had initially thought. So what does this simile mean? Again, the mind is not content to remain with the image; it must go elsewhere, to other parts of the poem. The second half of the poem moves self-consciously into a mythical reading of the first more literally-presented half, so perhaps this image is simply meant to give the intimation of a cosmic significance lurking behind an ordinary event. Whatever the case, a simile creates ambiguity, which on a psychological level is the inability of the mind to achieve a comfortable sense of closure from which it can move on to the next line.

The point I want to make here is that strange things happen in our experience of meaning. When we ask what something means, we do not look solely to that something for the answer. In fact, we look anywhere but at that something. The thing is not adequate in and of itself: we impute meaning; we associate visual experiences with mental ones. This kind of meaning is discursive, a word that comes from the Latin *discursus* "to run in different directions." When reading, our mind runs in different directions, searching for meaning, looking for closure. Traditionally, a good poem is one that resists easy closure, one that creates ambiguity like the shooting star simile. But we deal with this ambiguity in the same manner as all discursive meaning generation: we look elsewhere for meaning.

When we claim that we are analyzing a poem, then, we are mistaken. We don't analyze poems. Remember, an analysis is a breaking of a whole into its constituent parts; what we do is the opposite: we synthesize, do collage. Sure, we abstract sections of text from the whole, but when it comes to reading those sections, our reading is by nature synthetic, not analytic. What we identify as a word's meaning depends on context, the context of a reader's knowledge of syntax and lexicon. Likewise, when we "analyze" what a simile means, we perform a synthesis: the mind associates the visual experience with a cluster of mental ones.

The funny thing is that, although we need to look elsewhere for meaning, we locate meaning in the object we are trying to interpret. If we ask, what does "snag" mean, the answer that satisfies us does not lie in the visual perception of the word but in an associated concept. The meaning that pleases us is located in the synthetic mental experience, not in the visual experience alone. So meaning depends on mental and visual experience – meaning is contingent.

But what would happen if we actually analyzed a text, if we tried to find the meaning of a text without looking beyond it? Look at what happens if you remove part of the context. Let's say I had only given you one line:

It fanned sparks down like shooting stars.

You can form a rough conceptual picture of sparks fanning, but the "it" remains ambiguous. A pronoun is indexical; it points away from itself. But here, we can't see

what it's pointing at. We can't possibly achieve closure without a broader context. But never fear, we can generate a number of possible answers in order to close the ambiguity: a firecracker, a volcano, a flint. And we could even look at other Snyder texts to see if any of these possibilities seemed likely. At this point, we would be practicing criticism: the proliferation of discursive interpretations of ambiguity driven by the desire for closure.

In a way, every word works like the pronoun "it." While a pronoun's indexical function is partly internal to the text, each word does function as an index: it points to a concept. Building a lexicon, then, is an associative process. Over time, a visual perception of a word evokes a cluster of mental events. A poem, then, continually points away from itself, but we have the funny habit of thinking that a text possesses its meaning. However, the fact that meaning is something our mind looks for outside of the text, that meaning depends on a range of contexts, should (by now) alert us to the fact that the poem doesn't mean anything at all on its own.

Again, focus on the poem. Try keeping your mind on one word without slipping away into any mental associations: "sparks." Drop your lexical and conceptual associations; drop your auditory associations (i.e., your mental sounding out of the word). Just stay with the word. Now try to see the word all by itself, without the ground, without the white page. Not only is the word linguistically meaningless outside of our lexical conventions, we can't even see the damn thing without the space around it. We can't honestly conceive of the word as existing independently.

Let's analyze the poem's word even further, down to the parts of a letter. Go ahead, chop 'em all up. Where is the meaning now? Where is the poem? On analysis, the poem vanishes. On synthesis, the poem arises.

> Smash a cherry-tree,
> And you will find no blossom
> In the splinters.
> It is in the sky of spring
> That cherry-blossoms bloom. (qtd. in Ueda 26)

Smash a poem, and you will find no meaning, no poem in the shreds of ink and paper; it is in the reading performance that poems and meanings bloom.

If poems or words possessed some kind of inherent meaning, then the parts should convey that meaning. But they don't. As the Madhyamika assert, "entities are simply mental constructs" (Williams 61):

> the letter A, for example, which we consider to exist as part of the real "furniture" of the world, is simply imputed by the mind when / - \ are brought together in a particular way. *All* entities without exception do not exist from their own side but are imputed by the mind in this way (including the mind and emptiness themselves). (Williams 61)

So where do we get off claiming that we study a poem? It seems to me that "study" implies non-interference between mind and object. It also implies an object's independent existence. Do we not believe that a poem's existence pre-dates the reading performance? Do we not believe that our own minds pre-date the reading performance? Do we not believe that our reading reveals something about the poem, that the poem has depth? Do we not feel that there really are entities like "my mind" and "poem" that transcend this moment, this appearance?

But when you analyze these entities, they disappear. They are radically and fundamentally contingent, enmeshed. And no, this is not some kind of grand solipsistic position. The private mind too is radically contingent. There is no substance that stands behind mental events and possesses them. There are events, yes, but no substance. Smash your own mind and see.

When you look for the substance, when you shred a poem all the way to the level of word bits, what the hell happens to the poem and its meaning? Where does it go? If the poem's meaning and existence were actually independent, then the poem would be unanalyzable. You could cut and tear, but the existence and meaning would remain. But meaning and existence are contingent, dependent. When you put the word bits back together, there comes a point when the mind can recognize the symbols, can trigger the association of visual and mental events, can snap closure on the image. But the poem and its meaning do not exist on their own.

The contingency of meaning and existence is an absolute disaster for literary study. We can't in all honesty make statements about a poem because when we look for the poem, the damn thing disappears. The same goes for authors and genres and time

periods and national literatures and whatever else we create for study. Any interpretation of a poem is simply a new synthesis of parts – it doesn't say anything about the poem per se. In fact, it doesn't say anything about anything. We simply generate more text, inventing rules to dam the proliferation.

I was always so sure that poems granted access to some kind of truth, that they held the secret to some kind of redemptive experience. Why else spend so many years studying literature? I believed in the depth of poetry.

> We try to peel away the apparent world to get at the real one, but that dualism between them *is* our problematic delusion, which leaves, as the only remaining candidate for the real world, the apparent one – a world whose actual nature has not been noticed because we have been so concerned to transcend it. And without any effective dualism between real and apparent, the question of whether the world is real or apparent loses meaning. (Loy, *Lack* 93)

Buddhism challenges us to find that depth, to analyze our objects of study to see if there is anything that actually transcends appearance. But the more you focus on an object, the more you try to ignore its contextual ties, the more you realize that meaning and ideas are mental events, enmeshed in a particular arrangement of the universe, not solid, timeless things. There is nothing hidden in a text, nothing concealed: "Each thing is preaching the law incessantly, but this law is not something different from the thing itself" (Blyth I.242). When you don't look away, you lose the poem, but you gain the freedom of a dependently originated, empty awareness. If the poem means anything, it means just this.

Here is Snyder talking about Dogen's writing:

> The "Mountains and Waters Sutra" is called a sutra not to assert that the "mountains and rivers of this moment" are a text, a system of symbols, a referential world of mirrors, but that this world in its actual existence is a complete presentation, an enactment – and that it stands for nothing. ("Blue Mountains" 113)

You can read "stands for" here as a description of substance, that stable essence that stands behind appearance – the truth or meaning or existence we tend to think poems possess. And I'm not just talking about lyric poems here: all texts – Buddhist sutras, epics, novels, advertisements – are meaningless in and of themselves. They have no depth

that needs sounding; they possess nothing, reveal nothing. But this emptiness, this contingency does not mean that we can't perform functionally meaningful readings; we just need to realize that these performances never transcend their own contingency, that they do not really say anything about some existent entity called "the text." Our readings cannot be considered knowledge of things. So whether you're searching for meaning inside the text or using the text to say something about the cultural and historical context of its so-called original production, the text cannot really support your desire for meaning or knowledge. The text is not an historical artifact – it is a never-stabilized dependently arising (my grammatical error there is intentional).

For us, texts are not sufficient; they require discursive interpretation to breathe life into them or they require historical and cultural contextualization in order to reveal their full significance. But, ironically, we base this notion of insufficiency on the assumption that texts exist independently and that the life of these little symbols consists in their association with concepts. But the world is complete at every moment – nothing stands outside looking in. Texts don't really need us because nothing is hidden:

> [Earth] A flower
> for nothing;
> an offer;
> no taker;
>
> Snow-trickle, feldspar, dirt. (Snyder "For Nothing" 34)

Those final three images are sufficient. They are not symbols pointing to some transcendent truth; they are words on a page, and they are never the same, always enmeshed in the dependently arising universe. And they stand "for nothing."

#

I can almost hear you saying, "yeah, yeah, I've heard all this before. This is just post-structuralism without the French jargon. And post-structuralism was so 20th century." And I am inclined to agree with you. But what the post-structuralists forgot to mention is that this location of meaning in the text follows the exact same pattern as our hypostatization of experience, and that hypostatization is the origin of suffering. Ignoring

the fact that things do not inherently exist, that there are no ontological objects that possess various experiences, creates the conditions for *duhkha*.

The critic, of course, can ignore the nonduality of experience and continue to predicate as if the world were really constructed of readers, authors, and texts, but there are ethical consequences to ignoring the nondual, interdependent nature of experience. This is where a Buddhist-influenced poet like Gary Snyder becomes interesting. For him, poems grow "from an energy-mind-field-dance" (qtd. in Steuding 35), not from a world of independent subjects and objects; poems are like standing waves, "whorl[s] in the grain," "turbulence patterns of the energy flow" (Snyder, Interview with Jacoby 44): embedded pockets of swirling linguistic energy, unabstractable from the flow of temporal experience. For Snyder, understanding and experiencing the present nondual embeddedness of mind and poem and world is the whole point of reading poetry: "at this very moment, just *be* the very mind that reads *this* word and effortlessly knows it – and you will have grasped the Great Matter" (Snyder, "On the Path" 151). Full nondual awareness of the present moment in reading is the goal, and what emerges in this awareness is a vision of delight:

> Delight is the innocent joy arising
> with the perception and realization of
> the wonderful, empty, intricate,
> inter-penetrating,
> mutually-embracing, shining
> single world beyond all discrimination
> or opposites. (Snyder, "On 'As For Poets'" 113)

Here Snyder links three of the Buddhist teachings about the nature of existence that I've been pursuing at various points in this dissertation: *sunyata* ("empty"), *pratityasamutpada* ("inter-penetrating, / mutually-embracing"), and nonduality ("beyond all discrimination / or opposites"). Each idea mutually implies the others, so pursing one means pursuing all. For example, an object's dependence on conditions means that it is empty of inherent existence – and without inherent existence to discriminate it ultimately from other dependent objects, its individuality hovers against a background of nonduality. The field of experience is whole, and the objects that we usefully perceive as individual (including ourselves) never really step out of that field. As Snyder says of moving through

landscapes, "There is a 'going' but no goer, no destination, only the whole field" ("On the Path" 151). Thus, returning to a perception of one's emptiness, one's contingent existence in a nondual reality, precipitates the delight Snyder celebrates.

But this pursuit of delight is not some new form of hedonism (as hedonism is popularly conceived); it is the pursuit of wholeness or health within a world of complete nondual interdependence. Reading texts has a role to play here. Reading that operates on the assumption of a poem's independent identity through time, its transcendence beyond the spatio-temporal-mental field, prevents the delight of whole experience. Julia Martin, quoting from Snyder's essay "Blue Mountains Constantly Walking" emphasizes the relationship between the metaphysics of transcendence and suffering: "In [Snyder's] work the language of transcendence, to the extent that it implies a denial of our material interdependence in this world, this ecosystem, is seen to be dangerously misleading. It is 'a delusion and an obstruction: it diverts us from seeing what is before our eyes: plain thusness,' and this implies a diseased relation to our environment" ("Practicing Emptiness" 3). This "language of transcendence" is much more than, say, Christian belief in the soul or heaven; it is the basic belief that subjects and objects persist independently. In criticism, the pursuit of knowledge about authors and texts and cultures only reinforces those notions of transcendence because we predicate the pursuit on the delusion that our abstractions are real and more important than "what is before our eyes: plain thusness." From a Buddhist perspective, the result of this delusional activity is *duhkah*, for you, those around you, and the ecosystem that sustains you. Any reading practice that operates on a knower-known binary or that tries to fool itself into thinking self can be lost in other is doomed to create the conditions for suffering.

Snyder's interest in place, his interest in shamanistic healing, his interest in Buddhism, and his interest in ecology all coalesce in this "seeing what is before our eyes: plain thusness," which in Sanskrit is called *tathata* – the empty, interdependent, impermanent, nondual world. And his poetic practice is an attempt to use language, which tends to evoke and maintain ontological faith in transcendent objects, as a means of returning the mind to wholeness, to *tathata.*

Reading can be so much more than discursive proliferation for its own sake. It can walk a soteriological path, where study and interpretation serves the quest for liberation.

Just look clearly at what is going on in the reading moment. It's all there; it's all fully enmeshed. And if you feel like abstracting the poem from *tathata* and forming predicates about it, fine. There is a richness that arises from conceptualized experience. But "study" these conventionally existent objects with wisdom; study them for the pleasure of playing in proliferating interdependence and for the pleasure of leading others to wisdom. But never trade your freedom for the anxiety of ontologized existence.

PRATITYASAMUTPADA #

sierra granite;
mt. Ritter—
black rock twice as old.

Deneb, Altair

windy fire

The last five lines of "Burning the Small Dead" are puzzling. How do you read a sentence that has no verb, no connectives, no discernable syntax – just some nouns and adjectives and ambiguous punctuation? Jody Norton reads this kind of syntactical and structural ellipsis as, paradoxically, a form of structure: "Snyder's ellipsis of overt logical and grammatical links between images magnifies the significance of juxtaposition as a structural mechanism" (175). It is odd, however, to consider juxtaposition as a "structural mechanism." "Structural mechanism" implies internality – something located within the structure that helps to stabilize it. But placing images in proximity does not guarantee stability – in fact, it reveals that the poem's structure depends as much on the reader as on anything Snyder has constructed with language.

Tim Dean also points to juxtaposition as a crucial technique in Snyder's shorter poetry, but he reads Snyder's use of juxtaposition as a way to involve the reader in the production of sense: "juxtaposition, elision and the metonymic arrangement of elements provide space for the insertion of the reader as active participant – although not master – in the production of sense" (145). What juxtaposition foregrounds is the dependence of "sense" on reader participation. Sense or meaning is the result of an interaction between

reader and text, not something that the reader discovers. And as Dean emphasizes, the reader is not the "master" of this relationship – neither is the author or the text. In fact, freeing the text from the burden of grammar and syntax, Snyder relinquishes much of his control over the possible range of meaning and responses (Dean 120). Any search for "predetermined meaning" must end in failure (120).

What juxtaposition reveals to me is that all production of sense is a contingent exercise. Meaning is not something given in the external world that we must uncover; rather, it is something that arises dependent on a number of conditions. And those conditions are not all solidified in the past; rather, they are here, and they are in flux. From a Buddhist point of view, both meaning and text are unstable because contingent: "all things, including texts, are always changing because they depend, at the moment of their origin and at all times, on other things which are themselves changing" (Wright 3). Texts and interpretations flicker in the breezes of contingency as much as Snyder's krummholz fire.

There is no kernel or core that escapes dependence and impermanence. Snyder has not hidden a predicable meaning within the weave of text or submerged a secret between two juxtaposed images – any search for some kind of authorial, permanent, or independent meaning discovers nothing. Along the same lines, Dale Wright argues that meaning's contingency means that we should abandon any notion of or methodical search for "original meaning":

> Our romantic and historicist inclination to privilege an "original meaning" as the one to which correct interpretation must correspond would have to be seen, from this Buddhist point of view, as an act of clinging to illusory permanence and substantiality – a denial of interdependence and change. Our desire to have the text be intelligible in and of itself, and separate from current understanding, however, can never be fulfilled. (59)

Snyder's juxtaposing poem, then, invites this desire for a unifying idea or set of predicates behind the text, for self-contained intelligibility. The mind must have its meaning; the mind must produce a structure. The result is a mental plate techtonics: desire pushes phrases and images against each other in a cognitive orogeny that raises temporary ranges of meaning. But the meaning produced does not belong to reader, text,

or author – none of these imputed objects acts as primary agent. All are necessary for meaning to arise. Thus, meaning has no independent existence – it cannot survive apart from this specific arrangement of the universe, this specific performance.

Juxtaposition, then, is not a structuring device – rather, it is a situation that gestures at the impossibility of independent structure. There is no "poem" that contains juxtaposition, no "author" that uses it, and no "reader" who identifies it. Any production of sense (with or without syntactical cues) arises when conditions align. Thus, sense has no specific locale – nothing possesses sense.

Snyder critics have no problem seeing that "Burning the Small Dead" is a poem that invites the reader to knit connections, but they don't seem to follow the logic of dependence to its conclusion – that "reciprocity, dependence, is the lack of inner essence" (Murti 16). For example, Altieri sees Snyder's short lyrics in general as hymns to "unity" (*Enlarging* 131). Altieri argues that Snyder's poetry foregrounds the organic unity behind discrete particulars – something that lyric poetry does generally through devices like metaphor. According to Altieri, Snyder can "accept the organic poem as testimony to an organically unified cosmos" (131-32). In fact, Altieri equates Snyder's vision of interdependence with the production of meaning in lyric poetry: in an organic whole, the parts mutually inform each other internally (132).

Altieri's notions of an "organic poem" and an "organically related cosmos" are not unreasonable, but they make me uncomfortable. To me, "organic" here implies a self-existent centre or organizing principal inherent in poem or cosmos. This would imply that sense is something discoverable within a poem (or the cosmos), not something that arises dependently within a fluid matrix of experience. A poem, then, would have necessary connections that exist independently – connections that could be studied and predicated.

But saying that everything is connected organically is not exactly the same as saying everything arises dependently. The "connection" metaphor gives the impression that there are independent things that somehow stand in relation to each other – dependence implies that things have no identity beyond a particular meeting of equally dependent conditions, including mind. Things aren't connected – they don't arise in such a manner that they could connect. As Frederick Streng notes of Buddhist dependent origination theory, "the arising-process [cannot] be segmented into self-substantiated

elements which then somehow cause changes in each other" (28) – or that somehow connect with each other. Rather, things have no thingness, no self-substance, beyond dependent origination.

The connection metaphor bothers me as much as the alternative reading of "Burning the Small Dead" that Norton puts forward. Norton links "Burning" to Zen Buddhism and haiku aesthetics, arguing that, like haiku, Snyder's poem yokes disparate images in order to imply a higher fusion within an "undifferentiated Oneness" beyond categorical logic (176). But Norton's notion of "undifferentiated Oneness" strikes me as misleading. This phrase seems to imply that the highest experience of the world is one where things completely blur out of focus or drown in a giant flood of sameness, as if things were an illusion that needed to broken. But as one of the central Mahayana sutras, *The Heart Sutra*, says, "form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form" (Conze, *Wisdom* 86). There's no need to cross your eyes in order to gain awakening. These things that appear – poem, self, Deneb, Altair – they are neither the same nor different, neither differentiated nor undifferentiated. There they are, dependently arisen, empty of anything permanent that could take a predicate like same or different.

The desire for permanence, however, sneaks its way into readings of "Burning the Small Dead." For example, Murphy reads the poem as depicting "the rhythm of ongoing cosmic energy transfer" (*Wayfaring* 71) – an aesthetically pleasing interpretation. However, he "discovers" a unifying image to link the stars and the fire and everything in between – stardust: "Everything on the earth, whether dead branches or human beings, has come in its atomic forms from the dust of stars" (72). However, the idea that we are all stardust depends on a notion of atomic substance, as if atoms were imperishable little balls bearing their tiny identities through all the apparent changes of form and appearance. For readers no longer inclined to believe in invisible substance, atoms provide a convenient opportunity to pass a metaphysical belief for a physical certainty. Indeed, there is something engaging, even comforting, about the notion that the iron of my blood was produced in a supernova explosion, but that notion provides for a misleading sense of connection, a sense based on permanence. Atoms too are dependently

originated – or, one might say, dependently originating. The recycled stardust image, then, may heighten my sense of diachronic *connection* to larger forces, but it does not reveal my ever-shifting synchronic *dependence* on a web of ever-shifting dependent conditions. Stardust recycling seems environmentally friendly, but it only serves to strengthen a belief in substance.

To me, "Burning the Small Dead" is an opportunity to contemplate dependent origination. Considered self-reflexively, one's initial search for sense among the image fragments reveals a text's utter dependence on mind for meaning and structure. The self's search for knowledge about something external or non-self becomes complicated and messy because self is inextricable from the search and its results. Push the self-reflexive reading a bit further, and one can experience the mind's utter dependence on the text for its present content and structure. Just as the fire is nothing in and of itself, neither are you or the poem or the meaning thus produced. The experience of this interdependence, this utter contingency, is much more transformative than the warm and fuzzy feeling of "oneness" and "connection" where the feeling of "me" expands into the far reaches of space. The "windy fire" of Snyder's poem can burn the fuel of "self" entirely, burn the fuel of suffering and grasping desire. The result is *tathata* – just *this* – empty form, dependently arisen.

#

sierra granite;
mt. Ritter—
black rock twice as old.

Deneb, Altair

The images in Snyder's poem push outward from a particular Sierran space-time point, moving back in time and outward in space, following the lines of causal contingency emanating from a tiny branch fire. The poem begins with an incomplete participle phrase marked off with a period: "Burning the small dead / branches / broke from beneath / thick spreading / whitebark pine" (22). The main action of the poem (burning) has no definite causal agent (no subject) and no definite temporal marking (no auxiliary). The poem, however, plays with our instinctive syntactical desire for definite causal agents and

delineated time frames in the next clause, which delivers on both but with an ecological twist: "a hundred summers / snowmelt rock and air // hiss in a twisted bough" (22). The second clause's verb is in the present tense, but its causal agent stretches back 100 years in time. The present moment deepens. At the same time, the second clause points to the twisted bough's causal dependence on conditions: without snowmelt, rock, and air, that branch would not exist. The individual branch, then, starts to slip out along its lines of causal dependence.

After the second clause, the poem abandons conventional syntax and punctuation altogether. The connections between nouns open up in the absence of syntactical and lexical restrictions. While the first phrase lacks a subject, the third "phrase" lacks a verb: predication falters. The nominal phrase "sierra granite" evokes an image in space, and the nominal phrase "black rock twice as old" widens the time frame, but the causal connections between these geological images and everything before and after is unclear. However, you can read the images as modifying the "rock" of the second phrase: the branches depend on rock, and those rocks depend on an ancient geological history. The branches exist in part due to the fiery energy generated in continental subduction that melted parts of the Pacific plate to magma 80 million years ago, forming deep earth plutons of granite. And the branches arise in part due to the black metamorphic rock of Mt. Ritter formed in the heat and pressure of the Nevadan orogeny 150 million years ago. Diachronically speaking, the tiny branches owe their present existence to these ancient forces – the mountains and their memories hiss in that fire.

From the mountains, the poem's imagery pushes further out in space and further back in time to Deneb and Altair, the brightest stars glimmering above the southern horizon in clear summer west coast skies. These stars take us about as far away from the poem's temporal and spatial starting point as one can go. Deneb, for example, ignited long before earth's origination and spins through curving space somewhere between 1600 and 3200 light years away. Curiously, though, the mention of these two stars helps to delimit the poem's direction of observation and the season: in the Sierras, these are summer stars, appearing over the southern horizon.

Far and near, past and present dovetail here – especially in the poem's final image, "windy fire." This image, syntactically uncommitted, resonates with the twinkling stars,

the high Sierra campfire, and the dynamic energy exchange that produced the poem's elemental landscape. All of the poem's images mesh together in a present moment that stretches the seams of space-time without bursting them: everything is present as windy fire; it's all causally connected and flickering with impermanence. The subject lacking from the poem's first phrase turns out to be the entire cosmos: everything is burning those small dead branches – everything burns in those small dead branches.

It is easy enough to see how the campfire of "Burning the Small Dead" is, diachronically speaking, the result of innumerable past conditions. Ecologists and Buddhists would agree that everything in the cosmos up to that moment operates as a necessary causal condition for that fire. If anything had been different, the fire either would not have arisen or would have arisen differently. The more difficult fact to grasp is that the fire is also synchronically dependent on the cosmos, including mind.

Snyder's "windy fire" of whitebark branches does not ever achieve individual existence. Not only does it rely on the stored energy of past events, but it relies on present conditions: wood fuel, oxygen, heat. Take any of those factors away, and the fire ceases to exist. It is nothing more than a continuous interplay of these conditions. It is this contingency that makes fire unstable, impermanent – "windy." A fire is impermanent, it is free to change, because it is empty of own-being, that is, its existence is wholly dependent:

> For something to be "empty" means that, because the entity "originates dependent" upon other entities, and is transformed in accordance with changes in these "external" conditions, the entity therefore lacks "own-being" (Sanskrit: *svabhava*) or "self-nature." The thing is not self-determining [...]. Its existence and its character are attributable to the multiple factors that condition its origin and subsequent transformations. (Wright 51-52)

For Buddhists, the fact that things arise, change, and cease is evidence of their lack of independent inherent existence.

This empty impermanence extends, of course, to the notion of self that we clutch through time: "Like everything else, we are embedded in the world; we are immersed in an infinitely interconnected context in such a way that 'self' and 'other than self' interpenetrate" (Wright 52-53). Mind (what we most identify as our self) and its context

are not separable; any separation is nominal, metaphysical: *samvrti*. Thus, mind and context mutually define each other continuously – mind and self do not move through space and time hermetically sealed off in the grey folds of our brains. Consequently, we are at the mercy of change: "as one correlate in the [mind/context] relation changes so [does] the other. As the world changes so does the self; as the self changes so does the world" (Wright 53). A change in Deneb 3200 light years away is a change in our self. Lift a finger and Deneb is transformed. Self and star flicker like windy fire.

Here Buddhism leaves ecology far behind. In fact, it appears to leave sanity far behind. I can assure you, however, that I am not the only one who reads the basic ecological observation of interdependence in this way. For example, Thomas Cleary summarizes the "universal interdependence" of Hua-yen Buddhism (a Chinese school of Buddhism that privileges the *Avatamsaka Sutra*) in a similar fashion:

> The Hua-yen doctrine shows the entire cosmos as one single nexus of conditions in which everything simultaneously depends on, and is depended on by, everything else. Seen in this light, then, everything effects and is affected by, more or less immediately or remotely, everything else; just as this is true of every system of relationships, so is it true of the totality of existence. (*Entry* 2)

As soon as you impute independent entity existence, as soon as you superimpose a conceptual gridwork on experience, you get impermanence, interdependence, and emptiness. All you wanted was a little twig fire, but you got the universe instead: "The emptiness of absolute nature and the transience of one thing is in principle the same as the emptiness and transience of all things, and so it may be said in this light that even a minute particle contains the central principle of the whole universe" (Cleary, *Entry* 31). From the Sierras right to the edge of the universe, it's all windy fire.

Here, then, is the principal motif of this dissertation: Buddhism is a disaster for traditional literary study. We need independent entities to study; we need them to support predication. But Buddhism says quite plainly that, ultimately, there isn't a thing to hang a predicate on (nor nothing at all): "no precise predicate can be asserted of anything because there is no 'thing' in the everyday world adequate to accept predicates" (Sprung,

Introduction 3). All of this writing that I'm doing now does not really refer to any-thing. The problem is that any division of the world into, say, poem and not-poem (the basic gesture of definition), fails to delimit or discover an independent poem: "Emptiness means that things in themselves are indefinable; being dependent on relations, things are said to have no individual or absolute nature of their own" (Cleary, "Nature" 36). A critic's claim to be studying the same poem as another critic, then, (or the claim to be studying a poem at all) is conventionally but not ultimately true – it is a shared fiction. Anything a critic says about a poem depends on, well, everything in the cosmos at that particular juncture – including an arbitrary delimitation of experience as poem, reader, and so forth. Likewise, anyone who reads said ramblings of said critic finds him or herself enmeshed in a different irretrievable moment. Normally we don't care about all this – normally we ignore any changes as "secondary" or "superficial" and remain content (we think) with our fictional predicates – but Buddhism asks us to reconsider this practice.

For Buddhists, there is much at stake in our hypostatization of imputed conceptual entities – not only is it an ontological mistake, but it also causes suffering. Remember, the cause of suffering in the Buddhist analysis is *tanha*, desire or grasping, and desire needs to impute a substantial subject and object in order to grasp. Grasping for knowledge of conventional entities, then, may be fun and nice – it is, after all, desirable – but this grasping is harmful if one lacks wisdom (*prajna*). In his introduction to Dogen's essay on *prajna* from the *Shobogenzo*, Cleary notes that *prajna* "is commonly described as knowledge of the true nature of things, as being 'empty' or lacking absolute, independent existence" ("Great" 23). This "empty" vision is the goal (or the goalless goal) of Buddhist practice:

> All things are subject to causes and conditions, none are independent. [...] because of this they have no intrinsic nature of their own. Because of having no intrinsic nature, they are ultimately empty. Not clinging to them because they are ultimately empty is called transcendent wisdom. ("Great" 23)

"Transcendent" here means transcending *samvrti*, conventional reality, which is an interpretation of experience, not experience itself. The point is that the realization of emptiness leads to a new orientation to the world, one that does not expect independent

existence and stable definitions or predicates from things. As Mervyn Sprung observes, "[The wise man] *lives* so that the everyday world is neither rejected as unreal nor accepted as real" ("Madhyamika" 51). In this middle-way mode of experience, things still arise, but without hypostatization: "Though [the awakened] observed objects, they knew that all existents are ungraspable" (Cleary, *Entry* 5). Things appear as open individuals – not as closed objects of desire.

The point of study for Buddhists, then, is this *prajna* wisdom, not a proliferation of predicative knowledge for the literary critical journals. In fact, the Buddhist studies an object until its independence dissolves: "where there is no object to be grasped at – no ground whatsoever – there is no basis for clinging or antipathy, and the mind is naturally at peace" (Huntington 39). Objectless study is, ultimately, what we are all engaged in anyway; a Buddhist reader just happens to realize it. The poem is still there, of course, but poem and reader reweave themselves into the vivid fabric of experience. The result is a radical shift in perception and orientation, one that dissolves the conditions for suffering. Like a lotus flower unfurling on the surface of a calm mountain tarn, awareness opens out into the dynamic, shimmering, interconnected cosmos – into the flickering glow of a pilgrim's high altitude campfire. And there is peace.

windy fire

DUHKHA # I have a memory of my grandfather's burial.

The funeral had been held earlier that autumn day at The Cathedral Church of All Saints, Halifax, sun showering slantwise through static stained-glass images. The Church was packed, as I recall. He was the 11th Bishop of Nova Scotia, and his life touched a lot of lives – at least that's how I interpreted the presence of so many unfamiliar faces, how I comprehended so many handshakes and half-heard consolatory words from strangers. For all I knew, they might never have actually met my grandfather.

I don't remember a lot about the funeral service. It was all very formal – the Church taking care of one of their own in their own way. The words intoned were mostly from a book, and they described (I think) some kind of promised resurrection. But it was all very general, impersonal – a bit too formulaic. I must confess that I didn't pay much attention to the robes and gesticulations. I stood when I was supposed to and sat when everyone else did. But mostly, I stared as the light streaming in the large east-facing window flooded the dusty space high above the pews. Did anyone else notice that the space above hung golden like a still field pond catching the morning sun? We were all under water.

I found no solace in the careful phrases of the Anglican ceremony for the dead. I did not arrange the well-used lines of text into a polarizing filter to tint my perceptions, to stain the light with eternity hovering above the mourning pews. Those Anglican spells transmute grief into faith for some – but they didn't catalyze any emotional transformations for me. I had laid aside my Sunday-school belief over the past few years, bagged it bit by bit with the clothes that no longer fit. I didn't believe in heaven – I fought Christian consolations willfully, impetuously, self-importantly – but I had no replacement that carried any emotional weight. Sitting in those varnished pews, all I had was the light leaking through the window, pooling in dusty corners.

After the ceremony and its final procession of robes and hats, books and staves, the crowd filed into the adjacent hall for food and drink. I remember feeling disgust at the ease with which people devoured tiny triangular sandwiches – revulsion at shaking hands with an old man, crumbs stuck to the corner of his mouth. I recognize now the fear hidden in my youthful disdain of time-frail bodies, my absurd attempt to stand clear of old age, sickness, and death – as if impermanence were a sign of weakness, not an inevitable condition of this corporeal life. I remember too my body betraying me: eventually, I gave in to hunger and ate triangular sandwiches, wiped crumbs from the corners of my mouth.

From the reception, a much smaller crowd drove the 40 minutes along the old south shore highway to Hubbards. Here, we buried an urn of ashes in front of a granite stone inscribed with my grandparents' names. Ashes to ashes.

I have a memory of this burial.

The sky was a clear, deep, immediate blue. The late afternoon sun warmed the grave site unseasonably. I was comfortable in a blazer; I needed no other coat. We stood on a gravel road at the base of a small slope. The land here did not lie flat – people had to step up against gravity to lay flowers. I remember thinking how unremarkable this graveyard was. It was near the ocean, but had no views of it, no views of anything sublime. It was a relatively new graveyard, and parts were littered with construction equipment, with bare moved dirt, like a developing subdivision. But near my grandparents' plot, there was a stand of old white pines that shushed as the warmed autumn breeze slipped between the needles. I found myself looking up again while the words and motions of the internment went on around me.

The pine needles glowed, full brimming with light passing through – liquid light, dripping. These high-arching trees, vivid green against the sky, were growing from roots plunged deeply and widely in the soil – life rising from death's plot. It is an ancient consolation, but it soothed me under those pines, in front of that dark earth opening – death seeds new life. After the frozen winter, my grandfather's ashes will nourish spring needles spreading into sky and light, shushing in the warming breeze. He will have a corporeal resurrection. He will circulate, rising and falling, through the physical universe forever.

I am attracted to this kind of spiritual ecology. In the rise and fall of vegetation, in the cycling of energy and nutrients through ecosystems, in the notion that we are all stardust taking various forms as the universe expands, there is a potential for consolation.

> The founder of Rhode Island, Roger Williams, and his wife were buried side by side. Later, an apple tree was planted near the grave. When, decades later, the citizens went to find the bodies to rebury them with honor, it was discovered that they had wholly decayed. Not even the bones were left. A nearby apple tree had wound its roots around the corpses, sucking up the phosphorous of the bones and weaving in living roots the shapes of the dead man and wife. (Logan 57)

I find comforting beauty in the image of corpse-formed woven roots, in the image of bodies nourishing growth, rising as apple blossoms. Like a spring shoot, the desire for

images of resurrection is persistent, perennial – it rises again and again. Even stripped of Christian clothing, the idea of resurrection does not vanish; it merely puts on new clothes, even scientific ones.

The idea that our bodies contain nutrients that pass into other living creatures is part of a pattern of resurrection imagery that carries consolatory power for some poets in the latter half of the 20th century. For example, Snyder's friend and fellow San Francisco renaissance poet Lew Welch saw in turkey buzzards

> The very opposite of
> death
>
> bird of re-birth
> Buzzard
>
> meat is rotten meat made
> sweet again ("Song of the Turkey Buzzard" 88)

In Welch, the idea of spiritual rebirth gives way to a corporeal or ecological rebirth – one that makes sense in the scientific mythology of contemporary times but also connects to ancient agrarian myths of resurrection. In his preface to Welch's *Selected Poems*, Snyder mixes these two discourses: "Ultimately Lew's poems are devotional songs to the Goddess Gaia: Planet Earth Biosphere: and he is truly one of the few who have Gone Beyond, in grasping the beauty of that ecstatic Mutual Offering called the Food Chain" (vi). The fact is that beings feed on each other – energy passing through an ecosystem constantly changes form while nutrients constantly combine, fall apart, and recombine in new ways. In Welch's self-elegy, "Song of the Turkey Buzzard," he invites this kind of energy-exchange resurrection:

> NOT THE BRONZE CASKET BUT THE BRAZEN WING
>
> SOARING FOREVER ABOVE THEE O PERFECT
>
> O SWEETEST WATER O GLORIOUS
>
> WHEELING

BIRD

Welch locates eternity ("forever") in a cyclical, ecological transfer of energy and nutrients – and he locates continuity not in the idea of a spiritual soul but in energy and nutrient exchange. In the end, Welch finds freedom from nihilistic notions of death in images of resurrection and transcendence ("soaring forever above") and of cycles ("wheeling"). The words have changed, but the story of consolation remains the same – we seem to need these images of permanence, even if we have to relocate that permanence in atoms and molecules, the spiritual substance of our day.

Somehow you have to deal with those damn triangular sandwiches. It's one thing to think of your rebirth as a pine tree or an apple blossom or a vulture – it's quite another to think of your rebirth as a thousand maggots. Will spiritual ecology do?

I remember visiting an uncle of mine dying of cancer. We went as a family, three generations: my parents, my brother and his wife, their two year old son. We sat out on the back porch on a warm Annapolis Valley summer day, drank coffee and ate caramel biscuits. My uncle sat in the corner, obviously struggling to stay with the conversation that went on around him – working so hard to smile politely, to stay engaged despite the pain. Everyone watched my little nephew playing – it was a welcome distraction, a body so full of energy and potential, as if he were guaranteed a whole life ahead of him. Nobody knew what the hell to say to a dying man. And what can you say?

I felt stupid and ashamed. Surely this was the last time we were going to see this man alive, and we had nothing of consequence to say – nothing at all. But what phrase could stand in the face of that mystery?

This speechlessness, this complete helplessness and ignorance, has made me a bit suspicious of the spiritual ecology that soothed me like the murmuring wind through the white pines above my grandparents' grave.

I want to believe in the kind of spiritual ecology that Mary Oliver professes so gracefully in her self-elegy "Gravel" from *The Leaf and the Cloud*:

When death
carts me off to the bottomlands,
when I begin
the long work of rising—

Death, whoever and whatever you are, tallest king of
tall kings, grant me these wishes: unstring my bones;
let me be not one thing but all things, and wondrously
scattered; shake me free from my name. Let the wind, and
the wildflowers, and the catbird never know it. Let
time loosen me like the bead of a flower from its wrappings
of leaves. Let me begin the changes, let me— (37)

Here is a soaring, almost Whitmanesque acceptance of the physicality of death (maggots not included). But the passage never lets go of the first person pronoun and the desire for identity, for being. Oliver recognizes her composite nature – that her name does not refer to anything but a temporary collection of parts – but she clings to an identity that persists as it changes, as it scatters widely, as it merges. Through it all there is some ground to cling to. There is something that rises:

Listen, I don't think we're going to rise
in gauze and halos.
Maybe as grass, and slowly.
Maybe as the long-leaved, beautiful grass

I have known, and you have known—
or the pine trees—
or the dark rocks of the zigzag creek
  hastening along—

or the silver rain—

or the hummingbird. (44)

Ecology and its ideas of cyclical natural systems provide images of resurrection that resonate within a world of scientific authority. Tree roots can suck our phosphorus, vultures can digest our meat, the dry air can absorb our water – and we rise. If we are our molecules, then we can rise and fall, rise and fall like breath – we can persist through the

transformations of form. Our identity can expand from this narrow collection of particles out into the whole universe forever:

> Yes, yes, the body never gets away from the world,
> Its endless granular shuffle and exchange—
>
> Everything is one, sooner or later— ("Riprap" 29)

Oliver seems to keep her feet firmly planted in the soil of this world; however, I can't help but feel like all she's done is find a new home for spiritual substance in the granules or particles that science says compose and circulate through the physical world. The indestructible atoms seem to carry our primary identity through all the accidents of form: whether as person, tree, vulture, or rain, we are the same stuff, forever. The molecular and atomic realms, which we think of as so solidly physical, have become the ground and home of our metaphysical desires, our projections of substance. Oliver's eco-elegy, then, gives desire what it craves: permanence – here in the form of a mystical union of persistent particles:

> *dirt, mud, stars, water—*
> *I know you as if you were myself.*
>
> *How could I be afraid?* ("Gravel" 45)

How could I be afraid? Thinking about my uncle sitting in the corner suffering while we focused our attentions on the toddler digging through a pail of toys, I can't help but feel how absurd it would have been to say, "don't worry, uncle; you're about to become dirt and rise again as grass; you're about to decompose and scatter throughout the universe forever." It seems to me that what people are most afraid of losing is not necessarily their bodies but their consciousnesses. Sure, if you think that molecules and atoms stay the same through time, then yes, those that made you up will join the cycles of nature – but what about the things we valued most in life: our particular loves and memories, our particular human life? How could I not be afraid?

The crux of any elegy reading, I think, is how you and the text construct the notion "I," what it refers to, what ontological ground it covers. In Oliver's poem

"Gravel," the first-person pronoun gestures beyond the individual, tightly-woven psycho-physical organism that we commonly think of as our "self." Death (she hopes) releases her from this finite collection of matter and narrowly circumscribed self-awareness: "unstring my bones; / let me be not one thing but all things, and wondrously / scattered; shake me free from my name" ("Gravel" 37). Death does not annihilate identity; rather, death releases identity – identity leaks out of its tightly-clutched boundaries like a body decomposing into soil, renewing the soil's fertility. Identity diffuses but then suffuses or infuses all living things.

But what happens to self-consciousness? It sounds like self-awareness expands out into a much larger self: "let me be not one thing but all things," as if "me" were something larger all along. The pattern of expansion here is reminiscent of the perennial mystical experience of an individual's identity with all things: thou art that. In effect, Oliver is using the language and imagery of biology and ecology to express the merging of *atman*, the individual self, with *Atman*, the Hindu notion of the universal Self – except here *Atman* is the biosphere.

And she's not the only poet drawing elegiac consolations from a kind of mystical ecology. In his epigraph to *The Wheel*, a book of poems containing many elegies, Wendell Berry quotes an agricultural study that draws a parallel between ecological cycles and "eastern religion":

> It needs a more refined perception to recognize throughout this stupendous wealth of varying shapes and forms the principle of stability. Yet this principle dominates. It dominates by means of an ever-recurring cycle... repeating itself silently and ceaselessly.... This cycle is constituted of the successive and repeated processes of birth, growth, maturity, death, and decay.
>
> An eastern religion calls this cycle the Wheel of Life and no better name could be given to it. The revolutions of this Wheel never falter and are perfect. Death supersedes life and life rises again from what is dead and decayed. (iii)

Ah, yes. Stability. If you can't beat impermanence, then you might as well call it permanence. It's a good trick. The wheel or cycle is an image that conveys impermanence and permanence – change and stability – at the same time. All evidence points to the fact that the individual never returns – "We will see no more / the mown grass fallen behind

him" ("Requiem" 3) – but if you shift the burden of meaning from the individual to the larger forces of life, then you can find a ground for being and meaning in the cyclical continuities of family, community, tradition, seasons, ecological cycles and the like.

Within the "ever-recurring" cycles of nature and community, Berry finds fertile sites for resurrection. In "Elegy," he visits his mentor Owen Flood in the land of the dead and learns of the larger life that every individual participates in:

> "Our way is endless," my teacher said.
> "The Creator is divided in Creation
> for the joys of recognition. We knew
> that Spirit in each other once;
> it brings us here. By its divisions
> and returns, the world lives. [...]" (12)

Here is the substance behind that holds firm, that makes sense of all the bewildering changes in this world. Call it what you will: Spirit, soul, Form, substance, ego, Life, atom, author, text, *Atman*. In the end, this stability is desire – it is what we crave in every perception, what we fear losing in death. Something must abide – and in that something everything returns, everything merges:

> There is a song in the Creation;
> it has always been the gift
> of every gifted voice, though none
> every sang it. As he spoke
> I heard that song. In its changes and returns
> his life was passing into life.
> That moment, earth and song and mind,
> the living and the dead, were one. ("Elegy" 13)

Elegy or song here becomes the site for union between living and dead. The dead's life shapes the living song – with every reading, this life is renewed. Mutual dependence of life and death is the law of the Wheel: "Where the tree falls the forest rises" ("Rising" 17). In the Wheel itself, everything unites as one.

But the Buddhist in me retreats from this eco-mysticism. The Wheel of Life that Berry's epigraph celebrates and takes as the given condition of existence is exactly the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*) that Buddhism seeks to escape, not to accept. For the

Buddhist, birth and death are not inescapable facts of life – they are misinterpretations of experience arising from *avidya* and *tanha*. We crave being, we crave resurrection as grass, vulture, apple blossom. We want to go on and on. But ultimately, there is nothing that is born and nothing that dies.

Welch and Oliver and Berry have found another path away from the annihilationism of Ramazani's modern elegists back to the eternalism of Sacks' elegists. In Freudian terms, they have redirected their libidos back into the world of things, away from self-sustaining melancholia. They've (re)discovered an image for their renewed desires in the cyclical death-life patterns of ecosystems. The wheel of being-nonbeing rolls on in their elegies. But for Buddhists, there is escape – this wheel does not turn the way we think it does. There is an end to elegy.

NIHSVABHAVA # In the weeks surrounding deep winter solstice, the Saturday morning ferry rides my wife and I embark on begin in star night darkness. As the boat slips through city light shining waters, earth's spin dips us cold and shivering in the first shallow pools of sunlight. Like an imperceptibly rising tide, light refraction spreads across the sky, smoothing over the stars with brightening blue electro-magnetic radiation.

> We pick our way
> through the edge of the city
> early
> subtly spreading changing sky;
>
> ever-fresh and lovely dawn. (Snyder, "Night Herons" 36)

A thin blue translucent sky precedes the sun's appearance, prepares the way. In the shortest days, we feel the value of precious turquoise skies keenly: subtle joys unfurl like morning glory awakening; the mind finds room to expand through cloudless layers of stratosphere – the claustrophobic isolation of low overcast days and long freezing nights dissipates in the lapis lazuli glow. Self dissolves like a salt crystal in boundless peaceful seas.

"Here in the mind, brother
Turquoise blue.
I wouldn't fool you.
Smell the breeze
It came through all the trees
No need to fear
What's ahead
Snow up on the hills west
Will be there every year
be at rest.
A feather on the ground –
The wind sound –

Here in the Mind, Brother,
Turquoise Blue" (Snyder, "Magpie's Song" 69)

"Magpie's Song" opens with Snyder meditating on an early-morning scene of industrial expansion: forests and deserts surround piles of "excavation gravel" (69). Interstate trucks rumbling threaten to drown out coyotes "howling and yapping from a rise" (69). Snyder sits on the friction edge of the human-nature fault line, where human "progress" threatens to bulldoze the natural world.

Here, at the front-lines of an ecological war zone, Magpie sings to soothe fears and sufferings: "*be at rest.*" His strategy for lifting Snyder up from a vision of despair to one of peace is to expand Snyder's too-narrow perspective. Ironically, Snyder's despair, his anger at and disgust for humans at the start of the poem – his anxiety over the disruption of ecological cycles (the "snow up on the hills") – all reveal that he is temporarily stuck in the very binary metaphysical assumption that catalyzes and sustains ecological crises – the human-nature duality. What people do in the world is just as "natural" as anything else, no matter how destructive. It is thinking that people are somehow separate from nature that allows for the destruction in the first place, allows people to ignore their connections to and responsibilities for the world that sustains them. So a kind of environmental activism based on anger towards humans does nothing to undermine the metaphysical assumption that underlies the devastations of "progress" – it only further alienates. Anger widens the human-nature fault line, causes more destructive friction.

Look at what Snyder says in the Preface to *No-Nature*: "Nature also means the physical universe, including the urban, industrial, and toxic" (v). It's all nature, including all the bits we don't like. In discussing "Night Herons" (quoted above), Snyder reminds us that "The city is just as natural as the country, let's not forget it. There's nothing in the universe that's not natural by definition. [...] Got to get rid of these dualisms" (Interview with Kowal 91). Getting rid of the dualisms is the key, here. The tendency to think of the human world as somehow alien to the natural world, whether you privilege the human or the natural, inevitably results in binary friction. One must seek a larger wholeness, a nondualisitc alpine vision. One must learn how to behave non-destructively and sustainably in an interdependent world.

As Snyder sits "on excavation gravel," he digs through layers of dualistic conceptual consciousness in order to unearth visions of a larger wholeness. He finds these spacious thoughts in myth consciousness:

> There's a world behind the world we see that is the same world but more open, more transparent, without blocks. Like inside a big mind, the animals and humans all can talk, and those who pass through here get power to heal and help. They learn how to behave, and how not to give offense. To touch this world no matter how briefly is a help in life. People seek it, but the seeking isn't easy. Shapes are fluid here. ("The Woman" 164)

In "Magpie's Song," Snyder briefly enters this world, where a normally incoherent (and thus alien) bird song becomes the healing song of a mythical being. Magpie's song reminds Snyder that there are larger realms of wholeness to which he has temporarily become blind. Everything unites, open and fluid, "*Here in the Mind, Brother / Turquoise Blue.*"

The song moves from the dualistic isolation and fragmentation of small-m mind at the beginning of the song out into boundless nondual large-M Mind by the end, where the boundaries between human and nature, between internal and external, dissolve into pure undivided Turquoise Blue Mind. And like a meditation on present-moment awareness, Magpie reveals that the path leading to Mind passes through the visceral and direct mindful experience of interdependence: "*Smell the breeze / It came through all the trees.*" Magpie's song is a simple reminder of contingency and dependence: the oxygen we rely

on, the air we are enmeshed in, depends on the respiration of all the photosynthesizing trees: trees, oxygen, poet – all arise in mutual dependence. Remove one, and the rest fail. Magpie reminds us of all our larger relations, reminds us that he too is kin.

The lesson of "Magpie's Song" is that people and nature don't need to be saved; they need to be healed, made whole. The people in the big machines that tear at the Earth's skin act out of bewilderment and ignorance. The cure is not to rave in anger at the injustice; it is to "*be at rest,*" to lose the fear, and to let the perfumed breeze of dependent origination dissipate the fog of confusion. Everything – the poet, the junipers, the trucks and drivers on I-80, the Coyotes, Magpie, "*A feather on the ground -- / The wind sound*" – it's all Mind, Turquoise Blue.

In certain Snyder poems, blue works as an image of healing through wholeness. The *Mountains and Rivers Without End* poem "The Blue Sky," like "Magpie's Song," invokes the colour blue as an ancient symbol of healing, of making whole: "*Heal*, hale.... whole" (Snyder, "The Blue Sky" 41). In "The Blue Sky," Bhaishajyaguru, the Buddhist "Master of Healing," shines with "AZURE RADIANCE" and lives in a realm "PURE AS LAPIS LAZULI" (40). One seeks this celestial Buddha and his realm to become whole, to see through the illusory solidity of independent self (*atman*) and things (*svabhava*). But it's not only Buddhism that Snyder evokes here. He also draws on "the ancient lore of the protective and healing powers of the color blue and of certain blue stones" (Notes 160) like lapis lazuli – "blue bead charms against the evil eye" (42) – the eye that discriminates substantial individuals.

Snyder invokes these blue-tinted Buddhist and shamanistic images of healing because, in his view, the fundamental business of poetry is healing – removing dualistic interpretations of world and self and reawakening a living awareness of Turquoise Blue Mind. Poetry is an opportunity to wake up to the interpenetrating whole: "The poet as healer is asserting several layers of larger realms of wholeness. The first larger realm is identity with the natural world, demonstrating that the societal system, a little human enclave, does not stand by itself apart from the plants and animals and winds and rains and rivers that surround it" ("Poetry, Community" 171). Discovering our basic ecological enmeshment is the first and most obvious step towards wholeness in Snyder's poetry.

From there, Snyder tries to reintegrate his listeners' everyday consciousness with the unconscious/myth realm (*ibid*), stretching the inner cosmos as wide as the outer:

> Horse with lightning feet!
> A mane like distant rain,
> the turquoise horse,
> a black star for an eye
> white shell teeth.
>
> Pony that feeds on the pollen of flowers
> may he
> make thee whole. ("The Blue Sky" 40-41)

Figures like Magpie and the turquoise horse emerge like dream visions from unconscious imagination, reawakening a mostly-forgotten connection to myth realms. The symbolic figures and landscapes beyond everyday familiar consciousness carry an impossible-to-articulate feeling of depth and meaning. Read with open awareness, the images reknit our connections to larger forces of imaginative energy, which we don't normally touch in everyday experience. We can ride Snyder's turquoise horse into unexplored areas of experience where thoughts and images carry meanings as vast and ambiguous as the cosmos. When limited to personal ego consciousness, psychic energies feel small and alien in a world of large forces. But psychic energy is still energy, and it can feel just as large and powerful as nature's energy: the energy that drives the thunderstorm is the same kind of energy that generates the image of a "Horse with lightning feet! / A mane like distant rain." Snyder's mythical images resonate with a kind of power that links us to a world of impermanent metamorphosing forms, a dance of energy and boundless identity. For Snyder, poetry uses myth imagery and language to strike a harmonic resonance between seemingly discrete realms: everyday consciousness, myth unconsciousness, and the external world. It all runs on the same forces.

Beyond this reintegration of conscious and unconscious realms, Snyder's poetry attempts to reawaken a sense of shared humanity with those people beyond our immediate kin group: "We must go beyond just feeling at one with nature, and feel at one with each other, with ourselves. That's where all natures intersect" ("Poetry, Community"

172). In "The Blue Sky," the image of a clear blue sky, a turquoise sky, an azure or lapis lazuli sky operates as an image of unbounded wholeness, of healing:

> Celestial. Arched cover ... *kam.*
> Comrade: sharing the same tent or sky,
> a bent curved bow.
>
> Kama, God of Love, Son of Maya,
> bow of flowers. (43)

Using etymology and homophonous relations between words, the text seems to gesture toward lost meanings hidden in the very language that normally contributes to our sense of dualistic isolation. Snyder is perhaps using language to remind us of the broader connections and lines of relation that link people to nature, each other, and themselves: we all share the same empty indivisible azure sky, inside and out.

The point about the healing possibilities of language is a crucial one for Snyder. In his opinion, we are too apt to think of language in dualistic terms, as a wholly human force that stands outside of a chaotic nature, shaping the world into meaningful forms. But for Snyder, the patterns of language are wild: "The grammar not only of language, but of culture and civilization itself, is of the same order as this mossy little forest creek, this desert cobble" ("Tawny" 76). Yes, language and the arbitrary conceptions words point to do not express the way things really are, but language and concepts are not themselves unnatural. Snyder quotes Dogen in an effort to reknit the connections between nature and language:

> In one of his talks Dogen said: "To carry yourself forward and experience myriad things is delusion. But myriad things coming forth and experiencing *themselves* is awakening." Applying this to language theory, I think it suggests that when occidental logos-oriented philosophers uncritically advance language as a unique human gift which serves as the organizer of the chaotic universe – it is a delusion. The subtle and many-layered cosms of the universe have found their own way into symbolic structure and have given us thousands of tawny human-language grammars. ("Tawny" 76-77)

For Snyder, it is a mistake to separate mind and language from the world. Mind, language, myriad things arise, but there is no essential space dividing them: all arise dependently, fully enmeshed. So language does not heal or make whole by standing back and reformulating the world in a more desirable way. The poet healer does not move into realms of chaos with the view to create new solidifying myths: "What a final refinement of confusion about the role of myths it is to declare that although they are not to be believed, they are nonetheless aesthetic and psychological constructs which bring order to an otherwise chaotic world and to which we should willfully commit ourselves!" (Snyder, "Blue Mountains" 112-13). What madness to think that our selves occupy some space outside of experience! Language heals when it points to its own empty, dependently arisen nature – not when it tries to set itself against the rush of experience. Got to get rid of these dualisms!

In Snyder's analysis, we are all sick. We've tried to cut ourselves off from layer after layer of wholeness, tried to abstract ourselves from the ever-new and ever-present interdependent web, tried to slash our way free in a desperate bid for transcendence. But the boon of this war for independence is not freedom; it's suffering – for nature, for other people, for us. And this suffering originates in one fundamental mistake: the hypostatized split between self and world. According to Snyder, we operate

> under the delusion that we are each a kind of "solitary knower" – that we exist as rootless intelligences without layers of localized contexts. Just a "self" and the "world." In this there is no real recognition that grandparents, place, grammar, pets, friends, lovers, children, tools, the poems and songs we remember, are what we *think with*. Such a solitary mind – if it could exist – would be a boring prisoner of abstractions. ("Tawny" 60)

Nothing is disconnected, not even mind. Nothing pulls or abstracts itself out of the stream of dependently arising experience, not even mind. Nothing transcends this moment this place this mind. Dogen says, "Whoever told people that 'Mind' means thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concepts? Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles, and grasses" (qtd. in Snyder, "Etiquette" 20). We don't observe and know the world from some point of view outside of it. We are enmeshed, body – mind. Magpie says, "*Here in the Mind, Brother, /*

Turquoise Blue" ("Magpie's Song" 247). There is no fundamental division between thought and object – they are useful concepts, but they lack independent, substantial existence. There is only this this this now – the healing wholeness of turquoise blue mind sky – "AZURE RADIANCE TATHAGATA" ("The Blue Sky" 40).

#

When sunlight fully weaves its blue thread celestial tapestry, and luminescent water lies still across the harbour, riding the ferry feels like flying through liquid sky. Sky and water feel limitless – there are no divisions anywhere. And looking out beyond the HalTerm container port, beyond the steep wooded slopes of Fergusons Cove, sky and water curve down beyond sight lines, following the continental shelf's plunge towards the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. The individual mind reaching out into this vast space pulls itself dangerously thin.

In his notes to "The Blue Sky" in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, Snyder points out that "The character *k'ung*, used for the Buddhist term *shunyata* or 'emptiness' in Chinese, also means 'sky'" (160). According to Nancy McCagney, the image of glowing blue groundless expanse serves as the root image informing Nagarjuna's explication of *sunyata*, which she translates as "openness" rather than "emptiness." In his writings, Nagarjuna often conveys the experience of *sunyata* using the image of *akasa*, empty space: "For Nagarjuna, all events, and most importantly, *samsara* and *nirvana*, are not distinct because they are all like the sky, like space (*akasa*), without limits or boundaries which separate and distinguish them" (xx). Like Snyder, Nagarjuna uses the image of the blue sky to, in Snyder's words, "get our heads clear to certain wholenesses that are there anyway" (Interview with Helm 157). In Nagarjuna's Madhyamika tradition, *sunyata* operates as a provisional universal predicate, serving a healing function – to cure the view of independent existence that leads to suffering (*duhkha*) due to grasping (*tanha*): "This sense of *sunyata* as spacious and open is closely connected [...] to the concept of having no place to settle down (*analaya*) and nothing to grasp (*anagraha*)" (McCagney 26). Individual selves and things open out into limitless space: this is the healing power of dependent origination, of realizing universal wholeness.

This image of open space, though, needs some qualification. We tend to think of space as background and selves or objects as figures that move within that ground. Space for us is static, unchanging, timeless. We move, but space remains unmoved – it is what we move through, what makes movement possible. According to Trungpa, however, this notion of space as static is the first hypostatization on the way to ego (*atman*) formation. In *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, he spins a provisional creation story to help the mind sort out what is given and what is imputed in experience. Before *atman*, he says, there "is open space, belonging to no one" (123). There is spacious experience, but no firmly held belief in conceptual divisions between internal "me" events and external "not-me" events. But the temptation to binary reification is strong. We become "*self*-conscious, conscious that 'I' am dancing in the space" (123). Here, then, is the fundamental interpretive split: "space is no longer space as such. It becomes solid. Instead of being one with the space, we feel solid space as a separate entity, as tangible. This is the first experience of duality – space and I, I am dancing in this space, and this spaciousness is a solid, separate thing" (123). Suddenly, self and space rise out of the original "flowing, open quality" of experience – self and space transcend the energy dance. This is where we leave time and change behind. With the static feeling of space all around us, we can ignore the present, divide experience into variant and invariant.

How we get from open experience to dualistic I-world experience is a bit of a mystery. We seem to be wired to perceive experience in conceptual terms. And while this is a tremendously powerful and useful way of interpreting the world, we tend to idolize our concepts beyond usefulness. In everyday experience, the shift from open to closed perception happens so quickly that we feel that our conceptual interpretations are simply givens. We never bring the openness into conscious view.

The point I want to focus on here, though, is that Nagarjuna's metaphor for explaining the fundamental nature of experience – *akasa* – is not exactly the same as our static experience of space, the space that arises in dualistic perceptions. However, *akasa* does share a quality with our everyday experience of vast blue sky: they are both limitless, without division. What Nagarjuna is trying to say with this metaphor, I think, is that when we experience ourselves and other things, we are mistaken if we think that our/their existence or being is finite and limited, that there is a location where I stop and

the rest of the world begins, a place where a tree stops and the rest of the forest begins. For Nagarjuna, being is not contained – it stretches far beyond the glowing horizon. And it is not static, not transcendent – it flows like electro-magnetic energy flooding the bewildered star-filled sky.

In Snyder's poetry, the empty, dependently originated nature of existence translates into a celebration of the ordinary – *tathata*, thusness. A Zen saying: "Unformed people delight in the gaudy and in novelty. Cooked people delight in the ordinary" (qtd. in Snyder, *Place in Space* 115). While readers may initially assume that Buddhist enlightenment is something exotic, something that only happens to mostly-mythical lamas walking through Himalayan clouds, Snyder asserts (like Buddhists do) that enlightenment is nothing special. For example, in *Myths and Texts*, the final section "Burning" culminates in a "Leap through an Eagle's snapping beak" ("Burning 13" 49), a leap through the duality of this and that. And on the other side,

> it was nothing special,
> misty rain on Mt. Baker,
> Neah Bay at low tide. ("Burning 13" 49)

Nondual wholeness is just this – "This, *thusness*, is the nature of the nature of nature" (Snyder, "Blue Mountains" 103) – just the Sierra mountains and the rains that flow into the Pacific:

> "Mountains and waters" is a way to refer to the totality of the process of nature. As such it goes well beyond dichotomies of purity and pollution, natural and artificial. The whole, with its rivers and valleys, obviously includes farms, fields, villages, cities, and the (once comparatively small) dusty world of human affairs. (Snyder, "Blue Mountains" 102)

Snyder's poetry points directly to thusness, the flow of dependent arising experience right now. To see it, you simply loosen the grasp of inherent existence interpretations and open awareness to the empty blue sky at the heart of every present experience:

> The voice of the Dharma
> the voice
> *now*

A shimmering bell
through all.

Every hill, still.
Every tree alive. Every leaf.
All the slopes flow.
old woods, new seedlings,
tall grasses plumes. (Snyder, "Regarding Wave" 35)

In Tibetan and Japanese Buddhist communities, the "shimmering bell" begins every period of meditation. The bell's oscillating waver calls the mind to thusness. For Snyder, reading and writing poetry is akin to meditation: both pay deliberate attention to consciousness in order to experience Mind, the ground of individual consciousness, the ground of all experience (Snyder, *Place* 109-110): "Poetry is a way of celebrating the actuality of a nondual universe in all its facets" (Snyder, *Place* 112). And because actuality contains everything, anything can serve as the object of meditation or poetic celebration:

> *All is actuality*. There is nothing special about *actuality* because it is all right here. There's no need to call attention to it, to bring it up vividly and display it. Therefore the ultimate subject matter of poetry is profoundly ordinary. The really fine poems are maybe the invisible ones, that show no special insight, no remarkable beauty. (Snyder, *Place* 115-116)

Anything and everything teaches the Dharma: "Every hill," "Every tree," "Every leaf," "All the slopes" – it's all "fluid, open, and conditional" (Snyder, Preface v). The material for poetry that seeks to reveal thusness is endless: "Not only plum blossoms and clouds, or Lecturers and Roshis, but chisels, bent nails, wheelbarrows, and squeaky doors are all teaching the truth of the way things are" (Snyder, "Blue Mountains" 105). Because there are no substantial divisions in experience, every particular image contains the whole, conveys the whole.

The concept of poetry that I'm trying to formulate here using a collage of Snyder text snippets is a functional one, that is, what I'm saying poetry *is* results from what I think readers should *do* with poems. And what I'm saying readers should do with poems is try to analyze what poems are, not just what they say or mean. The result of this

analysis is, ironically, the disappearance of poetry altogether as a fundamentally or ultimately distinguishable category of experience. As Snyder says, "from the enlightened standpoint, all of language is poetry" (Interview with Chowka 134). No collection of words is inherently more or less "poetic" than any other – any word is as empty of inherent existence as any other. So any text can serve as a condition for nondual awareness.

In fact, any activity can accomplish what Snyder and I are saying about the purpose of poetry: "The point is to make intimate contact with the real world, real self [...] [to move] out of our little selves into the whole mountain-and-rivers mandala universe" (Snyder, "Good, Wild" 94). And the way to do that is to dissolve all the binaries, first on a conceptual level, and then on the level of practice. But nondual practice can be anything, from reading a text to sweeping, as long as it is done mindfully:

> There is a body-mind dualism if I am sweeping the floor and thinking about Hegel. But if I am sweeping the floor and thinking about sweeping the floor, I am all one. And that is not trivial; nor is the sensation of it trivial. Sweeping the floor becomes, then, the most important thing in the world. Which it is. (Snyder, Interview with Lampe 7)

In my mind, all of Snyder's poetry points to this goal of nondual awareness in the present moment. The poetry does not automatically reveal its dependent openness – but it tries its damndest to reveal those flowing dependencies and interrelationships on all levels.

> *Walking on walking,*
> *under foot earth turns*
>
> *Streams and mountains never stay the same.* (Snyder, "Endless" 9)

QUESTIONS # Sometime during the 11th century, there lived in India a great Buddhist scholar named Naropa. By all accounts, he was a pretty smart guy. It is said that nobody of his day was as learned or as clever as he. At a young age, Naropa showed up at Nalanda University (the Buddhist Harvard of its time) to test his learning in debate. Up to

this point, he had crushed everyone with whom he had debated, but Nalanda was a new challenge, the big leagues. Through his superior intellect and elegant speech, however, he not only defeated a room full of visiting philosophers, he also converted them all to Buddhism. Impressed and excited, the old boys at Nalanda elected Naropa as a department head on the spot. Students clamoured to study with him. He was a hot shot, a star – a Buddhist scholar celebrity.

Nobody could analyze the sutras with Naropa's acuity. Nobody could weave arguments as tightly or as gracefully as Naropa. He was a master of logic, a genius. He published widely – he grew famous.

One day, while Naropa was hard at work reading and studying the sutras, an old woman interrupted him. Pointing to Naropa's texts, she asked in a creaky old woman voice, "Do you understand the words or the sense?" (Guenther, *Naropa* 24). Naropa may have been famous, but he was no dismissive jerk. He halted his reading and engaged fully in the conversation. He answered that, in fact, he understood the words. At this, the old woman laughed and danced around with delight. Smiling at the old woman's antics, Naropa completed his response, hoping to increase the woman's joy: "I also understand the sense." Instantly, the old woman stopped dancing and began to weep. Bewildered, Naropa inquired about this sudden mood shift. The old woman replied that she was happy at his first response because he had told the truth; his second answer saddened her because he had told a lie: "you don't understand the sense at all."

Well. The great scholar Naropa, who had defeated all comers in debate, was shocked. But his instincts told him that this was no ordinary old woman and, moreover, that she was right. So he asked her how he could come to understand the sense of Buddhist texts, and she told him that he should abandon the University and search for the Guru Tilopa – he should abandon conceptual analysis and seek authentic experience. After delivering this advice, the old woman "disappeared like a rainbow in the sky" (Guenther, *Naropa* 25).

Turns out that the old woman was Vajrayogini, a *dakini*: "a tantric muse who urges adepts beyond logic, reason, and abstract theory and guides them toward the unwalled sanctuaries of the illuminated heart" (Baker 77). Vajrayogini's visit set Naropa's mind on fire – her challenge cut like diamond through the crust of conceptual

knowledge accumulated around his heart. He realized that his practice had to change radically.

So he resolved to leave Nalanda in search of Tilopa. At this point in Naropa's spiritual biography (*The Wondrous Life of the Great Scholar Naropa, Crown-Jewel of All Philosopher-Saints*), the narrator portrays Naropa, learned Naropa, almost as a beginner. Reflecting on the vision of Vajrayogini, Naropa realizes some Buddhist basics, as if for the first time: that *samsara* is misery because filled with dissatisfaction; that self or body-mind is "impermanent and perishable"; and that the path to "understand[ing] co-emergent awareness," an awareness beyond dualistic experience, lies beyond conceptual analysis (Guenther, *Naropa* 25). You have to assume that Naropa, a department head at Nalanda, was quite familiar with these concepts before Vajrayogini's visit, but the narrator wants to emphasize that Naropa's vision of the old woman catalyzed a life-changing realization: while he could manipulate Buddhist concepts to weave complex philosophical arguments, he had no direct experience of what these concepts gestured at.

Internally, Naropa began to shift his mental practice from playing with words, concepts, and philosophical systems to searching experientially for the words' sense or meaning. Externally, he gave "up all his belongings and books" (27) and left the comforts and accolades of Nalanda for Himalayan jungles. The University had become for Naropa what Suddhodana's palace had been for the future Buddha, what metaphysical questions had been for Malunkyaputta – distraction from the spiritual path. Naropa's external search for the guru Tilopa, then, embodies his internal search for illumination, for the enlightened guru within.

Predictably, the heads of various departments begged him to stay, but Naropa's resolve was firm. He departed with these words – a pronouncement on the scholarly life:

> Whate'er is born will die, whate'er is joined will part.
> How can we find the path of freedom and immortality
> In that which only builds up (Karma)?
> I know all the scriptures which are like the sea,
> All five branches of learning have I mastered
> With grammar and epistemology,
> Yet without a competent Guru
> The fire of my craving will not die.
> If my yearning be not stilled
> By the Guru's grace which is like

> The nectar stream of Tantra essence
> Wide as the ocean, despite my attainments,
> Virtues and supersensible cognitions,
> I have not seen Reality.
> Therefore I shall rely on dGyes-pa rdo-rje (Hevajra)
> And seek firmly for the true Guru. (Guenther, *Naropa* 28)

Naropa here realizes his predicament: he's caught in a vast web of discursive thought. Now he must return to his breath, to the empty and luminous present, to "Reality." But he can't do that at Nalanda. He must reject the textual analysis and philosophical debate that he loved so much – the motivations guiding that work were rooted in craving, and the faculty of mind performing that work was rooted in craving. His work at Nalanda was never going to liberate him from ignorance, suffering, and death. Searching for the "true Guru," then, becomes a metaphor for cutting through the jungle of conceptual attainments and returning to the mind (the guru) that abides in the luminous present.

The Nalanda episode of Naropa's biography seems to leave little hope for marrying literary criticism and Buddhist practice. While the critic spends his or her days cloistered in a university office studying words and playing with concepts, the Buddhist gives up on texts and strikes out into mind's wilderness, cutting through mists of discursiveness to reveal vast blue sky mind in the name of compassion and wisdom. Herbert Guenther's comment on Naropa's abandonment of Nalanda does nothing to mend the gap between these two practices: "Throughout the years [Naropa] had been engaged in intellectual activities which were essentially analytic and thereby had become oblivious of the fact that the human organ of knowledge is bi-focal. 'Objective' knowledge may be entirely accurate without, however, being entirely important, and only too often it misses the heart of the matter" (ix). Naropa's story seems to suggest that the pursuit of conventional knowledge (i.e., knowledge of entities that only exist as entities by convention), even when that knowledge is of things Buddhist, is irretrievably dualistic, rooted in *avidya* (ignorance). The pursuit of such knowledge only mires us deeper in samsaric notions of substantial existence. The old woman, looking over our shoulders, gleefully reminds us that we have no clue what anything really means. The strings we follow through the labyrinth lead us in circles.

But Vajrayogini's appearance was not simply the result of blind chance; she appeared because Naropa's understanding had ripened: when the student is ready, the master appears. Naropa's hours of analytical study may not have given him access to the sense of Buddha's teaching, but they did create the conditions for approaching that sense. Naropa's sutra study – his years of thinking through the concepts – were crucial: Vajrayogini's appearance depended on them. Naropa's real problem was that the concepts seduced him: he got lost in discursive thought and forgot to return to the breath. He lost sight of the fact that all Buddha's teachings are *upaya*, provisional – tools to slice through deep habit-thought-pattern encrustations. Naropa got caught admiring the tools, forgetting the real work.

In order to push that work ahead, Naropa engages in *shamatha*'s sister meditation *vipashyana* – insight or contemplation. At the Shambhala Centre, I learned the basic form of this practice, a practice similar to *shamatha*. The meditation posture is the same as for *shamatha*, but the object of meditation is not. While in *shamatha* we release our attachment to thoughts and remain mindful of the breath, in *vipashyana* we use a thought as the object of mindfulness: "Our object of meditation is no longer the breath. Instead, we hold our mind to a thought or a sentence and keep it there, and use insight to understand its meaning" (Mipham 132-33). "Meaning" here has the same connotation as "sense" in Vajrayogini's challenge to Naropa. The search for meaning in *vipashyana* does not remain in the sleepy lotus fields of concepts and categories – the dictionary's domain – where meaning leads in circles: words sliding into other words, definitions eventually leading back to the word being defined. No. In *vipashyana*, you contemplate a sprig of text not simply to generate a series of related discursive thoughts but to pass beyond conceptual understanding into a direct apprehension of the root experience that the text grows from: "Contemplating the meaning of a particular thought moves us from concept toward a direct experience of reality, which is wisdom" (Mipham 133). Sakyong Mipham's use of the word "reality" here may not be pragmatic, but what is important to note is that textual contemplation shifts the aim of reading from knowledge production to wisdom, direct experience. What you do with your mind while reading changes in *vipashyana*.

Here's how *vipashyana* works. First, practice *shamatha* until mind calms. Then mentally conjure your chosen text, using the words as mindfulness object. There are many traditional topics of contemplation from death to wishing happiness to all beings. My favourite is "Everything is impermanent" (Mipham 147). Focus on the words. When mind strays from text to unrelated thoughts, emotions, or narrative fantasies, acknowledge the distraction and return to the text. At this point, you need to generate thoughts about the text in order to access the experience to which they refer. Mipham advises meditators to "Bring ideas and images to mind to inspire the meaning" (227). This is where textual study, where thinking through Buddhist concepts, enriches practice. The more pervasive your conceptual understanding of the notion of impermanence, the more likely your contemplation will access the direct experience of impermanence. Here, the trick to contemplation is to separate words and concepts from sense or meaning: "After a certain point, the words fall away, but the meaning stays. We are no longer operating from the basis of concept. The subject-object separation is gone" (Mipham 133-34). The meaning of impermanence might be felt as "a sense of groundlessness" (Mipham 135); the important point is to experience the impermanence of self and all things in the present moment. In the moment you touch a glowing stove element, you experience the meaning of "heat" directly: this is the kind of direct experience *vipashyana* seeks to access. What does "impermanence" feel like?

Once the words and concepts dissolve and the direct feeling of impermanence arises, you stay with the feeling, abide in it, become familiar with it. In ending the session, you keep the feeling in heart and aspire to orient your thoughts and actions in the world accordingly. For example, if all is impermanent, then there is no ground for attachment, nothing to desire. Over time, the experience of groundlessness accompanies your perceptions, so the conditions for attachment no longer arise. The knowledge that everything is impermanent leads to the direct experience of impermanence, leads to wisdom. Without that direct experience, however, your knowledge is bootless. If, like Naropa at Nalanda, you remain only at the level of knowledge, you incur the old lady's scorn: you understand the words but you do not live according to their sense.

Must we Buddhists, then, abandon the university and follow Naropa into the jungle? Yes, we must. You cannot see the guru Tilopa (illuminated mind) within the

university's walls (dualistic conceptual knowledge). That being said, the university of the mind is crucial to spiritual development, and reading texts and thinking through certain concepts can serve a spiritual end. Reading texts can become awareness practice, where the reader observes harmful habitual thought patterns as they arise, and it can serve contemplative practices, even if the texts were not originally generated to serve Buddhist practice.

Take Shakespeare's sonnet 18, for example:

> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
> Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
> Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
> And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
> Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
> And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
> And every fair from fair sometime declines,
> By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.
> But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
> Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
> Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
> When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

As a Buddhist reader, what can I do with this poem?

#

A Reading of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18

Warm coffee aroma. Quiet early-morning writing time. Steam rising curling from dark green pottery mug. On mug's lip, tiny condensation beads appear in interlocking patterns, shift wave-like with heat, vanish like breath. December-cold apartment hands wrapped tightly around for warmth – smooth glaze, turning.

Environment Canada rainfall warning in effect for the whole province. Clouds strain under their own dark weight. Puddle of grey filtered light on glossy bird's-eye laminate floors. Compact fluorescent desk lamp turns wall electricity into endless streams of photons – electron dance energy spills out across yellow varnish table, some books, a computer.

Reading *Tao Te Ching* dark misty valleys and unseen trickling waters. Mind still: a mountain tarn reflecting. In T'ang and Sung mountains and rivers painting, the first brush stroke dipped disturbs the waters, splits heaven and earth on the empty luminous page. The ten thousand things emerge; the empty vessel fills; the uncarved block takes form. Black ink is *yu* – being – faded yellow parchment is *wu* – non-being: "being and non-being give rise to each other" (Lao Tzu 2.2).

Lamp light emitted streams forth through space, tumbles over open book, pours down into dark letters like misty valleys: subatomic waterfalls of absorption. Pages of text carve light, make words by removal. Try to lift this text clean off the page. You can't do it: "being and non-being give rise to each other."

Open book at Shakespeare's sonnet 18: ink clutches light; white page reflects freely. Dappled light sparks photosynthesis of meaning when mind is present: "Named, the mother of ten thousand things" (Lao Tzu 1.2a). But conceptual meaning is more than the meeting of mind and bright-dark patterns. For meaning to arise, mind must look with intention, with desire. Lao Tzu says,

> Therefore, always without desire,
> In order to observe the hidden mystery;
> Always with desire,
> In order to observe the manifestations. (1.3a)

Look with desire and the sonnet appears as an entity. Desire creates the conditions for knowledge reading: it names, splits heaven and earth, splits ink and page, splits mind and poem. Sometimes it chooses one and rejects the other. But ink always depends on page; without page, ink has nowhere to settle. Just so, the spaces between fingers make fingers useful, make typing possible. Something cannot exist without nothing to support it; in other words, ink without non-ink is unreadable – ink is impossible on its own. But desire-mind is forgetful – looks at ink and forgets page. Worse, desire-mind looks at poem and forgets mind, page, light, table, rain-soaked cloud-weight sky. Instead, it wills independent entity perception, calls forth abstract history: that there is Shakespeare's sonnet 18, published in 1609.

White tight-woven Norton Anthology pages, onion-skin thin. The sonnets on page reverse show through, backwards. Footnotes stacked in layers at page bottom look like a

house foundation: critical apparatus – extra text "to make ready." The dictionary says of apparatus, "the things necessary to carry out a purpose or for a particular use" ("Apparatus"). These reading apparatus are laid out carefully like surgical tools for an ambiguity-ectomy, a dramatic separation of conjoined binaries. A successful surgery extracts knowledge. But I'm more intrigued with the faded coffee-coloured stain that spreads off the page across all the page ends. I can't remember when that happened, and there's no footnote to help me.

When desire moves, reader and poem split, solidify in habit-thought-patterns. But you can no more lift mind from this moment than you can lift the sonnet off the page or a wave off the ocean: nouns are not that powerful. They mark boundaries for their king, plant flags. But while they can't take the territory home with them, they can enslave. Reader and poem do exist (stand forth) separately, but only as concepts, only as conventional interpretations of a whole universal movement. The figure never transcends the ground. These figures, concepts, are useful but also dangerous if you believe in their independence.

A zen story. Two monks were arguing about a flag roiling in late autumn winds. One was convinced that it was the flag that moved – the other that it was the wind. The master overheard and appeared dramatically by their sides: "Neither. It is mind that moves."

Rain now on bare blackened tree limbs, on asphalt. Gutter streams flow down Victoria Street, carrying the last leaf detritus down storm drains to quiet harbour bottom compost. Energy is always moving through. My mind focuses on small details – even there impermanence is the rule: water drop hangs on the telephone wire, reflects the Baptist church behind upside-down, falls. A *haiku* by Shiki:

> The sparrow hops
> Along the verandah,
> With wet feet. (Blyth, Vol. II, 517)

The moment lasts for a breath – the tiny wet prints across the mind fade. Even so, "every fair from fair sometimes declines, / By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed"

(Sonnet 18, 7-8). The lush warm beauty of summer gives way to cold, barren landscapes. Nature's beauty always fading: nature's course, always changing.

Why do things change so quickly, so inexorably? Why do seasons shift? In a northern winter, earth's orbit positions the globe's tilt such that our hemisphere receives less solar radiation than in summer – we lean away from the fire. In this reduced energy state, everything changes: "summer's lease hath all too short a date" (4). Summer here depends on a certain influx of energy – as the energy levels fluctuate, so does nature. What this constant change reveals is that nature's beauty lacks permanence because it is dependent. If, say, the "darling buds of May" were independent, that is, if spring buds clutched their own permanent self-defined being, then any external changes would not affect them. They would be free to remain buds through all seasons. But things don't work that way: the buds arise because a number of conditions coincide. And as those conditions change, as the "eye of heaven shines" with summer virility, those buds shed their bud-ness and become flowers – they easily slip from one conceptual category to another. This slippage, like spring melt trickling below a thin crust of ice, undermines our firm belief in substantial being. What we named "bud" possessed nothing of its own from moment to moment, so it lost nothing when conditions aligned as "flower" and its grasp opened empty. It lost nothing; we lost a conceptual entity. Nothing stays, even for a second: "being and non-being give rise to each other."

Shakespeare's sonnet laments nature's dependent transience. Nothing is ever perfect: "Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May" (3), summer days get too hot (5), and clouds mar the beauty of clear blue skies (6). Worse than this, everything in nature eventually dies. At the heart of this sonnet is life's great contradiction – death and desire. Desire clutches the nouns (day, buds, summer, eye, fair, possession); death haunts the verbs (shake, dimmed, declines, untrimmed, fade, lose). Death inevitably unmakes the entities desire desperately grasps: the oasis clutched is sand slipping between fingers. In the phenomenal world, being returns to non-being.

Or does it? In the first two quatrains, death and change seem to rule the day. However, in the third quatrain, desire asserts itself, muzzles the verbs with negatives: "But thy eternal summer shall not fade, / Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st" (9-10). Summer's virility and potency is subject to change, but the beloved's beauty is not

subject to such a tenuous tenancy: he owns his beauty. His beauty grows out of Death's reach in the ground of poetry, the ploughed "eternal lines" of text (12). For Shakespeare, language grants access to fields eternally fertile. In the sonnet, nouns survive the verbs of transformation like seeds survive the winter's cold. When the proper conditions arise, when the solar energy of a reader's mind lights the page, the nouns revive, send out tiny feeling shoots: like Orpheus, like Jesus, the poem reemerges from the underworld.

Sonnet 18 operates like an elegy. The first two quatrains mourn impermanence and the inevitability of change and death; however, the third quatrain and the final couplet provide consolation. Line 9's volta shifts the sonnet's tone in much the same way as Spencer's consolation "Ah no: it is not dead, ne can it die" (283) shifts that elegy's tone from nihilistic grief to solid faith – "But thy eternal summer shall not fade." In Spencer's elegy, the poet's desire abides in a figure of Sidney's immortal soul; in Shakespeare's sonnet, the poet's desire abides in a figure of the beloved's beauty – here the vegetative trope escapes time through cyclical renewal. For each poet, death's threat to desire is a threat to life itself: desire or love operates as the creative force. For solace and a renewal of life, Spencer anchors his desire in heavenly belief – Shakespeare anchors his desire in the text's symbols.

But Shakespeare's textual eternity sits on thin ice because it is dependent. The beloved only lives and "grow'st" (12) when watered with breath, vision, and mind: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (13-14). Here the beloved's life ("thee") depends on the poem ("this"). In turn, the poem's life depends on a reader, depends on eyes and breath. Where Sidney's infant soul transcends corporeal contingency (although Spencer's trope is necessarily rooted in phenomena, it is meant to point beyond), Shakespeare's beloved remains rooted in temporal soil.

I'm making a big deal out of dependence here because I think it transforms what appears to be a fairly optimistic love poem into an uncertain ontological minefield. The poem appears to make an ontological claim for "thee," the last word of the sonnet. It claims that "thee" is an eternal entity, dodging dissolution and death (9, 11). "Thee," then, must contain some kind of being that survives time and change. Curiously, though, that being's location is a bit sketchy. Somehow this eternal quality can be transferred from the

specific corporeal beloved to the poem itself. Take a look at lines 11-12: "Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade, / When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st." The implication here is that had the poem not been written, death would have reason to brag. So the poem captures something that changing nature would otherwise destroy.

But what exactly does the poem preserve from death? What exactly does "thee" refer to? At the beginning of the sonnet, "thee" seems to refer to a beautiful person. If we read the sonnet within the context of the sonnet sequence as a whole, then "thee" perhaps refers to a beautiful young man. Let's go with the beautiful youth reading for argument's sake, despite the reading's uncertainty. At the start, the poet draws a comparison between the young man's beauty and nature's. Fair enough. "Thee" and "thou" seem to refer to a man who possesses the quality of beauty. At lines 9-10, the poet emphasizes that the man owns the quality of beauty: "thy eternal summer" and "that fair thou ow'st." But a strange shift happens in line 12: "When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st." Suddenly, "thou" becomes a trope. "Thou" is no longer a beautiful man but a beautiful herbaceous figure. Thus, the "thee" of the last line is ambiguous: is it man, plant man, or pure figure?

My first instinct here is to go Platonic. It seems that what is most important to the poet is beauty. Beauty's passing is what he mourns in the first two quatrains, and beauty is what he seeks to preserve in the last quatrain and the final couplet. Up until line 10, the second-person pronoun seems to refer to a substantial entity in which beauty inheres, but that substance slips away like spring melt by line 12, leaving only beauty. All the other qualities one might associate with a substantial person – thoughts, memories, body, consciousness, and so forth – never find their way into the "eternal lines." It is not this particular person's survival, nor even the survival of his soul in heaven, that this sonnet offers; rather, it offers the survival through literature of beauty. The "thee" of the last line makes little sense if it refers to those qualities we normally associate with the self as it ages through time – body, feelings, consciousness, attitudes, accomplishments, memories, even name – all are lost. But if you abstract the quality beauty from its particular manifestation in this youth and think of it as its own entity, then that quality can find a more secure home in poetry.

In the *Republic*, Socrates too places more value in "Beauty itself" (507b) as an unchanging abstract reality than in particular manifestations of beauty in phenomena. For

Socrates, detaching beauty as adjective from the nouns it modifies and considering it not as a subject-dependent predicate but as a subject in itself leads one out of opinion into knowledge, out of flux into the eternal. For example, in Book VI, Socrates defines philosophers as "those who can apprehend that which remains in all respects ever the same," while the rest of us "wander among the many phenomena which exist in multifarious ways" (484b). Like Shakespeare, Socrates wants out of the world of change and death, so he seeks knowledge, "which makes clear to [philosophers] that everlasting reality which does not wander to and fro through generation and decay" (485b). For Socrates, the real has to remain eternally unchanged – value lies in permanence.

So Shakespeare's sonnet locates the youth's immortality (his ontological core) in his beauty. For this location to work, though, you have to assume that there is a real relationship between the youth's beauty and the poem's beauty. Furthermore, for the sonnet's offer of renewed life to carry any weight, you have to assume that beauty is this youth's essential self. Otherwise, the poem simply gives life to an aesthetic experience, not also to "thee." Finally, you also have to believe that this beauty and the poem remains the same through time, seeded in never-changing lines of text. This immortality game is complicated.

And it gets even more complicated when you add the fact that all this life renewal promised in the final couplet depends on a reader. Here, Buddha raises an eyebrow. For the Buddhist, anything that is dependently originated is empty of inherent existence, empty of any time traveling or transcendent substance. In fact, Shakespeare's realization that "this gives life to thee" (14) sounds eerily like the Buddhist formulation of *pratityasamutpada*: "When this is, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises. When this is not, that does not come to be; from the nonarising of this, that does not arise" (Strong 99). This simple observation about the dependent origination of all entities, an observation we've all made, cuts through any notion of abiding substance. An entity has nothing of its own; it is empty. Our problem is that we see dependence but maintain a belief in independence. We think that entities arise in causal dependence, then – like cells dividing – somehow achieve independence. These entities persist awhile independently, then cease due to some cause. But for the Buddhist, an entity never achieves independence.

Unwittingly, Shakespeare has stumbled over one of the central concepts of Buddhism. As the *Salistambasutra* states, "One who sees pratityasamutpada sees the Dharma, and one who sees the Dharma sees the Buddha" (qtd. in Strong 99). Dependent origination can be viewed as the essence of the Buddhist notion of *karma* (cause and effect), the essence of *sunyata*, the essence of *anatman*, and the essence of *anitya*. All things only exist in dependence on causes and conditions: change the conditions and the entity changes. To the Buddhist, then, the fact that "thee's" life is contingent means that "thee" is nothing on his own; he cannot ultimately be abstracted from the reading situation. The "thee" that arises when I read the poem cannot be the same "thee" that arises at any other time with any other reader. The same goes for the poem, which also depends on the reader.

From the Buddhist point of view, then, there is a contradiction in the sonnet: on the one hand, the sonnet claims eternity for the beloved, but on the other hand, it also claims that eternity depends on temporal objects, reader and poem. The result is a tense fusion of opposites: something that is eternal is forever the same, but something whose being is dependent is never the same. The sonnet's claim, then, is that the beloved is at the same time always the same and never the same.

However, the sonnet does not support this contradiction comfortably. It seems to promote eternity without realizing that the bit about contingency makes entity immortality impossible. For example, "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this" (13-14) seems to imply that "this" (the poem) remains unchanged from reader to reader. The poem contains "eternal lines" that protect its ideas and images from the ravages of time, but even so, the poet can't seem to extract his images from nature and time. His instincts about where to locate eternity seem torn. He spends the first two quatrains trying to separate his beloved's beauty from the phenomenal world, knowing full well that phenomenal beauty fades. But in those lines, his metaphors weave the natural and human together: "summer's lease," "eye of heaven," "gold complexion." The two worlds seem inextricable. Then in the last six lines, the metaphors flip; instead of turning his imagery completely away from the natural, the poet roots his figure for the beloved's immortality in a natural image: "thou grow'st." Socrates would not be happy with this image. For him, true eternal reality "does not wander to and fro through

generation and decay" (485b). Eternity is static for Socrates, but for Shakespeare – who could not abandon sensuous imagery if he tried – eternity is organic. One might argue, then, that Shakespeare's eternity here is ecological. The figure does not point beyond its embedded-ness in phenomena to a transcendent Socratic/Platonic eternity. It does not emphasize its independent, static reality as eternal entity; rather, it hints at a kind of immortality in nature's regenerative force, in a pattern of energy transfer.

In this ecological reading, the beloved's self as an independent entity is less important than the life energy that the beloved's beauty inspires in the poet – an energy exchange economics. That energy flows through a causal chain that links the present to the early 1600s: the beloved's beauty evokes the bard's desire – the sonnet is child of that desire – the sonnet evokes aesthetic desire in a reader. While the beloved's beauty and the bard's teeming brain cannot travel through time – they are only temporary nodes of energy exchange – the energy stored in the poetry does seem to persist like fossil fuel into the present, my present.

Now. December 2006. Heavy rains transform in dropping temperatures, fall as snow. Fluorescent light fueled by distant raging coal fires fills my empty coffee mug. My mind turns to this sonnet: heaven and earth split, time ebbs back, energy pools – the circuit of desire closes and beauty sprouts in the hovering energy field: a delicate lotus. Causally speaking, my living desire depends in this moment on the beloved's beauty of so long ago. I cannot conjure his face or name or even his soul, but I can experience the energy of desire that quivers electric between reader and poem, creating both.

In this energy-exchange picture of reading, life-giving is bidirectional. Shakespeare's final couplet, however, presents life-giving as a unidirectional operation: the reader gives life to the poem, which in turn gives life to the beloved. There is dependence here but not interdependence – it is the dependence that arises in a linear picture of cause and effect. Look closely again at Shakespeare's agricultural conceit. He links his beloved with plant life through an image of growth in line 12. In that same line, he links the poem with soil: lines of text become plough lines, the site of plant growth. In line 13, the reader's breath and eyes resonate with the images of wind in line 3 and sun ("eye of heaven") in line 5. The reader is air or atmosphere and sun; the text is soil; the

beloved is seed or plant. In a figurative apotheosis, the beloved becomes a vegetation god, able to transcend death through regeneration thanks to text and reader. The reader too becomes god-like in his or her ability to function as catalyst and site for regeneration.

The picture of cause and effect that Shakespeare draws maintains the commonsense metaphysical interpretation of the world as consisting of independent entities. The poem depends on a reader for life, but does the reader depend on the poem? The plant needs sun, air, and soil to grow, but do sun, air, and soil depend on that particular plant? The concept of cause and effect that the sonnet seems to operate on is like a chain with a unidirectional flow of causal dependence. The poem needs a reader for life, but a reader does not need the poem – the reader is abstractable. Likewise, the plant needs the sun but the sun certainly does not need the plant.

This picture of causation operates on the assumption that entities exist outside of the present moment, that things are removable and portable – independent. But for Buddhist readers, mind and poem are enmeshed and boundless. For the Buddhist, Shakespeare's final couplet is fully reversible, and the entities named therein possess only conventional existence. Shakespeare's beloved does not wander in death's shade because his beloved was never born and never possessed independent existence beyond Shakespeare's desire.

The poem I read in my Norton anthology does partly depend on past causes and conditions. If Shakespeare had not written, if his beloved's beauty had not moved his desire, then this present experience could never have arisen. But dependence does not work simply like a chain stretching back through time diachronically. Dependence also works synchronically. In the act of reading, there are countless discernable matrixes in which poem and reader are boundlessly and irremovably embedded. Poem and mind are inseparable from a linguistic matrix of meaning and definition. They are inseparable from a cultural matrix of connotation. They are inseparable from a physical matrix of light, atmosphere, matter, and so forth. The mind does have the ability to abstract reader and poem out of these matrixes conceptually, but those concepts are not substantially real (no matter what Socrates says) – they are the products of desire. Even from a conceptual standpoint, though, while consciousness gives life to the poem as entity, the poem also gives rise to consciousness as entity – consciousness and not-consciousness mutually

arise. But it would be foolish to imagine that the poem-entity thus arisen is the same poem as created in Shakespeare's time. Why? Because no poem was ever really created. And the conceptual entities perceived back in the day depended on the myriad particular conditions that obtained at the time. The sonnet is empty and impermanent.

In the reading process, we generally feel that only we possess consciousness, the faculty of mind able to create meaning out of otherwise meaningless patterns of ink and page. We generally assume that consciousness is something special to humanity, something that has a very narrow locus in space and time. We carry it around with us – a passenger in spaceship body. But Buddhism's insistence on boundlessness makes me wonder about these limits we impose on consciousness. The old Lockean understanding of perception operates on the knower-known dichotomy, where the known world is a chaotic and meaningless flood of sensations that the knower organizes into stable, substantial causes that may or may not correspond with the way things "really are" outside of the knower. In this picture, there is always a feeling of alienation between knower and known, an alienation desire creates and sustains, a situation desire depends on. What happens, though, if there are no entity boundaries? Is the act of perception a whole movement, one that is as much a being seen as it is a seeing? Being and non-being give rise to each other – poem and reader give rise to each other. On a conceptual level, the poem reads me into life as much as I read the poem into life.

Dogen: "Whoever told people that 'Mind' means thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concepts? Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles, and grasses" (qtd. in Snyder, "Etiquette" 20). Buddhist reading is an opportunity to get rid of that feeling that you are a narrow interior piece of consciousness observing an exterior unconscious world, moving through a static, unchanging space like an actor on stage. There are no boundaries anywhere.

When you read Sonnet 18, then, you read the universe. With desire, "this gives life to thee" – limited and demarcated conceptual entities (this and thee) arise. Without desire, "this gives life to thee" – the poem grants access to boundless life. So long as we can see, there is awareness. So long as we can breathe, there is mindfulness. Return to the poem, the breath. Without the dualistic interpretation of reading as an interaction between knowing subject and known object, reading is free, mysterious, deeply peaceful; within

that dualistic interpretation, reading is knowledge, chains of discursive thoughts. But it is in the experience of boundlessness that the beloved achieves immortality: not through some kind of desired substance preservation through time, not through some kind of resurrection, but through an experience of the world without the conceptual grid-work that produces time and death. Without desire, there is emptiness and luminosity. Poem and reader spill out of their reservoirs; past and future contract. *Tathata.* Suchness. Just this. Empty lamp light spilling across the page, the universe. This rain

this snow

falling.

PRATITYASAMUTPADA # Northern Ontario. Chill night spacious skies. White pine crowded lake, surface still, barely a quiver. Quiet launch: yawning dock creak and glass tinkle water splash. Soft rhythmic paddle drips as edge dips through unseen membrane where water meets sky. There isn't enough light for shapes now. Enmeshed in disorienting darkness – lake V's invisibly behind as canoe moves smooth through star waters.

Newfoundland. Five days into the East Coast Trail. Camping near Roaring Cove at the base of Flambers Head, a grassy jut of cliff leaning out high over the North Atlantic – a billion suns dance glittering in a web of diamond flashes, rising and falling beneath a rare clear Newfoundland sky. All evening watching the endless waters: sunset burns ember red in the atmospheric soot from raging Quebec forest fires, whale fins gleam crimson among the waves, dim refractions dissolve in breathy blowhole mist. Even at night I can hear the slow deep forceful exhalations of surfacing humpbacks, the seismic boom of careless rogue waves shattering against the sheer drop cliffs.

In the morning, at Soapy Cove, a humpback feeding right next to shore. So close I could almost touch – trace the deep cleavage lines running under her jaw, rub the rough barnacles clinging to her taut glossy dark skin, caress her baleen as she rises, mouth spilling water, into the morning sun. Diving and breaching, sliding and rolling just under

the surface, white tinged fins and giant tail propulsion. She isn't just feeding; she's playing, taking pleasure, hidden among the cliffs of this cove. Her noises fill the space, the snap of her mouth shutting echoes off the rock. There's no room in this moment for thought, only watching. Time and again she surfaces, rolls slightly, opens her depthless eye to the awakening sky and looks.

Everything you need will fit into a pack. The lighter the better. The rest you can find along the way.

Snyder talks about backpacking (specifically mountain backpacking) as a kind of pilgrimage: "The wilderness pilgrim's step-by-step breath-by-breath walk up a trail, into those snow fields, carrying all on the back, is so ancient a set of gestures as to bring a profound sense of body-mind joy" ("Good, Wild" 94). There's something about moving through wild landscapes, eating, sleeping, pissing wherever you happen to be in the moment. There's a fluidity, an openness to backpacking and canoe tripping. To Snyder, the wild spaces we move in "take us (not only human beings) out of our little selves into the whole mountains-and-rivers mandala universe" (*ibid*). Getting out into the wilderness makes us feel intuitively our connections in a wholly interdependent world: "The point is to make intimate contact with the real world, real self" (*ibid*). The body-mind joy of wilderness tripping is expansive, whether you canoe through dark starry waters or stare as ocean water runs off the convex lens of a humpback's eye.

> I perceived that there was a kind of freedom and mobility that one gained in the world, somewhat analogous to the wandering Buddhist monk of ancient times, that was permitted you by having a proper pack and sleeping bag, so that you could go out on the road and through the mountains into the countryside. The word for Zen monk in Chinese, *yun shui*, means literally "clouds and water," and it's taken from a line in Chinese poetry, "To float like clouds, to flow like water," which indicates the freedom and mobility of Zen monks walking around all over China and Tibet and Mongolia on foot. (Snyder qtd. in Gifford and Lee 204)

According to Snyder, a Buddhist monk is someone who constantly relates to the world like a backpacker or a pilgrim. Like clouds and streams, monks wander through

existence, abiding nowhere, realizing that there is no ground anywhere to support a home. In fact, "The Buddhists say 'homeless' to mean a monk or priest" ("Blue Mountains" 103). Here, "home" is a metaphor for the cherished belief in a substantial, persistent self and "homeless" is a metaphor for the realization of vast unobstructed emptiness in all things.

> Unfettered at last, a traveling monk,
> I pass the old Zen barrier.
> Mine is a traceless stream-and-cloud life.
> Of these mountains, which shall be my home?
> (Manan in Stryk and Ikemoto xliv)

Snyder quotes Zhiang-yan, a fifth-century poet, on the proper life of a hermit, who should "take the purple heavens to be his hut, the encircling sea to be his pond, roaring with laughter in his nakedness, walking along singing with his hair hanging down" ("Blue Mountains" 104). While it's a bit silly to be proscriptive about how to act freely and spontaneously, Zhiang-yan's (and Snyder's) point is that there is nowhere any division between home and wilderness, no division between self and world:

> The vast wild
> the house, alone,
> The little house in the wild,
> the wild in the house.
> Both forgotten.
>
> No nature
>
> Both together, one big empty house. (Snyder, "Ripples" 381)

Floating on Northern Ontario night waters, dreaming the misty exhalations of whales, hiking on lichen trails above the krummholz zone – this is home. Likewise, washing the dishes, walking the concrete and asphalt trails, watching the dirty smoke belched from the glowing eye of the oil refinery – this too is home. In the Buddhist tradition, "homeless" means "being at home in the whole universe" ("Blue Mountains" 104), inside and out.

> For eighty years I've talked of east and west:

What nonsense. What's long/short? big/small?
There's no need of the gray old man, I'm one
With all of you, in everything. Once through
The emptiness of all, who's coming? Who going?
(Kiyo in Stryk and Ikemoto 21)

Of course, this Buddhist homelessness is not a romanticization of the kind of homelessness you see in the doorways and street corners of urban centres. Buddhist homelessness is not having too little; it's not having too much. There is no freedom when you lack access to the conditions that sustain body-mind, but there is also no freedom when you try to sustain the inside-outside self delusion. The trick is to go light – to take what you need and leave the rest.

Moving/resting is meaningless.
Traceless, leaving/coming.
Across moonlit mountains,
Howling wind!
(Unoku in Stryk and Ikemoto 67)

When Naropa left his books and wandered around Tibet searching for the Guru Tilopa, he came to experience that high Himalayan world of blinding peaks and braided waterfalls as "the play of co-emergence delight" (Guenther, *Naropa* 80). In this delight, he found the lightness that all backpacking pilgrims seek: "just like a feather drifting in the wind, one roams among things without becoming attached to them" (Guenther, *Naropa* 80). The heaviest weight to carry through the mountains is the weight of *atman*, the weight of *svabhava*. Walking is much harder when you have to drag the same self all the way up the mountain. When you divide your walking from the mountain, the friction and strain produce suffering. Better to go light.

Coming, going, the waterfowl
Leaves not a trace,
Nor does it need a guide. (Dogen in Stryk and Ikemoto l)

For me, the homeless, wandering, backpacking monk-pilgrim who is awake to the empty, dependently originating, impermanent movement of the whole thing is the ideal model for

the Buddhist reader. As the backpacker moves through high alpine fields, so the reader moves through textual fields. As Buddha moved through northern India, so too the reader through texts: "I dwell wherever I happen to be, at the root of a tree or in a deserted temple, on a hill or in a forest, and I wander without ties or expectations in search of the highest good, accepting any alms I may receive" (Asvaghosa V.19). The reader wanders through various discursive fields, unhindered by limiting metaphysical assumptions such as author and text, unmoved by desires for grasping discursive knowledge, and he or she receives passages like alms that help towards the overarching goal: awakening to the luminous interdependent empty whole – awakening to wisdom and compassion.

Buddhist-inspired reading is not meant simply to pile up more discursive descriptions of conceptually created entities; the goal is metaphysical spring cleaning. Snyder quotes Dogen on the practice and aim of study: "'We study the self to forget the self,' said Dogen. 'When you forget the self, you become one with the ten thousand things.' Ten thousand things means all of the phenomenal world" ("On the Path" 150). Likewise, we study the poem to forget the "poem." We move homeless through textual worlds. This way, the words and images don't disappear under interpretive thought coverings. We experience the vastness of the living territory unobscured by concepts:

> In the spring rain,
> The pond and the river
> Have become one. (Buson, qtd. in Blyth IV, 995)

Mind and poem never arise substantially; the conceptual gulf never opens: "at this very moment, just *be* the very mind that reads *this* word" ("On the Path" 151).

The thing is that the textual field is wide open. Words don't have inherent meanings: the activity of meaning-making as we know it is simply a discursive slide from one word or one predicate to another. The feeling of closure that we get when our newly generated set of predications seems to reflect the interpreted text adequately – the feeling of finality when textual ambiguities solidify in less ambiguous phrases – is misleading. We understand the words, but we don't really get the meaning. We go around in circles, piling up discursive knowledge like shoppers on spree in Wal-Mart.

We forget that the textual field is wide open. Charles Altieri, taking a phenomenological approach to texts, reminds us that "poetry is a form of activity and that there are no essential verbal properties (like paradox) that distinguish poetry from other modes of discourse. Poetry depends on one's taking a certain attitude toward discourse (elicited by a wide variety of conventions), not on specific properties of the discourse" (*Enlarging* 23). There is nothing inherent in a poem that maintains its identity as poetry in the field. In fact, no poem is self-contained – it leaks out of any "organic unity" we may impute for it. All the boundaries we create to isolate the objects of study are arbitrary: reality ignores them and walks on.

> Leaving, where to go? Staying, where?
> Which to choose? I stand aloof.
> To whom speak my parting words? The galaxy,
> White, immense. A crescent moon.
> (Shoten in Stryk and Ikemoto 25)

The important point here is to recognize (I'm using Altieri's language) what kind of "attitude" we as readers take towards texts. For what purpose are we dividing the world into poem / not-poem? What are we hoping to gain through study? Do we think that as we dig through stacks of books and sift through piles of journals that we are going to find something more than just more words words words? If we assume poems are independent of the textual field, independent of the visual-mental field, that is, if we place utmost value on our arbitrary conceptions about the textual performance, then, from a Buddhist perspective, we simply pile up descriptions and sustain the conditions for suffering. But if we experience texts like a backpacking pilgrim, then textual study just might lead us to the essential nature of the poem, which is no nature at all.

> Unaware of coming, going,
> I turn back alone.
> Caught in the midnight sky,
> The moon silvering all. (Eun in Stryk and Ikemoto 75)

When I was watching that humpback off the eastern edge of the Avalon Peninsula in Newfoundland, I was reading nature like I would read a text. But I did not read that whale

as a symbol or a metaphor; it did not stand for something else. I did not think: "what is nature trying to say?" or "what is God trying to say?" No. Like Basho says, "there is nothing behind phenomena" (Blyth IV, 981). Instead, I read that whale as free and fully present: she was the universe feeding, playing; I was the universe hiking, watching – and, in fact, she was watching too. I did not need to look elsewhere for meaning. The unfolding nondual moment was always sufficient.

However, language is tricky because it invites us to look away, to look for what it stands for. A text, we feel, is incomplete without an interpretation – insufficient. After all, we generally use language indexically, to point to something. In the Buddhist tradition, words get a bad rap for this reason. Words are dangerous because they are so closely linked to concepts and to our belief in the ontological primacy of those concepts – words lead us away from *tathata* (thusness). A traditional Zen image describes sutras and words as a finger pointing at the moon, where the moon stands for direct awakened experience of empty reality. The saying is a warning: don't confuse a conceptual or philosophical understanding of the dharma for a direct experience of it. A poem by Zen poet Keppo:

> Searching Him took
> My strength.
> One night I bent
> My pointing finger –
> Never such a moon! (qtd. in Stryk, Introduction 15)

The danger here, though, is to think that language and reality are somehow different things, that language is an alien force that must be destroyed. But this is not the case. If we take the attitude that language only points away, that a poem's meaning is located somewhere in a series of prosaic phrases, then we will never feel the delight of a Buddhist reading. But to the awakened Buddhist, the poem is the moon: "Never such a moon!"

The poem, our interpretation – both are equally real, equally empty of inherent nature, but one does not stand for the other. The Buddhist reader wanders through poem and interpretation freely, watches how they arise in mutual dependence. He or she has no desire to negate or ignore one or the other: the words in the visual field are essentially the same as the concepts in the mental field – watch how they all arise and fall.

The Diamond Sutra: "The mind should operate without abiding anywhere" (Stryk and Ikemoto xlix) – no coming or going, no home – traceless.

The Buddhist tries to see all arising experiences as dependently originated, as empty of substance, persistence, and independence. And this includes the experience of words and concepts. However, words and concepts often become the objects of negation in Buddhism. A Buddhist will say that eating the menu does not satisfy hunger. That's clever, but it's only partly right. Yes, hypostatizing conceptual entities creates hunger (*duhkha*, suffering) and does not satisfy craving (*tanha*) – in this case, you've mistaken the menu for food, the conceptual for the physical. But the menu shares the same essential nature as any plate of food.

Snyder alludes to this point – that words and poems aren't necessarily obstacles to the dharma, that they don't just point to emptiness but are themselves inherently empty – in one of the epigraphs to *Mountains and Rivers Without End.* Here he quotes Dogen on the relationship between art and reality:

> An ancient Buddha said "A painted rice cake does not satisfy hunger." Dogen comments:
>
> "There are few who have even seen this 'painting of a rice cake' and none of them has thoroughly understood it.
>
> "The paints for painting rice-cakes are the same as those used for painting mountains and waters.
>
> "If you say the painting is not real, then the material phenomenal world is not real, the Dharma is not real.
>
> "Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting.
>
> "Since this is so, there is no remedy for satisfying hunger other than a painted rice cake. Without painted hunger you never become a true person."

The "ancient Buddha's" point is that you shouldn't expect more from reality than it can give. If you expect a painted rice cake to behave like a rice cake, then you will be disappointed. In the same way, if you expect entities to exist and persist independently,

that is, if you expect them to respond to and satisfy your desire for permanence, then you will suffer, especially when the conditions upholding your reifications fall apart. But this does not mean we shouldn't paint rice cakes, that we shouldn't form concepts. If we negate the painted rice cake (the concept), which is no different in its essential nature from a rice cake, then we've done nothing but divide the world dualistically. We just need to view the painted rice cake correctly, as a painted rice cake not a rice cake. The concepts that arise in perception and the conceptual entities we impute are still part of the dependently arising world – we don't need to destroy them, we just need to see them correctly. In the same way, clearly seen, the poem does not point away to some metaphysical or transcendent truth; rather, it embodies, like the physical mountains and rivers, the whole thing:

> The colours of the mountains,
> The echoes of the valleys, ...
> All, all are
> The Form and voice
> Of Shakamuni. (Dogen, Blyth I, 182)

Poems and sutras don't convey the truth; they are the truth. No duality, anywhere. Poet, poem, and reader leave no trace: "No end to the sky -- / But his poems, /Like wild geese, / Fly off the edge" (Snyder, "As For Poets" 88). Poet and reader make the empty trackless space of this ordinary world their home:

> A Mind Poet
> Stays in the house.
> The house is empty
> And it has no walls.
> The poem
> Is seen from all sides,
> Everywhere,
> At once. (Snyder, "As for Poets" 88)

There is no metaphysical transcendence here. The poet "stays in the house" because he or she realizes there is nothing outside Mind – Turquoise Blue Mind. There is also nothing in the Mind: "it has no walls." Everything there is open, blue sky within blue sky. There

is form; there are mountains and rivers, beings of all shape and size; but the very form is empty. Thus the poem and its reader in the rolling moment of poetic performance match each other for spaciousness, "Everywhere, /At once."

From a Buddhist standpoint, then, the best activity to pursue with texts and interpretations is to experience their empty, dependently originated nature and to wander freely among them, a mendicant, using whatever works best to help others to look directly, undividedly at the reader-text-world performance:

> A scudding plume on the wave –
> a humpback whale is
> breaking out in air up
> gulping herring
> —Nature not a book, but a *performance* (Snyder, "Ripples" 381)

DUHKHA #

Everything, whether moving or stationary, passes away; therefore take ye good heed. The time for my entering Nirvana has arrived. Do not lament; these are my last words. (*Buddhacarita* XXVI.88)

It has rained here in Hubbards for a week: sometimes driving hard, sometimes misting, barely noticeable, but always rain. Everything is damp. The pages of my notes droop; the covers of my books curl. The chill of early April evenings in Nova Scotia seeps through layers; I never really feel warm. A mug of hot chocolate provides some consolation, but it's temporary. I'm feeling a bit sorry for myself, alone, cold, and damp. I've been reading the *Buddhacarita*, and I can't help but think of poor Ananda grieving at Buddha's imminent death.

"Do not lament," Buddha said, but Ananda couldn't help it – he felt adrift like jetsam in an ocean of loss. And there was also guilt: he knew that he should not grieve, that mourning would only betray the inadequacy of his understanding. But still he couldn't help it. Near the end, Buddha had reached out especially to him in compassion with consoling words: "Recognize, Ananda, the real nature of the world and be not grieved. For this world is an aggregation, and therefore impermanent because its state is

compound" (XXIV.14). There is nothing in this sea-foam bubble world to grasp, nothing to have or lose.

This simple observation, that the things of the world are impermanent and composite, contains the insight that led to Buddha's victory over death: there is nothing that is ever born, nothing that can die. But still Ananda grieved.

> Ah, it's a depressing situation:
> we imagine that
> we live and imagine
> that we die, too bad,
> too bad (Kerouac, "Orlanda Blues" 248)

I began this PhD program in September of 2001. *That* September. It was only the second week of classes when it happened; school had barely even begun. Of the innumerable images of violence and suffering that I've witnessed through news media, I don't know why I was so affected by these – I didn't know anyone on those planes or in those buildings. Sure this series of events was horrifying – but the news is often horrifying. I did not suffer intimate loss like so many who did. But I felt loss; I felt the terrifying darkness that threatens when the familiar ground vanishes beneath your feet.

That day, bewildered, I asked at the department office if – I don't know why – if classes were going to be cancelled. It seemed to me that tragic events of this scale tended to close institutions. But, no, I was assured, classes would continue as usual (usual!). So off I went to the first-year English course I was TAing.

The professor's lecture that day was on prosody – scansion, poetic devises, that sort of thing. And sitting in that classroom while buildings burned (and they are always burning somewhere), I felt something snap, detach – something that had already been weakened, something that was already cracked and ready to break. Scansion seemed so absurdly meaningless in the face of loss and great suffering. I was adrift.

I realized in that classroom something that I had kind of known for awhile but had only really played with as a concept, an idea, not as a lived experience – nothing means anything in and of itself. Scansion could not evoke a feeling of meaning and importance on its own; meaningfulness needed some other condition in order to arise, some other condition no longer present. Gone.

On that sunny September morning, a growing number of repressed doubts and disillusionments about the value of conventional literary study finally erupted into consciousness – those images of death and suffering were not the cause but the final nudge that broke the levee. In the ensuing rush, I lost my faith in the givenness of meaning – I lost the text, the author, the scholar – I lost my naïve faith in the value of studying poetry. One of the main motivations behind this project, then, has been to mourn this loss – they will come again no more.

The easiest thing would have been to walk away from the PhD program and look for meaning somewhere else. It was tempting: classes, comprehensive exams, professional development, conferences, publishing, funding proposals, resumes – the whole process did nothing to restore my faith in the value of professional scholarship. All of it seemed empty of meaning and substance: how could I study texts and authors when I was no longer sure that they were given realities, that they inherently existed? How could I meaningfully study mirages? I couldn't. My old faith in conventional academics was gone and beyond resurrection.

But I didn't walk away. Instead, I grew angry at the absurdity of literary study but felt too despondent to bother quitting. And then there were those lines from the 51st chorus of Kerouac's "Orlanda Blues." Here was the antidote to my self-involved melancholy: "we imagine that / we live and imagine / that we die" (248). Instead of finding a new object of study to pursue – I could not find one that felt meaningful – I could engage in a kind of study that actively sought to end "object" interpretations altogether. The project felt right, felt peaceful.

Thus, the conditions for this dissertation work aligned, catalyzed by my reading of Kerouac's lines: elegy, Buddhism, my search for meaningful work in the face of loss – the whole web of resonating ideas began to appear: Snyder, ecology, dependent origination and emptiness; Monet, Locke, perception, substance, impermanence; elegy, Freud, no-self – all have been attempts to understand how we create the life we imagine, the death we imagine. And the goal has been to look through grief, desire, and attachment, to face the terrifying work of liberation.

#

I had planned in this final *duhkha*/elegy section to do a reading of Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues*. I wanted to conclude this series of discussions neatly with an interpretation of how Buddhism shapes Kerouac's work and how his poem opens up new metaphysical and psychological territory for the elegy genre to explore. In fact, in the early stages of this project, I considered my reading of *Mexico City Blues* as this dissertation's *raison d'etre* – the showpiece – my work's contribution to the field. But I feel now that doing the reading is undesirable. To be honest, I feel it would be a betrayal of my own work to label the poem an elegy, set it within the context of my previous meditations on elegies, and discuss. After all this work to form a coherent narrative for the elegy genre and to construct a Buddhist context for understanding the poem, after all these pages to prepare the way for a climactic discussion championing Kerouac as a Buddhist innovator of the elegy, I think it best to walk away rather than to add a new chapter. Another piece of criticism about author and genre would simply be a distraction, another heap of discursive thoughts to tempt the mind away from liberation back into the suffering round of birth and death.

The whole point of talking about elegy has been to, as the 7th chorus of *Mexico City Blues* puts it, break "Free From Arbitrary Conceptions / of Being or Non-Being" (7). There is a groundless empty wide-open peace that is the meaning of all these words:

> Self depends on existence of other
> self, and so no Solo Universal Self
> exists – no self, no other self,
> no innumerable selves, no
> Universal self and no ideas
> relating to existence or non-
> existence thereof – (*Mexico* 6).

In this wide-open space, questions about genre and author are meaningless and valueless because they are questions about mirage-like, imaginary entities: "A bubble pop, a foam snit / in the immensities of the sea / at midnight in the dark" (*Mexico* 24). Further discussion would only perpetuate the conditions for suffering.

> What the Tathagata of Buddhism
> preaches,

The Prophet of Buddhahood
is that
nothing
is really
born nor dies (*Mexico* 102)

Instead, watch carefully how your reading performance unfolds in this moment. Who is it that reads?

The thing is to express
the very substance of your thoughts
as you read this
is the same as the emptiness
of space
right now (*Mexico* 67)

The point of reading these words, then, is to enter into an experience that authenticates them – otherwise, all this writing and reading is simply a waste of time.

> When neither being nor nonbeing is present before the mind, then, because there is no other possibility, [the mind] has no object and is at peace. (Santideva qtd. in Eckel, *See* 39)

om mani padme hum

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