BOOK REVIEWS

A Glimpse of Nothingness: Experiences in an American Zen Community. By Janwillem van de Wetering. Published by Routledge & Kegan Paul. London, 1975.

Deconstructing Zen. Popular accounts of religious experiences form a genre of their own, often easily recognizable. The narrative tends to fall into three distinct phases. It frequently starts as a record of suffering in some of its multifarious forms, illness or sudden loss, a sense of dislocation or strain, the trauma which seems impossible to assimilate. Such angst generates the quest for a radical re-vision of experience. The second phase centres on the encounter with the new sect or cult or church, the fascination, the tentative steps forward, the crises, the backslidings and reversions. These trials, however, are there to be overcome, and the third phase is almost always exemplary, declarations of faith or of access to some kind of enlightenment, which usually strike a triumphalist note. This is also the phase of maximum design on the reader, the kind of denouement which seeks to elicit an identical type of response.

Popular records of encounters with Zen are, in the main, no exception, and tend to conform to type (the experiences, for example, set down by the eight aspirants in Kapleau's *The Three Pillars of Zen* show how decisively the demands of the genre determine the shape of the story). At the same time the contradictions inherent in the genre, especially where Zen is concerned, are peculiarly acute. Other kinds of religious encounter easily lend themselves to urgent questings and triumphalist satisfactions; the contradictions are not immediately apparent. In Zen, however, they are glaring. For all such questings, such purposeful strivings manifestly project and reconstitute the self which they are designed to dissolve, and triumphalist affirmations are often barely concealed acts of ego-assertion. In Western accounts of Zen experience, the naive if enthusiastic narrator is most frequently betrayed by the hidden demands of a genre which insists on some ultimate affirmation of self-hood, and on the closure of the story at a point of climactic enhancement, an exhibition of joys or assurances.

One of the fascinations of Mr. van de Wetering's book is to watch him confront the contradictions inherent in Zen narrative quests, and his discovery of an ingenious way out. His immense advantage over more innocent questers lies in his sophisticated grasp of the resources of fiction, its sleights and its stratagems. Thus he conjures up scenes and vignettes with a novelist's ease, shaping and shuffling his material in the interests of narrative force (he confesses to "chopping" so much that the originals have virtually disappeared from the scene). He handles the flashback in a masterly way, all the time disrupting the forward thrust of the story, switching his chronologies, subtly defusing his quest. He punctuates his narrative with fables and parables, updated mondos and anecdotes, shifting the style and the tempo at will. And, while the questing "I" (whom for convenience I shall simply call the "quester") is hesitant, wry and often amusingly sceptical, yet receptive and eager to submit, as all attractive questers should be, the authorial "I" is in total control of his material, and organizes it as effectively as the Zen master of the story does his disciples. It is this assurance which enables van de Wetering to "deconstruct" the typical Zen quest story, and rewrite it in quite a remarkable way.

The book opens in the traditional manner of all quest narratives, at the point of urgent departure, in this case the waiting room of an airport in New York, the quester himself anxiously poised for his flight into the unknown, a visit to a rural American Zen community located mysteriously somewhere near the Canadian border. Immediately, however, a flashback assures us that his days as a novice are long since over, going back, in fact, to a period ten years earlier when he turned up in Kyoto in eager pursuit of "the explanation of Life," the innocent "clue to the mystery." Nevertheless, as all good narrators should, van de Wetering intrudes a sinister element into the start of his story, a recall of his father's warning that all such ventures into the unknown end in disaster and death. In the intervening ten years, and in the midst of unspecified wanderings as well as a settled business man's life in Amsterdam, he preserved a fragile awareness of "some purpose" in life, a promised location, some final "oasis of freedom." He is now on the way to discover it.

The first half of the book is dense with traditional questing metaphors, deftly stitched into the web of the narrative, all vigorously reinforcing the conviction of a concentrated direction and purpose. Typically, they are in the main spatial images, glimpses of doors opening, walls crumbling, prison gates unlocking, mirages of the "other shore," all appearing and disappearing as the pace of meditation in the zendo intensifies. These metaphors are all innocently recorded, with no suggestion as yet of their ontological treachery, their inevitable positing of an alternative *place*, a locus of being at the end of a tempestuous journey. So too the reader is propelled along, suspending his disbelief, innocently succumbing to the exigencies of the archetypal quest, often persuasively and succintly recorded.

Success is in the air. Existential riddles may be solved; the "koan-egg" ("the most frightening possession I had ever owned") may crack its shell; the rhinoceros of doubt may be finally confronted and conquered. There is the quester's compulsive urge to enquire from the master if his solution of the koan really involved a genuine Satori ("I've got to be somewhere. But where?"). There is also an exemplary Buddhist car-trip to the neighbouring town, where the omnipresence of suffering and fear is confirmed, the alcoholic, the retarded youth, the aggressive old lady. And the questing climaxes in Rohatsu week with its gruelling schedules, its gnomic intensities, its electrifying intimations of "another dimension." The week's meditation is completed with at least some of the complacencies of a clear conscience, something done as well as it possibly could be.

It is precisely at this point, half way in the book, and when the quest-mode seems firmly established and its impetus assured, that it too is imperceptively dismantled, its metaphorical certainties undermined, its contradictions exposed. The book is at its most original in the way it persuades the reader to disentangle his own participation, and dissolve his own assurances about going-places and getting-there. In this way it *enacts* the picking asunder of quest motives, the surrender of drive and purpose, even of the urge to solve koans (they are noticeably absent from the second half), the "deconstruction" of the house of fiction itself until, as with the ego, "nothing is left of it." To contemplate the process by which van de Wetering achieves this is as fascinating as it is salutary.

As he awaits the start of a memorial service for his former Japanese master, the quester is abruptly assailed with the thought that all such strivings, even those formalized in the "other shore" metaphor, are mere arrogance, "egocentric behaviour," a type of ontological "grabbing" (he is still at this point compelled to counter this intuition with his sense of the *urgency* of the koans). There is a salutary lesson too in the "deconstruction" of fantasy, of projected identity. The round-faced girl sitting opposite to him in the zendo, who seemed to resemble the moon-faced Buddha, an image of peace and tranquil power, turns out on acquaintance to be a failed suicide with scars on her wrists.

At this point, too, the narrative itself begins to stall and to "idle," to relinquish its forward drive, apparently to lose its direction. Simultaneously the quester himself appears with time on his hands, time to look around, to sense his own crumbling purpose, the gradual attrition of the ego. There is a charmingly novelistic visit to a dinner party, an "aimless" get-together of wealthy socialites, where the Zen master teases his hostess with a fantasy of evolutionary *progress*, of a paradisal Himalayan tribe who develop light elastic wings with which to fly (we, as readers, are privileged to see the joke, which the hostess does not). That same evening there is an encounter with an old professional quester who has now given up ("I don't search"). Instead, like Hui-hai, he eats and sleeps; and builds cabins. And soon after, another ex-quester confesses that his once-comforting

belief in reincarnation may merely reinforce the will to live, the projection of fantasy into unimaginable future lives, another consoling fiction. Even the koans themselves, those once treasured if frightening "possessions," must in the end be discarded like pieces of soiled "tissue paper."

Gradually too the spatial metaphors, those loci of an ultimate ontological assurance, are dismantled, replaced by mere "gaps," holes in the "firm ground," a no-place where metaphors of penetration or of attainment are no longer appropriate. The directive is no longer "onward," but simply "let go." It is characteristic of van de Wetering's skill in exact placing that it is just at the moment when the quester actually loses his way, literally without guide or direction in the community's extensive forest, wandering about "in emptiness," that a fox appears, the revelation of a creature complete in itself about which there is nothing to be said or imagined, that-which-emerges when the questing has stopped. The non-being of language is the being of the creatures.

There is one final paradoxical twist. The carrier of an ultimate "wisdom," the man who sees through it all, comes from *outside* the community, possessor of expensive clothes and cars, wearing a wig, and who unexpectedly wakes up the quester. He is the "bird of prey," the insidious marabou who pecks away all assurances, whether they be those invested in Nirvana or the Tao or even the notion of Emptiness. It is left to him to expose the vanity of training itself, when there is no-one to train.

The book closes on a slightly rueful note, the quester alone with himself, wryly recognizing that he has been hot for "adventure and heroism," for the "hunting of visions" and a trip to the precipice. At the same time he recalls the old Japanese master who had once stated, very seriously, that life is a joke. So too may be the adventure of language, the business of writing a book where "the words are of another order than the imaginable order I am in." The final image mirrors the end of all quests, the encounter with a floating face in the river, the last glimpse of the corpse of a quester carried downstream, confirming the prophecy of the archetypal father of the opening chapter.

Mr. van de Wetering confesses in his preface that this is his last book on Buddhism. For such an accomplished writer of fiction, there may of course be other books. But in this area, at least, there seems no-where more to go.

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