

# REVIEW ARTICLE

## Poetry and Risk

### Ideology's Edge in Dōgen and Tamekane

WILLIAM R. LAFLEUR

EXCEPT FOR THE fact that Dōgen (1200–1253) and Kyōgoku Tamekane (1254–1332) inhabited the same land and almost the same time-frame, they otherwise seem to have lived in different worlds. The former, although of aristocratic origins, spent most of his life in Zen monasteries and, at least during his final decade, geographically very far from the centers of power. Largely by having their value re-discovered in our own century, Dōgen's prose writings show that he was one of Japan's preeminent thinkers and, quite likely, was one of the most original and powerful philosophers to appear within Asian history. Almost incidental to that opus in prose, a slim body of poetry was also composed by Dōgen—64 poems in all in the classical 31-syllable form known as waka. Partially because they are so few, these poems to-date have received scant attention.<sup>1</sup>

Tamekane, by contrast, hobnobbed with emperors, at times held considerable power, but twice lost it and was dispatched into political exile. His claim to fame, however, is not what he did in the world of politics but in that of poetry. Some Japanese critics today regard him as one of that land's most important poets, even though still understudied.<sup>2</sup> Tamekane was prolific and in his own diary boasted of

---

<sup>1</sup> The books chiefly under review here are Steven Heine, *A Blade of Grass: Japanese Poetry and Aesthetics in Dōgen Zen* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1989, xiii + 171 pp.) and Robert N. Huey, *Kyōgoku Tamekane: Poetry and Politics in Late Kamakura Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989, xii + 228 pp.)

having written 10,000 waka, more than any other person at any time in history. Although only a fraction of that vast number, at least 827 survive—itsself a considerable opus.<sup>1</sup>

Tamekane's interest in Buddhism, however, was deep. Thus, to bring him and Dōgen together for consideration in this essay is not nearly as gratuitous as it may at first seem. The specific foci of my concern here, however, will be on the Buddhism and the role of power in the poetry of these two medieval figures. This means that, of necessity, I will pass without comment over many other things in the two fine books under review.

What I find fascinating is that, although for very different reasons, there is in both Dōgen and Tamekane what would appear to be an odd, perhaps even flawed, integration between the poetry and other parts of life. Dōgen's disparity would appear to be one between the existence of his sixty-three waka and his explicit warnings in prose to his disciples concerning the risk to their Buddhist practice posed by any indulging in the literary arts. The disjunction in Tamekane's case is one between his intense, often turbulent, political life and the body of his poetry, in which virtually no trace of that turmoil can be found. That is, Dōgen's split looks like one between his preachments and his practice, whereas that of Tamekane is due to the fact that his literary and his political lives seem to lie next to one another without coming into discernible contact.

Heine's book on Dōgen addresses precisely this problem and does so in a sustained and fairly successful fashion. He writes:

In a cultural tradition which has been marked by a profound and direct convergence of religion and aesthetics, Dōgen

---

<sup>1</sup> My own appreciation for Tamekane owes much to personal conversation with Professor Kitayama Masamichi, whose "Uta no Kyōkyoku: Kyōgoku Tamekane" (*Risō* no. 494, July 1974, pp. 27–40) has been especially helpful to me. I began this essay while enjoying the research facilities of the Kokubungaku Kenkyū Shiryōkan during 1990. I here express my thanks to its director, Professor Koyama Hiroshi, and among its staff especially Professors Matsuno Yōichi and Komine Kazuaki for their insights and great help.

<sup>2</sup> This compilation is by Iwasa Miyoko in her *Kyōgokuha Waka no Kenkyū* (Kasama Shoin, 1987). Huey himself compiled 720; see his book, Appendix C, pp. 168–9.

seems to stand out for his strong criticisms of literature. He warns his followers against involvement in literary pursuits by advising a single-minded dedication to sustained zazen practice to achieve the Buddhist Dharma. [p. 4]

Given his warnings about the risks involved in writing verse, we naturally are puzzled by the collection of poems he himself wrote. The fact that they are few in number does not solve the mystery since, if Dōgen were attempting to be consistent, they should not exist *at all*.

*A Blade of Grass* deals with this conundrum from a variety of angles and with a battery of interesting materials—so many, in fact, that they cannot be summarized here. If I were to choose where Heine seems most effective, it would be in those places where Dōgen can be shown to be distancing himself in a very strong way from what had become, at least in certain parts of the Ch'an/Zen tradition, a posture of antipathy towards verbalized expression. Implicitly agreeing in this with a position that has been well argued by Hee-Jin Kim,<sup>4</sup> Heine summarizes Dōgen's view as follows:

Discourse is itself a full and concrete manifestation of the reality of impermanence and the unity of man and nature. Words attain their meaning in the same way flowers realize their beauty—because of their frailty and evanescence. [p. 17]

This fits in with what is clear about Dōgen's insistence on a truly radical interpretation of impermanence and his rejection of all forms of eternalism and essentialism, especially the types that slip in when we have our guard down.<sup>5</sup> This, I think, is why the sentences and prose paragraphs of the *Shōbōgenzō* often read like verbal mercury—something that flees precisely when you think you have it captured between your fingers. This is not an incidental feature of Dōgen's language but something he intentionally forged in order to make his words match the modality of his understanding of total impermanence.

---

<sup>4</sup> See his "The Reason of Words and Letters: Dōgen and Kōan Language," in William R. LaFleur, ed., *Dōgen Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, pp. 54–82.

<sup>5</sup> The understanding of this point in the West is largely due to the influence of Professor Masao Abe. See now also Joan Stambaugh's *Impermanence is Buddha-nature: Dōgen's Understanding of Temporality* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990).

Heine, however, lets some instances of what I would call nasty little “eternalogems” sneak into his own narrative, especially when writing of the “psyche of the Japanese” [p. 13], the “Japanese genius” [p. 12], and what he takes to be the Japanese language’s built-in immediacy, a feature which automatically helps it “eliminate any gap between reflection and fully engaged experience” [p. 4]. Although in this he is picking up on hypotheses and suggestions from a variety of Japanese scholars who have written on these topics in the past, in my view Heine is not sufficiently critical of these theories. Moreover, he does not ask whether they are compatible with Dōgen’s sense of impermanence. In statements such as the following, he not only strains the evidence but also lays his work open to attack from persons suspicious of how an “ideology of Japaneseness” might have gotten implanted in modern studies of Dōgen:

Dōgen is unique precisely because he is typically Japanese and has heightened and refined the traditional Japanese outlook.  
[p. 12]

Dōgen, to my knowledge, expressed no interest whatsoever in “Japaneseness” and spent his whole life honing and articulating an insight that he claimed had initially come to him while in China. Where, then, does the reification of “Japaneseness” in Dōgen come from?

I suspect it came in as part of the rhetoric used in the 20th century to “liberate” Dōgen from being confined to traditional interpretations offered within the school he founded. That is, although in 1924 Watsuji Tetsurō wrote publicly about the need to free this 13th century figure from the sectarian embrace of the Sōtō school and to recognize his potential as a philosopher with universal import, soon enough Dōgen was again confined. This time the entrapment was within a rhetoric about Japan, about inherent characteristics of the Japanese language, and about a native “tradition” taken to be a uniform unfolding of something *essential* inasmuch as it is rooted primordially in the language itself. Watsuji himself contributed to this hermeneutic of Japaneseness. But this too is now an interpretative limitation from which the strong writings of Dōgen ought to be disencumbered—perhaps especially by readers outside of Japan. In his writings on Dōgen, Heine has shown a mastery of many of the 20th century Japanese discussions of this figure, but I am suggesting here the need for

more rigorous probing of some of the ideological suppositions therein. And is this not, after all, something implied by Dōgen's rigorous rejection of all essentialism and eternalism?

What I wish to praise about Heine's book is the fact that it has opened up a discussion of what there is in Dōgen of relevance to questions of aesthetics. Although I am not certain that Dōgen intended to construct what philosophers in the West have often called "an aesthetic," it is clear that his sensitivity to language, to literary form, and even to the visual arts gave him occasion to refer to these things in sometimes strikingly original ways. *A Blade of Grass* has launched this enterprise and others should join Heine in continuing it. (An important item, not to my knowledge dealt with by Heine, is the rich essay "Gabyō" [画餅] or "Painted Rice-cakes" in the *Shōbōgenzō*.<sup>6</sup>) The results of further studies might be quite surprising since Dōgen in his own way is, after all, a wily fox.

Is that perhaps why he gave us the conundrum of his poetic practices out of accord with his own injunctions against taking the risks of versifying? Would he allow us to feel comfortable in reconstructing his "aesthetic" as a way of bridging these incompatibles? These questions would have to be raised.

We need have much less trouble finding reasons to praise certain of Dōgen's verses and the way Heine has translated them. Take, for instance, the profundity and beauty of the following:

Natsu fuyu no	Summer, winter,
Omoi ni wakanu	Both inexpressible:
Koshi no yama	Across the Echizen mountains
Furu shirayuki mo	White snowflakes falling,
Naru ikazuchi mo	Thunder crackling. [p. 111]

It is, I suspect, not incidental that within the verses of this philosopher of radical impermanence, those that stand out are the ones wherein he has captured that teaching with a striking image. That surely happens in the following:

---

<sup>6</sup> As, for instance, in Terada Tōru and Mizuno Yaoko, *Dōgen* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970), vol. 1, pp. 283–288, and in English in Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), pp. 134–139.

Yama no ha no	A firefly's
Honomeku yoi no	Soft glimmer,
Tsukikage ni	As the mountain ridge
Hikari mo usuku	Faintly appears under the
Tobu hotaru kana.	Dim glow of the moon. [p. 123]

Chinese Zen phrases had it that even the mountains walked, but in keeping with the Japanese waka tradition of modulated perceptions rather than surreal images, Dōgen gets the mountain—like the firefly and the glimmering moon—to slip almost imperceptibly but still *perceptibly*, away.

Poems such as these fit right in with what we know (or want to think) of Dōgen as both consistent and “realized.” But there are others, verses in which it is quite possible to see evidence of pain and even confusion in the life of the poet. In one of these Dōgen envisions his own parents—persons whose deaths left him an orphan at an early age—as wanderers, along with himself, in the samsaric condition known in medieval Japan as the “six paths” or “six realms:”

Mutsu no michi	My companions
Ochikochi mayoi	Trekking
Tomogara wa	The six realms—
Waga chichi zo kashi	I recognize my father!
Waga haha zo kashi	There is my mother! [p. 108]

Heine, rightly I think, takes this as a lament [p. 82]. Theoretically at least, by turning this into an evocation of the bodhisattva's vow to rescue sufferers in the six realms, one hypothetically could move the sense and maybe even the sentiment of the poem in a positive or affirmative direction.

However, although bodhisattvas might somehow “enjoy” getting reborn into the dark realms of suffering, there is no hint from Dōgen that his parents were such—or that he himself knew anything other than suffering in his own recognition of their protracted pain. The verse, in a word, is not one we easily can or should associate with the poetry of “enlightenment.” It is a dark poem. Dōgen, who pictures himself along with his parents in the middle of despair and “delusion” [*mayoi*], lets us see himself in a moment when he scarcely seems to be the usual highly realized person we see in his prose.

I find something problematic too in the following poem and in the way it is rendered by Heine. It comes with a headnote:

Fubo shoshō no manako	True Seeing Received at Birth
Tazune iru	Seeing the Way
Miyama no oku no	Amid the deepest mountains paths
Sato nareba	The retreat I find
Moto sumi nareshi	None other than
Miyako nari keru	My original abode: satori! [p. 95]

There may be far better poems than this one in the opus, but I choose it to explore just how problematic things can be. Heine has inserted a “satori” into the English without there being any precise equivalent in the original. (He reads the word *sato* [“former home” or “native village”] as implying *satori* [“sudden awakening”] by virtue of its being, as it were, two-thirds of the way there in terms of its syllables. (See page 32.) However, by making this the linguistic telos of the forward-thrust of the entire poem, the sense of the poem gets straight-jacketed: “Satori” gets to be what the poem is all about—*unambiguously* so.

A fairly flat, but literal and parsimonious translation of the poem might go something like this:

With the Very Same Eyes with Which We're Born  
Searching into  
the mountains' deepest  
places, I've clearly located  
my old home—the capital  
where I long ago lived!

Although I am not an advocate of the literal and terse at all times when translating waka, this happens, I think, to be a place where the “interpretative” translation offered by Heine goes too far. I have a minor problem with the “satori” not found in the original but a fairly major one with Heine’s omission of reference to a “capital” [*miyako*] that figures largely in Dōgen’s original.

Heine, I must note, has an extended discussion of this verse and in it sees a complex set of doubled significations. He reads the “headnote” [*fubo shoshō no manako* 父母所生眼], which is lifted from the 19th chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. In a way that pretty much guarantees that

he will be able to take the entire poem as an allegory of the "awakening" event in Zen. Virtually every word of the poem has, when so translated, something *other than* its ordinary signification. The result is that in the English version primordial enlightenment itself gets forefronted. Consequently, the reference to the "capital" is dispensed with altogether.

What is the alternative to such a heavily allegorized reading?

It is, I suggest, to take the reference to a capital as anything but negligible. And since this poem seems to derive from the final decade of Dōgen's life—that is, the period when he had moved to Echizen and in 1244 founded the temple Eihei-ji (initially called Daibutsuji) in a mountainous area very far from Kyoto—this verse seems to be saying something about the degree of satisfaction or accommodation the poet found in that far-off location. Although to most people the "capital" meant Kyoto [Heian] with its splendour, wealth, and power, Dōgen in this interesting poem declares his own "capital" to be in the remoteness of Echizen province.

The *literal* capital, we must remember, was not unimportant to Dōgen. In fact, what shows up in this poem is, I want to suggest, connected to one of the nastiest problems in Dōgen scholarship, namely his attitude to events in the capital. There is no need or place here for details of the debate. Suffice it to note that, especially in research carried out by Furuta Shōkin, the matter of the reasons for Dōgen's rather abrupt departure from Kōshō-ji on the outskirts of the capital to settle in remote Echizen have been deeply problematized. Furuta and others hold, in brief, that it was because Dōgen had lost out in the capital-centered game of ecclesiastical politics that he opted for a move to the geographical periphery in 1243. Echizen was a place to recoup his losses after having been politically bested by the monks of Mt. Hiei and some of those associated with the ascendant wave of Rinzai Zen.<sup>7</sup>

If there is even a modicum of truth in this revisionist scholarship on Dōgen, it cannot but be important for our grasp of the poem under consideration. If, as seems very likely, Dōgen's move from Heian to

---

<sup>7</sup> The sources in Japanese by Furuta and others as well as the arguments on this question are available in Carl Bielefeldt, "Recarving the Dragon: History and Dogma in the Study of Dōgen," in *Dōgen Studies*, pp. 40 ff. and in Bielefeldt's *Dōgen's Manuals of Zen Meditation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 43ff.



Echizen was less than a totally happy one, the verse about having located a personal “capital” in the midst of far-off mountains is bitter-sweet. There strikes me as an element of rhetorical straining in this verse. I cannot escape the sense that in these lines Dōgen is either trying to convince his fellows (and even himself?) that their mountain location will do or, alternatively, is expressing what he has come to accept as a necessity to which he now is reconciled. In either case there is testimony to a state of affairs—either present or in the past—in which there is or was unhappiness over the “loss” of life in the capital and all opportunities such provided for patronage and the forward movement of Zen as understood, taught, and institutionally structured by Dōgen himself.

This poem, in fact, may tell us a good deal about why Dōgen advised his followers to avoid writing poetry. He knew by his own experience that there are risks in writing waka—especially if, as seems the case here, such poems were closely tied to events in one’s life and the emotions such events engender.<sup>8</sup> One of the things that had gotten to be conventional in Japan’s world of literature was the taking of waka as a medium in which expressions of weakness and vulnerability were far more welcome than those of strength. Lachrymosity and delusion *mayoi* (迷い) were acceptable; conversely, too much evidence of enlightenment was not. Awareness of impermanence (*mujō* 無常), when expressed in waka, was supposed to engender sadness—that is, something far different from what is taught in Dōgen’s temple talks and prose writings.

Dōgen may, with only partial success it seems, have been one of the few who struggled against the pressures of this as a convention in waka. (Most Buddhists in medieval Japan simply used verse in Chinese, kanshi, as a literary form through which to express and practice their realizations. This, I think, was simply because kanshi did not have what had become waka’s built-in resistance to such things. Because of these conventions, ironic as it seems, it was far easier for

---

<sup>8</sup> Although a minor poet, Dōgen appears to have shared with Saigyō (1118–1190), a major poet but also a Buddhist monk, an eagerness to connect his writing to his own experience. In that sense they both took partial exception to the regnant convention according to which it was expected that there be “aesthetic distance” between life and verse.

Japanese Buddhists to write “enlightened” verse in Chinese than in Japanese.)

If waka was widely understood to be the context in which one should express weakness and delusion rather than strength and clarity, it should come as no surprise that Dōgen told his adherents to practise their Buddhism in another medium. At the same time it also seems quite natural that he himself would have tried—at least in the few waka he composed—to do something *against* the convention in this matter.

My impression is that he was only partially successful. He wrote too few waka to revolutionize the form. Moreover, I think he at times let himself be pulled into waka’s readiness to offer its own form to persons experiencing sadness, resentments, and weakness. This is why it became the natural place for him to lament what he saw as the fate of his dead parents. This too is why it is in waka that we find the bitter-sweet expression about having repositioned his own “capital” in the remoteness of Echizen’s mountains. Waka was a world in which one could let pain be pain. It also allowed illusion to be illusion and ambiguity to be ambiguity.

Heine steps away from this part of the evidence and this part of the man—largely, I think, through theory. For him even Dōgen’s ambivalence is not real. He writes:

. . . Dōgen’s ambivalence does not reflect uncertainty and confusion about whether he wishes to turn to literature or Buddhism, aesthetics or religion, Kyoto or Echizen, and emotions or detachment to find fulfillment. Rather, the ambivalence discloses the fundamental paradoxicality of absolute and relative which encompasses the unity and distinction of apparent opposites. [p. 35]

Perhaps.

My own sense, though, is that appreciation here slips into adulation. By comparison, I am suggesting that a solid but open-eyed appreciation of Dōgen’s accomplishments goes farther when seen in conjunction with what appear to be his ongoing struggles, not as the smooth unrolling of an unruffled life and glitch-free philosophy.

Kyōgoku Tamekane, as noted earlier, was very different. Over the past couple of decades Japanese scholarship has progressively built a

case for seeing him as one of the major figures in the history of Japanese verse. Because it provides a fine introduction in English to such an important poet, Robert N. Huey's book is a valuable contribution. In if we are given a well-documented account of Tamekane's turbulent life and competent translations of a sixty-poem sequence, the "Kinyoku Uta-awase."

It always is an act of minor violence to lift a poem out of such a sequence, but I do so to give a sense of a couple of those I find especially well done. In the summer sequence number fourteen is:

Kawa mukai	Water seen
Yanagi no atari	Around willow trees
Mizu miete	That line the river,
Suzushiki kage ni	And herons sport
Sagi asobu nari	In the cooling shade. [p. 172]

And in the "miscellaneous" grouping number fifty-two is rendered:

Tabi no sora	This rainy day of travel,
Ame no furu hi wa	The sky so dark I wonder
Kurenu ka to	If already the sun has set
Omoite nochi mo	But then I continue on
Yuku zo hisashiki	For I still have far to go. [p. 177]

There is beauty in the original and a sure skill in most of the translations.

In its opening pages Huey's book makes bold claims. Perhaps this should be expected in a volume subtitled "Poetry and Politics in Kamakura Japan." To announce that you have chosen such a theme is at the same time to appear to be, at least in the West's study of the Japanese waka, turning over new critical turf. Huey writes:

This book will not be simply an exercise in literary criticism. Certainly Tamekane's poetry will be explored in some detail from that standpoint. But another important line of inquiry will be the extent to which the complicated political and social issues of the time affected Tamekane's ability to write and publish his poetry and conditioned his influence on his own age as well as the reputation he carried in later times. [p. 4]

One phrase needs emphasis since Huey has weighed his words very

carefully here; his interest is in how political and social issues affected Tamekane's *ability to write and publish*. Questions of the impact of these things on either content or the ideological matrixing of Tamekane's verse are not to be considered. The key question becomes: Was all the turbulence and nastiness of his political life worthwhile? Was there a net plus in and through it all—one that is demonstrable in the quality and quantity of his verse?

The surprising thing is that in the final analysis Huey does not really answer this, the very question he himself poses as having crucial importance. Tamekane's losses were not negligible; disgrace and exile during the last twelve years of his life meant, for instance, that virtually nothing of his from that period survives. On the other hand, Huey notes that if Tamekane had not gotten involved in politics, "he would probably not have been commissioned to do an imperial anthology." (p. 150) But the final estimate is hard to make and Huey's last paragraph is one in which he admits to bewilderment.

We can never know whether Tamekane exhausted his political capital in devoted service to his imperial patrons, or whether he did so realizing it was the only way his poetry would survive the ages. In any case in contrast to Tameyo, who was an adequate, if uninspired poet, and a fairly successful politician, Tamekane is memorable because he took risks, in both poetry and politics. From our standpoint, his successes in the literary field provide more than adequate justification for his political failures. [p. 150]

To call it a willingness to take risks, however, is to put a nice face on it; what, in fact, comes through the interesting details of Huey's narrative is that more often than not Tamekane made trouble for himself through his own pettiness and arrogance. He played a rough political game with lawsuits, sycophancy, and dirty tricks. And it appears that he was not terribly successful at it.

But there is one risk Tamekane never took. He seems not to have brought anything of his roller-coaster political life into the *content* of his verse. In this he stuck fast to the convention of court poetry. Huey notes that ". . . merely by reading Tamekane's waka one would get almost no sense at all of how tumultuous his life was." (p. 4) This is worth noting because it is the rationale for Huey to treat Tamekane

the politician and Tamekane the poet as virtually unconnected. The biography is graphically and accurately narrated and the technical mechanics of the poetry are skillfully described. But there is very little intellectual curiosity about the copula in the subtitle's reference to "poetry and politics." In spite of its strong claims about doing more, ultimately Huey's *explanation* goes no farther than that provided thirty years ago in Robert Brower and Earl Miner's *Japanese Court Poetry*—to wit; that waka is as close as we can get to "pure lyricism" and within the court was kept from verging off into extraneous topics by its traditions and conventions. (p. 2)

Explanation—at least today—cannot stop by reference to conventions. Now it is surely the reasons *for the conventions themselves* that need close examination. And it has been, I suspect, the stubborn refusal by Western scholars to open up the problem at this level that has made most studies of waka, at least in terms of their methodology, to be not only frozen in time but intellectually dull as well. Exceptions exist but too often Anglo-American waka studies have been little more than further uses of the approach of *Japanese Court Poetry*, however pace-setting in its own time. This means there has been almost no real movement in this discipline for thirty years.

What needs asking are questions about the reasons for the limits placed on the usable range of diction, the tight constriction of topics, the socio-political function of the historical sequence of imperial anthologies, the creation of a climate wherein poets attempted innovation only at the risk of not being anthologized, the nearly complete absence of reference to civil strife or war, and the taboo against letting mention of commoners and their lives into what one dared write about in waka.<sup>9</sup>

I am suggesting, of course, that there needs to be more attention to the nexus between waka and ideology.<sup>10</sup> Surely "conventions" are

---

<sup>9</sup> Saigyō was an exception, writing waka about fisherfolk met on his pilgrimages and about the toll of deaths caused by internal warfare. See my *Mirror for the Moon: A Selection of Poems by Saigyō (1118–1190)* (New York: New Directions, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> A ground-breaking study of this, one dealing principally with prose, is Michele Marra's *The Aesthetics of Discontent: Politics and Reclusion in Medieval Japanese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991). Waka is the subject of the final chapter in Hyōdō Hiromi, *Ōken to Monogatari* (Tokyo: Seikyōsha, 1989).

social and contingent constructions, not natural and necessary phenomena. With roots that go back to Feuerbach's analysis of religion, a sensitivity to the ideological component in texts involves asking whether things may in fact be the *opposite* of what we are being led to believe. It turns some questions inside-out. For instance, Huey's bland claim is: "if it were not for [Tamekane's] tenacity as a politician we might never have had a chance to read his waka at all—history might have swallowed it up." (p. 4) But since it is clear that Tamekane adhered closely to the taboos by not letting anything of his own stormy career impact upon his verse, does it not seem that he shied away from taking literary risks that would have been *real* ones?

Huey's proposition needs to be inverted. It is not that Tamekane fought dirty in the world of politics so that he could keep his poetry pure but, on the contrary, that he kept his poetry pure so that he could use even that purity for credentials and leverage in the dirty world of political power. Moreover, it is important to note that for those whose critique of ideology is given an additional Marxian thrust, it would appear that the "lyrical purity" of the whole waka tradition is itself nothing other than a ruse by which the court class, having appropriated to itself both wealth and leisure, publicly tried to launder out the seaminess of court life and disguise the realities of power.

I find merit in Richard Rorty's view that "the 'critique of ideology' is an occasionally useful tactical weapon in social struggles, but as one among many others."<sup>11</sup> I think it difficult to deny that, whatever else it did, waka also played a socio-political role in Japanese history: its "purity" was designed not for the sake of the poetry alone. Such literary art came to be harnessed into playing a role in the strategies of legitimation. Here too there is a link with what was noted earlier concerning Dōgen and the need to see him as other than an instance of something reified as the Japanese aesthetic.

This does not mean that the critique of ideology can be the whole of literary studies. Nor is it to be assumed that the Marxian-Althusserian approach is the only or the best way of carrying it out.<sup>12</sup> While it is

---

<sup>11</sup> Richard Rorty, "De Man and the American Cultural Left," in *His Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 135.

clear that serious attention to ideological factors is already overdue in many of our studies, there is an important question to be asked as to whether or not a critique of ideology *exhausts* the significance and value of literature.

I find merit in the argument that it does not. While allowing such a critique to throw light where it can, we do well to avoid being so dazzled by it that we no longer can see a literary text as anything other than a social or political code that has found an ingenious way of disguising itself. We may not ignore the deceptions written into the texts we read. Yet at the same time history, man, and literature are each too complex to allow us to feel satisfied with methodologies so defined that they require a reduction of that complexity to one or more of its component parts. To want to get a clear view of those places where literature gets enmeshed with politics is not to adopt the theory that literature is really *only* politics in a dissembling mode.

We can illustrate this point by again considering Huey's study of Tamekane. A very important paragraph is the following:

Scholars agree that one of the consistent characteristics of Kyōgoku poetry in general and of Tamekane's work in particular, is that nature, or human behavior, is captured therein at its moment of trans-formation from one state to another. It is somewhat misleading to call this sort of thing "technique." It is an artistic stance, and more than that, a way of looking at the world. To attempt through art to capture nature or human consciousness at that single moment when it is changing from one state to another is to imply that there is significance in the moment, and that there is significance in the movement from one moment to another. This is basic Buddhist doctrine. [pp. 73-74]

This is a fine statement. After such an impressive start, however, it is as if Huey looks back over his shoulder and remembers the stance of most Anglo-American studies and what Huey himself calls "the tendency among some scholars to resist discussing religion in relation to Japanese poetry." Wary on this score, he then makes concessions that have the effect of making his own view sound confused. For instance:

. . . after all, no one nowadays would suggest that a person must have some knowledge of Buddhism to understand or appreciate Tamekane's poetry (although Tamekane himself might have held such a view.) [p. 74]

To this he adds the by-now hackneyed point about Westerners' tendency to assume that "if it is Buddhist, it must be Zen," comments about the necessity of seeing Tamekane as eclectic,<sup>13</sup> and finally a note about the Buddhist basis for the fact that "in the best of Tamekane's poems there is a sense of time suspended, even though his superficial materials focus on the flux wrought by time." (p. 75)

I here call attention to this not so much to make a case for the importance of Buddhism in this literature as to suggest that one of the reasons that Japanese poetry strikes Western readers—and especially students of comparative literature—as "slight" or "superficial" is that our long-standing scholarly preoccupation with technique and the workings of conventions has made it so. Certainly Huey is correct in noting a scholarly animus against considerations of religion. More precisely and more broadly, however, it has actually been a discomfort with any suggestion that *ideas* could ever have mattered to some of the best poets of medieval Japan.<sup>14</sup>

Although there is much farther to go, Huey has started to tug on this important skein in the tradition. There are clear connections between the practice of poetry and what was actually an intellectual project underway in this era, one running through the various aesthetic

---

<sup>12</sup> Especially valuable for its depth of analysis and balance is Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. by George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> In fact, however, in her superb study of Tamekane, Iwasa Miyoko has shown that what mattered to this poet and his aesthetic was not a generalized "eclecticism" but, rather, a concentrated devotion to the texts and practices associated with the *yuishiki* [唯識] tradition in Buddhism. She devotes the initial seventy pages of her *Kyōgokuha Waka no Kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kasama shoin, 1987), explicating this in detail. Huey refers to this work as one which, for reasons of time, he could not consult adequately before completing his own (p. 168).

<sup>14</sup> Japanese scholarship has for some time now been paying much more attention to the intellectual dimension (*shisō*) in literature. See references in my "Zen and the Art of Dealing with Zen and the [Literary] Arts," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 11:1 (Winter 1985), pp. 152–169.



treatises and their sophisticated discussions of the relations among mind (*kokoro*), verbalization (*kotoba*), and whole configuration (*su-gata*). And for some of these poets—especially, Shunzei, Teika, and Tamekane—Buddhist meditative practices, experiments of an epistemic type [“cleansing the organs of perception”, etc.], nature as perceived, and the structuring of aesthetic forms were all interconnected.

Once our studies begin to explore this more rigorously there will be a benefit that accrues to the overall appreciation of Japanese verse. And this will, in turn, assist non-specialists to see that waka in fact is more than an almost endless proliferation of merely pretty poems.

Surely the world of the court poets was a hothouse one. Both it and the process of anthologizing had certain deleterious consequences—things that show up, for instance, in the petty kind of person Tamekane became and in limitations on the range of literary expression. However, while not dulling the edge of the critique of the ideology behind all this, attention also to the kinds of things discussed above can demonstrate that there was a lot going on in the literature of this period. And the exploration of these aspects of the poetry should show that the story of this literature may not be reduced to politics alone. That is, there was more here than a tradition of vacuous verse, the very “purity” of which was intended to be a justificatory veneer over the ugliness of the lives and machinations of the people in power.

There are two senses in which the critique of ideology has an edge. Surely it is sharp and can cut deeply to expose some things that badly need to be seen. But it also has an edge in the sense of a limitation. Although it can tell us about the subtly disguised political and social agendas in our literature, arts, religion, and philosophies, it cannot prove that those agendas exhaust the meaning and value of that in which they are lodged. Although he sees largely positive results having come from what he has called the the modern world’s “hermeneutics of suspicion,” Paul Ricoeur rightly rejects the tendency towards reductionism often found in such styles of interpretation. In his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* he writes:

. . . we recognize that the great works of literature and other disciplines are not merely expressions of their times. What makes them great is their capacity to be decontextualized and recontextualized in new settings. The difference between

something which is purely an ideology reflecting one particular time and something which opens outward to new times is that the latter does not merely mirror what presently exists. A great part of our culture is nourished by projective ideas which are not only expressions, or even concealed expressions, of the times in which they were set forth.<sup>15</sup>

To be “nourished” by the likes of a Dōgen and Tamekane involves that we allow their writings to have their own “edge”—that is, something that gets under *us* and our own common assumptions. The risk works both ways.

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 313.