

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Paradigms and Poems

A Review of LaFleur's *The Karma of Words*

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William R. LaFleur's *The Karma of Words* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983) is a major contribution to the fields of Japanese studies, comparative literature, and history of religions. This is true in spite of the potentially constricting implications of the book's subtitle, "Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan." Formally, the book consists of a preface, eight substantive chapters, and such standard apparatuses as notes, glossary, bibliography, and an index. Although the chapters are generally self-contained and although some of them have even seen separate prior publication elsewhere, they are arranged in the present volume into an orderly and purposeful pattern in which later essays often take up or round out issues begun many pages earlier. Thus the serious reader will be best rewarded by reading the book from front to back, rather than taking it as a collection of individual pieces whose present arrangement is no more than an easy reflection of historical chronology. The clear structure of the book also invites, pleasantly enough for the reviewer, a seriatum, chapter-by-chapter examination of its considerable merits and occasional points for dispute.

From the Preface of the book, several of the author's intentions and prime items of agenda can be made out. Central among these is his desire to frame the relationship of Buddhism and literature in the Japan of pre-modern times as a coherent and interrelated, though not homogeneous, process, rather than as a series of discrete and usually sect-related epochs. This search for a coherency that transcends ordinary sectarian and temporal categories leads LaFleur to cast virtually the whole of pre-modern Japanese religious history into a structure that functions under the aegis of three crucial rubrics. These are "medieval," "Buddhism as cosmology," and "Buddhism as dialectic." LaFleur mentions these terms in the Preface, but fully unpacks them only in the following chapters—though he does signal even in the Preface that his usage of "medieval" is "to be sure, unorthodox and irregular." To get ahead of LaFleur's story, but not that of the reviewer, a very brief, possibly oversimple, prefiguration of these categories is necessary. For LaFleur, "medieval" encompasses all of Japanese history from the Nara to the early Tokugawa. This long span of time

is held together by the presence of two modalities of Buddhism. The first of these, the *rokudō* or six realms cosmology is present in Japan as early as the Nara period and is a normative constant for the whole medieval period. The second, Buddhism-as-dialectic, is a countervailing tendency towards non-dualism. These are forces in tension and the proportionate balance between them is what generally marks the movement through time from early medieval (strongly *rokudō*) to high medieval, to late medieval or even early-modern (largely non-*rokudō*).

If much of the book revolves around three conceptual terms, a second feature that also needs to be made clear is its crosscutting methodological approach. On the one hand LaFleur is intent on providing clear, vigorous analyses of major examples of Japanese literature. In part what he does is to give the reader some expert guidance in the appreciation of literature *qua* literature. Equally important, however, is the author's desire to apply, without being himself used by them, various literary critical approaches that have emerged in recent decades in Western scholarship. These are drawn from a number of provenances: a sort of generalized structuralism, Foucault, Turner, Quine, Kuhn, and the like. This courageous and instructive decision takes the book well beyond the orbit of most purely-appreciative literary studies.

The first full chapter " 'Floating Phrases and Fictive Utterances': The Rise and Fall of Symbols," is to no small degree an extension of the Preface and like it is concerned with large issues that set the stage for the later chapters. It begins with an elegant evocation of the Buddhist perspective on reality, drawn from the depths of two poems of Saigyō Hōshi and ends with a discussion of the literary usage of Buddhist symbols, especially the fostering of a kind of philosophical-literary simplicity and second naiveté under the impact of the fundamentally non-dualist, Buddhism-as-dialectic concept, *hongaku*, or innate enlightenment. But the main thrust of the chapter is to spell out LaFleur's meaning of "medieval" as it emerges from Buddhism-as-cosmology. From this reviewer's perspective, it seems that, in the final analysis, this structure needs carry considerable less weight than the author wants to give it. Though he intends the term to serve as a hegemonic cover-term for a whole epistemic era in which Buddhist ideas had a kind of cultural centrality (ranging from Asuka-Nara all the way up to late Ashikaga or early Tokugawa), in the end his usage of medieval seems neither more full, nor more empty, than such conventional terms as "pre-modern" or "traditional." While LaFleur's claim that Buddhism held a position of special privilege in these centuries seems acceptable enough, his further assertion that these centuries were thus, in spite of the vast disparities *within* Buddhism and despite the impact of a considerable range of non-Buddhist and non-religious counter-ideologies, a coherent *episteme*, is not finally convincing—at least not to this reader. But, where the author might, were he

won over by this criticism, perhaps feel sorely the loss of this hegemonic consistency, the average reader will not; for him or her its lack will hardly cut at all into the fine-detailed treatments that are the hallmark of the book as a whole.

Following from my initial sense that LaFleur's affirmation of the constitutive quality of Buddhism for Japanese culture is somewhat overdrawn, I wish that LaFleur's second chapter, "In and Out the Rokudō: Kyōkai and the Formation of Medieval Japan," had come almost anywhere else in the book, for it is the only chapter in the book with which I have real problems. Again, the key issue centers around the terms "medieval" and "*episteme*." In this chapter the author has a tiger by the tail and, unable either to control the beast or let it go, ends up with one of his contemporary, analytical approaches using him instead of vice versa. The tiger in this case is Kuhn's theory of paradigm shift. It is LaFleur's argument that the Buddhist *rokudō* schema of six realms of being—gods, human, asuras, animals, hungry ghosts, and creatures of hell—provided early Japan with a new and transforming epistemic taxonomy and that this Buddhist cosmology *cum* taxonomy "explained" the world, took on "much of the role now customarily assigned to science," "provided a cognitive satisfaction to [both] learned monks and unlettered peasants," was "universally accepted by all the schools of Buddhism," marked Japan's "transition from the archaic to the medieval paradigm," "became the common sense of people on every level of society," and "pervaded the literature and art of medieval Japan." LaFleur rests this series of contentions primarily on his treatment of the Nara monk Kyōkai's *Nihon ryōi-ki*, "a watershed work" whose transposition of the cloistered and canonical Buddhist *rokudō* schema into a normative part of Japanese popular ideology makes this book, says LaFleur, "critically important for observing the historical adoption of a new paradigm for understanding the world, a process not unlike those described in different contexts by Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*."

Now, the *rokudō* schema is widespread in Buddhist works and it did become a common literary, artistic, and religious theme in Japanese culture. But from LaFleur's treatment it is not at all clear that the tales in the *Nihon ryōi-ki* were such as to have convinced their average reader/listener even of the likely actual cosmological reality of the six realms—however interesting a literary trope or ethical allegory their presentation by Kyōkai may have made. Even less likely seem the claims that this slender thread was adequate to support a scientific, or at least positivistic, epistemic revolution. (As far as that goes, the *rokudō* was hardly the sole cosmological model brought into Japan by Buddhism. One thinks immediately, for example, of the Mount Sumeru motif and its productive connections with Japanese mountain worship and Shugendō.) Further, a confusion between Kyōkai's alleged attempt to give a rational explanation to reality and the objective basis of modern, Western scientific views of the exter-

nal world, leads LaFleur into cartwheels and backflips of interpretation when he tries to reconstruct the objective medical anomalies that he supposes underlay Kyōkai's stories. For example, a tale in which a cruel melon merchant drives his horses to tears until one day karma catches up with him and his own eyes fall into a kettle of boiling water, must, according to LaFleur, be based on the unusual observation of a horse whose eyes oozed water "for reasons we would today describe as medical." The story of a greedy woman who dies, goes to hell, and then is revived seven days later with her upper body transformed into that of an ox, complete with two four-inch horns, represents a case of "severe psychosis" complicated by "secondary physiological changes."

A simpler understanding of the "anomalous stories" of the *Nihon ryōi-ki* would seem to be that they were moral tales whose less than credible details constituted not the scientific placement of anomalies within a lawfully ordered (by karma) universe, but only the obvious rhetoric of moral hyperbole, something to be "believed in" not as a matter of fact but at the levels of metaphor and allegory. Again, the *rokudō* schema is entirely too fragile a structure to bear the full weight of the Buddhist transformation of Japanese culture (better perhaps, transformations).

Indeed, even if one could catalogue a full list of key Buddhist innovations, it seems doubtful that they would constitute much of a rational, [quasi-] scientific transformation. Rather, their fullest thrust would surely have to be salvational and religious. Oddly, on these themes, the second half of the "*rokudō*" chapter is quite good. In this segment, the "out of the *rokudō*" section, LaFleur provides useful analyses of four types of escape from samsara that were important in Japanese Buddhism: infiltration (typified by pious devotion to Kannon or Jizō), transcendence (escape to the Pure Lands), copenetration (Tendai's three-thousand worlds in one thought), and ludization (a non-dual transmutation of samsara into Nirvana through a sort of comic playfulness found most often, but not exclusively, in Zen). Interestingly enough, all of these, save Pure Land piety, tend to circle about *archaic* motifs. Though these motifs *do* get cast into Buddhist philosophical categories, the fact that nearly all of this technical terminology points in the same direction and that that direction is usually immanentist and non-dual (LaFleur's "Buddhism as dialectic"), ought if anything show not that Buddhism finally gave Japan a new "medieval" paradigm of reality, but to the contrary, that underneath and in spite of a change of language it was Buddhism itself that underwent a sea-change and became "revalorized," revalorized into an archaically-toned and fully Japanese religious structure that was basically continuous with Japan's pre-Buddhist past. To restate my criticisms more simply and directly, where LaFleur sees Japanese religious culture as a balanced tension of *rokudō*/Buddhism-as-cosmology and non-dual/Buddhism-as-dialectic, it would be my contention that only the lat-

ter was truly *central* to Japanese Buddhism and that the *rokudō*, and a number of similar transcendental/dualizing structures, were *regularly* swamped out by the more vital, non-dualistic elements of Buddhism. Even the Pure Land development, the most clearly dual counter-example, is but a partial and inconsistent exception. We note first how it usually reduced the six-realm *rokudō* to an assimilation of the old Indo-European and Central Asian three level Heaven, earth, underworld cosmology, thus undercutting the "normative" quality of the *rokudō*. Indeed, often the collapse went down to two levels as can be seen in the heavy prominence in the so-called *rokudō-e* of, one, depictions of Heaven (the Pure Land) and, two, of Hell (*jigoku zōshi* and *gaki zōshi*, of course, but also the *yamai no sōshi* and *kuzō-e* which though nominally representing the world of men were in fact but a variant of Hell themes). Beyond that, the Pure Land tradition was rich its own non-dual confluences such as Ippen's doctrine of primordial, immanent rebirth (*sokuben ōjō*), the *hōben hosshin songō* (Dharmakāya *nembutsu*) icon, or those Pure Land gardens that went beyond mandalic symbolization of the Western Paradise to create virtual pocket Pure Lands in this very world. (In this last connection, one also recalls Nichiren's parallel indication that Mount Minobu was an earthly paradise transformation of Vulture Peak.) That is, I see the "*rokudō* cosmology" as something of a straw man set up in part to balance "Buddhism as dialectic" and in part to serve as the content of a hoped-for revolutionary paradigm shift. But since I do not feel this doctrine ever had the strength implied by the latter claim, I cannot agree that it, either, functioned as a co-equal partner to the, to my understanding, much more central, "dialectical" mode of Buddhism. Where LaFleur sees both radical disjunction and countervailing rapprochement, I see, with minor exceptions, generally continuity.

If LaFleur's chapter two leaves me full of misgivings, his chapter three, "Inns and Hermitages: The Structure of Impermanence," instead fills me with admiration. Loosely based on the binary analyses of French structuralism, and more deeply indebted to the liminality model of Victor Turner, the chapter offers an elegant comparison of hermitages and monks on the one hand and inns and prostitutes on the other. To say much more would spoil the fun the reader will find for himself in this delightful essay. Suffice it to say that this chapter really works both on the diachronic-historic and the synchronic-analytical levels.

With his fourth chapter, "Symbol and Yūgen: Shunzei's Use of Tendai Buddhism," LaFleur ups the ante a bit. This chapter is not easy reading. It deals seriously and at length with the Tendai concept of *shikan* and its adoption or transmutation into a category of Japanese poetic aesthetics. In particular the author traces this process from its canonical setting in Chih-i's *Mo-ho chih-kuan* into the theory and practice of the great Heian poet, Fujiwara Shunzei. (The attempt made to make Chih-i's reading seem a convincing extension of

the Lotus Sutra itself may please adherents of the Tendai tradition, but it did not persuade this reader. It is also an unnecessary move on LaFleur's part, since his basic argument need depend on nothing more than the unarguable givenness of Chih-i's interpretation of the Lotus for early Tendai.) The subsequent treatment of Shunzei, and the Tendai background on which the poet drew, is powerful and moving. Further, its explicit contrast with typical literary analyses of Western materials gives it an added conceptual dimension of a sort rarely seen even in the best literary studies of non-western materials. Statements such as "In Shunzei's view, a poem is Buddhist not because it has hidden within it an allusion to a scripture or an unambiguously sacred source, but because the trajectory back to that source itself produces a rejection of the distinction between sacred and profane literatures" may not apply to all forms of Buddhist literature, but LaFleur demonstrates that it does apply to Shunzei, and by that demonstration, suggests a whole range of sophisticated parallel analyses that might open new understandings of other works, both Japanese and Western. This is comparative study at its best.

The end of the chapter is given over to "analysis" of *yūgen* in several poems by Shunzei, Fujiwara Teika, and Saigyō. Best of these is the concluding discussion of Saigyō's "woodcock" poem, though the whole section is valuable and the translations virtually flawless. Interestingly, and appropriately, we never quite get a definition of *yūgen*. But we do, through example, get a much enriched sense of, if not what *yūgen* means, what it is, and this reader at least was left at chapter's end on the interesting cusp of wondering to just what extent "oxy-moron" and "*myō*" might be considered synonyms.

"Chōmei as Hermit: Vimalakīrti in the 'Hōjō-ki'" is a shorter and more direct chapter than those previously surveyed. It examines the impacts of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, from which Chōmei drew the title "ten foot square [*hōjō*] hut" of his famous essay. The most intriguing feature of LaFleur's treatment are the contrasts he makes between the Chinese and Japanese usages of the Vimalakīrti legend and between early Buddhist, anti-worldly reclusion and the more worldly (or perhaps, non-dual) reclusion of the Japanese tradition. Though they do not add up to an extended study, these are useful and suggestive points.

Some time ago I took a less than serious vow never to read another study of the interrelationship of Buddhism and the Nō. LaFleur's sixth chapter, "Zeami's Buddhism: Cosmology and Dialectic in Nō Drama," has not fully dissuaded me of the validity of that vow. What are we to do with Nō? This complex, fascinating, and clearly Buddhist in some sense, dramatic form has drawn the attention of a host of Western commentators. Some, as LaFleur aptly points out, see Nō as entirely Zen, others see it as predominantly Amidist, others as general Mahayana or mostly *mikkyō*. Some scholars look at the aesthetic theory of Nō's great playwrights; some look only at the libretti or at the music

or at Nō as living drama. Yet none of this ever seems satisfying. The reason is, I suspect, simply the obvious one. A communicable understanding of Nō that will feel right will come only when some amazingly gifted soul manages to read, see, and hear virtually all of Nō's large repertoire, manages to read all of the theoretical works of such disparate geniuses as Zeami and Zenchiku, manages to understand how the music works, develops a firm hold on Nō as a genre of world drama, and understands the wide ranging forms of Buddhism that have differentially "infected" both the philosophy and the plot lines of Nō. In the meanwhile all treatments seem partial, incomplete, dissatisfying.

LaFleur's treatment of Zeami, like several of his other chapters divides fairly neatly into two parts. In the first of these he traces out the not entirely surprising structural parallels between (or derivations from) the *rokudō* cosmology and the five standard rubrics of Nō plays: gods, martial figures, women, contemporary figures, and demons. In the second, richer, half of the chapter he treats several features of the Nō. One of these is the dialectic of Buddhist and reemergent non-Buddhist values that come into conflict within the Nō framework. Much of this tension he sees as a movement away from the *rokudō*-as-prison metaphor that he believes makes up the core of the early medieval Buddhist episteme. Thus the development of the Nō is in parallel to the salvational strategies outlined in the second chapter of the book and, like them, represents a break with *rokudō* cosmology. While I would agree with him that there is a specifically Japanese theme present here, I would once again deny that it is in contrast to a normative and constitutive *rokudō* metaphysic. Rather it seems to me that we see once more the strong tendency of Japanese religious culture to manifest itself in basically archaic motifs and structures—a process that far from being new in the Nō is one of the main lineaments of Japanese Buddhism since at least the early Heian period where it had such manifestations as the Shingon doctrine of *sokushin jōbutsu* (bodily Buddhahood), Tendai's *sōmoku jōbutsu* (the Buddhahood of plants), in the more immanentist sorts of Pure Land doctrine such as the generally overlooked "*himitsu nembutsu*" tradition, and still later even in Dōgen's famous *Uji* essay.

In his last two chapters LaFleur moves to the end of, perhaps even out of, his Buddhist medieval episteme. "Society Upside-down: Kyōgen as Satire and as Ritual" is, like the earlier "Inns and Hermitages" chapter, highly thought-provoking. Once again this is a chapter that falls into two segments. In the first of these LaFleur discusses the probable motivational roots of the satire of Kyōgen. In doing so he brings under criticism both the Marxist claim that kyōgen was a proletarian protest literature and the common alternative that it was a psychological safety valve for social dissatisfactions. Instead, he suggests, kyōgen began as a hard-boiled celebration of the cunning and self-confidence that had brought both the peasantry and the new urban-commercial-military elites

up in the world of the late Ashikaga. Thus both the "lower class" players and their *nouveaux riches* patrons could alike laugh at the fumbling inefficiency of the old aristocracy, and by extension all forms of hesitation and naiveté. This leads him to posit not only performance differences between the Nō (a more conservatively aristocratic form) and kyōgen, but an even deeper difference of worldview in which Nō represents an acceptance of the karmic norm of lifetimes-long passage through the *rokudō*, while the kyōgen took as its base the much more worldly *gekokujo* (lessers scrambling over their betters) view of rapid upward mobility. I find this differentiation an extremely productive insight at the synchronic level. I am less convinced by LaFleur's argument that the kyōgen thus represents a move out of the late medieval episteme into something like what Robert N. Bellah in his famous "Religious Evolution" article called "the early modern" era of social history. Though the distinction LaFleur makes seems valid to me, his anchoring it this late in Japanese history does not. In point of fact, I think it is once again closely connected with the whole non-dual side of Japanese Buddhism and could as well be anchored in the ancient motif of *sokushin jōbutsu*, whose literal meaning "Buddhahood in this very body" was normally taken to also mean "Buddhahood in this very lifetime" (in direct contrast to the ages long procedures of salvation of non-Shingon schools of Buddhism) as anchored in the late Ashikaga slogan of *gekokujo*. Indeed, it would not strike me as historically absurd to consider *gekokujo* as an indirect social metamorphosis of *sokushin jōbutsu*.

The ritual half of this chapter draws very effectively on Victor Turner's theories of liminality and anti-structure. LaFleur makes an exciting case that while early kyōgen had been satirical and a direct attack on the aristocracy, later kyōgen, patronized by the new elite that gradually moved into the structural slot of the former elite, had to be toned down. To make this argument, he documents two rather discrete stages in the plot structure of kyōgen, one from the late Ashikaga and the second, much less satirical style, from early to mid-Tokugawa. This transformation in plot, he suggests, was paralleled by a transformation in the social usage of the kyōgen. Under Tokugawa patronage Nō became official ritual, the Confucian music of the regime. Kyōgen, in turn, became a secondary extension of the Nō in which all normative values were inverted and set to disorder—but inverted and set to disorder in a highly circumscribed and controlled context. Thus kyōgen became an arena of liminal but limited criticism of the normal order similar to, though LaFleur does not offer these examples, the Holi festival in North India and Carnival and the Feast of Fools in Europe. Thus for LaFleur the Nō is basically a late-Ashikaga form ("high medieval") in his terms) firmly based on the hierarchical values of the canonical *rokudō* cosmology, and kyōgen is a Tokugawa liberation from that structure in which the collapse of social forms and categories parallels the metaphysical collapse

of the distinction of Nirvana and samsara in the non-dual schools of Buddhism. As repeatedly noted above, my disagreement here is less with LaFleur's formal analysis than with the way he fits data into history. This can be reduced to two points. I, for one, do not believe that the Japanese generally took the *rokudō* schema as seriously as LaFleur suggests. And, two, the non-dual side of Japanese Buddhism—which I would see as the mainstream in spite of the emergence of a certain amount of dualistic transcendentalism in the Kamakura period—was, the “egalitarianism” and “antihierarchical” tendencies LaFleur finds in its *kyōgen* manifestation notwithstanding, neither modern nor proto-modern, but clearly archaic in basic valence.

The eighth and last chapter of the book is called “The Poet as Seer: Bashō Looks Back.” It brings LaFleur's investigation clearly out of the “medieval” and to the edge of the modern. Indeed one of its most interesting suggestions is the view that Japanese modernity is fundamentally different from Western modernity, that it is much more transitional, being the extension of a long, blended continuum of history rather than, as in the West, a rapid and radical disjunction. Though not fully argued, this is like many of LaFleur's numerous insights in *The Karma of Worlds* an attractive invitation to further reflection and research. Another key element of this chapter is the author's insistence on the innate closeness of religion and literature in Japan and the suggestion that this fact, not entirely predictable on the basis of study of Western cultures, provides us with extended leverage on the fuller study of both religion and literature as elements of pan-human culture. But perhaps the best feature of this chapter is its extended and brilliant analysis of a small segment of Bashō's *Oku no hosomichi* from which LaFleur manages to disentangle a wonderfully complex series of encrypted references to Bashō, to chestnuts and horse chestnuts, to Saigyō, to Gyōgi, and to the Western Paradise of Amida. Though an important aspect of the book as a whole is LaFleur's considerable capacity to interweave direct literary exegesis and the application of broader analytic tools and concerns, he is at his very best when he stands, as here, face to face with the raw data.

From the above paragraphs both my specific disagreements with LaFleur's treatment and my great respect for the value of this book as a whole should be perfectly clear. Only a few minor points need be added. The first of these is to praise the tautness of the appendices. Though one ought to be able to expect good notes, a good glossary, a good bibliography, and a good index in a serious book, sadly we see more and more productions in which, presumably for the sake of expense, these items are either omitted or perfunctory. Thus both LaFleur and the University of California Press ought be commended for their refusal to skimp on these. In the same vein, one may also note the lack of typos and errors in this book. Though I did not make any great effort to

catalog these, it is almost normal to simply bump into a dozen or so such problems in a book of this size. I found only two, and these both quite minor: the spelling of *asura*, varies from *asura*, to *asura* to *ashura*, and the dates listed on p. 147 for Ikkyū (“1394–1581”) give him a kindly, but inaccurate, extra century of life.

There were also two things that I regretted with this book. Firstly, it is too bad that LaFleur’s *History of Religions* article, “Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature” could not have been included (length was, I suspect, the problem). It is one of the best, possibly the best, piece of work that LaFleur has yet published and, further, its concerns would have meshed perfectly with those of this volume. The second “omission” is one that I hope will see early correction. That is the need to have this book out in paper. It is well worth the present cost (given the standard range of book prices these days), but without a paper edition the book will probably go little past the library and individual scholar market. And this is a book that begs for classroom use. It would, for example, make a wonderful central text to set up against a selection of original readings and alternative literary studies in an undergraduate course on Japanese literature, religion, and culture. I hope the University of California Press will have the wit and wisdom to soon give us this option.