



Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen, *Emptiness and Temporality: Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Poetics*

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. 224 pp. Hardcover, \$55.00. ISBN-10: 0804748888, ISBN-13: 978-0804748889.

2008 HAS BEEN a good year for Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen. In addition to her groundbreaking *Emptiness and Temporality*, which itself constitutes a major contribution to the fields of *waka* 和歌 and *renga* 連歌 studies, she has published a 416-page annotated translation of the poet Shinkei's fifteenth-century *Sasamegoto* ささめごと (*Murmured Conversations: A Treatise on Poetry and Buddhism by the Poet-Monk Shinkei* [Stanford University Press, 2008]). Following on the heels of her *Heart's Flower: The Life and Poetry of Shinkei* (Stanford University Press, 1994), these two new volumes confirm their author as one of the world's leading authorities on Shinkei, *renga*, and medieval Japanese poetics.

Although a relatively slight work of some 208 pages, *Emptiness and Temporality* is a bravely ruminative and wide-ranging study of principally twelfth- through fifteenth-century Japanese poetry and aesthetics, contemporary poststructuralist and postmodernist literary theory, and traditional Buddhist philosophical thought. Ramirez-Christensen writes on the first page of her introduction that her book is a work of “poetic theory, philosophy, and critical practice,” and that “it is intended, first of all, to provide a theoretical framework for understanding linked poetry and the poetic treatise considered most representative from the Japanese medieval period, *Murmured Conversations* (*Sasamegoto*, 1463–1464).” As she later explains (3), her ultimate aim is “to situate medieval Japanese poetic practice and aesthetics within the discourse of Buddhist philosophy and religion, with the central Buddhist concepts of emptiness and temporality as the leading themes, renga and waka as the principal illustrative models for analysis, and the critical writings of Shinkei, Shunzei, Teika, and Shōtetsu as primary references.” *Emptiness and Temporality* does all of this and more; it is a work of insight and erudition, and should be of as much interest to students of Western philosophy and literary theory as to those of Buddhism and medieval Japanese literature.

One of the more unusual and intriguing characteristics of *Emptiness and Temporality* is its ambitious, even audacious concern with reconciling contemporary critical theory and traditional Buddhist thought. Ramirez-Christensen writes that “the extent to which contemporary Western thinking on language and meaning has come to resemble the basic concepts of Buddhist philosophy is undoubtedly one of the more remarkable intellectual developments of our time” (31). She pursues this resemblance throughout her book, at one point identifying its origins in the modern emergence of “the existential analytic, the analysis of the temporality and historicality of being” (94, in a section of chapter 9 titled “Wittgenstein’s Silence, Heidegger’s Understanding”). Ramirez-Christensen both retranslates Buddhist texts in the language of contemporary theory as a means of illuminating conceptual correspondences, and employs Buddhist terminology in her explications of Western criticism in order to demonstrate the actual antiquity of some “modern” European thought. As an example of the former, she explains in note 14 on pp. 173–74 that she has rendered the word *mon* 文 as “sign,” rather than Donner and Stevenson’s earlier translation of “text,” so as to “draw the [sixth-century] *Makashikan* into the contemporary theoretical discourse of the sign”; as an example of the latter, she employs the Buddhist concepts of *kū* 空 (emptiness) and *engi* 縁起 (dependent origination) to explain Ferdinand de Saussure’s analyses of language, and Jacques Derrida’s related concept of *différance* (chapter three, “Emptiness, or Linking as *Différance*”). Ramirez-Christensen then applies her seemingly hybrid Buddhist-Western theory to the interpretation of *renga*—particularly to the oppositional relationships between verses—to great and convincing effect.

As its jacket flaps attest, *Emptiness and Temporality* articulates “a radically new definition of Japanese poetry from the medieval period onward as a symbolist

poetry, a figuration of the sacred rather than a representation of nature.” For me, at least, this is one of the most fascinating aspects of the book. In the first pages of chapter nine, “Medieval Symbolic Poetry and Buddhist Discourse,” Ramirez-Christensen recounts Ki no Tsurayuki’s famous tenth-century conception of poetry as “leaves of words” that sprout from “seeds” in the human heart. She contrasts this with Shinkei’s own fifteenth-century understanding of poetry, arguing that the two views “mark the difference between a lyricism understood as an effluence of the heart, an expression of subjective feeling/thought, and a symbolism whose object is to reveal ultimate reality, the Real, as a manifestation of an impersonal, open-ended process” (86). Ramirez-Christensen traces this conceptual shift to the twelfth-century poet Shunzei’s redaction of Tsurayuki’s ideas in the treatise *Korai fūteishō* 古来風体抄 (1197; rev. 1201). Later, in pursuing the link between poetic composition and Buddhist meditational practice in Teika’s, Shōtetsu’s, and Shinkei’s writings, she argues that for “the avant garde poets of the *Shinkokinshū* anthology and their descendants in the Muromachi period,” language is “not being used to represent and transmit meaning; rather, it is a heuristic device for experiencing existence or true reality as it is understood in Mahayana Buddhism” (117). For Shinkei, this experience of the Real by means of poetry was akin to a “lightning flash.” Ramirez-Christensen explains that “if the poem is good, it will re-enact for readers centuries later the same mind-opening flash, or tense fullness of significance, that it generated when first created” (120). Despite the temporal and cultural specificity of her argument, Ramirez-Christensen articulates the appeal of all good poetry everywhere—not just medieval Japanese poetry.

Although it is difficult to imagine assigning all of *Emptiness and Temporality* for an undergraduate course—the technicality and theoretical intensity of the work can be daunting—individual chapters may be ideally suited for a seminar on Japanese poetry and poetics. Chapter seven, for example, titled “The Close Link and the Distant Link,” contains an appealing balance of theory and analysis, including explanations of Shinkei’s preference for the so-called “distant link” (*soku* 疎句) in *waka* and *renga* composition, and explications of particular poems by Teika, Jichin, and Shōtetsu that Shinkei cites as examples of the distant-link technique. Likewise, chapter ten (“Beyond Meaning: Beauty is the Aura of Contemplation”), which concerns Shunzei’s medieval aesthetics and includes lengthy and highly engaging discussions of two of Saigyō’s *waka*, including his famous “snipe” verse (*Shinkokinshū* 362), may be suited to a class session devoted to *Shinkokinshū* poetry and/or medieval aesthetics. Ramirez-Christensen writes and translates with a poet’s sensibility, and the depths of her insights are frequently matched by the beauty of her prose.

To my mind, the single serious flaw of *Emptiness and Temporality* is its tendency to comment upon contemporary sociopolitical conditions with little or no relevance to the book’s purported subjects. These generally left-leaning digressions are distracting, and they have the unfortunate effect of politicizing and radicalizing the author’s work. In the Introduction, for example, Ramirez-Christensen writes that

it is her “conviction, as a native of the Philippines, a twice-colonized third-world country, that the knowledge practices of the modern industrialized nations have principally redounded only to the efficient exploitation of the poor of this earth.” She continues by stating that:

the only way that the so-called humanistic sciences can justify themselves is to undertake an overturning of those hierarchically organized dualisms that again and again merely confirm the system of oppression that operates the global society we have constructed. Surely the winners in the new world order will eventually become bored with such a one-sided game? But will they? Is there an end to the blindness of ignorance or is education, in particular the liberation of the mind from prejudice, an area that must be vigilantly cultivated again and again to avoid easy, mindless collusion with the powers of oppression? (7)

Although these ruminations are most prominent in the Introduction, the book's later chapters are also marked by periodic denunciations of globalization, the “new world order,” and “our obdurately self-aggrandizing, wholly trivial mundane existence in the early years of the twenty-first century” (102). In her defense, Ramirez-Christensen's willingness to address contemporary sociopolitical issues in a book about medieval Japanese poetry lends her work a uniquely postmodern tone, which is not out of place with the structuralist/poststructuralist theory that she explores. Furthermore, in contrast to her pessimism about the current state of global affairs, she is profoundly optimistic about the transformative powers of Buddhist truth as expressed in poetry, writing that the discovery of that truth “leads to a breakdown of borders, a way out of contrived, narrow views and positions, and can be the basis for the survival of human civilization, as well as for the conservation of nature in the twenty-first century” (118).

In her Acknowledgements (p. ix), Ramirez-Christensen writes that *Emptiness and Temporality* “began modestly as an introduction to the annotated translation of the medieval poetic treatise *Sasamegoto*,” and that it functions as an “accompanying theoretical reflection” to Shinkei's commentary. Yet despite its “dependent origination” (in note 16 on p. 178, Ramirez-Christensen describes *Sasamegoto* as “the *engi* of this whole study”), *Emptiness and Temporality* is a wonderful book in its own right, independent of the translation that inspired it. As a sophisticated theoretical apprehension of medieval Japanese poetry and aesthetics, it stands as an important new addition to the fields of premodern Japanese literary and cultural studies.

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