

REVIEWS



Jean-Noël Robert, *La Centurie du Lotus. Poèmes de Jien (1155–1225) sur le Sūtra du Lotus*

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RECALLING A rueful comment of his colleague Bernard Frank—“Japanese is not a mystical language”—Jean-Noël Robert seeks to show that a close reading of Jien’s century of poems on passages from the Lotus Sutra, when read according to the complex intertextual hermeneutics that *waka* poets presupposed, reveals that these tiny poems have a contemplative depth. I wondered, though, if he could show that this is *because of* rather than *in spite of* the language.

In a bid to secure religious primacy for his own tongue, Jien claimed that the sacred language Sanskrit with its forty-seven characters is closer to Japanese with its forty-seven syllables than to Chinese (ix). We may take it that he had the sense of penning phrases in a sacred language, or of bringing out an innate sacredness in a language used by other poets for profane purposes. “For Jien, poetic composition in Japanese was not only a salvific path to be put on the same level as the Buddhist path itself, but intrinsically constituted an exercise of meditation, the poems becoming the concrete fruit of that meditation” (xix). In that case, they perhaps will mean much more to meditators steeped in the Sutra text than to the average reader of Japanese poetry. “With the help of the Japanese language,” Jien states, “one softens the letter of the Scriptures” (xx–xxi). The softening is not an esthetic or sentimental haze, but a quiet translation of Buddhist insight from one sacred linguistic medium to another.

Robert first presents the Sutra citations in French (from all 28 chapters of the Chinese translation of the Sutra) along with the transliterated text of the 144 *waka* commenting on them and his own translations and commentary (1–180); an appendix gives the Chinese text of the Sutra citations and the texts of the *waka* in the original script (245–64). He presents Jien’s twelve *waka* on the Ten Suchnesses in the same way (201–15; 265–66). There is no introductory essay or *saggio integra-*

tivo. Just as happens in the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, the reader is plunged into close reading of the text straight away. This is a rather steep pedagogy, but it must be admitted that when ancient texts are prefaced with a long introduction, most readers probably never get beyond the introduction, sparing themselves the labor of tackling the text itself. As the poems often modulate between Chinese and Japanese readings of characters, transforming technical Buddhist terms into homelier Japanese paraphrases, they are not easily understood without knowledge of the language. And indeed, just as in the EPHE, the readers are being instructed in language as much as in literature as they chew over these poems under the professor's guidance. His comments are never invasive; in each case he indicates two or three dimensions of the poem that the uninitiated reader would miss and that make radiant sense when pointed out.

By taking up the format of poems about love and nature, and infusing Buddhist content into them, Jien was able to reveal that everything in the universe is preaching the Buddha-dharma. All the phenomena of nature, the rhythm of the seasons, scattered leaves and blooming flowers, are themselves the dharma, or skillful means whereby the dharma is communicated. The Buddha using these skillful means to teach us is no longer a human preacher but the dharma-body, whose divine voice is heard in all things, which are all originally enlightened. Jien ingeniously uses Japanese place-names, already cherished in the poetic tradition, as vehicles for propagating the Dharma and inculturating it. The effect is more convincing than analogous efforts to inculturate Christian teaching in the poetic forms of classical Greece, as in Gregory Nazianzen's tragedy *Christus Patiens* or Nonnos of Panopolis's paraphrase of St John's Gospel in Homeric verse. The place names themselves can acquire a metaphysical sense:

津の国の難波のこともまこととは
たよりのかとの道よりぞしる

That the bay of Naniwa in the province of Tsu is real too, we know from the way
of the gate that assists. (no. 11)

Here *naniwa* also means "anything"; such *double entendres* give these poems a density of reference comparable to those of Mallarmé or Valéry:

The locution *naniwa no koto* was well-known in the Heian period in the sense of "anything at all, everything whatever"... Thus the ensemble *Tsu no kuni no Naniwa no koto mo* is nothing other than the poetic elaboration of the Buddhist technical term *shohō*, itself a rendering of the Sanskrit *sarva-dharma*... To these "things" the poet applies the term *makoto*, an almost banal word, that can be analyzed as *ma-koto*, "veritable thing"... The expression *tayori no kado* is the Japanese transposition of the title of the Skillful Means chapter: *Hōben bon*. (18–19).

One can see how this poetic method brings out hidden depths in the simplest Japanese words, enacting a Tendai doctrine that surface phenomena are themselves the presence of the absolute, or as Valéry would say: “*le plus profond, c’est la peau*.” Thus *sabishii*, lonely, carries a new meaning when we recall that the Chinese character used for it is the first in the compound *jakumetsu*, “peaceful extinction” or nirvana (145). By a homonym the autumn wind (*akikaze*) becomes a wind of emptiness (137). The algae *mirume* likewise can mean “the eye that sees” or the gazes that cross in an amorous encounter, indicating in poem no. 99 the realm of fleshly distraction (133). “The moon at dawn is ever peaceful” (*itsumo nodaka ni ariake no tsuki*) turns out to be a transcription of *jōjakkō*, eternally appeased light, the name of a pure land where the Buddha abides eternally in his dharma-body.

The enlightened gaze penetrates the usual landscape of Japanese poetry, where all is impermanent, to discover “beyond impermanence, the real aspect of the existent” (17). Japanese poetic technique, with its layers of meaning, intertextual references, and punning homonyms, is set at the service of manifesting how all of nature, originally enlightened, is constantly preaching the dharma. Everything becomes skillful means, and the skill of the poet flourishes on this realization. Even the moods of love or sadness amid natural scenes are enlisted in this pedagogy; emotions themselves are skillful means, conveying the Buddha’s Dharma without one’s being explicitly aware of it.

The *Lotus Sutra* is an energetic, galvanizing text, which accentuates the positive in its promises of future buddhahood; Jien’s *waka*, in contrast, are gentle utterances nudging one to calm insight. The Sutra freely plays with such gigantic numbers as 300,000,000,000 when recounting the activities of buddhas and bodhisattvas throughout cosmic time. Jien has no space in his seventeen syllable *waka* for this, and prefers to replace the infinities of the *Sutra* with modest numbers such as five or ten (140). Jien’s poems are a series of static moments, very quiet, and verging on the melancholic. Robert notes how the triumphant close of the *Sutra* (ch. 28; 26 in Sanskrit), in which the Buddha entrusts the teaching to a host of bodhisattvas who receive it with ecstatic praise, contrasts with the downbeat tone of Jien’s last three tear-laden *waka*. The Buddha’s imminent departure from this life, though only an illusory show according to the *Sutra*, cannot but evoke such sentiments in a Japanese poet. Or perhaps the tears are just for the passing of an accustomed situation: “For eight years we had become used to our mossy mats; sadly we brush away the dew on the path of the Eagles’ Mount” (180). Similarly, the rejoicing at the end of chapter 22 (27 in Sanskrit) is dimmed by an anxious allusion to the age of decline (*mappō*) as Jien asks if the Buddha has now closed the doors of the dharma (146).

Robert often judges the quality of the individual *waka*, sometimes deploring the occurrence of heavy Chinese terms; sometimes finding power in their emphatic emergence, as in the four characters *jikyōriki*—revelation, teaching, benefit, joy—that form the last line of poem no. 109, where Jien seems to confess the impossibility of

otherwise translating the pregnant diction of the Sutra into the confined space of a *waka* (144).

Jien is more didactic in the poems on the Ten Suchnesses, written for the ceremony honoring the Buddha's relics. Each of them begins with the technical name of a Suchness, however unpoetic, which the rest of the poem "digests" by finding appropriate poetic images. Thus the components 本 and 末 in 是本末究竟等 suggest root and twig (ne and kozue) to give: "when the spring goes, the flower on the twig returns to the root" (214). This poem affirms the "complete solidarity, complementarity and cohesion" of the other nine Suchnesses (214), but perhaps one can read it also as elegiac, a resigned acceptance of death? The transference of Tendai thought from the scholastic to the poetic medium subjects it to inflections and swerves as it melds with the different kind of thought practiced by poets.

Imitating the quiet elegance of his poet, Jean-Noël Robert has presented a work that sets one pondering on the Japanese reception of Buddhism and on how the world of the Lotus Sutra imprinted itself on Japanese sensibility. Perhaps the relative failure of Christianity in Japan is in part due to the lack of such a poetic "softening" of the Scriptures. Such books as this, to be read slowly, open up a path into the depths of Japanese culture for Western readers. What is most admirable is that Robert's mastery of the dizzying intertextual reach of the poems never loses sight of their delicate mode of being or gets in the way of their capacity to speak across the centuries to the patient contemporary reader.

Joseph S. O'Leary
Sophia University