ENLIGHTENED INDIVIDUALISM

BUDDHISM AND HINDUISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE FROM THE BEATS TO THE PRESENT

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INTRODUCTION

ON NOVEMBER 6, 2012, Hawaiian voters elected to the US Congress the first Buddhist senator, Mazie Hirono, and the first Hindu representative, Tulsi Gabbard. Their elections were cultural landmarks in a country where, at the time, 73 percent of the adult population—and 90 percent of the members of Congress—identified themselves as Christian ("Faith on the Hill"). To honor their faiths, both Hirono and Gabbard have diverged from the Congressional tradition of taking the oath of office with one's hand on the Bible. In 2007, when Hirono was sworn into the US House of Representatives, she took her oath without any book. Justifying her decision to make her oath without a text, she later said, "I certainly believe in the precepts of Buddhism and that of tolerance of other religions and honesty and integrity" (Camire). Gabbard's religion also played a role in her 2013 swearing-in ceremony, when she took her oath on the Hindu scripture the *Bhagavad-Gita.* Religious scholar Stephen Prothero called Gabbard's groundbreaking gesture "a time to shed some light from Asia onto American politics" ("Hindu Moment"). Prothero further proposed that the *Gita*'s "principle of selfless service" can enrich the "great tradition of reconciliation" of American founders such as Jefferson and Washington and has the potential to counteract the extreme partisanship of current national politics.

Hirono's and Gabbard's elections—and Prothero's response to it—would have been unimaginable for most of US history, given Protestantism's long-

standing dominance and the American tendency to view Asian religions and people as inscrutable and incompatible with national ideals. But these historic elections are signs of cultural trends that have long been in the making. As shown in Hirono's and Gabbard's distinctive swearing-in ceremonies, the meeting point between Asian religions and American politics gains particular symbolic force when texts are at issue. To better understand the interplay between Asian religions and American culture, therefore, we should pay attention to these important texts—not only ancient scriptures such as the Bible or the *Gita* but also the religious visions of American literature.

This inquiry helps to flesh out the agendas of postsecular and literary studies. The public viability of stances like Hirono's and Gabbard's are examples of what philosopher Charles Taylor calls the "nova effect," the proliferation of religious and spiritual options in Western societies over the last two centuries, expanding even more rapidly in the second half of the twentieth century (299, 473–76). In his landmark work *A Secular Age,* Taylor mentions that in Western cultures, "Christianity and Judaism [are] now more and more joined by Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other faiths" (676). But the specific ways non-Christian religions shape modern religious landscapes in the West is beyond the scope of Taylor's already extremely expansive study. By exploring US literary adaptations of Buddhism and Hinduism, we can carry Taylor's interest in "new and unprecedented itineraries" of religious exploration further than Taylor does himself (755).

My approach joins postsecular approaches to literature with literary studies' turn toward transnationalism. Although scholarship on Buddhism and Hinduism in American literature has been ongoing for decades, it has gained particular salience in the current climate of transnational American studies, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the many ways American literature reaches out beyond American borders (Appiah; Dimock; Fishkin; Fluck, Pease, Rowe). This book thus builds on developments in transnational American studies with an eye toward giving a bigger, fuller picture of American literature and Buddhism and Hinduism, particularly after 1945. Previous book-length studies on this topic have largely focused on Transcendentalism, Modernism, and single-author studies (Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*; Park; Trigilio). I am indebted to this body of work, which explores the influence of Asian religions on American literature back to the Transcendentalists and even before. However, American literary treatments of Buddhism and Hinduism take on distinctive features in the postwar period, and in this book I seek to understand and explain those features. In a burst of innovative writing and public recognition in the 1950s (Fields 205, Iwamura 5, Seager 40), American writing on Asian religions established unprecedented visibility,

concreteness of vision, and a unique combination of countercultural defiance and reformed patriotism. From this point onward, Buddhism and Hinduism have played an increasingly crucial role in shifting understandings of what it means to be an American. The importance of Buddhism and Hinduism to American literature's ongoing engagement with American identity—particularly that identity's rugged, defiant, energetic version of Enlightenment ideals of freedom, individualism, and democracy—is greater and more complex than previous scholarship has acknowledged. This study explores the surprising turn in US literature to synthesize Asian religions and American liberalism rather than to declare incommensurable difference or praise transcendent Asian faiths *against* parochial American liberalism. By engaging with these Buddhist- and Hindu-inspired texts, readers have a fresh opportunity to rethink the limits of American liberalism itself and reexamine what counts as "American."

Along these lines, American literature's adaptations of Buddhism and Hinduism seek to ameliorate the most problematic aspects of American individualism. In his tract *American Individualism* (1922), Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, warns of the risks of unfettered individualism and argues that true American individualism is tempered by a dedication to social justice, fairness, and opportunity (8–13). But Hoover's early 1920s optimism looks particularly naive from a post-Depression perspective. More broadly, American individualism has come under heavy criticism for contributing to aggressive territorial expansion (Immerman 25, 106), narrow concentrations of entrenched wealth (Mason 7), shallow consumerism (Archer 9, 18), and racism (J. Turner). These considerations have led one particularly blunt social scientist to conclude that "American individualist ideology facilitates structural injustice" (J. Turner 197). How could an American agree with these critiques while also celebrating how "the novelty of America . . . lay not in the perennially restless pursuit of happiness but in the extension of that pursuit to an entire culture on a scale hitherto unknown" (McMahon 337)? Moving toward an answer, the writers I study seek to challenge common meanings of happiness in the US through ideas of transcendence in Asian religions. These authors believe that American individualism and its attendant pursuit of happiness need not be rejected; instead, these writers strive to reform these ideals by creatively incorporating Buddhist and Hindu notions of freedom into them.

This literary project of cross-cultural synthesis is what I call *enlightened individualism.* The term plays on both the European Enlightenment of democracy and individual rights and the Asian enlightenment of transcendence and nonattachment. As Buddhist studies scholar David L. McMahan points out,

when nineteenth-century translators rendered the Pali Buddhist term *bodhi* (literally *awakening*) as *enlightenment,* the word gained a range of European political meanings surrounding representative government and individual rights (4–5, 18). My use of the term *enlightened individualism* has precedent in the work of Arthur Versluis, who coins this phrase in the conclusion of his book *American Gurus: From Transcendentalism to New Age Religion* (243–44). Versluis uses this term to gesture provocatively toward an emerging synthesis between mystical ideas of transcendence and liberal ideas of democracy and individual rights. While I carry on a more sustained exploration related to Versluis's closing thoughts, my sense of the term is more specific: It is a transformation of liberal and American identities through particularly Buddhist and Hindu influences. Furthermore, the kind of enlightened individualism I am concerned with often involves gradual cultivation, not the instant gratification of spiritual "immediatism" that Versluis describes.

The notion that American identity has something to gain from Buddhism and Hinduism may seem far-fetched at first. Given the geographical distance involved, and the marginality of Asian religions for most of US history, it is unsurprising that the best-known tenets of Buddhism and Hinduism appear to be starkly incompatible with long-standing American ideals. What could American individualism and progress gain from Asian transcendence and renunciation? As religion scholar Thomas Tweed observes, these tensions significantly inhibited Buddhism's popularity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America (133). However, post-WWII writers have imagined new ways of walking Asian spiritual paths in the US. Their stories dramatize how the very transcendence that would seem to alienate Asian mysticism from American individualism actually enables a synthesis between the two. If, as Buddhist and Hindu teachings stress, subjects and objects are never truly separate, then there are always ways to build bridges between seemingly incommensurable cultures. Through contemplating Asian religions and cultures, writers have imagined more humane forms of American identity that retain but redefine key American motifs of freedom and individualism.

As positive as this initial description sounds, I want to consider both the admirable and the problematic aspects of what the writers I study are doing. Do the writers I discuss engage effectively with difference, or do they indulge in Orientalism, the Western practice of objectifying Asia (Said)? There are no easy answers. Philosophers Conrad G. Brunk and James O. Young have argued that in spite of America's focus on religious freedom, "there are important moral obligations owed by those who appropriate the religious ideas and practices of others that may place limits on the exercise of these rights" (Brunk and Young 94). But these limits are difficult to define. In the case of Asian

religions, scholars have criticized American seekers, past and present, for adopting Asian religions without considering those faiths' cultural context or caring about the voices of Asian practitioners (R. King, *Orientalism* 4; Cheah 20). The authors I examine are conscious of the racist history through which Buddhist and Hindu thought have come to the US. They unsettle ethnocentric assumptions by treating Asian religions not as objects of knowledge, but as socially relevant traditions from which to critique American racism, consumerism, and militarism. However, these writers still participate in the widespread Anglo-American tendency to adapt Asian religions selectively.

More specifically, most Western adaptations of Buddhism and Hinduism emphasize seated meditation and abstract philosophy, whereas the religious lives of most Buddhists and Hindus in Asia traditionally revolve around material rituals and deity devotions, not the rarefied pursuits of meditation or philosophy (Prothero, *White Buddhist*; McMahan; Seager). This selectivity is a consequence of what Charles Taylor, following Max Weber, describes as the West's "disenchantment," the replacement of an "enchanted" world of spirits and sacred objects with a "disenchanted" world of impersonal laws where meanings reside only in minds, not in charged objects (29–30, 553–54). Much of the appeal of Asian religions to American audiences has been that their religious transcendence is supposedly free from the faults of traditional Christianity, such as authoritarianism, "problems of theodicy," and superstitious beliefs in miracles (305). Thus in the case of these transnational adaptations of Asian religions, this disenchantment shapes the terms of what gets transmitted and what gets left out.

The disenchanted lens through which this cross-cultural adaptation has occurred raises complex ethical questions. Given that religions' goals supposedly transcend culture, does one have less of an obligation to engage with a foreign religion's native culture than, for instance, with foreign music or dress? How can writers engage or inhabit Asian religions without exoticizing the cultures these religions come from? What, if anything, do American writers interested in Asian religions "owe" contemporary Asians and Asian Americans? I will not attempt to answer these questions conclusively, but I will show the varied ways American writers creatively respond to them.

My argument that enlightened individualism has flourished in post-1945 American literature supports a more nuanced account of Asian religions in American literature than previous scholarship does. Existing work in this area tends to fall into one of two categories: sympathetic readings that praise texts' investments in Asian philosophy or critical polemics that decry texts' Orientalism. The former type praises writers for bringing assumedly valuable wisdom into a new context, while the latter type scolds writers for complicity in

imperialism and stereotyping. Critics doing the first type of work include Todd Giles, John Whalen-Bridge ("Waking Cain"), and Gary Storhoff (*Understanding*). These scholars adopt Buddhist or Hindu metaphysics as their primary theoretical framework, describing ways in which selected American literature uses various elements of craft to convey doctrines such as nonduality [Sanskrit: *advaita*] (Rambachan 43) or emptiness [Sanskrit: *sunyata*] (McMahan 150–51). This body of scholarship occasionally mentions Orientalism but does not dwell on it. For example, Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff acknowledge that Buddhist-inspired writing will "engender suspicions that orientalist writers" are making "a picture of the Other designed especially to flatter the self" (8), but they do not evaluate these suspicions. Their articles' philosophical orientations generate productive readings and are important to our understanding of what these texts do, but this approach tends to leave out crucial political considerations.

By contrast, critics in the second category tend not to discuss Asian religions or spirituality in general (Egan, Eperjesi, Schueller). When religion does come up, these critics mention it only to quickly pull the reader back down to earth. For example, here is Malini Johar Schueller's summary reading of several of Emerson's most famous essays, which were influenced by Asian philosophies: "Although these essays have been read mainly in the light of transcendental aesthetics . . . concerns of the embodiment of the nation remain in them" (162). Elsewhere, Schueller makes a similar point about the poetry of Walt Whitman: "History emerges here as the unavoidable, even as the cadences of the poem attempt to elide it" (192). For Schueller, Emerson's "concerns of . . . the nation" undermine his supposedly "transcendental aesthetics," and Whitman's "unavoidable" embeddedness in the "history" of East-West engagements likewise gives the lie to his pretensions of universalizing holiness. In this view, Orientalism and transcendent spirituality are playing a zero-sum game. If there is more of one, there must be less of the other.

Schueller's critical approach plays an important role in understanding Asian influences on American literature, but it is not the end of the story. Orientalism and religious sentiments are not mutually undermining, as Schueller implies. While Orientalist approaches to spirituality rightly earn suspicion, this dynamic complicates, but does not invalidate, the texts' spiritual dimensions. Religiously concerned literature is always entangled with critically fraught symbols that convey both mystery and insight, and this tension is what makes the texts in this study complex, vexing, and immune to simple dismissals. Whereas previous criticism focuses on either the virtues of Asian philosophies or the ills of stereotyping, my analysis shows how both of these elements are present—and vexingly interconnected—in the same texts.

SCOPE, METHODS, AND KEY TERMS

By focusing on Buddhist and Hindu influences in post-1945 American literature, I am leaving out other Asian traditions, most notably Daoism and Confucianism, that have also influenced American writers. I follow scholars such as Arthur Versluis and, more recently, Jane Naomi Iwamura, in limiting my consideration of "Asian religions" to Buddhism and Hinduism. I have found this boundary useful because enlightened individualism draws from specific ideas in Buddhist and Hindu traditions that are not equally present in Daoism, Confucianism, Shinto, or other Asian religions. By using the term *Asian religions* interchangeably with *Buddhism and Hinduism,* I am not trying to make a strong knowledge claim that Buddhism and Hinduism are the only, or even the most important, religions from Asia. Rather, it is a term of convenience I use to reflect the fact that Buddhism and Hinduism have been the most influential of all Asian religions on American literature, and that these religions' status as Asian has great relevance to how writers contend with these faiths' distant origins and matters of cultural difference.

A more precise term to unify the philosophical systems at issue is *dharma,* a Sanskrit word that refers to teachings in both Hinduism and Buddhism (Iyer 61, 93; Rahula 8; Hiltebeitel 3; R. King, *Indian Philosophy* 171). According to the Dharma Academy of North America, a division of the American Academy of Religion, Hinduism and Buddhism are both "dharmic religions" that share central tenets ("Mission"). The most important of these points are that worldly phenomena are impermanent and illusory (Iyer 68, Deshung Rinpoche 198); ultimate reality is undifferentiated and property-less (Coleman 37–38, Rambachan 43); karma conditions actions and their results (Iyer 89, Rahula 32); and reincarnation is a troubled cycle that one can transcend through meditative insight (Rahula 32, Rambachan 104–5). While Daoism and Confucianism have much common cultural ground with Buddhism and Hinduism, these specific ideas within Buddhist and Hindu intellectual traditions have been distinctively important to American adaptations of Asian religions. The fact that Buddhism grew out of Hinduism makes it unsurprising that there would be many key ideas in common; as Huston Smith writes, "Buddhism drew its lifeblood from Hinduism" (Smith 92). Thus one may refer to the Hindu-Buddhist tradition in the same way that people speak of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Furthermore, these philosophical formulations within Buddhism and Hinduism allow for a transcendence that secular occupants of the West continue to crave (Taylor 727), and they do away with the Christian idea of a personal God who created the universe, a concept many Western spiritual seekers find unpalatable (Campbell). Of course, the very decision to define a religion by a

set of beliefs could be said to reflect a Western and specifically Protestant bias (Prothero, *White Buddhist*), and the meanings of this culturally conditioned scope will also occupy my attention. But all of this is to say that this dharmic tradition is the common interest of the writers I study, which is why I focus only on influences from Buddhism and Hinduism.

Given the kinship between Buddhism and Hinduism, it is not surprising that these religions appeal to overlapping audiences. My focus on both Buddhist and Hindu influences reflects these religions' intertwined reception in the US. As Colin Campbell argues, both Hindu and Buddhist practices in the West have become inseparable from Beat, Hippie, and New Age movements; one cannot talk for long about the former without also discussing the latter (191, 112–13, 140). Accordingly, I emphasize that enlightened individualism comes into its own as a countercultural phenomenon, even as it has gradually become more mainstream. The texts I study often mention Buddhism and Hinduism together, although I specify whether a given reference is Buddhist or Hindu where appropriate. But Buddhism and Hinduism have undergone similar adaptations by Western adherents: Both religions have undergone convergent processes of reducing ritual, emphasizing rationality, and focusing on meditation for laypeople, not only monastics (Williamson, McMahan). The texts I discuss both respond and contribute to these ongoing trends.

One can further understand Buddhism's and Hinduism's role in US literature by differentiating between "religion" and "spirituality." Here I follow Alexander Astin, Helen Astin, and Jennifer Lindholm, who specify "religion" as an institutional affiliation with an attendant set of ritual observances and community membership. "Spirituality," on the other hand, is a personal search for transcendent meaning that often involves little or no formal practice (5). This term has a particular American history; Leigh Schmidt explains that what we now call *spirituality* arose in the context of nineteenth-century US progressive religious liberalism (4–7). He further shows that the capacious umbrella of "spirituality" has long been relevant to reforming and revitalizing American individualism in more humane directions (289–90). Keeping this history in mind, I explore how, from the Beats onward, specific influences from Asian religions become increasingly important to countercultural spiritualities and beyond.

Although spirituality may seem vague and difficult to study, it is becoming an increasingly popular term. For example, the US Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life lists "spiritual but not religious" as one of its official categories of religious identification ("Spiritual But Not Religious" 2014). Although the 2014 survey finds that fewer than 1 percent of survey respondents identify with the specific phrase "spiritual but

not religious," it also shows that 40 percent of those who identify with no religion say that "spiritual" experience plays a significant role in their lives (Masci and Lipka). This 9 percent of the total population is a significant, but far from the only, constituency of people who are often receptive to Buddhist and Hindu influences.

This distinction between *religion* and *spirituality* allows us to see that Buddhism and Hinduism have influenced many more Americans than those who formally affiliate with these religions. A major factor of these traditions' growing popularity in the US is their tendency to offer American audiences teachings without demanding conversion. For example, the famous Indian guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi positions his Transcendental Meditation not as a religion but as a form of mental training that can complement any religion one already follows (Griffin). Also, the 14th Dalai Lama writes that people can flourish without religion, but not without a spirituality and ethics based on compassion (Gyatso, *Beyond Religion* xiii–xv). Western-targeted adaptations of Asian religions tend to prioritize spirituality over religion, a trend reflected in the literature in this study. All of the writers I discuss are deeply influenced by Asian religions, but very few claim any religious affiliation, and some explicitly disclaim any affiliation.

Furthermore, the role Buddhism and Hinduism play in post-1945 American literature and culture complicates Charles Taylor's influential notion of the *immanent frame,* a complex concept that has become a widespread point of reference for scholars of contemporary religion and secularity. This immanent frame is a way of viewing the world that is implicitly shared by both religious and nonreligious people in the modern West. Some of the most noteworthy aspects of the immanent frame are the sense that individuals have a "buffered self" impervious to coercive spiritual forces, that time is "pervasively secular" by flowing at the same rate without regard for special occasions, and that "instrumental rationality," not symbolism or mythology, is a definitive method for understanding physical phenomena (37–41, 542). In his response to *A Secular Age,* José Casanova says that non-European religions, including Buddhism and Hinduism, are becoming Americanized in the US, similarly to other previously marginal religions like Catholicism or Mormonism, and thus will not create any significant disruption to the immanent frame as Taylor conceives it (280–81).

And yet what I am calling *enlightened individualism* does not fit neatly into Taylor's understanding of the "cross-pressures" of the immanent frame. For Taylor, the cross-pressures of the immanent frame are toward an openness to transcendence, on the one hand, and toward a closed system of exclusive humanism, on the other (542–44). Taylor identifies this transcendence with

"God," and exclusive humanism with an impersonal order in which humans must create their own flourishing (544, 546–48). But American adaptations of Asian religions rely neither on God nor on a secular impersonal order. The transcendence they offer is not a vertical reverence toward "God, or something ontologically higher" (544), but a horizontal dissolution of all distinctions between subjects and objects. This kind of transcendence involves an embrace of an impersonal order that is also sacred. The limitless, nondual nature of phenomena *is* itself transcendent; therefore, this sacred but nontheistic reality is not experienced as threatening to human fullness. Thus one need not avoid this reality with hedonistic superficiality or make a defiant expression of compensatory self-assertion or courage.

The nonduality of which enlightened individualism partakes further complicates Taylor's immanent frame by eroding the "buffered self" of contemporary individualism. This does not mean the return of a porous self in a world of spirits, but rather a positive vision of compassion based on the interdependence of all phenomena. Furthermore, the formations I am discussing are distinctive to the US because they rework American individualism in terms of ideas from Asian religions, while also changing those imported faiths as well. This synthesis complicates the buffered self in complex ways. Enlightened individualism relies on individualist habits cultivated by the buffered self, such as inner depths, autonomous choices, and philosophical introspection (539–40). But the metaphysical notion of interdependence also changes this individualism into a more relational, embedded model. Enlightened individualism channels Asian ideas of transcendence into a greater openness to others by challenging the idea of a stable, fixed self. This coexistence is remarkable, and we will see in the coming pages how post-1945 writers bring it to life.

By exploring only the development of Asian religions in the US while bracketing their Asian histories, it might seem as though I present Buddhism and Hinduism as fixed systems distorted by transmission to the modern, fast-paced US. Such a portrayal would reproduce the same rarefying tendencies that American literature has problematically practiced, as shown in the work of scholars such as the aforementioned David McMahan, Stephen Prothero, and Thomas Tweed. Indeed, this is not the impression I wish to convey. Rather, I treat Buddhism's and Hinduism's growth in the US as continuous with these traditions' long histories. To view these religions' Asian forms as static would be to repeat the bias of nineteenth-century European scholars of Buddhism, who thought of early Indian and Sri Lankan Buddhism as pure philosophy that later degenerated into superstition as it spread throughout Asia (Seager 29). As Stuart Hall famously declares, "There is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'" (226). The Asian religions I reference are no

exception. As others have noted, Buddhism underwent significant changes as it spread beyond India and established itself in China, Tibet, Japan, Thailand, and elsewhere (McClure 51, Storhoff and Whalen-Bridge 3). America joins a long series of new homes for Asian religions, one in which American literature plays a unique role.

TRANSCENDENTALISM

The growth of Buddhist- and Hindu-influenced literature after WWII builds on a centuries-old tradition of Anglo-American writing on Asian religions. Although references to Asian cultures in American writing go back to before the Revolutionary War (Schueller 1), the first major wave of American literature that concerns itself with Asian religion is Transcendentalism (Campbell 25–26, Goldberg 7–8). Text-based European scholarship on Asian religions effectively began in the 1780s with Sir William Jones's studies of Sanskrit, but Asian religious texts did not reach a significant audience in the US until the 1840s (Versluis 7). During this decade, Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Henry David Thoreau's "Ethnical Scriptures" column in the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial* introduced readers to English translations of Asian texts such as the *Baghavad-Gita* or the sayings of Confucius (Versluis 79). Much later, Thoreau's discussion of the *Baghavad-Gita* in *Walden* would help introduce Jack Kerouac to Asian religions (Prothero, Introduction 1–3). While the Beats did not wholly depend on the Transcendentalists for their introductions to Asian religions—D. T. Suzuki and Dwight Goddard were also important transmitters—the Beats were more generally influenced by the Transcendentalist agendas of spiritual innovation and American cultural renewal. In Emerson's best-known writings, direct allusions to Asian religions are rare, but his ideas about spiritual "Unity in Variety" and "universal Spirit" were influenced by the Hindu teaching that all phenomena are fundamentally divine substance (Emerson, "Nature" 506, 507; Goodman 627–28), ideas that Beat writers such as Kerouac would find appealing.

We see more-explicit engagement with Hinduism in the work of Henry David Thoreau. In a well-known passage in *Walden,* Thoreau writes, "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta . . . in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial. . . . The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges" (269). Thoreau's ambitious imagery, which expresses his veneration for Hindu scripture as a fantasy of erasing geographical distances, is noteworthy for its implication that Asian wisdom can emerge in American spaces.

But if American nature can be a place of rebirth for Asian wisdom, it is only because, in Thoreau's view, this wisdom is essentially dead in its lands of origin. In his lesser-known essay "Walking," written shortly before his extended stay at Walden, Thoreau reflects, "The West is preparing to add its fables to those of the East. The valleys of the Ganges, the Nile, and the Shine having yielded their crop, it remains to be seen what the valleys of the Amazon, the Plate, the Orinoco, the St. Lawrence, and the Mississippi will produce. Perchance when, in the course of ages, American liberty has become a fiction of the past—as it is to some extent a fiction of the present—the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology" (qtd. in Versluis 96). If the future "poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology" only after "American liberty" is extinct, the implication is that poets of the present are similarly inspired by the "fables . . . of the East" whose vital origins now exist only as memories and myth, their crops already harvested. Thoreau treats Asia as a fallen realm whose greatest treasures are static artifacts from the past, not dynamic cultures of the present; he forecasts a parallel course for the New World. The post-1945 writers I discuss build on Thoreau's vision by treating Asian religions as a source of renewal for "American liberty," but they complicate Thoreau's and others' visions of Buddhism and Hinduism as exotic relics.

The writings of Emerson and Thoreau illustrate how Transcendentalists connected Asian religions with projects of questioning authority and discovering personal authenticity. Also important, the Transcendentalists made a crucial modification to the traditional frameworks of Asian religions—probably without fully realizing it—a modification that later American writers follow: They did not fully subscribe to the orthodox Hindu and Buddhist narrative of spiritual development that ends with the complete transcendence of the individual self. Rather, Transcendentalists treated idealized versions of Hinduism and Buddhism as ways of discovering a truer, more authentic individual self. This vision retains elements of a Romantic epiphany in which the self transcends itself in ecstasy but reemerges afterward, revitalized. This vision is in contrast to a Buddhist or Hindu epiphany, after which all clinging to an idea of individual selfhood is gone (Thanissaro, McMahan). Thus Transcendentalist understandings of selfhood create a basis for future writers to preserve a sense of individualism in their American adaptations of Asian religions.

For example, Emerson's *Self-Reliance* describes spiritual growth as a source of creativity and individuality. He writes that for every man [*sic*], "imitation is suicide. . . . The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried" (2–3). This rugged, defiant individualism celebrates individual creativity and "power," in contrast to Asian religious texts such as *The Dhammapada,* the

sayings of the Buddha. In this text, the Buddha also counsels a certain kind of self-reliance insofar as a realized people should "depart with their thoughts well-collected, they are not happy in their abode; like swans who have left their lake, they leave their house and home" (l.91) But the goal is not achievement; it is renunciation: "There is no suffering for him who has finished his journey, and abandoned grief, who has freed himself on all sides, and thrown off all fetters" (l.90). Emerson celebrates a vigorous individual vitality, whereas the Buddha urges complete detachment and equanimity. With some adaptation—or, less charitably, projection—the Transcendentalists saw Asian religions as ancient but vital ways of finding oneself, expressing individual artistic creativity, and questioning authority, themes that the Beats and their successors would develop further.

While a small number of white spiritual seekers, exemplified by Emerson and Thoreau, explored Asian religions through texts in the first half of the nineteenth century, on the country's opposite coast, immigrants brought Buddhism from China (Fields 72–73), and Hindu immigrants from India would follow a few decades later (Kurien 41–43). These immigrant religions retained the devotional and ritual elements that the white adapters tended to dismiss as mere culturally particular superstition in contrast to the supposedly universal truths that the white adapters could recuperate from sacred texts. West Coast immigrant Buddhists, because of both geographical and attitudinal distance, would almost never interact with the East Coast strain I have just described. This marks the beginning of a deep split between immigrant religions from Asia and primarily white adaptations of them, a chasm that remains up to the present day. This division has profoundly affected enlightened individualism, and I will take up this issue more extensively in my later discussion of Asian American Buddhist writing.

GROWING EXCHANGE AND THE WORLD PARLIAMENT

Cultural exchange between East Asia and the West accelerated in the later nineteenth century in ways that contributed to Asian religions' status in the West as a respectable but distant curiosity. In particular, increased trade between Japan and Europe, which took off in 1853, led to Japanese artistic influences on European and American painters from the 1860s through the 1890s, including Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt, and James Whistler (Ives). These painters were not engaged with Asian religions in particular, but they generated an interest in Japanese and Chinese aesthetics that greatly influenced European art. This development set the stage for international

figures such as Lafcadio Hearn, Helena Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott, Sadakichi Hartmann, and Ernest Fenollosa, many of whom were deeply involved with the visual arts, to further expand the influence of Asian religions among Anglo-American audiences. Some of these writers, such as Olcott and Fenollosa, were also influential contributors to religious and cultural revitalization efforts in Asian countries, particularly Sri Lanka and Japan, respectively. Such transnational circuits contributed to the popularity of Edwin Arnold's epic poem *The Light of Asia,* an instant hit in England when it debuted in 1879. Arnold's admiring narrative of the Buddha's life helped to solidify the Buddha's image in the West as a modern-friendly wisdom teacher who eschewed ritual and superstition, even though the poem presents many traditional miraculous stories (Arnold 10, Clausen).

An expanding interest in Asian cultures, supported by increased international trade, also manifested through Orientalist exoticism. English novels such as Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), Marie Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886), and H. Rider Haggard's *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905) offered suspenseful plots that centered on mysterious Buddhist or Hindu rituals. American writing on Asian religions at this time included occasional Asian-influenced monographs, such as the Theosophical Society's 1877 *Isis Unveiled, A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (Blavatsky), which lent Asian religions an exoticized air of the occult (Fields 92, Tweed 52–53).

While these various nineteenth-century writings brought gradual growth in American interest in Buddhism and Hinduism, a dramatic turning point came with the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, a part of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. The first event of its kind, the World Parliament of Religions brought together representatives from many faiths from around the world. Through this gathering, numerous Americans in attendance—and many more who read newspapers' accounts—learned about Buddhism and Hinduism for the first time, and from in-person teachers, not translated texts (Goldberg 77, Williamson 27, Seager 35, Snodgrass 1, Tanaka). This event also saw the first known American to convert officially to Buddhism (Fields 129). Asian religions' best-known American adaptations can be traced to this gathering. For instance, modern, fitness-focused American yoga owes its existence to the interest inspired by the Hindu missionary Swami Vivekenanda's charismatic opening address to the Parliament (Goldberg 79–80, Bardach). Additionally, the Parliament's Zen contingent would later send a young D. T. Suzuki, arguably the most influential Buddhist teacher in the early to mid-twentieth century, to continue promoting Japanese Buddhism in the US (Snodgrass 259–60).

Many of the key representatives at the Parliament presented versions of their traditions carefully catered to American audiences. The "Eastern" religions they represented were already influenced by Western-inspired reform movements that sought to emphasize compatibility with rationalism and downplay anything that would look like superstition, such as rituals and deity worship (Snodgrass, Williamson). This disenchanted adaptation was an attempt to cater to American audiences who lived in what Taylor calls an immanent frame of instrumental reason and impersonal order (542). The representatives were sent by their governments to improve their countries' international reputation and promote current modernization movements. The delegates thus attempted to appeal to the progressive spirit that underlay the larger background of the World's Columbian Exposition. A closer look at a couple of key representatives at the World Parliament is warranted, as these figures articulated the basis of enlightened individualism that, while obscure at the time, would be magnified and transformed by countercultural movements a half-century later.

Parliament representatives echoed some Transcendentalist themes of universal brotherhood and Asian religions' relevance to American individualism, but with greater theoretical development and social concreteness. In particular, Swami Vivekananda and Zen Buddhist representative Shaku Soyen are noteworthy examples. Swami Vivekananda's reception at the Parliament was so positive that he used its momentum to launch a speaking tour around the US. In a particularly remarkable lecture in San Francisco in 1900, Vivekananda boldly articulated with unprecedented ambition what would become an influential set of ideas about the compatibility of Asian religions and American democracy:

> You want to be democratic in this country. It is the democratic God that Vedanta teaches. . . . Its God is not the monarch sitting on a throne, entirely apart. . . . You are all kings in this country. So with the religion of Vedanta. You are all Gods. . . . India cannot give up his majesty the king of the earth—that is why Vedanta cannot become the religion of India. There is a chance of Vedanta becoming the religion of your country because of democracy. (*Complete Works* 125–26)

Vivekananda uses the text-based term *Vedanta* instead of the geographical term *Hinduism* both to identify a specific strain within Hinduism [*Advaita Vedanta,* which holds that all phenomena are ultimately undifferentiated divine substance] (Rambachan 43) and to avoid unfavorable cultural associations such as India's caste system. He also boldly inverts Vedanta's foreign

status, going so far as to say that the US is actually a better home for Hindu-inspired religion than India itself, which has lapsed into spiritual decline—as manifested in a hierarchical government—and needs modernizing reform. Vivekananda's claim that "you are all kings in this country" is, of course, a flattering exaggeration, but it does effectively appeal to what Thoreau calls the "fiction" of "American liberty."

But the most interesting aspect of this argument is its ambitious—and intriguingly coherent—claim that Indian Vedanta is a better religious basis for democracy than monotheism. A sovereign God "entirely apart" is too monarchical and, by implication, tyrannical. There is no surer way, Vivekananda must have thought, to critique something to Americans than by labeling it as *monarchical.* By contrast, the Vedantic belief that all beings are ultimately at one with the universal Divine is more consistent with democratic commitments to individual rights and representative government—in short, that there are certain ways in which each person always matters. Vedanta's "democratic God" is immanent, impersonal, and nonhierarchical. But in a sophisticated appeal to American sensibilities, Vivekananda still uses this belief to celebrate individual sovereignty over oneself rather than Vedanta's traditional ideal of a total erasure of individuality. Vivekananda's ideas also influenced William James, whose decision to focus his groundbreaking treatise *The Varieties of Religious Experience* on private religious experiences rather than religions' social and ritualistic aspects further reinforced American literature's tendency to focus on Asian religious philosophy at the expense of culture.

At the World Parliament of Religions, these building blocks of enlightened individualism emerged from Buddhism as well as Hinduism, as seen in the thought of Zen Buddhist representative Shaku Soyen. Like Vivekananda, he parlayed his Parliament appearance into a US speaking tour, and his talks were compiled into a book, translated into English by D. T. Suzuki and published in 1906 as *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot.* More reserved and less outspoken than Vivekananda, Soyen is eager to show that Buddhism has much in common with Western traditions more familiar to his American audience. He declares that the "moral law" that leads to "enlightenment" and "Buddhahood . . . was incarnated not only in Gautama-Buddha, but also in all great men in a higher or lesser degree, foremost among them in Jesus Christ, and, allow me to add, in George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and other great men of your country" (71). This is an odd juxtaposition. Many Americans greatly revere Washington, but if they could have dinner with him, it would probably not occur to them to ask him what the meaning of life is. It is also incongruous to place the Buddha, who taught and lived nonviolence, alongside statesmen who presided over momentous wars. It appears, then, that appealing to

American patriotism is more important to Soyen than engaging in nuanced cross-cultural comparisons.

A particularly troubling aspect of Soyen's efforts to reach American audiences is his reliance on Orientalist stereotypes. As I mentioned, the few late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Americans who knew about Buddhism mostly viewed it as passive and therefore incompatible with American industriousness and political activism (Tweed). In response, Soyen defends Buddhism against accusations of passivity not by refuting the charge but by conceding the point and shifting the blame elsewhere: to the Asian race. He says, "If there is anything passive in Eastern culture, which is often no more than tolerance or indifference or self-restraint, it is not due to Buddhism but to the racial idiosyncrasy of Asiatic peoples" (43). While admitting that there are always exceptions, Soyen reinforces the stereotype that "generally speaking . . . the West is energetic, and the East mystical" (89).

Nevertheless, Soyen argues that Buddhism has important contributions to make to American life. In particular, he promotes meditation as a valuable tool for relaxation "in these days of industrial and commercial civilization" (104–5). In a remarkable anticipation of later secular meditation trends such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Soyen proposes that Buddhist meditation, "whatever its religious merits, is not devoid of its practical utilities and *even for this reason alone* its exercise is universally to be recommended" (92, emphasis added). This is the basic rationale for using Buddhist meditation for secular purposes—articulated more than seventy years before the emergence of the contemporary mindfulness movement in the 1970s (Kabat-Zinn, Wilson). Overall, Soyen's cross-cultural adaptations focus more on bending Buddhism into an American shape than on using Buddhist teachings to critique American society.

The World Parliament of Religions gave Asian religions unprecedented exposure in the US and yielded some ambitious frameworks for synthesizing Asian religions and American liberalism. But these ideas did not gain much traction in the immediate aftermath of this historic event, except among small numbers of bookish white sympathizers. And in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American literary treatments of Hinduism and Buddhism, while often sympathetic to abstract doctrines in these religions, still depicted the people who practice these religions as incommensurably foreign, a symptom of the strong anti-Asian immigrant beliefs and policies in the US during this period. For example, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American fiction showed varying degrees of admiration for Chinese religion, but it generally suggested that Chinese people could not successfully integrate into the US. Stories of this type include Mary Austin's "The Conversion of Ah

Lew Sing" (1897), Willa Cather's "The Conversion of Sum Loo" (1900), Katherine Anne Porter's *My Chinese Marriage* (1902), and Joseph Hergesheimer's *Java Head* (1918). During the same period, English novels also continued to combine admiration for Asian faiths with stereotypes of foreignness and antiquity. Noteworthy instances include Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1902), E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), and James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933). Just as the age-defying properties of Shangri-la disappear as soon as one leaves, *Lost Horizon,* along with many other texts of this period, conveys the sense that Westerners can learn from, but not truly inhabit, Asian religions. However, a remarkable outlier in this period is W. E. B. Du Bois's little-known novel *Dark Princess* (1928), which weaves a plot that spans Hindu mysticism and Chicago machine politics. The novel's African American protagonist meets an Indian princess who seeks to organize a revolutionary uplift of dark-skinned peoples around the world, citing Hindu teachings as the source of her perseverance. This novel is an early example of dramatizing how Asian religious teaching can be a resource for American—and even global—political reform.

MODERNISM

The view of Asian religions as exotic counterparts to Western corruption continued largely unchanged in Anglo-American Modernism. Major Modernist writers integrated established tropes of Asian religions into their ambitious aesthetic agendas of capturing experiences with maximum vividness. Many figures were crucial in Modernist engagements with Asian religions, including Ernest Fenollosa, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Amy Lowell. In the words of literary scholar Josephine Park, "modernist Orientalism rendered the Asiatic sign as a silent figure" and not as a pathway into living traditions (3; see also Stalling 147–48, Sielke and Kloeckner 9–12). Modernist treatments of Buddhism and Hinduism were Orientalist in the sense that they positioned the authenticity and ancient purity of Asian religions against the contemporary soulless corruption of Europe. For example, R. John Williams and Jonathan Stalling have persuasively argued that Ernest Fenollosa was deeply influenced by Buddhist ideas, such as emptiness and interdependence, in forming his aesthetic principle that good art involves interacting elements without separate foregrounds and backgrounds. He came to think that this method is best exemplified in East Asian art as opposed to sterile, rigid, fixed-perspective European art, and that European artists should learn lessons from these East Asian styles (Williams 95–100, Stalling 34–38).

American literature's interest in Asian religions as bygone glory, well established by the early twentieth century, takes a particularly poignant turn in the high Modernism of the post-WWI period, when the reaction to the devastation of the Great War was a dominant theme, and when Asian teachings on emptiness and impermanence took on even greater social timeliness. An especially important example of Modernist Orientalism is T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land.* The poem's third section, "The Fire Sermon," is named after an important Buddhist text of that title (Rainey 99–100). In the scripture, the Buddha describes desires as like fire, extending this analogy to argue that the greatest achievement is to extinguish all craving just as one would put out a dangerous and painful fire. Eliot alludes to this text to critique Western decadence, implying that the fires of nationalism are responsible for the devastation caused by the Great War, and that postarmistice entertainments are vain, superficial distractions that perpetuate the underlying fires of desire. (See chapter 5 for a related discussion of *The Waste Land*'s influence on novelist Lan Cao.) Additionally, the poem's last thirty-eight lines repeatedly allude to the Hindu *Upanishads* (Rainey 74n401, n433), giving the poem's end a distinctive turn toward Asia. The "fragments I have shored against my ruins" include artifacts from Asia, not just Europe (l. 430) In particular, the poem's last words, *Shantih, Shantih, Shantih* (l. 433), are the Sanskrit word for *peace,* a yearning especially salient in the uneasy peace of Eliot's immediate historical context. Eliot's allusions express a concluding desperation for mystical Oriental transcendence. If Europe is a Waste Land, fragments from ancient Asian texts are a resource through which to yearn for something better. Eliot thus positions Asian religions as an idealized but unattainable answer to the *wasteland* that post-WWI Europe has become; these faiths are beautiful but ultimately too distant to grasp.

WORLD WAR II AND AFTER

During the 1920s and 1930s, readers continued to flirt with Asian religions in texts such as Hilton's *Lost Horizon,* and more serious seekers gathered with small organizations such as the Vedanta Society in New York or the Zen Mission in Los Angeles. During this time, Asian religions in the US remained mostly obscure. The 1930s and 1940s saw the emergence of several important writers adapting Buddhism to English-speaking audiences, including D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, Dwight Goddard, and Walter Evans-Wentz, all of whom who would later influence the Beats and subsequent authors.

However, the Second World War hindered Asian religions' already modest growth in the US, especially Buddhism. Although Japan's official religion during the war was Shinto, Buddhist centers in America came under suspicion by their assumed association with the Japanese enemy. During the war, D. T. Suzuki stayed out of the public eye (Fields 195), and several important Japanese American Buddhist teachers were interred by Executive Order 9066 (Fields 192–94, Seager 57). After the war ended, Japanese Buddhist teachers resumed teaching, this time free from political suspicion, but they had lost ground they needed to make up for.

The end of WWII also brought some noteworthy—and divergent—allusions to Hinduism. For instance, J. Robert Oppenheimer invoked the *Bhagavad-Gita*'s emphasis on national duty to justify the Manhattan Project, and he famously quoted the text's cosmic imagery to capture the destructive power of the bomb: "I am Shiva, destroyer of worlds" (Hijiya 123–24). In contrast, in Theodore Dreiser's 1947 novel *The Stoic,* a character's discovery of Hinduism inspires philanthropy. The protagonist's widow travels to India and, alarmed by the poverty there, returns to America and learns to attend to the squalor in her own midst, donating money to build hospitals in New York.

Given these varied treatments, it was unclear in the 1940s what shape Asian religions would take in American literature and culture. Emblematic of this uncertainty, W. F. C. Northrop's ambitious study *The Meeting of East and West* (1946) attempted a postwar framework for helping previously disparate cultures to relate harmoniously. The book sought to help citizens and leaders of the world navigate the still-emerging postwar world order in ways that would lead to greater peace and understanding. Although the book gained immediate attention and acclaim, especially in academic circles (Williams 209–10, 305n32), it did not retain a significant readership in succeeding decades. I think the reason is that the book pinned its exigency to a number of specific geopolitical situations that dramatically changed shortly after the book was published in 1946, as evidenced by the establishment of Israel, the independence of India, the victory of Communism in China, and the start of the Korean War. Nevertheless, the book's basic argument is influential in its ambitious but ultimately oversimplifying argument for cross-cultural synthesis. Northrop sees the roots of international conflict as arising from incompatibilities between cultures, and he tendentiously identifies these cultural characteristics in representative works of literature, philosophy, and art. His main argument is that bridging the mainly "theoretic" nature of "Western civilization" and the primarily "aesthetic" character of "Eastern civilization" is crucial in building a more peaceful world (375–77; see also 434, 443). This book was also a significant influence on Robert Pirsig (Williams 209), whose work I will discuss in chapter 2.

Having briefly overviewed some of the most noteworthy Anglo-American literatures on Asian religions before the Beats, the general stage I want to set is this: Prior to the mid-1950s, American literature about Asian religions had a distinctly genteel and polite character, an assessment that the contrast of exuberant and irreverent Beat writing will soon make even clearer. These pre-Beat texts were read by a small number of sympathizers who largely viewed Asian religions as beautiful threads in their ecumenical tapestry rather than traditions with unique ideas and practices to offer American identities. There was no meaningful interaction between white spiritual seekers who read Thoreau, Vivekananda, and others, and West Coast Asian Americans who practiced Buddhism. Pre-Beat American literature on Asian religions also followed patterns of Orientalist stereotyping that, contrary to what much scholarship argues, was actually disrupted by Beat Buddhism.

What changed from the Beats onward is that Buddhism and Hinduism in the US became countercultural. I treat this change not as the definitive beginning of enlightened individualism but as a meaningful maturation of it. Once the Beat Generation adapted Asian religions into a resource for American anticonformism, Asian religions took on countercultural associations that influenced American treatments of Buddhism and Hinduism from that point onward. This development drove countercultural seekers to explore Asian religions more extensively to escape from what they saw as the hypocrisy, corruption, and complacency of mainstream US culture. Some of these engagements have included reenvisioning US individualism through specific Buddhist and Hindu mantras, receiving spiritual tutelage from Asian teachers, and giving closer consideration to specific Buddhist and Hindu metaphysical theories of emptiness, nonduality, and transcendence. Paradoxically, this countercultural impulse itself turned into a kind of devotion to American ideals of the Enlightenment because of the revolutionary nature of the American founding. As a result, appeals to the revolutionary spirit of individualism played a role in Buddhist- and Hindu-inspired countercultures, even as these movements defied contemporary national norms. Beat and hippie engagements with Asian religions showed an unprecedented openness to the details and depths of Buddhism and Hinduism as traditions that could transform the US.

One noteworthy consequence of this shift is that enlightened individualism was characterized by a more uneven relationship to Christianity than to its antecedents. Pre-WWII promoters of Buddhism and Hinduism, such as Swami Vivekananda, Shaku Soyen, and Paul Carus, tended to go out of their way to say positive things about Jesus Christ, presumably to build bridges to their mostly Christian audiences. Since American identity has been largely bound up with Christianity (Ahlstrom, Taylor 447–48), pre-WWII efforts to cater to American audiences mostly strove not to threaten this alliance. But

enlightened individualism from the Beats onward often had a greater willingness to break from Christianity. Writers of enlightened individualism are devoted to disruptively renewing American identity through Asian religions, but the extent to which this enlightened identity has a place for Christian identities and motifs varies greatly from one writer to the next. As the following pages will show, the writers I study have, for all their commonalities, very different relationships to Christianity that range from friendly (Salinger) to indifferent (Snyder) to hostile (Walker).

As a result of Asian religions' countercultural turn in post-WWII US literature, whether viewed positively or negatively, it became increasingly difficult for Americans to see Asian religions as passive in their American versions. Ironically, for the last sixty years Asian religions have seemed cool and hip in the US, even though their reputation in Asia is one of stuffy and old-fashioned establishment. The popularity of Beat literature and bemused coverage of Beats and Buddhism by the mainstream press gave Asian religions unprecedented visibility in the US, to the point that scholars describe the late 1950s as a "Zen Boom" (Fields, Seager).

Starting with the Beats, the texts I focus on vividly dramatize what American conversion to Buddhism and Hinduism can look like and how these faiths can confront—and be confronted by—specifically American racial and economic histories. I will focus especially on how these narratives create cross-cultural syntheses in elements of literary craft such as plot, character, metaphor, and imagery. As I will show, these texts have an ambivalent relationship to Orientalism: On the one hand, they shatter Orientalism by presenting Asian religions not as strangely foreign but as just what America needs, and with a far greater attention to the specifics of these religions than their predecessors. On the other hand, these writings selectively transmit and adapt some aspects of Buddhism and Hinduism but not others, often ignoring the lived religion of Asians and Asian Americans and indulging in visions of Asian religions as relics to be revived. Still, by creatively rewriting Asian religions into the fabric of American life, these writers explore what it means to be American in tandem with what it means to be spiritual.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

While American writing since the Transcendentalists has explored what enlightened individualism might mean, I start with the Beats in chapter 1 because their countercultural turn decisively shapes subsequent adaptations of Buddhism and Hinduism in American literature. I first show how disruptive Buddhist *crazy wisdom*—a Buddhist pedagogy of deviance designed to

disrupt conventional thought—animates the anticonformist, anticonsumerist Beat visions of Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, and Tom Robbins. In response, as the second chapter explores, countervailing appeals to mystical equanimity govern the anti-Beat responses of J. D. Salinger and Robert Pirsig. The third chapter shows how secret Asian rituals inform reflections on the faded countercultures and inspire a renewed sense of American freedom in texts by Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo. In chapter 4, I turn to how Asian metaphysics of ultimate unity inspire unique visions of African American spiritual ancestry in the works of Alice Walker and Charles Johnson. Finally, the fifth chapter examines how Buddhist doctrines of nonself enrich Asian American identities in novels by Lan Cao and Maxine Hong Kingston.

The Beats resisted the conformism of American middle-class norms that emerged in the 1950s, which involved jingoistic patriotism, the nuclear family, suburban living, and some version of monotheism, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. For many of the Beats, Buddhism offered an ecstatic liberation from America's vapid consumer culture and alienating monotheism, and this veneration led them to emphasize both Buddhism's spiritual transcendence and its cultural difference from the American mainstream. This tendency creates a uniquely American approach to Buddhism, an approach that downplays traditional teacher-disciple lineages and celebrates individual spontaneity. This dynamic is the theme of the first chapter, "Beat Buddhism and American Freedom: Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, and Tom Robbins." Each of these writers appeals to *crazy wisdom* as inspiration for their contemporary nonconformism. Beat Buddhism, I argue, synthesizes Buddhist and American ideas of freedom in original ways. It envisions an enlightened individualism that uses Buddhist disruptions of conventional thought to critique contemporary American decadence. In its place, Buddhist emptiness informs a more authentically American individualism that frees one from social oppression—and one's own sense of clinging to a fixed self. Within this common vision, Beat Buddhism shows considerable diversity. Ginsberg establishes influential links between Buddhist emptiness, countercultural critique, and the American Revolution. Snyder sees a harmonious synthesis of Buddhism and American freedom, while Kerouac struggles with unresolved tensions. A half-generation later, the relatively overlooked Tom Robbins, a standard-bearer of Beat aesthetics and motifs, develops a cautious stance that is more reserved than Snyder's but more optimistic and realized than Kerouac's. This view of Beat Buddhism complicates current scholarly debates on Beat engagements with Asian religions. In a reflection of larger trends in American literary criticism, scholars of the Beats are split into opposing camps that see the Beats as either shallow Orientalists or sincere devotees of Asian faiths (He; Griswold; C. Jackson; Prothero, "Holy Road"; Giamo; Giles). I argue that a more complex

understanding is necessary, one that accounts for both the Beats' selective adoption of Buddhist thought and their receptivity to the new ideas of American identity that these philosophies inspire.

This Americanized Buddhism of the Beat movement, or "Beat Buddhism" for short, was the most visible expression of Asian religions in the US until well after its heyday. Thus Beat Buddhism has inescapably shaped subsequent American adaptations of Asian religions. One of Beat Buddhism's most noteworthy legacies is inspiring counter-countercultural writing that takes exception to alleged Beat, and later hippie, frivolity and superficiality. Two of Beat Buddhism's foremost detractors are J. D. Salinger and Robert Pirsig, whose key works I examine in the second chapter, "Anti-Beat Reactions and Mainstream Mysticism: J. D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey* and Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.*" Like the Beats, Salinger and Pirsig adapt Asian religions for American audiences by synthesizing American and Asian notions of freedom, thus continuing the tradition of enlightened individualism. But countering Beat narratives of disruption, Salinger and Pirsig portray Asian religions as nonthreatening and mainstream, compatible with the postwar status quo. Whereas the countercultural literature of the first chapter focuses on freewheeling adventure, Salinger's and Pirsig's narratives prioritize healing fractured nuclear families with the help of Asian-inspired spirituality. Salinger and Pirsig disparage countercultural nonconformism as too adversarial to convey the Asian equanimity that Americans truly need. Their cross-cultural syntheses offer harmony, not heresy; reassurance, not provocation. They attempt to show that Asian ideals are compatible with normative middle-class American life. However, although Salinger and Pirsig critique the Beats, they still use Beat-inspired rhetoric, repurposing a radical tone to steer readers toward mainstream modes of living. Crucially, Salinger and Pirsig view the American mainstream as not necessarily conformist; in their texts, Buddhist and Hindu philosophies offers ways to live authentically as unique individuals without disrupting the larger social status quo.

Both the Beats of the first chapter and the anti-Beats of the second enthusiastically advocate for adapted Asian religions as solutions to the challenges of contemporary American life. They are, in short, believers. The faith expressed in their fiction comes under fire by postmodern writers who refuse the ultimate promises of religion, patriotism, and absolute truth in general. But even these skeptical writers reveal investments in enlightened individualism. This persistence comes about, surprisingly, by giving up on transcendence instead of celebrating it. I explore this development in the third chapter, "Secret Rituals and American Autonomy: Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* and Don DeLillo's *Underworld.*" Pynchon and DeLillo adapt Asian religions in ways that offer

modest spiritual resources for addressing American problems, particularly an oppressive and opaque government and the paranoia that results. I show how Pynchon and DeLillo empower readers to overcome reactionary paranoia—and even recuperate American ideals of freedom and autonomy—by adapting earthbound versions of Buddhist and Hindu traditions of secret transmission, not these religions' philosophies of transcendence. Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990) imagines a form of ninjutsu that is influenced by both Buddhism and consumer capitalism and gives political radicals tools to resist, not simply fear, governmental oppression. Furthermore, *Vineland* critiques the shortcomings of 1960s infatuations with Asian religions, dramatizing both followers' naive zeal and these religions' tendency to prioritize metaphysical transcendence over political change. For Pynchon, ninjutsu offers a model of resistance that responds to sinister conspiracies by fashioning underground practices of Buddhist-inspired empowerment.

Whereas *Vineland* focuses on countercultural engagements with Asian religions, DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) foregrounds mainstream mistrust of them. *Underworld*'s characters repeatedly encounter Hindu and Buddhist mantras, but they dismiss them as foreign, thus keeping Asian religious insights secret through socially reinforced dismissal. However, by juxtaposing these supposedly exotic Asian practices with more familiar Christian chants, the novel's form shows the reader hidden kinships between East and West that its characters fail to acknowledge. The novel invites the reader to uncover how Asian religions can redeem American individualism, thus obtaining the secrets hidden from the novel's own characters. *Underworld* is charged with religious language and symbolism, but it does not valorize any one religion. Rather, the novel suggests that paranoia, whether against foreign religions or domestic institutions, inhibits one's ability to form an adequate picture of the varied influences that shape our lives. Pynchon and DeLillo, the consummate postmodernists, are skeptical of everything, including both Asian enlightenment transcendence and liberal enlightenment governance. But even so, they still adapt Asian ideas and practices in ways that promise to advance something like American freedom. Furthermore, their metaphysical skepticism leads their adaptations of Asian religions to make more room for the materiality of ritual, offering an interesting exception to enlightened individualism's tendency to privilege abstract ideas over specific, often culturally marked, practices.

This selection of writers thus far reflects the fact that most of the American literary voices exploring Asian religions have been white. However, recent years have seen the emergence of noteworthy minority American literatures about Asian religions. Crucial examples have appeared within African Ameri-

can literature, which is the focus of the fourth chapter, "Asian Religions and African Dreams: Alice Walker and Charles Johnson." Walker's and Johnson's novels allegorize Asian religions' relevance for African Americans by reimagining Asian-style sages as African Americans' ancestors. For both writers, Buddhist and Hindu teachings of nonduality—the idea that ultimate reality is undifferentiated—enable this complex, imaginative move. Walker's and Johnson's fiction suggests that the universal insights of Asian religions allow African Americans to claim Asian religions as their own. Their protagonists develop connections to Asian traditions that do not strictly depend on heredity; but in a complex bid to legitimate Asian religions for African American spiritual seekers, the texts still rely on ancestry as a metaphor for this connection. Walker and Johnson further propose how Buddhist and Hindu nonduality can uniquely critique racism and enrich African American identity. As I will show, both writers' bold adaptations raise complicated issues about cultural authenticity, the ethics of cross-cultural adaptation, and the relevance of Asian religions to American liberal activism.

In the developments I am tracing within enlightened individualism, one striking feature has been the relative lack of contributions from Asian Americans, the very people for whom Asian religions would be an inheritance rather than an import. Curiously, since the flowering of enlightened individualism in the 1950s, religiously themed prose narratives by Asian Americans have been rare. But that has recently changed, as I show in the fifth chapter, "Buddhist Nonself and Asian American Identity: Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace.*" Here I explore reasons why Asian American Buddhist fiction has emerged only recently. For one thing, there has been a steady increase of Asian American immigrants after liberalized policies in 1965, along with the maturation of a second generation of immigrants. Another significant consideration is Asian American studies' theoretical shift, c. 1990, toward questioning the concept of coherent Asian American identity that previously gave rise to the label *Asian American.* The last of these developments is especially important, I argue, as this theoretical move allows Asian American novelists to reflect on Asian American identity in terms of Buddhist teachings of nonself. My case studies are Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* (1997, 2003). Whereas the other writers in this study explore Asian philosophies largely without representing Asian people and practices, Cao and Kingston put readers up close to Buddhist materials: colorful shrines, shiny statues, food offerings, gritty pilgrimages, loud bells. Cao and Kingston use the novel form to bring Asian Buddhism into an American context and attest to previously undernarrated varieties of Buddhist experience. Furthermore, by engaging with Buddhist teachings

on the illusory nature of both individual and collective identity, Cao's and Kingston's texts open up a space for fluid identity that can be both Asian and American, valuing Asian Buddhist tradition while also integrating American individualism and future-oriented thinking. Cao and Kingston begin to fill a gap left by non-Asian novelists who neglect Asian American religious life. By concluding with Cao and Kingston, I show how enlightened individualism has taken a long journey back to a greater consideration of Asian cultures and histories. Cao's and Kingston's contributions raise intriguing possibilities for an enlightened individualism that balances multicultural identities, abstract philosophy, and religious materiality.

CHAPTER 1

Beat Buddhism and American Freedom

Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, and Tom Robbins

THE AFTERMATH of the Second World War led to an increasingly consolidated middle-class ideal that included religious elements. During this time America saw an upsurge in church membership, church attendance, and religious identification. In a landmark midcentury study of American religion, Will Herberg cites a survey in which 95 percent of Americans identified as Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, the three groupings that Herberg identifies as the contemporary American religious mainstream (46). Factors behind this religious revival included a wish to feel and appear patriotic, an impulse to affirm a religious bulwark against Godless communism, and a yearning for spiritual consolation against the uncertainties of the nuclear age (Ahlstrom 949–52).

This increasingly consolidated religious mainstream inspired a countertrend. As many scholars have recognized, religion and spirituality played an important role in the rift between the bourgeois mainstream and the bohemian Beat and, later, hippie countercultures (Roszak). For many of those disaffected by the religion of their upbringing, Asian religions were appealing because of their cultural distance from the perceived vices of the US (Campbell 128, 190; Masatsugu 425). Charles Taylor nicely captures the religious mainstream the Beats rebelled against by describing American civic religion of the 1950s as a “bland religion of American conformity” (506). The denominationalist consensus of the 1950s somehow managed to seem both wishy-

washy and oppressive at the same time. This description indicates two ways in which the Beats wanted to rebel from the status quo. One is that midcentury Christianity was a sign of bourgeois social conformity, as shown, for example, by the decision to add the phrase "under God" to the pledge of allegiance in 1954 (Lipka).

A second factor is that this religion seemed watered-down and did not actually deliver satisfactory transcendence. This kind of midcentury Christianity emphasized the "social function" of religion over the importance of specific beliefs (Hungerford 2). Taylor writes that when a society makes "an identification of Christian faith and civilization order . . . [we] lose sight of the full transformation that Christians are called to" (743). This sort of impression contributed to the Beat interest in Buddhism, a faith many Beats thought of as a fresh, radical way to experience transcendence and go against the stifling order of the time. In this context, literature played a crucial role in Asian religions' growing popularity, as shown in Buddhism's emergence in the 1950s. Influential documents included teachings by Japanese teachers such as D. T. Susuki and Nyogen Senzaki, reflections by Western students of Buddhism such as Alan Watts and Eugen Herrigel, and creative works by Beat writers and their literary descendants.

The Beats stand out for their inventive contributions to Buddhism's rapid emergence in the US. They defined themselves against the American religious mainstream of the 1950s, which promoted conformity to seemingly triumphant middle-class norms. In spite of its lack of doctrinal rigor or devotional intensity, this religious consensus still bore the history of belief in a paternalistic God separate from and superior to humanity, a hierarchical theology that irreverent and freedom-loving Beats tended to find unpalatable. In contrast, Beat writers such as Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Philip Whalen, and others praised Buddhism for its perceived nondualistic view of reality and criticism of established institutions (Prothero, "Holy Road" 208, 216; Seager 46–61). Buddhism's religion of origin, Hinduism, would also become a major point of interest for Allen Ginsberg, and it also plays a role in Snyder's religious explorations.

A central element of Buddhism's appeal for the Beats was its perceived exotic difference from the US. As Beat critic Jonathan Eburne points out, by defining themselves as exiles from the American mainstream, the Beats made otherness into a hip commodity. This countercultural credential depended on the marginal status of the various groups with whom the Beats claimed affinities (55). Accordingly, the Beats tended to valorize Buddhism, and, by extension, Asian Buddhists, as an exotic other. But they also presented Buddhism as uniquely suited to America, often by appealing to traditional notions

of American freedom. How, then, could the Beats both exoticize Buddhism as different from the US—even to the point of emphasizing a distance from the mainstream Christianity bound up with American prosperity—and also identify with Buddhism as a fulfillment of American values at the same time?

Previous accounts of Buddhism and the Beat Generation have not answered this question fully, for they engaged with only limited facets of relevant texts. Beat studies tend to split into unfavorable and favorable camps, each side focusing on a different aspect of Beat texts. The first camp views the Beats as appropriative distorters of Buddhism, a view pioneered by influential Zen popularizer Alan Watts. In 1958, Watts famously derided "Beat Zen" as too adversarial and agenda-driven to convey the equanimity of mere "Zen" (7–8). Watts contends that practitioners of Beat Zen are still unconsciously governed by the very Western culture they think Buddhism helps them to resist, and thus these practitioners are not successful at cross-cultural adaptation (6–7). Given this critique, it is ironic how much the Beats had depended on Watts's writings for their understanding of Zen and Buddhism more generally (Roszak 132, Coupe). One of Beat Buddhism's most important resources became its most influential critic.

While Zen is only one of many forms of Buddhism that drew the interest of Beat writers, scholars have often agreed with Watts that Beat writers were too invested in their own anticonformist agenda to engage with Buddhism on its own terms. For example, Carl Jackson ambivalently writes, "The way in which the Beats utilized and distorted Asian conceptions reveal[s] both the rewards and dangers of turning to non-European sources" (53). Similar, or harsher, criticisms have issued from Jonathan Eburne, Jerry Griswold, and Yuemin He, who agree that the Beats distorted Asian religions and exoticized Asia in the process. They argue, with significant justification, that Beat Buddhism is guilty of Orientalism. This criticism fits easily within the larger judgment that the Beats failed in their treatments of racial, sexual, and cultural difference, far more often celebrating stereotypes than questioning them (Martinez, Panish). However, members of this unfavorable camp often ignored the seriousness with which many Beat writers engaged with Buddhist philosophy.

Conversely, critics who judge Beat Buddhism more favorably admire how Beat writers incorporate Buddhism's abstract philosophical doctrines, but they do not give sustained attention to the question of cultural appropriation. They view the Beats as faithful transmitters of Buddhism. Deshae Lott, for instance, writes approvingly of how Kerouac, "like a Buddhist, uses concepts or language to transcend concepts" (179). For Lott, Buddhism is a static system against which to measure Kerouac, one which Kerouac strove but failed "to understand completely or *apply* fully" (182, my emphasis). Similar analyses

admiring Beat writers' philosophical complexity have occurred in the work of Stephen Prothero, Benedict Giamo, Nancy Grace, and Tony Trigilio. These scholars praise the Beats for applying authentic Buddhist ideas, but for the most part they do not wrestle with the often stereotyped cultural images at work in these texts.

Both of these views rest on problematic assumptions about authenticity that treat Buddhism as a fixed object. Furthermore, both camps talk past one another; that is, they focus on different aspects of the texts in question. In light of this situation, I want to promote a view of the Beats as neither merely inauthentic nor strictly authentic but as creative agents of cross-cultural adaptation. This perspective is influenced by scholars of religion such as Jeff Wilson who argue that while American adaptations of Buddhism involve novel engagements with Western individualism, they are also continuous with Buddhism's long history of cross-cultural adaptation as it spread throughout Asia (Wilson 4–6).

To bridge these views, I argue that Beat Buddhism marks the decisive emergence of enlightened individualism in American literature. Beat Buddhism makes a significant and innovative cross-cultural adaptation by attempting to harmonize Buddhist and American views of freedom, a process that relies on both abstract Buddhist philosophy and culturally specific images of Asia. At first these two types of freedom seem to be incompatible. The American freedom of "the pursuit of happiness" has largely come to mean the freedom *to obtain* what one desires (Foner 28, Taylor 484–85), whereas the Buddhist (and Hindu) freedom of *moksa* (Sanskrit, *liberation*) is a freedom *from* the constraining pull of desires themselves (McMahan 17). Beat Buddhism attempts to stretch the meaning of American freedom to include liberation from consumerism and celebration of the downtrodden, while also shifting Buddhist freedom to be more open to individual pleasure. Furthermore, this effort to harmonize Buddhist and American freedom has allowed Beat Buddhism to remain influential well beyond the Beat period, even to the point of somewhat transcending the countercultural associations of the Beat Generation. Beat Buddhism is a historically significant strain of cross-cultural adaptation that has influenced subsequent generations of American writers, readers, and spiritual seekers, offering novel ideas about how Buddhism can inhabit—and change—the US. The legacy of the Beats thus carries through all the chapters that follow.

As I showed in the introduction, many of the themes of Beat Buddhism were already percolating through previous movements and events, especially Transcendentalism and the 1893 World Parliament of Religions. The history of enlightened individualism certainly begins well before the Beats. Never-

theless, the Beats mark a turning point that I treat as the decisive emergence of enlightened individualism. Relative to the Transcendentalists to which they are most often compared, the Beats are significantly more reliant on an aesthetic of raucousness and disruption, openly supportive of profanity and sexual liberation, engaged with specific content from Buddhist and Hindu traditions, detailed and concrete in their vision of what Asian religious practices in America can look like, and capable of challenging stereotypes about Asia. Furthermore, the media environment in which these adaptations occur also allows the Beats to make Asian religions highly visible to American popular culture for the first time. Moreover, the distinctively countercultural character of enlightened individualism from the Beats onward paradoxically enriches its connection to Enlightenment liberalism because the counterculture's political dissent often ties itself to the rights-based defiance of the American Revolution, even as it refracts these ideals through Asian religions. It may be true, as literary scholar Lee Konstantinou points out, that "midcentury . . . countercultural heroes . . . were never so completely oppositional as they were commonly imagined to be" (275). But then again, as the Beats' creative adaptations suggest, neither must defining American values be as conformist as people often believe.

To explore the significance of Beat Buddhism, I will first consider how Allen Ginsberg attempted to transform the spiritual patriotism of Walt Whitman into a countercultural movement in which Asian religions fostered post-1945 American renewal. Ginsberg's creative vision sets the stage for my subsequent focus on three key figures who offer a revealing window into the long life of Beat Buddhism: Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, and Tom Robbins, the last of whom postdates the Beat period but influentially carries on Beat values, aesthetics, and motifs. I will briefly touch on how Ginsberg is relevant to each of these three writers, specifically in terms of Snyder's mantra-based activism, Kerouac's self-criticism, and Robbins's use of crazy wisdom. My examples are not comprehensive and should not lead to overgeneralizations about all Beat and Beat-influenced writers, but they point toward a fuller understanding of Beat adaptations of Buddhism in America. While there are too many contributors to Beat Buddhism to discuss at length here—Diane di Prima, Kenneth Rexroth, Lew Welch, Anne Waldman, and Philip Whalen are also important—the three writers I discuss here provide especially revealing syntheses between Buddhist and American notions of freedom. Within this shared Beat commitment to shaping American Buddhism, there is diversity. Ginsberg's synthesis of Whitmanian vitality and Buddhist emptiness becomes an ambiguous, evolving prophecy. Snyder optimistically envisions a harmonious merging of Eastern and Western cultures. Kerouac, by contrast, hopes for such a synthesis

but struggles with unresolved conflicts. Robbins ambivalently hovers between Snyder's synthesis and Kerouac's conflict, combining cross-cultural openness with ethnically sensitive caution.

GINSBERG'S BUDDHIST REVOLUTION

Snyder, Kerouac, and Robbins are all significantly connected to Allen Ginsberg. His poetic influence, enduring celebrity, and famous tutelage under the eccentric Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche qualify him as the Beat Buddhist *par excellence.* As Ginsberg specialist Tony Trigilio has extensively discussed, Ginsberg's progressively more serious Buddhist practice was a complex, always evolving struggle to integrate Romantic individualism and Buddhist nonself (61, 88, 99, 104–5, 112, 154–55, 178–79, 184–85, 193). While there is no need to recapitulate Trigilio's excellent work on Ginsberg's Buddhist poetics, what is worth adding to Trigilio's perspective is that Ginsberg's body of work reveals a meaningful investment in distinctively American ideals of democratic individualism.

Ginsberg's commitment to American democracy is not always obvious. He mostly invokes American ideals to ironically call out hypocrisy, as when he sarcastically describes the American "Freedom to assemble & get gassed or shot" ("Industrial Waves" 1981, 847; all Ginsberg poems are from *Collected Poems*). But Ginsberg's investments in American notions of freedom and individualism can be best understood by reading him through his hero, Walt Whitman. Whitman's 1871 essay *Democratic Vistas* was of particular importance to Ginsberg, as direct references in Ginsberg's poetry show ("Wichita" 1966, 408; "Salutations" 1988, 976). In this text Whitman issues a call for American writers to create a "prophetic literature of these States," declaring that "a new Literature, perhaps a new Metaphysics, certainly a new Poetry, are to be, in my opinion, the only sure and worthy supports and expressions of the American Democracy" (70). This literary expression of American democracy must be both individualist and religious. One of the nation's core principles, Whitman says, is "individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself," which he deems "of utmost importance" to American democracy (38). Whitman further asserts that "at the core of democracy, finally, is the religious element. All the religions, old and new, are there" (27).

Whitman prophetically urges that "In the future of these States must arise poets immenser far" than those who have come before (76), and Ginsberg's poetry positions himself as one of those "immenser" poets who answers Whitman's call. Even though Ginsberg does not fully share Whitman's optimism

about the trajectory of American society, Whitman's influence indicates that when Ginsberg is being prophetic, individualistic, and religious, he is attempting to carry on Whitman's project of promoting American democratic individualism. The fulfillment of this ideal would mean a US that lives up to its liberal promise. Whitman, citing John Stuart Mill, defines the purpose of the US as using its individualist-religious culture of government by the people to allow "full play of human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions" (1). For Whitman, true progress is both the "Daughter of a physical revolution—[and the] mother of the true revolutions, which are of the interior life, and of the arts" (62). Accordingly, in Ginsberg's 1957 poem "Death to Van Gogh's Ear!" which decries American hubris, Ginsberg says, "The day of the publication of the true literature of the American body will / be day of Revolution." Ginsberg echoes Whitman's connections between the revolutionary spirit and American art and literature, thus showing his wish to carry out Whitman's patriotic agenda in spite of Ginsberg's stinging political critiques.

Ginsberg's investments in American individualism relate complexly to his interest in Asian religions; his early exoticism changes as his career goes on. Ginsberg's early Buddhist poetry exoticizes Asia, as with "Angkor Wat," written at the famous Cambodian Buddhist temple complex. Here Ginsberg's poetic speaker explicitly takes refuge in the Buddha for the first time in Ginsberg's poems (314, 317). But this refuge is still mysterious; the speaker compares the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara to the inscrutable Sphinx, describing the images in the compound as "Sphinx-Avalokitesvara, all mixed up" (324). Ginsberg's sense of exotic distance decreases as time goes on, especially after 1972, the year Ginsberg took Buddhist vows from Chögyam Trungpa. Ginsberg dedicates his 1978 poem "Plutonian Ode" "to you O Poets and Orators to come, you father Whitman as I join your side, you Congress and American people" (713). If Whitman says that American democracy needs a "religious element," for Ginsberg the religion it most needs is Buddhism. In the close of "Plutonian Ode," Ginsberg exhorts these future poets, politicians, and citizens, to "Take this wheel of syllables in hand [. . .] thus empower this Mind-guard spirit gone out, gone out, gone beyond, gone beyond me, Wake space, so Ah!"

This concluding line synthesizes the institutions and citizenry of American democracy—"Congress and American people"—with Buddhist emptiness that has "gone beyond" conventional ideas of subject and object. What Ginsberg presents in this last line is a translation of a famous mantra from the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra, one of Ginsberg's favorite scriptures and one of the most famous of all Buddhist texts. Ginsberg also makes a drawing of this mantra in *Cosmopolitan Greetings Poems* with the Sanskrit transliteration

and Ginsberg's own earlier translation: "*Gate gate paratage parasamgate bodhi svaha*" [All gone, all gone, all overgone, all gone sky high now old mind so ah!] (975). This mantra is used to understand and meditate on the words in this sutra, whose most pivotal passage is usually translated as "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (Lopez). That is, the mind that understands emptiness still sees the appearance of forms, but that mind is "gone" from the suffering of ordinary existence. "Plutonian Ode" sees this Buddhist sutra as holding the key to transforming America. Here Ginsberg brings the American frontier, which offers the "full play of human nature," to a Buddhist fulfillment in a field of infinite possibilities. This vision of transcendence is empty of any fixed essence—and thus free from the dualistic thinking that leads to violence. Ginsberg's Buddhist transformation of Whitman's ideas exemplifies how Beat Buddhism takes Transcendentalist influences in a new direction, one that is both more invested in the specifics of Asian religions and more pointedly countercultural than Transcendentalist engagements with Asian religions. As I will show, Ginsberg's imprint on enlightened individualism remains relevant to the three writers I discuss in this chapter.

The popularity of these writers across many decades, as well as their collective breadth of genres including poetry, fiction, and essays, indicates a resonance with larger cultural trends. The issues Ginsberg, Snyder, Kerouac, and Robbins wrestle with—Asian religions' relevance to a politics of dissent, the ethics of borrowing across cultures, and the compatibility of Buddhist and American freedom—have shaped American engagements with Asian religions and given Beat Buddhism cultural relevance well beyond the Beat period. Beat Buddhism thus makes a significant contribution to American receptivity to Asian religions that is not reducible to appropriation. It has influenced American institutions (e.g., Naropa University's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics; Spirit Rock Meditation Center; and San Francisco Zen Center), American lexica (many American Buddhists now call themselves *Dharma Bums,* after Kerouac's coinage), and the writers I examine in the chapters that follow.

SNYDER'S SYNTHESIS

Gary Snyder is noteworthy for his pioneering Beat approach to Buddhism that changes along with the advancing century. Snyder (b. 1930) became involved with Buddhism in his early twenties, attending services at a Japanese Buddhist center in San Francisco in the early 1950s (Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers* 154). His interest in Asian religions and cultures deepened, and he spent most of

1956 to 1968 in Japan, receiving traditional Zen training in Kyoto (Murphy 7–9). Snyder's time in Asia also included travels through India with Ginsberg from 1961 to 1963, during which they both became more invested in Asian religions and in helping the disadvantaged (Sweet 247–62). Since his return to the US, Snyder's Buddhist faith has continued to animate his poetry and prose. His work consistently bears Zen emphases of concentration on the present moment, spontaneous realization, and reverence for nature. No American writer of his generation has matched Snyder's combination of dedicated Buddhist practice, international experience, and prolific creative output. In fact, Snyder is one of the few Beat Buddhists that Alan Watts, one of Snyder's early teachers of Buddhism, consistently approved of (Coupe 30, 44–45).

Previous critics have examined the role of Buddhist philosophy in Snyder's writing (Gray, Huang, Johnston, Kern), but they focus on how Snyder uses Buddhist ideals to critique US violence and pollution. This critical pattern has prevented literary scholars from seeing in Snyder's work important affinities between Buddhist and American concerns. The only exception, as far as I know, comes from American Studies scholar James Brown, who writes that "the very freedom in Zen that Suzuki had promised . . . was connected, in Snyder's thought, to American republican traditions of individualism and self-reliance" (224). I take Brown's idea a step further: Snyder's writing does not stop at seeing connections; it actually combines features of Buddhist and American freedom. Snyder's career is an evolving effort to harmonize Beat wildness with Buddhist calm. He defends Beat Buddhism by praising its subversion and, later in his career, by redefining its rebelliousness as responsibility. Every level of Snyder's writing reflects this complexity. In his work, East meets West by weaving American content into Buddhist forms, and vice versa.

Snyder's early work was strongly influenced by the ninth-century Chinese poet Han Shan, known in Chinese lore, along with his friend Shih-te, as "poor but happy recluses, bordering on the crazy, who constantly do and say nonsensical things" (Henricks 7). Snyder's first published work, *Cold Mountain Poems,* is a translation of twenty-four of some three hundred of Han Shan's poems. Snyder's translations of Han Shan have a more complex relationship to the Beat Generation than scholars have recognized. It is certainly true that Snyder represents Han Shan as a "countercultural role model" for the Beat Generation (J. Tan 228), and that this portrayal involves "appropriating [Han Shan's] Chinese texts for purposes other than those of the texts themselves" (Kern 234). And by portraying Han Shan as a "mountain madman in an old Chinese line of ragged hermits" (Snyder, *Riprap* 35), Snyder invokes the stereotype of the Oriental Monk who is inscrutable, otherworldly, and Asian (Iwamura 6).

But Snyder does not simply force Han Shan into a Beat mold. While he emphasizes parallels between Han Shan's social commentary and Beat critiques of American consumerism, Snyder's Han Shan models a different mode of living than a prototypical Beat adventure. In poem sixteen, Snyder translates: "I've got no use for the kulak / With his big barn and pasture / He just sets up a prison for himself." This ridicule of the superficial status of land ownership strongly evokes Beat criticisms of stultifying American middle-class conformism. But Snyder's Han Shan does not exemplify a positive American freedom *to* go on adventures, a freedom the Beats thought of themselves as reclaiming. Instead, he embodies a more negative Buddhist freedom *from* the hassles of worldly life. In poem seventeen, the speaker muses, "Go ahead and let the world change— / I'm happy to sit among these cliffs" (55). Likewise, in poem five, the speaker wants to "settle" and find a place that is "safe" (43). Snyder's Han Shan speaks not of Beat restlessness but of the contentment valorized in Buddhism. Snyder challenges the Beat Generation by presenting Han Shan as a role model for Beat irreverence, a role model who is nevertheless not straightforwardly assimilable into Beat culture.

Snyder's efforts to synthesize Buddhist and American freedom develop more fully in his original poems. In *Riprap,* Snyder's earliest publication of original poems, Snyder relies on Buddhist concepts of emptiness and impermanence that owe much to Han Shan. But Snyder innovatively presents Beat adventurism as a liberating expression of this underlying Buddhist vision. Buddhist emptiness comes across strongly in "Piute Creek," where the speaker, upon seeing "Sky over endless mountains," rhapsodizes that "All the junk that goes with being human / Drops away" (8). In this expansive vision, "A clear, attentive mind / Has no meaning but that / Which sees is truly seen" (8). Snyder's title suggests that the same Buddhist sense of meditative expansiveness that Han Shan experiences in China is available in America.

But Snyder also gives voice to a more rambunctious spirit in *Riprap* than in *Cold Mountain Poems.* For example, in "All Through the Rains," the speaker tries to grab onto a moving horse to go bareback riding, a stunt the unassuming Han Shan would probably not have attempted. Also, the poem "Toji," written at Shingon temple at Kyoto, conveys a distinctively Beat combination of reverence and irreverence. A statue of Avalokitesvara, the Buddha of compassion, has "An ancient hip smile / Tingling of India and Tibet." It is a fine piece of venerable craftsmanship, "haloed in snake-hood gold," but it is also "cool" and "hip." Thus the speaker solicits the reader's Orientalist curiosity about Avalokitesvara's "ancient hip smile"; the hope is that one will pursue the inner peace from which the expression presumably arises. Furthermore, Avalokitesvara is "Bisexual and tried it all." This line refers to the fact that the Indian and

Tibetan version of this Buddha is male, while the Chinese and Japanese version is female (Yü). But Snyder's gloss of Avalokitesvara as "Bisexual and tried it all" carries a sense of sexual experimentation and free love absent from traditional Buddhist contexts. "Toji" exemplifies how *Riprap* creatively combines Buddhist calm with Beat wildness. Snyder's Buddhist American freedom is its own kind of Zen riddle, a paradox of individualism and nonself.

Just as Snyder helped shape the politically alienated Beat Buddhism of the 1950s, he also tied Buddhism to the more activist hippie counterculture of the 1960s. This project is exemplified in Snyder's short prose piece "Smokey the Bear Sutra" (1969), which rewrites a Buddhist scriptural genre for a hippie audience. While in his 1986 commentary on the essay, Snyder is right that it "follows the structure of a Mahayana sutra fairly faithfully" (244), its innovative appeals to American values and institutions are significant. The essay replaces traditional Asian Buddhist tropes with American counterparts and mixes Buddhist formality with countercultural irreverence.

The text's central conceit is that Smokey the Bear is a Buddha. This conflation sets up Buddhist critiques of environmental destruction. The Great Sun Buddha, speaking "in the Jurassic, about 150 million years ago," prophesied that "the human race in [Snyder's] era will get into troubles all over its head and practically wreck everything in spite of its own strong intelligent Buddha-nature" (242). In Mahayana Buddhism, every being has Buddha-nature, the inherent potential to become enlightened (H. Smith 2, 388). This potential is heavily obscured by ignorance, especially, according to Snyder, the ignorance of those who pollute. One must carelessly objectify nature in order to abuse it. Later, the narrator calls forest fires a symptom of "the stupidity of those who think things can be gained and lost whereas in truth all is contained vast and free in the Blue Sky and Green Earth of One Mind" (242). This admonition seems to misattribute accidental fires started by careless campers to corporate greed. But the larger point stands that environmental degradation is caused by those who objectify nature. The Buddhist implication here is that a more insightful attitude would emerge from the doctrine of nonduality (Suzuki, *Essays* xxix), such that one's self and nature are inseparable.

Snyder makes these points speak to contemporary America by inserting American place names into Buddhist figures of speech. The Buddha prophecies that a future "continent called America . . . will have great centers of power such as Pyramid Lake, Walden Pond, Mount Rainier, Big Sur, Everglades, and so forth; and powerful nerves and channels such as Columbia River, Mississippi River, and Grand Canyon" (242). In this vision America has sacred spaces just as India has the Ganges River. The narrator later says, "Those who recite this Sutra and then try to put it into practice will accu-

mulate merit as countless as the sands of Arizona and Nevada" (243). Snyder tweaks a common Buddhist hyperbole which describes immense quantities "as there are grains of sand in the river Ganges" or "as high as Mount Sumeru" (Goddard 95, 91). By rewriting Buddhist expressions with American instead of Asian place names, "Smokey the Bear Sutra" appeals to an exotic, mystic East while also suggesting that sacred places are not confined to Asia; they are in America as well, right in its readers' backyards.

Snyder's substitutions give "Smokey the Bear Sutra" a tone different from that of canonical Buddhist texts. Whereas Buddhist sutras are rigorously formal, "Smokey the Bear Sutra" is irreverently playful. By deifying Smokey the Bear, the sutra plays on the comical tension between the Buddha's mystical dignity and Smokey the Bear's status as a mass-media cartoon mascot. Accordingly, Smokey is "austere but comic." He holds a "vajra shovel" and raises "his left paw in the Mudra of Comradely Display" (Snyder 242). *Vajra* is a Sanskrit word for *diamond,* conveying clarity and strength; a *mudra* is a ritual gesture (Seager 29–30). The text thus describes Smokey's signature pose in Buddhist terms, a move that simultaneously makes light of Buddhist decorum and valorizes Smokey's appearance.

This essay is thus an act of synthesis that combines Buddhist and hippie concerns. But it also offers another, even less expected, meeting point. "Smokey the Bear Sutra" actually merges a broad critique of industrial civilization with an indebtedness to the institutions of the US. The text criticizes modern pollution as the result of "a civilization that claims to save but only destroys." And yet the essay's central figure is a production of the US Forest Service, which is funded by the federal government. Therefore, American "civilization" does not only destroy nature; it protects it too. Snyder resists this point in his 1986 commentary to the essay by saying that the Forest Service was unaware "that it was serving as a vehicle for this magical reemergence" (244). He works hard to avoid acknowledging the US government as the source of something good. Even so, Smokey wears "the broad-brimmed hat of the West, symbolic of the forces that guard the Wilderness." Again, the West does not simply destroy the wilderness; it can protect it as well.

Although Snyder's implicit affirmation of the West may seem surprising, it makes Buddhist sense that Snyder would find merit, if only unconsciously, even in US institutions. If Snyder is serious about Buddhist nonduality, then he cannot treat the US as a monolithic evil. Buddha-nature can be obscured, but never lost. Therefore even a degraded civilization must still be capable of manifesting wisdom. For Snyder, Smokey the Bear is a rare touchstone of holism in a culture increasingly alienated from nature. Snyder's imagery does not simply denigrate the West, of which the modern US is a major part. It also

makes room for productive engagements between Asian and North American traditions.

This synthesis also occurs through elements of mantra that blend American activism with Buddhist incantation. Snyder writes that "if anyone is threatened by advertising, air pollution, television, or the police, they should chant SMOKEY THE BEAR'S WAR SPELL: DROWN THEIR BUTTS / CRUSH THEIR BUTTS / DROWN THEIR BUTTS / CRUSH THEIR BUTTS, / And Smokey the Bear will surely appear to put the enemy out with his vajra-shovel" (243). This is a playful version of Buddhist mantras and rituals that invoke wrathful powers to destroy one's enemies both symbolically and, sometimes, literally (Samuel 7–9; see also Oppert 10). Snyder thus combines Buddhist mantras with the repetitive chanting of protest slogans. Snyder's combination of mantras and American activism has a significant parallel in Ginsberg's use of Americanized mantras. When Ginsberg famously writes in "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (1966), "I lift my voice aloud, / make Mantra of American language now, / I declare the end of the War!" (415), he is using "American language" like a Buddhist or Hindu "mantra" whose utterance brings about the state it declares through the vibrations of the sound itself (Hungerford 38–41).

Ginsberg and Snyder put these ideas into practice at the 1967 Human Be-In in San Francisco. This was an antiwar protest, but it had a festive air of pageantry and even goodwill (Roszak 65–66, Trigilio 2–3), an ethos further suggested by the name *Be-In,* an irreverent riff on *sit-in.* Although it is not apparent who coined the name *Be-In,* it clearly captured the attitude of the event's participants and its countercultural ringleaders. In this event Ginsberg and Snyder adapted Buddhist and Hindu techniques to lend American protest a kind rather than a predominantly angry energy. Ginsberg and Snyder sought to "make mantra of American language now" in ways that combined Western-style activism with Asian mantras about transcendence. This technique was also on display in the 1967 attempt to levitate the Pentagon (Hungerford 32, Roszak 124–25). While Ginsberg was not directly involved with that spectacle, his poem "Pentagon Exorcism," written less than a month before the protest, supports its methods of chanting Sanskrit mantras in order to make the "Pentagon wake from planet-sleep!" (491). Such an inclusion of transcendence and positivity in protest activism envisions, and attempts to enact, a reality in which the rifts that spur the activism are overcome, just as Buddhist and Hindu practice seeks to transcend subject-object duality in general.

This emerging synthesis between Buddhist-inspired activism and American ideals became even more nuanced later in Snyder's career. Earlier texts such as "Smokey the Bear Sutra" transmit the raucous energy of countercultural movements. These texts capture the mood of Beat Buddhism, which

defined itself against an American mainstream it sought to subvert. From the mid-1970s onward, however, the tenor of Snyder's writing shifts from revolution to reconciliation while retaining its basic commitments to spirituality and environmentalism. Snyder's evolution, and the ambiguous place of Beat Buddhism in American culture more broadly, gain particular illumination in his 1990 essay "The Etiquette of Freedom." While *Riprap / Cold Mountain Poems* (frequently published as a single volume, as indicated) is consciously derivative of Han Shan, and "Smokey the Bear Sutra" inhabits a Buddhist literary genre, Snyder's later essays are less dependent on Buddhist role models, having more in common with the essays of Thoreau.

"The Etiquette of Freedom" has broad significance for the life and afterlife of the countercultures with which Snyder was involved. Here Snyder proposes an alternative understanding of the word *wild* that replaces negative connotations of chaos with positive resonances of naturalness. Snyder is aware of how the term *wild* is not merely an epithet against general unruliness; it is a historically specific criticism of the Beat and hippie countercultures. Popular culture of the time saw Beats and beatniks as "delinquent" and "ridiculous," views somewhat encouraged by Beat writers but also caricatured by journalists covering them (Petrus 5, 9; see also Lawlor 233). The hippies also bore a "stigmatized identity" often associated with filth and delinquency (Hoffman and Steffensmeier). In "The Etiquette of Freedom," Snyder implicitly writes against these unfavorable perceptions, even though time has reduced their intensity.

Snyder poses his central question: "Where do we start to resolve the dichotomy of the civilized and the wild?" (15). He works toward an answer by defining "the wild" as a type of order, a counterintuitive move that nevertheless makes sense within Snyder's body of work. In his straw-man definition, a wild society is "uncivilized, rude, resisting constituted government." But in his favored definition, a wild society is one "whose order has grown from within and is maintained by the force of consensus and custom rather than explicit legislation" (10). Here, *wild* and *order* are complementary. In sum, Snyder asserts that "to speak of wildness is to speak of wholeness" (12). The wild is not brute savagery but a healthy balance, a self-regulating system. Snyder attributes these positive definitions to Buddhism and Daoism, emphasizing that his understanding of the wild "is not far from the Buddhist term *Dharma* with its original senses of forming and firming" (11, emphasis in original).

By recuperating the word *wild,* Snyder echoes Thoreau's essay "Walking," in which Thoreau declares, "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil." Thoreau's paean to the spiritually vital "art of Walking," not for transportation but for its own sake, seems almost to anticipate the "rucksack revolution" of

Beat Buddhist pilgrims. But Snyder develops a much more intricate synthesis of American and Asian ideals than Thoreau did, one based on both Buddhist philosophy and a countercultural motivation to create new kinds of communities, a synthesis that is in contrast to Thoreau's inward and solitary purview.

Snyder argues that *impermanence*—a word Westerners usually associate with fear and instability—is actually crucial to liberation, writing that "in a fixed universe there would be no freedom. With that freedom we improve the campsite, teach children, oust tyrants. The world is nature, and in the long run inevitably wild, because the wild, as the essence and process of nature, is also an ordering of impermanence" (5). This positive treatment of impermanence echoes the preeminent Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, who made a similar claim using the related concept of emptiness. In the second century, Nagarjuna influentially declared, "All is possible when emptiness is possible" (Siderits and Katsura 276). In an exemplification of enlightened individualism, Snyder's synthesis uses Buddhist thought to encourage American social activism, relying on both the concept of impermanence and the classically American imperative toward "freedom."

Snyder's discussion implicitly reflects on his entire career. In his early writing, Snyder is "wild" with an exuberance that Alan Watts criticizes as "Beat Zen." Snyder's later definition of the wild does not contradict his early Beat enthusiasm but recontextualizes it. The energy and irreverence in "Smokey the Bear Sutra" have faded and are tempered with calm. In his 1960 address "Notes on the Beat Generation," Snyder speaks approvingly of Beat "revolution" (11). In 1990, Snyder writes instead of "The Etiquette of Freedom." Snyder's terms of choice change from subversion to politeness. A young Snyder fondly called Han Shan "a mountain madman" (*Riprap* 33). But the Snyder of the 1990s and beyond would surely not use *madman* as a term of praise. Snyder's ongoing adaptations of American Buddhism speak to the mood of his times, while always retaining the spiritual imperative to defy oppressive forces and honor the natural world. Snyder's later work marks an important development in Beat Buddhism that continues its process of cross-cultural adaptation. Ironically, Snyder's capacious "Etiquette of Freedom" creates a conceptual framework for audiences to understand Beat Buddhism as increasingly compatible with nonrebellious American middle-class life.

KEROUAC'S CONFLICT

Gary Snyder was central to the Buddhist explorations of the Beat Generation's most programmatic spokesperson: Jack Kerouac. Kerouac met Snyder in San

Francisco in 1955, and the two quickly became close friends (Tan 231). Snyder's presence in Kerouac's writing quickly grows from two brief mentions in *Some of the Dharma* to, in the fictionalized persona of Japhy Ryder, the central figure of *The Dharma Bums* (Kerouac, *Some* 346, 408). Kerouac, like Snyder, offers Buddhist critiques of American consumerism and an injection of American restlessness into Buddhism. But whereas Snyder's long career evolves toward a greater synthesis of Buddhist and American values, Kerouac's writing reveals a hope for synthesis that it cannot fully realize. Kerouac's Buddhist period, which peaked from 1954 to 1957 (Giamo 180), is characterized by intensity, hope, pain, and conflict. Kerouac's Buddhism came exclusively from reading texts and conversing with Beat colleagues; he met D. T. Suzuki once but never studied under an in-person Buddhist teacher (Lott 172–73). Buddhism did not become a stable spiritual home for Kerouac, and after 1960, he gave it up, reverting in the following years to a preoccupation with Christian imagery derived from his Catholic background (Aronowitz 83; Maher 384). But during his fleeting engagement with Buddhism, Kerouac produced important reflections on how Buddhism was emerging in the US.

Kerouac's Buddhist period yielded several works of poetry and prose; my discussion will focus on the latter. Kerouac's Buddhist poetry, comprised of *Mexico City Blues* and *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (1959, 1960), tends to be highly abstract, dreaming, for instance, of "the knowledge that sees the golden eternity in all things" (Kerouac, *Scripture*). Kerouac's Buddhist prose more fully envisions what an American Buddhism might look like; therefore, I will examine *Some of the Dharma* (1956, but published posthumously in 1997) and *The Dharma Bums* (1958). Furthermore, by reading *Some of the Dharma* in tandem with *The Dharma Bums,* we can newly appreciate the latter as a dramatized outgrowth of the tensions presented in the former.

In the leading reading of *Some of the Dharma,* Nancy Grace convincingly argues that Kerouac's "Buddhism was more than Beat whim" by showing, among other things, how Kerouac "combines Buddhist and Christian concepts" and develops a "distinctly American" Buddhism that emphasizes individualism (134, 156, 158). But this adaptation does not only occur on the level of concepts; it also happens on the level of images. These images involve Orientalist resonances that Grace does not address, and the critics who do address such Orientalism view it as mutually exclusive with a serious commitment to Buddhism. My reading of *Some of the Dharma* explores how Kerouac appeals to abstract but salutary philosophy and concrete but stereotyped images at the same time.

Some of the Dharma develops Kerouac's conflicted commitment to spreading Buddhism in the US. Even though the text reads much like a freewheel-

ing private journal, it is an essentially missionary work Kerouac intended to publish, although it was not published until nearly thirty years after his death. Kerouac was convinced that Buddhist nonattachment and nonself are crucial antidotes to American consumerism and technocracy. He laments, "In America only the silent Buddhahood may be possible. . . . The clinging here is so intense and widespread (democracy) the populace is literally unteachable and sees not life as sorrow" (61). Thus the very reason that America needs Buddhism is also the reason Buddhism is difficult to establish.

Therefore, Kerouac's efforts at cross-cultural adaptation remain fundamentally conflicted throughout the text. Kerouac cannot decide how compatible American and Western culture are with Buddhism, and he reads Buddhism both into and against Western traditions. Kerouac regards "even great thinkers" in the West as "ignorant compared" to Asian sages who "understand everything" (288). He wants to write "AN AMERICAN DHARMA" that contrasts from the Western literature of "Proust, Emily Dickinson, Joyce, etc." (255). Accordingly, Kerouac dismisses Shakespeare's poetic brilliance as "just a shining technique in the darkness, and goes out" (103). But later Kerouac cites Shakespeare's phrase "waste of shame" as a gloss on Buddhist understandings of the dangers of sexuality (239), and he likens Buddhist concepts of emptiness to "the first pages of Dostoevsky's 'Eternal Husband'" (117). While these links are provocative, Kerouac does not present a fully formed idea of what enlightened individualism could look like, a problem deepened by Kerouac's nostalgia for a mystic Orient of the past.

This longing expresses itself as a fantasy of geographical transposition. Kerouac, eager to feel "connected with Asia" (278), imagines North America *as* Asia, declaring that "West is East" (319). For instance, Kerouac asserts that "My India / Is right in this house" (78); "Mexico is like old India" (124); and, writing in San Francisco, "It's Saturday morning in China" (241). Encompassing people as well as places, Kerouac imagines "In America, real wandering Taoist bums going around the country" (115), here using "Taoist" as closely aligned with "Buddhist" in an anticipation of his coinage of the influential term *Dharma Bums.* Rather than considering how Buddhism could change America, and vice versa, these transpositions convey the escapist wish that Buddhist Asia replace America.

To try to bridge this gap, Kerouac envisions distinctive forms Buddhism can take in America, creatively reapplying Eastern terms to Western situations. He encourages hermetic living in vehicles: "Get an old panel truck for $95 and be your own Monastery in it" (117). With this image, Kerouac innovatively combines tropes of monasticism and the Asian hermetic sage with Beat motifs of motorized road trips. Kerouac also applies the language of West-

ern political activism to the Buddhist path to overcome spiritual blindness by calling upon the reader to "BOYCOTT IGNORANCE" (166). He further recommends explaining Buddhism to Americans by retranslating the Buddhist term *Mind Essence,* Dwight Goddard's influential translation of the Sanskrit term *tathata* (roughly *suchness,* or the unelaborated nature of reality) (Goddard 518–19, Giles 194), as the "Mind of God" (198). This proposed translation prioritizes the use of theistic terminology recognizable to Westerners over philosophical accuracy. These efforts at cross-cultural adaptation coexist with lamentations that Americans are unteachable and Western civilization is too spiritually impoverished to understand Buddhism, demonstrating Kerouac's conflicted combination of hope for and frustration with American Buddhism.

In the midst of this tension, Kerouac struggles with whether to abandon literature as a self-aggrandizing, worldly fetter or to embrace it as a skillful means of teaching others. As other readers have observed, Kerouac wants to spread Buddhism through his writing, but he also develops hubris from imagining this missionary role (Grace 150–51, Smithers). Kerouac is ambivalently aware that he is "using Buddhist images for [my] own advantage, instead of for spreading the Law" (169). Although he aspires to be "THE WRITING BUDDHA" (312), Kerouac "realized I should perhaps not write a Buddhist novel for fear it will re-attach me to self-attainment" (188). This ambivalence makes it difficult for Kerouac to decide whether to continue writing at all (159, 310) and, if so, what Buddhist literary projects he should take up. Kerouac sees his attempt to spread enlightened individualism as continually threatened by his own impulses of unenlightened, self-important individualism.

Kerouac's self-awareness about his ulterior motives makes for an interesting comparison to Ginsberg. One of Kerouac's great contributions to Beat Buddhism was to introduce Ginsberg to Buddhism (Trigilio xii, 36–37); this influence became, in a sense, Kerouac's Buddhist legacy well after Kerouac's own involvement with Buddhism ended. Much later, Ginsberg named the Naropa University poetry program the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, a dark riff on Kerouac's death. But it might have discouraged Kerouac's ghost to know that Ginsberg, even after decades of Buddhist practice, still felt acute conflict over ego and fame much as Kerouac did. In a poignant example, Ginsberg's 1992 poem "After Lalon" conveys regret at his own spiritual inadequacy:

> How'd I get into this fix,
> this workaholic show-
>   biz meditation market?
> If I had a soul I sold it

for pretty words
If I had a body I used
it up spurting my essence
[. . .]
If I had speech it was
all about boast (1020)

Ginsberg was more involved with Buddhism than Kerouac was, but Ginsberg's longer life and extended fame made the temptations of egotism correspondingly greater as well. Later, in 1996, struggling with illness and feeling death upon him, Ginsberg scolds himself in "Bowel Song": "Your master gives good advice, you listen, follow it couple weeks / then lapse into old habits" (1097).

And yet Ginsberg's Buddhist self-analysis allows him to engage in more kinds of self-criticism than Kerouac, not only in terms of writerly ego but also in terms of sexual desire. Ginsberg exposed himself to Buddhist and Hindu teachings on renunciation that problematize sex in general, regardless of orientation (Trigilio 46, 55). This understanding is different from the stigmatization of homosexuality prominent in the 1950s US religious mainstream. So Ginsberg feels conflicted about his attachment to sex, saying in late illness that when he dies, "What good, half dozen gay porno films them?" (1097). The openly gay Ginsberg questions his attachment to sex far more than Kerouac ever does, but not because Ginsberg internalized antigay beliefs; on the contrary, Asian religions help Ginsberg accept his own homosexuality (Trigilio 46). But Ginsberg gradually takes Buddhist and Hindu critiques of sexual desire more seriously than Kerouac does.

Whereas Ginsberg brought Buddhism into his activism and formal religious affiliation, Kerouac's engagement with Buddhism remained primarily literary. Kerouac imagines "BUDDHIST MOVIES" and "BUDDHIST STORIES" as effective teaching tools for Westerners (Kerouac 199) and also considers writing a "Historical Novel of Buddhist India" (04). Kerouac's sense of conflict is productive, spurring him to continuously develop new ideas. But rather than write Buddhist movies, short stories, or a novel of ancient India, Kerouac decided to write *The Dharma Bums,* which is closely based on his own life during 1955 and 1956 (Miles 95). Here the reader encounters many of the leading lights of Beat Buddhism in fictional form. In addition to Kerouac as Ray Smith and Snyder as Japhy Ryder, readers will also recognize Allen Ginsberg in Alvah Goldbrook, among other playfully transparent references. *The Dharma Bums* attempts to harmonize Kerouac's conflicted Buddhist literary aspirations by dramatizing Buddhist content in a prose narrative set in America. It is Kerouac's most detailed vision of what American Buddhism

could look like, and his most famous and influential contribution to American Buddhism—and, for my purposes, to enlightened individualism. It is true, as critics have held, that Ray and Japhy distort Buddhist teaching and indulge in Asian stereotypes. But Ray's failings are not simply Kerouac's; they are conscious exhibitions of the problems of Orientalism that impede Ray's spiritual progress. *The Dharma Bums* thus contains a sincere hope for cross-cultural synthesis that it cannot fully envision.

The Dharma Bums is the first novel set in America with a Buddhist protagonist. Ray seeks to adopt the altruistic motivation of a Mahayana Bodhisattva, one who delays entry into nirvana in order to teach other beings the path of liberation from cyclic existence (H. Smith 124). The novel further exemplifies Beat Buddhism as a whole by linking Asian religion to countercultural critiques of capitalist consumerism. This move is evident in the novel's title, which connects Westerners who adopt bohemian lifestyles—"Bums"—to Buddhism—"Dharma." For Japhy, the mythic realm of ancient East Asian Buddhism contrasts with a degenerate modern America. Accordingly, Japhy describes the novel's Beat Buddhists as "Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming" (Kerouac, *Bums* 73). The logic here seems to be that if one is against American capitalism, then one should be for something as far away from America in both time and space as possible. Thus, in order for Buddhism to remain relevant to Ray's counterculture, "Eastern" religions must remain exotic relative to mainstream culture. Later writers attempt to resolve, and Kerouac seriously wrestles with, this tension in Beat Buddhism.

Ray and Japhy begin to deal with this tension by cultivating a version of Beat Buddhism that valorizes ancient role models for contemporary rebellion. They discuss Japhy's in-progress translations of Han Shan, whom Japhy describes as "a poet, a mountain man, a Buddhist . . . who could take off by himself" (22). Even though Ray (and Kerouac) turn away from Zen in favor of a more eclectic Mahayana Buddhism (Giles 180, 203n6), Ray speaks affectionately of the "Zen Lunatics of China and Japan" and listens to Japhy Ryder tell "anecdotes about the Zen Lunatics of the Orient" (6, 11). This description exoticizes Buddhism because the content of the lunacy is not clear at first, apart from Ray's repeated emphasis that the "Zen Lunatics" are Oriental.

This Orientalist Zen lunacy turns out to be, for Ray and Japhy, a way of rediscovering American freedom. Alvah Goldbrook calls Japhy "a great new hero of American culture," even though Japhy "didn't feel that I was an American at all" because "nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom" (22–23). Buddhism, with its perceived lack of repression, is an anti-

dote to America's "general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human values" (22). Japhy's Buddhism models an exotic freedom of spontaneous action that is truer to the American revolutionary spirit than the conformity into which American "freedom" has deteriorated.

But Ray's and Japhy's stereotyping gives credence to Alan Watts's complaints against "Beat Zen." The novel often presents Beat Buddhism with too great a point to prove in order to effectively evoke Buddhist nonattachment. But *The Dharma Bums* is not merely a symptom of this appropriation; it is also a conflicted engagement with it. The novel recognizes the faults of Orientalism even as it acknowledges that exoticism is a large part of what draws many Americans to Buddhism. More broadly, the novel expresses the vague hope that Buddhist ideals can spread across America and transform US individualism into enlightened wisdom. But Ray cannot envision how American society at large could integrate Buddhist teachings. Instead, he nurtures the escapist fantasy that an ancient Buddhist paradise would replace contemporary America altogether, a vision that began in *Some of the Dharma.*

Japhy's cultural openness arouses Ray's admiration, but the novel does not wholly endorse it. This fact represents the ambivalence of Beat Buddhism as it struggles to integrate that which it reveres. Japhy says, "East'll meet West anyway. Think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally, and it'll be guys like us that can start the thing" (*Dharma* 155). For Japhy, the Westernization of Asia is one side of a growing, positive exchange between two hemispheres. He has a "vision of a great rucksack revolution [of] thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em Zen Lunatics" (73–74). Japhy eagerly hopes for reviving America with Buddhism: "Just think how truly great and wise America will be, with all this energy and exuberance and space focused into the Dharma" (74). Ray is not on-board with this social vision, reflecting that he "didn't want to have anything to do . . . with Japhy's ideas about society" (80), but he still admires the optimism in Japhy, whom he memorializes as "the number one Dharma Bum of them all" (5).

The tensions between Ray and Japhy also illustrate larger ambivalences in the relationship of Christianity, a prominent aspect of American identity for many, to Beat Buddhism, and to enlightened individualism more broadly. Ray thinks Christianity is compatible with Beat Buddhism while Japhy does not. Japhy says, "'I don't like all that Jesus stuff,'" whereas Ray "'felt suppressed by this schism we have about separating Buddhism and Christianity, East from West, what the hell difference does it make?'" (86). While it is unknown if a conversation like this historically took place between Kerouac and Snyder, the

fact that Snyder does not mention Christianity in his own work does suggest that he wishes to distance himself from it. Kerouac, on the other hand, reaches out to Christianity, inspired by his Catholic background.

Kerouac, then, is engaged in a "religious pluralism" that seeks "to articulate a blend of Christian and Buddhist truths" (Ferretter 410, Grace 79). There seems to be a particular resonance for Kerouac, however implicit, between the suffering of Christ, which Catholic iconography particularly emphasizes, and the Buddhist truth that "All Life Is Sorrowful" (Kerouac, *Some* 3). Kerouac's preoccupation with suffering, and his sense of personal fallenness, is further reinforced by his older brother's death when Kerouac was four, as well as Kerouac's entanglement in self-destructive behavior such as alcoholism (Kerouac, Foreword viii; Maher 419–20). Ironically, Kerouac's ambivalent Buddhism is more open to Christian influences than Snyder's more optimistic Buddhist synthesis, which incorporates Native American, but not Christian, elements.

But Ray is ultimately too tied to a rarefied exotic vision of Buddhism to experience a Buddhist transcendence of all conditions. He tries but fails to transcend his Beat Buddhism as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak, where he lives alone for two months. Peering out from his secluded cabin, Ray muses, "The clouds were distant and frilly and like ancient remote cities of Buddhaland splendor" (180). Ray directly compares his surroundings to a Buddhist pure land, a heavenly realm in Mahayana Buddhism. The implicitly Asian "ancient remote cities" exist in a celestial "Buddhaland," which replaces Desolation Peak. In this vision, the exotic is heavenly.

This spatial imaginary also includes a spiritual description of Japhy:

> I saw that unimaginable little Chinese bum standing there, in the fog, with that expressionless humor on his seamed face. It wasn't the real-life Japhy of rucksacks and Buddhism studies and big mad parties at Corte Madera, it was the realer-than-life Japhy of my dreams, and he stood there saying nothing. 'Go away, thieves of the mind!' he cried down the hollows of the unbelievable Cascades. (186)

Here, not only does Japhy appear as unequivocally Chinese; he also takes on a mythic dimension. Ray's description is saturated with paradoxes. Japhy is both clearly visible and "unimaginable." His face shows "humor" and is yet "expressionless." The Japhy of his dreams is "realer-than-life." He is silent, "saying nothing," yet he shouts. These paradoxes show that Ray thinks in terms of Zen koans, unanswerable riddles that are designed to propel the mind beyond conventional, intellectual thought (H. Smith 133–36). This moment illustrates how much Japhy has taught him. Earlier, when mountain climbing with Japhy, Ray

is not yet comfortable with koans: "With horror I remembered the famous Zen saying, 'when you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing'" (Kerouac, *Bums* 63). At the time, Ray takes Japhy's remark too literally; but when Ray sees dream-Japhy on Desolation Peak, he has learned how to let koans work on his mind without intellectual resistance. This is the moment at which Ray is supposedly enlightened (Miles 103), and the stylistic imitation of Zen koans is impressive evidence in Ray's favor.

But Ray's vision is still shaped by Orientalism, and as a result his apparent epiphany lasts only as long as his peaceful, hermetic circumstances. Although Ray feels exalted in the moment, he also remains bound to concerns of time and space and feels the "'sadness of coming back to cities'" (Kerouac, *Bums* 186). It may seem as though Ray is tranquil when he "turned and went on down the trail back to this world" (187). But given Ray's apprehension about his return—and the opening retrospective in which Ray admits to having become "a little tired and cynical" (2)—we know that going back to the world means going back to more problems. If Ray were really enlightened, he would not feel sad at the prospect of reentering cities, given the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of the nondifferentiation of samsara and nirvana (Fauré 39–40). True enlightenment would be impervious to circumstance; but by fixating on an image of exotic Asia, Ray is not using the relative truth of appearances to guide himself toward the ultimate truth of emptiness. Instead, he mistakes relative truth for ultimate truth. Ray's realizations do not transcend changing conditions because of his attachment to Orientalist fantasies.

Kerouac's Buddhism was a bright flame that burned out quickly; he did not live long enough to reflect on his Buddhist period from a great distance of many years. But Kerouac's Buddhist output has much to teach us about American receptions of Buddhism. The cultural associations Buddhism carries have made Orientalism an unavoidable aspect of Buddhism's growth in the US. In this context *The Dharma Bums* does not portray a successful fusion of East and West, but it sympathetically dramatizes the obstacles that enlightened individualism must deal with. As a groundbreaking work of American Buddhist fiction, *The Dharma Bums* juxtaposes the appeal of Buddhist transcendence with the risks of cross-cultural appropriation. Kerouac's portrayal is largely aware of Beat Buddhism's limitations; he was dedicated to making American individualism more enlightened, but he did not figure out how. The novel's unfulfilled hope has remained influential in later generations, as writers continue to wrestle with how to go beyond admiring Buddhism to being truly changed by it. As it evolves, this search will lead to new ideas of what it means to be an American and what goals Americans should pursue.

ROBBINS'S AMBIVALENCE

Kerouac directly influenced a prolific but overlooked contributor to Beat Buddhism: Tom Robbins (b. 1932). Because he did not travel in Beat circles at the generation's peak, and his first novel did not appear until 1971, Robbins is not considered a Beat writer, even though he is only two years younger than Gary Snyder and he befriended Allen Ginsberg in the 1960s (Robbins, *Tibetan* 222–24). But Robbins deserves attention for extending Beat themes and motifs well beyond the Beat—and hippie—periods, especially through his investments in Beat Buddhism. A recent collection of interviews calls Robbins "the principal voice of American countercultural fiction" (Purdon and Torrey, *Conversations,* back cover), an alignment Robbins inched toward early in life. Robbins's experiences of hitchhiking around the country and taking LSD are typical of Beats and hippies, respectively (Purdon and Torrey, Introduction xxi; Rentilly 125–26; Miller 154). Robbins also lived in Korea and Japan as a weather observation instructor for the Air Force, where he developed an interest in Asian religions; upon his return, he took master's coursework in Eastern religions (Purdon and Torrey, Introduction xxiii). However, Robbins has not done extensive, rigorous meditation training, so his study of Asian religions and extensive travels throughout Asia indicate a level of involvement with Buddhism that is greater than Kerouac's but less than Snyder's.

In spite of his wide readership and skillful artistry, Robbins has received very little critical attention. Except for a handful of articles and one critical book in a series on "popular writers" (Hoyser and Stokey), most publications about Robbins are interviews. However, Robbins is an important artist thoughtfully engaged with what it means for Asian religions to become popular in the US. References to Asian religions can be found in all of his eight novels, and Asian religions are a particularly conspicuous theme in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1977) and *Villa Incognito* (2003). I will show how these novels indicate Robbins's movement toward greater receptivity to Western practitioners of Asian religions, and I will touch on how he further refines his thoughts in his memoir, *Tibetan Peach Pie* (2014). Robbins's vision lies in between Snyder's one of union and Kerouac's one of incommensurability. Robbins's early work combines a fascination with Asian religions with a skepticism toward all Western attempts to practice them, suggesting that cultural—and, troublingly, racial—differences prevent Westerners from doing anything other than merely appropriating Buddhism and Hinduism. Robbins's later work signals a progressively greater openness to cross-cultural adaptation and the hope that Asian ideals can transform American freedom, although he

still retains a strong touch of humility about Westerners' ability to understand Asian faiths such as Buddhism.

Robbins achieved literary success during the 1970s when the countercultures with which he identified were fading. During this time, as R. John Williams explains, many texts engaged in "postcountercultural" reflection on the supposed excesses of the 1960s (174). Robbins's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* is a noteworthy reflection on this situation. The novel admonishes its readers of the risks of adapting foreign religions, but it also further develops Beat Buddhism's hope that Buddhism can renew and transform American freedom. *Cowgirls*'s spiritual vision directly engages with Kerouac's. Like *The Dharma Bums, Cowgirls* is a road novel with strong debts to Asian mysticism. The novel attempts to carry on Beat Buddhism's zeal for subversion and enlightenment while envisioning a more complete cross-cultural synthesis than what *The Dharma Bums* presents. *Cowgirls*'s heroine, Sissy Hankshaw, is the greatest hitchhiker in the world because of her exceptionally large thumbs. This fact makes Jack Kerouac, whom Robbins fancifully imagines as having briefly dated Sissy, deeply envious (47). Also, throughout her travels, the "rucksack" Sissy wears is evocative of the "'rucksack revolution'" that Japhy prophesies in *The Dharma Bums* (170; Kerouac, *Bums* 351).

Sissy's better hitchhiking is not just a funny allusion; it also reflects her better insight. She improves upon Ray Smith's Beat Buddhism by pursuing spiritual liberation without resorting to Asiatic fantasies. Paradoxically, the novel promotes the transmission of Buddhist (and Hindu) teachings even as it admonishes Westerners against believing they can understand and practice a religion from a distant culture. This allows Robbins's Beat Buddhism to be more sensitive and informed than Kerouac's while maintaining more cultural distance than Snyder's. Robbins shares Kerouac's and Snyder's Beat Buddhist irreverence and commitment to mystical liberation as an alternative to Western consumerism. But whereas early Snyder and Kerouac ambivalently use images of the exotic East as both obstacle and lure, Robbins is especially emphatic about ironizing Orientalist stereotypes, and even slurs, allowing him to form an especially complex and daring synthesis between East and West.

Sissy's main spiritual teacher, the Chink, is a deliberately outrageous caricature of old Asian wise men. For all his wild behavior, his most alarming feature is Robbins's exclusive use of a slur as the character's name. I will not try to argue whether this choice is ethically justified, but it is a deliberate and provocative tactic. The narrative seeks to satirize and defuse the slur's offensiveness through nonemphatic overuse. Furthermore, it draws attention to the indignity of ethnic conflation as well. The Chink, who is actually Japanese American, claims that a group of Native Americans misnamed him with the

wrong slur (Robbins, *Cowgirls* 197). The Chink has chosen to riff on his marginal status by ironically reclaiming a label that is doubly offensive as both an insult and a sloppy misidentification.

The Chink's appearance and behavior are almost as extreme as his name. When Sissy first sees him, we learn that his "problem was that he looked like the Little Man who had the Big Answers. . . . He looked as if he had rolled out of a Zen scroll, as if he said 'presto' a lot, knew the meaning of lightning and the origin of dreams. He looked as if he drank dew and fucked snakes. He looked like the cape that rustles on the backstairs of paradise" (163). The Chink is a mysterious guru, but he relishes in sexual libertinism, vulgar speech, and teachings that focus more on appreciating one's present life than dissolving into a property-less transcendence.

These traits make the Chink an exemplar of Tibetan *crazy wisdom,* a term profoundly linked to Kerouac's earlier coinage, *Zen lunacy* (*Bums* 73). The term, coined by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche as a translation of the Tibetan term *drubnyon,* refers to the "disruptive holiness" of eccentric saints. These teachers' outrageous actions—including drunkenness, fornication, and pranks—serve to jolt their students out of conventional dualistic thought. By flouting distinctions between sacred and secular, pure and impure, "crazy wisdom" is supposed to help students realize the innate emptiness of all phenomena (S. Bell 59). Echoing the anticonformism of the Beat and hippie countercultures, Robbins has repeatedly emphasized the influence of crazy wisdom on his fiction (Miller 151–52), defining it as "the opposite of conventional wisdom. It is wisdom that deliberately swims against the current in order to avoid being swept along in the numbing wake of bourgeois compromise" (Robbins, "Defiance" 180).

Although the Chink never uses the term *crazy wisdom,* it is likely that the Chink is based on Trungpa himself, given the latter's exceptional and well-earned reputation for extensive drinking and sexual relations with students (Trigilio x). Furthermore, Robbins was friends with Ginsberg, Trungpa's most famous student, in the years before *Cowgirls*'s publication (Robbins, *Tibetan* 207, 222–24), giving further circumstantial evidence of Robbins's indebtedness to crazy wisdom. Robbins, who praised Ginsberg as "a Vedantic versifier" with "the capacity to cast a net of enchantment around nearly everything" (223–24), was likely an admiring onlooker of Ginsberg's forays into Trungpa's crazy wisdom in the early 1970s. Robbins's crazy wisdom shares the countercultural values of Ginsberg's, Snyder's, and Kerouac's Beat Buddhism, even though *Cowgirls* makes jokes at Kerouac's expense.

Like *The Dharma Bums, Cowgirls* showcases a myopic perspective on Asian religions that the novel as a whole calls into question. In *The Dharma*

Bums, Ray fails to effectively practice an Asian religion because he cannot see Buddhism outside of his Orientalism. In *Cowgirls* the Chink argues that Westerners cannot practice Eastern religion at all, a claim the novel refutes through Sissy's own spiritual journey. The Chink declares:

> Throughout the Western world, I see people huddled around little fires, warming themselves with Buddhism and Taoism and Hinduism and Zen. And that's the most they ever can do with those philosophies. Warm their hands and feet. They can't make full use of Hinduism because they aren't Hindu; they can't really take advantage of the Tao because they aren't Chinese; Zen will abandon them after a while—its fire will go out—because they aren't Japs like me. To turn to Oriental religious philosophies may temporarily illuminate experience for them, but ultimately it's futile, because they're denying their own history, they're lying about their heritage. (230)

According to the Chink, when Westerners try to get light, or insight, from Eastern religions, what meager light they can get from it will only "temporarily illuminate experience." Westerners should instead follow their ancestral pagan lineage: "The United States of America is the logical place for the fires of paganism to be rebuilt—and transformed into light" (234). Not only does this passage react to Asian religions' growing popularity in the US in the preceding two decades; it also implicitly criticizes Kerouac himself, given his eventual abandonment of Buddhism and his susceptibility to the criticism that his Buddhism is shallow and under- or misinformed. But the Chink troublingly indicates that Kerouac's limitation is not one of understanding but of race. Cross-cultural adaptation is impossible; spiritual seekers should restrict themselves to whatever the religion of their "heritage" happens to be. The Chink's admonition to avoid appropriation ends up positing gaps between cultures so unbridgeable that it starts to sound like racial determinism. In this context, the Chink's self-directed use of the slur *Jap* is especially noteworthy. His casual reappropriation of this slur suggests that he is immune to feeling ashamed by others' racism, reinforcing his teaching that "freedom . . . is largely an internal condition" (183). Furthermore, the Chink ironically redeploys this racist insult as a marker of superiority, positioning him in a privileged position of authentically understanding Eastern wisdom in ways Europeans cannot.

Significantly, the Chink also defines Christianity as an "'*Eastern* religion'" because it teaches "truths that are universal" (231, emphasis in original). This universalism is connected to a religious transcendence that the Chink contrasts to the worldliness of Celtic paganism, which the Chink believes "put pleasure ahead of asceticism" (231). The difference the Chink posits between

worldly Western paganism and transcendent Eastern religions corresponds to Charles Taylor's distinction between Pre-Axial and Axial faiths, respectively. Pre-Axial religion dealt with ordinary human flourishing, whereas Axial religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Daoism teach transcendent goals that go beyond human flourishing (Taylor 147–51). The fact that the Chink acknowledges this, and links Buddhism and Christianity along these lines, suggests that Robbins sees more possibilities to connect Buddhism with Christianity than Snyder does, although he is less ultimately invested in this avenue than Kerouac. Overall, according to the Chink, Axial faiths do not properly belong in the US.

And yet, against his own words, the Chink transmits Buddhist insight to the Westerner Sissy by inspiring her spiritual awakening. This suggests that Eastern wisdom is available to Westerners after all, as long as they stumble onto it through crazy wisdom rather than seeking it in a doctrinaire system. The Chink helps Sissy realize what she already knows (174), which is that "one can change things by the manner in which one looks at them" (72). The Chink's method resonates with Zen Buddhist pedagogy, which focuses not on believing in propositions but on realizing one's innate wisdom (Kapleau 55). His message also fits the Buddhist notion that external reality is an illusory projection of one's own mind (Seager 30–31).

The Chink further adopts Zen methods by using koan-like enigmas to teach Sissy, a pedagogy Robbins sees as aligned with crazy wisdom (Robbins, "Defiance" 182, 186). The Chink gives Sissy paradoxical or nonsensical statements that force the mind to abandon familiar logical categories. While not strictly Zen koans, they employ similar tactics of contradiction and surprise. For example, the Chink explains to Sissy that the world needs "magic and poetry" to permeate all levels of society, including stereotypically prosaic enterprises such as politics and journalism (Robbins, *Cowgirls* 333). When Sissy asks if such a poetic sensibility could ever prevail on a mass scale, the Chink replies, "If you understood poetry and magic, you'd know that it doesn't matter" (333). This statement may seem to be a dangerous retreat from politics, but the Chink does not mean to generalize that one should care about "poetry and magic" and not bother with the world at large. His comment has a more immediate purpose: He tells Sissy what she needs to hear at that exact moment. The Chink's apparent negation mysteriously resolves Sissy's uncertainties. This moment is expressed by the convergence of several events: "The moon rose. / The clockworks struck. / A crane whooped. / She understood" (333). The novel expresses Sissy's new understanding in a seemingly abrupt, non-narrative digression that defines poetry as "an intensification or illumination of common objects and everyday events until they shine with their

singular nature" (333). In this Buddhist-inspired epiphany, objects and events, although distinct, occur within a background of transcendent "illumination" that permeates everything. Furthermore, by presenting this realization without direct segues, the novel's form imitates the sudden enlightenment of Asian spiritual practitioners (Cheng 595–600). *Cowgirls* seeks to transmit Asian wisdom in the US without explicitly calling it as such, thus skirting the issue of Orientalism in its use of Asian philosophies even as it parodies cultural Orientalism in its characters and motifs.

The novel further casts this sort of Asian wisdom as the fulfillment of American freedom, particularly by depicting a migration of American whooping cranes to Tibet. In so doing, Robbins uses animal symbolism to place American values in the service of an Asian vision. The cranes symbolize courageous, individualistic American freedom, an ideal the novel both values and complicates. Earlier in the novel, the narrator emphasizes that the cranes evolved in North America and are paragons of "majestic beauty" that habitat loss has driven to the edge of extinction (*Cowgirls* 251–52). The narrator rhapsodizes, "Unlike those integrity-short teemers, including man, the whooper opted for quality instead of quantity. . . . It would survive on its own terms or not at all" (252). Near the novel's end, the cranes change their migratory pattern and leave the country altogether. Observing this journey, the narrator rhetorically asks, "Is the most splendid and sizable American bird searching for a new home, scouring the globe in quest of a place where it can be private and free?" (360). The novel thus underscores the birds' Americanness by emphasizing a desire for privacy and freedom.

Although the novel positions these birds as quintessentially American, their quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of whooping crane happiness ironically leads them out of the US into Tibet (360). In this provocative vision of enlightened individualism, the novel suggests that the American aspiration for individual freedom is most fully realized in Buddhist-inspired teachings. In this view, the Buddhist freedom of spiritual liberation is more profound than the debased version of American freedom responsible for an "industrialized, urbanized, herding" society that the narrator identifies as the "one wrong way" to live (192). By imagining Tibet as the whooping cranes' best new home, the novel nudges its American readers toward Buddhist wisdom as well. The novel is not saying that Americans should literally move to Tibet as the cranes do; a more credible reading is that Americans should follow the cranes symbolically by exploring Asian religious insights as a new spiritual frontier. This move seeks to integrate Buddhist liberation into American life in a way that Kerouac hoped for but failed to envision. It also celebrates its particular sense of freedom *as* American more explicitly than Snyder's work does.

Robbins evolves his hopes for Asian inspiration in America in *Villa Incognito,* which shows an increased, but still qualified, openness to Caucasians practicing Asian religions. Whereas *Cowgirls* highlights an Asian guru who settles in the US, *Villa Incognito* portrays an American-born guru who settles in Asia. In this novel, Mars Stubblefield, a former US soldier lost while helicoptering over Laos in 1973, is declared missing in action and presumed dead. But he survives the crash and settles in a remote village in Laos, choosing to remain there even after the Vietnam War ends. Although technically a prisoner at first, he quickly charms his way into a position of prominence as a local spiritual authority, combining his Western philosophical training with his accumulation of experiences with local Buddhism and shamanism. Like the Chink, he is unkempt, sexually promiscuous, intellectually independent, given to didactic speeches, and self-deprecating.

Ironically, Stubblefield remains invested in American ideals even though he chooses to live in permanent exile (142–43). His frayed relationship to his home country is tied to his history of insubordination and antiwar sentiment, and even to his intentional botching of missions to avoid "inflicting collateral damage" (119–20). Nevertheless, Stubblefield's conflicted experiences as a soldier have led him not to reject American freedom as a ruse but to critique contemporary American politics as a corruption of worthy ideals. At one point, he muses, "What bouncy, enterprising weirdness is leaking out around the edges of [America's] disguise? *That's* the real America. That's what justifies its existence" (114, original emphasis). The novel leaves the question open. But the question's prominence suggests that the American "enterprising" spirit can find its justification in "bouncy, enterprising weirdness," the freedom of joyful, disruptive spontaneity that carries on the *crazy wisdom* discussed above. America has a "disguise" of bourgeois conformity, but a "real" American spirit can be revealed underneath this superficial layer. Crucially, Stubblefield's notions of what it means to be American arise because of his spiritual development in Asia.

Furthermore, Stubblefield's crazy wisdom relies on tropes from the Beat generation. He describes the soul as "a long, lonesome freight train rumbling from generation to generation on an eternally rainy morning: its boxcars are loaded with sighs and laughter, its hobos are angels, its engineer is the queen of spades—and the queen of spades is wild" (78). This passage is steeped in Beat imagery, style, and themes, including a focus on boxcars, a Kerouac-like freewheeling and run-on syntax, and a veneration of the derelict. Here the word *generation* invokes both the Beats and the Asian doctrine of reincarnation. Stubblefield is also self-deprecating, saying that the speech he just gave "might be high wisdom, it could be pure bullshit" (79).

The fact that Stubblefield is a white European demonstrates that one does not have to be Asian to gain crazy wisdom. But Stubblefield must settle in Asia to attain it, suggesting that what matters is not ancestry but immersion in a particular culture. That is, in order to realize a religion's wisdom, one must live where the religion is effectively indigenous. It is troublingly ironic that a necessary precondition for this immersion, in Stubblefield's case, is the gruesome escalation of the Vietnam War. But Stubblefield distances himself from the war to the extent that he can and thus embodies a cross-cultural intersection that suggests new relationships between Americans and Asian religions. In the novel's opening section, which takes place in late nineteenth-century Japan, a Zen monk says, "The blue-eyed ones can attain neither wisdom nor tranquility . . . because they're too busy clapping their hands in glee over the suffering of the damned" (20). Generations later, Stubblefield's example refutes this overgeneralization. But the "blue-eyed ones" must leave Western territory to overcome their ethnic disadvantage, as Stubblefield does.

The views of cross-cultural adaptation in *Villa Incognito* gain additional development in Robbins's more recent writings and interviews. In a 2009 interview, Robbins echoes the Chink's hope for a pagan "revival of mystical nature worship" in the US (Miller 154). But he does not repeat the Chink's insistence that Westerners take a spiritual detour around Asian religions altogether. Instead, his caution is more understated: Robbins says that "Americans may hold Buddhist ideals in our hearts and minds, but they're not yet in our genes" (Miller 154). In an apparent continuation of the racial-religious boundaries the Chink posits in *Cowgirls,* Robbins implies that one must have a particular religion in one's "genes" to practice it effectively. But by saying that Buddhist teachings are "not *yet* in our genes" (emphasis added), he suggests that Buddhism can work its way into Westerners' genes with enough time and, presumably, practice. With these remarks, Robbins's post-*Cowgirls* perspective moves closer to Japhy Ryder's vision that "East'll meet West" after all (Kerouac, *Bums* 430).

However, Robbins also thinks that the US is not yet a suitable place for realizing Eastern wisdom, establishing something of a spiritual Catch-22. In his autobiographical book *Tibetan Peach Pie,* Robbins reports an experience of *satori,* or Zen insight, in 1966 in which he "was witness to an indissolvable totality of reality" (89). What is especially interesting is how Robbins assesses the aftermath:

> Had I been Asian and of a certain temperament, I suppose I would have repaired to a Zendo, an ashram, or a wilderness cave to meditate on my neon

> golfball satori for the rest of my life, striving to integrate it somehow into my daily existence. Instead, although shaken, galvanized, and fairly splish-splashing in a fading aura of awe, I just motored on through the subsiding snow squall and went to a Hollywood movie. (89–90)

In this account, Asians have culturally supported opportunities to develop spiritually, opportunities that Westerners such as Robbins lack. Of course there are far more retreat centers in the US now than there were in 1966. But Robbins, writing about this memory in the present day, gives no indication that he thinks the cultural gap he posits has disappeared. He also opines that the risk of culturally shaped misinterpretations is so great that "Asian spiritual texts were probably best left to spiritual Asians" (215). However, one does not necessarily have to be an ethnic Asian to be a "spiritual [Asian]," so Robbins subtly leaves a door open. While Robbins envisions a fuller synthesis than Kerouac does, he gives more weight to the persistence of cultural difference than Snyder does.

Ginsberg, Snyder, Kerouac, and Robbins indicate the variety of visions within Beat Buddhism. But within this variation, these writers are similarly devoted to synthesizing Buddhist and American notions of freedom through creative cross-cultural adaptations. The complexity of Beat Buddhism has been fruitful for American literature and culture. This rich area of study shows how cross-cultural adaptations cause notions of American freedom to evolve, compete, and coexist. Kerouac's enduring popularity, as well as the long careers of Ginsberg, Snyder, and Robbins, shows that Beat Buddhism has outlived the Beat moment. These four writers were instrumental in a cultural breakthrough: They raised Buddhism's profile by linking it with a counterculture whose public recognition surpassed its strength in raw numbers. American perceptions of Buddhism, and other Asian religions, would never be the same.

The potential relationship between Beat Buddhism and American cultural history comes across especially vividly in Ginsberg's 1994 poem "City Lights City" (*Collected Poems*). Ginsberg imagines a fictional American city in 2025 with Beat-based place names, including "Via Ferlinghetti & Kerouac Alley," "Bob Kaufman Street," "McClure Plaza," "Snyder Bridge," and "Neal Cassady R.R. Station." In this vision of the near future, not only is the Beat legacy countercultural; the Beat impulses of enlightened individualism are embedded in city infrastructure, a vision of an American culture renewed, not overthrown, by countercultural exuberance, creating a place where "international surrealist tourists climb to see the view." While this future has yet to arrive, it remains clear that the issues Ginsberg, Kerouac, Robbins, and Sny-

der wrestle with—Asian religions' relevance to a politics of dissent, the ethics of borrowing across cultures, and the compatibility of Buddhist liberation with American freedom—have set the stage for succeeding engagements with Asian religions. As I will show, these themes continue to evolve in anti-Beat, postmodern, African American, and Asian American expressions of enlightened individualism.

WORD UNHEARD

A Guide through Eliot's Four Quartets

by HARRY BLAMIRES

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The Dry Salvages

I

I do not know much about gods

The river represents the flow of Nature, within us and about us, the dark god which man has to subdue in civilizing himself and his world. The imagery matches an American river, altogether bigger, browner, more formidable, less friendly, than its English counterpart. Clearly we are back in Eliot's home area of St Louis, Missouri, beside the Mississippi. The description of the god as 'sullen, untamed and intractable' makes clear that the poet does not regard twentieth-century man as having subdued the powerful natural forces as effectively as he thinks he has. We sense that the dark god's apparent submission is a deception and, as often in Eliot, awareness of the precariousness of our civilized condition is compressed into an understatement of terrifying calm – 'patient to some degree'. To what degree? How far can we go? The implicit questions are worrying.

The first recognition of the river 'as a frontier' must be read in the light of the peculiar American usage of the word 'frontier' for the area which forms the border of a country's settled and inhabited regions over against its improperly explored and subdued ones. And one must recognize the implicit correspondences between world history, American history, and the individual's life-story, as the account of man's struggle with Nature proceeds. Thus, in the course of human history, awesome awareness of Nature in the fringe area of the yet knowable and controllable, is succeeded by a stage in which the natural is used but not yet thought of as mastered ('useful, untrustworthy', *DS* 4), indeed treated with the respect and wariness which the word 'untrustworthy' carefully suggests. The third stage is that in which the river

has become nothing more than 'a problem confronting the builder of bridges'. Superficially the natural appears to have been mastered, but in fact it has not been gripped and harnessed; rather it has been by-passed. The development has been such that the true character of the natural has been ignored. Man imagines that the 'problem' has been 'solved' (*DS* 6). The deceptive finality of the foolish, arrogant phrase (accorded nothing higher than a parenthetical status) aptly identifies the superficial confidence of our urban civilization in ignoring and underestimating the power and vitality of Nature. The god is not dead; neither is he domesticated or appeased. 'Implacable', he pursues his seasonal course within us and about us, likely at any moment to rage or destroy.

The sense that our mechanized culture presses forward under an ever-impending threat from the deep natural forces which it has but supposedly subdued and is now vainly trying to forget, is expressed in that fine generalized Eliotian idiom which renders the judgement applicable to our current condition over wide areas of social and personal experience. Eliot is not the kind of poet to make specific references to bombs or cancer of the lung or modern neurosis or mass-production, in order to press home his point. The choice phrases, 'dwellers in cities' (*DS* 7) and 'worshippers of the machine' (*DS* 10) are all that is necessary to make us feel small and fearful (Are there not overtones of Sodom and Gomorrah?) over against the 'waiting, watching' (*DS* 10) power which we have for so long ceased to respect.

The flow of Nature within us and outside us, binding our lives to the cyclic rhythm of the seasons, is referred to here (*DS* 11–14) in images which again recall those of the affirmative experience in *BN* II. There the flow of blood, and perhaps of semen, were by implication linked with the flow of sap in the tree and the 'drift of stars' in the sky (*BN* 54–5). Here the flow of urine 'in the nursery bedroom' (*DS* 11) marks our involvement with the untamable, flooding life of Nature as surely as does the flow of Molly Bloom's urine in

Ulysses. In the 'rank ailanthus of the April Dooryard'* we probably have a symbol of the overflowing of the sexual river in the spring of life. Eliot seems to pin both the animal and the romantic aspects of youthful sexuality by combining the word 'rank' with the word 'ailanthus' (the tree of heaven with a phallic connotation). His purpose is neither to denigrate nor to idealize the natural, but to see its paradoxical duality. The potentially uncontrollable profusion of the ailanthus is an apt symbol for the sexuality of adolescence or young manhood ('April dooryard' gives us the season of life), but the threat that our natural affiliations offer to our civilized human status is not peculiar to any one age. If the urination of infancy and the sexuality of youth remind us of the bondage to nature which we try to forget, no less threatening to our civilized balance is the bouquet from the wine-glass which tempts us more in the autumn of our lives ('the smell of grapes on the autumn table'). And finally the sentimentality of age (for surely, in line 14, in 'the evening circle in the winter gaslight', we are back at the 'evening under lamplight' of *EC* 198, turning the pages of the photograph album) is no less certainly a link with the flowing, liquid life of Nature, for one may take it that the old folks' reminiscences cause the tears to flow. Thus, at various stages of life, our bondage to Nature may be reasserted in the uncontrolled flow of urine, semen, drink, or tears.

Our interpretation here relies on an assumed correspondence between four ages of life and the four seasons. The justification for this assumption is firstly that the correspondence is a commonplace of Elizabethan thinking about the ordered universe, on which Eliot depends in his use of Elyot, Sir John Davies, Shakespeare, and others; secondly that a correspondence of this kind is explicitly made, for instance, in *EC* 74–5 ('the autumnal serenity/And the wisdom of age'); and thirdly that the same kind of

* There is an echo here, as also in *DS* 47–8 and *DS* 182–3, from Walt Whitman. See p. 113.

correspondence seems to be implicit in the imagery of *LG* 1–20, and again in the imagery of *EC* 51–67. The fact that the correspondence here, in *DS* 11–14, is drawn between Infancy, Adolescence or Young Manhood, Middle Age, and Old Age on the one hand, and a pre-Spring phase, Spring proper, Autumn, and Winter on the other hand, will not weaken the force of our reading for those who are familiar with the liberties taken by Elizabethan writers themselves with their own accepted system of correspondences. Discrepancies in parallelism are commonplace in the literary tradition we are exploring.

The four instances chosen at this point to represent our physical links with the flowing life of untameable Nature are perhaps intentionally all instances in which relief and satisfaction is experienced as physical needs are answered. They seem to be obliquely referred to again in *DS* 90–2, where the poet distinguishes between revelatory moments of happiness and mere experiences of satisfaction produced by fruition, fulfilment 'or even a very good dinner'.

The river is within us

The poet re-plants us locally. We move from the river to the coast. Eliot has himself identified the place for us. It is the coastal area near to the city of Gloucester, Massachusetts, where a lighthouse stands off Cape Ann. (In view of cumulative nature of the coming symbols it is worth noting that St Ann was the mother of the Virgin Mary.) We should remember that Eliot's father had come to live in St Louis in 1834. Before that date the Eliot family had been in Boston, Massachusetts. When the poet left home in St Louis to study at Harvard (Boston) he was returning to the 'home' area where many families such as his had been established since they emigrated from England in the seventeenth century. (Thus the move was the first in that series of steps to 'recovery' which later took Eliot back to residence in England and burial at East Coker.) Some thirty or so miles from Boston is Cape Ann and the City of Gloucester, one of the

most important fishing ports and markets in the world. It is also of course a centre for the manufacture of fishing gear and for boat-building. The fishing centred on the city of Gloucester is clearly in the poet's mind at many points in the first two movements of this *Quartet*. It is no doubt relevant that Gloucester was founded in 1623 by settlers, many of whom came from Gloucester in England. It must perhaps remain a matter for conjecture whether this connection caused Eliot to choose the name of a manor house in Gloucester for the title of his first poem, *Burnt Norton*. Readers might see significance in the choice of a manor house garden in Gloucester, England, as the scene of a might-have-been past. Eliot, associating the city of Gloucester, Massachusetts with the flow of natural life and the flux of history which moved families like his own from England to Massachusetts and thence to Missouri, might logically choose the corresponding English area for the location of a might-have-been childhood in which all was ordered and patterned, the family presences of the past and the future (echoes of the now dead and the laughter of children yet to be born) together blended with a present in which all were 'accepted and accepting', *BN* 30. We must bear in mind throughout that the *Burnt Norton* garden is the might-have-been Paradise of ordered family life which man might have enjoyed had there been no Fall, cosmic, or historic, or personal – no human rebellion to cause the ejection of Adam and Eve from Eden, no ideological quarrels, religious and political, such as brought about the emigration of Puritans and dissenters from England to America. Eliot's American upbringing is, for poetic purposes, in a 'strange land', and is symptomatic of man's alienation and homelessness. His search for roots is both literary and geographical, personal and social. We do not impose these parallels on the poems: they are implicit in the imagery. For the religious quarrels which caused English families to emigrate to New England (as Eliot's family emigrated), and which came to a head in the civil strife of the

seventeenth century, are touched on later in *Little Gidding* (cf. pp. 123–4), and imagery throughout the *Quartets* which speaks of wounds healed and wars appeased (*BN* 50–5 and *LG* 191) is thus interconnected in the total network with hints of an 'ideal' family history in which the movement of emigration (as symptomatic of a disorder destructive of the hierarchical dance) need not have taken place. Later overtones fill out this network of correspondences by linking the cost of civil strife in martyrdoms with the Crucifixion (*LG* 176, and see pp. 161–2), and by threading into the theme of past strife and its healing, echoes of the American Civil War (see p. 113).

It is not easy to draw the line between reasonable interpretation and fanciful conjecture at those points in the poem where perceptive reading makes one aware that Eliot is both hinting at, and shrouding, personal memories, but the preoccupation with his family's own history of movement, here evident, certainly throws a new light on the images of the might-have-been past conjured up in *Burnt Norton.* We may here add that Eliot's earlier lyrics, *New Hampshire* and *Cape Ann*, are quoted in *Burnt Norton* and *Little Gidding* (see p. 182) in such a way as to support our view of the elaborate thematic inter-relatedness which makes it possible to see the 'formal pattern' in the 'box circle' (*BN* 31–2) as alluding to an imaginary family history unbroken by emigration. Be that as it may, the symbolic use of the New England coastline and the sea in the present movement certainly throws back significance upon earlier sea images. Thus we can now (only now, I think) understand why the poet, having spied on an archaic dream picture of patterned family life among the rural dancers of *East Coker* I (27 ff.), thereafter quickly transferred his stance from an English country lane to a coastline ('Out at sea the dawn wind . . . I am here/Or there, or elsewhere', *EC* 48–50).

The sea, which is 'all about us' represents, as it did at the end of *East Coker* (*EC* 208), the ages of time stretching out before and after the human span. And here we use the words

'human span' both of the individual's history and of the history of the whole human race. It is important to grasp this concentration of meaning in the symbol: for the sea appears to be, not just time as it ebbs and flows tidally through the lives of men and families, but the inconceivable, virtually limitless scope of the temporal, stretching backwards and forwards beyond the range of human comprehension. In this sense the sea becomes a symbol of the very bounds and farthest reaches of the natural and the temporal and, as such, in its distances is lost in the eternal.

The sea of time bites into the granite edge of the land on which we stand, the earth of which we felt ourselves fashioned in *East Coker* I. It tosses up relics of history and pre-history. The picture of beaches littered with souvenirs of past life, animal and vegetable, and likewise with pathetic remnants of past human effort and action (fragments of net, lobsterpot, and oar) is sharply reminiscent of the *Proteus* episode in *Ulysses*. In view of this close resemblance, it is significant that the repeated phrase 'many voices' echoes Tennyson's *Ulysses* –

> 'The deep
> Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
> Tis not too late to seek a newer world.'

That Eliot's ancestors set out to seek a newer world is sufficient to account for the fact that Eliot found Tennyson's lines memorable: but we should note too that there is a later reference to Penelope (*DS* 41) and that Tennyson's poem came to mind at the end of *East Coker* (see p. 78).

One is probably justified in saying that faint sexual overtones once more reinforce the correspondence between the flow of water in river and wave and the tidal flow of sex through human history. 'It tosses up our losses' perhaps hints at the costly wastefulness of our self-expenditure in sexual as well as other activities. Certainly the 'torn seine' is a highly charged image, for 'seine' is of course the breast and Eliot has already, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, used

the word 'torn' with peculiar sexual sharpness in the phrase

'the torn girl trembling by the mill-stream'.

One might reasonably argue too that the phrase 'torn seine' with its inevitable and logical echo of the Latin 'sinus' has a Virgilian flavour and that Dido, along with the Virgin Mary and Eve, has her place in the multiple archetypal symbolism of womanhood underlying the thematic framework of this poem. Be that as it may, we must stress here the first mention of ocean wreckage (*DS* 22–4) and the introduction thereby of a theme to which the imagery of *DS* II, and many later scattered overtones, will add gradually and cumulatively until finally the articulate recall ('recovery') of actual historical disasters is achieved, and the external 'menace' of the uncurbed natural force about us is concretely asserted. (See App. III, 4.)

The underlying 'menace' of the uncurbed natural force at work *within* us is most powerfully asserted, as Raymond Preston first noted,* only when we reach the firm thematic statement of *DS* 101–3, in relation to which the imagery here may be likened to the premonitory figures and phrases which in musical form may anticipate the emergence of a clearly articulated subject or a fully-drawn melody. For indeed the imagery of broken remnants represents the souvenirs of a primitive racial past, which the retentive subconscious throws up fitfully into the waking consciousness, just as it represents the débris of a personal and individual history.

The salt is on the briar rose

These two images concisely remind us that all which grows and represents the beauty and joy and fruitfulness of the natural, rooted in the soil of earth, yet flourishing and flowering in the higher element of air, does so under constant threat from the destructive, erosive moisture blown

* Raymond Preston, *Four Quartets Rehearsed*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1946.

from the sea of time (the third element, water). The touch of bitterness which this tyranny introduces into human experience of love and beauty is symbolized by the 'salt' on the rose. The blur of mist and confusion which the steady passage of time introduces into human action and enterprise seems to be symbolized by the 'fog' in the 'fir trees'. It would seem that the overtones of the first image are feminine, of the second image are masculine (if one uses the terms 'feminine' and 'masculine' rather of different fields of human interest and action than as strictly sexual differentiae).

The sea howl

The two voices that are thrown at us from the sea of time (the sea of history) and the sea of eternity into which it reaches are distinguished as 'howl' and 'yelp', the one a threatening and frightening cry, the other perhaps rather a cry of pain. As we look out over the ocean of history, these two very different cries come to our ears, often at the same time – for the very experiences of man's past whose recall worries and threatens us most are often those in which men suffered most (the wars and turmoils, tortures and disasters recorded in history). These two voices have already been hinted at in the last line of *East Coker*, 'The wave cry, the wind cry' (*EC* 208). As the waters of time and the winds from the waters of time beat age by age against the land in which man's natural family life is rooted and against the frail vessels in which he launches himself for business and exploration, the cries that arise from the resultant constant struggle between humanity and time reflect the nature of the struggle. That there is pain and irritation to endure in man's struggle is sufficiently clear from the image of the 'whine in the rigging'. Something of the threat concealed under time's movement when she seems least inclined to interfere with our condition (when the waves of time are not actually touching us, but breaking over themselves), is caught in the line, 'The menace and caress of wave that breaks on water', (*DS* 29). The corrosive effect of time on even the toughest

of the earthly foundations on which men stand is heard in the 'distant rote in the granite teeth' (*DS* 30) as the winds and waves grind remorselessly at the indentations of the coastline. (Gloucester granite is famous. Cf. *DS* 16.) Thus with images of whining, grinding, and wailing, along with terms like 'menace' and 'warning', Eliot builds a strong verbal fabric to stand for the unceasing tale of struggle and pain, insecurity and fear, that is constituted by man's historic encounter with ravaging time.

We are, however, concerned with a struggle whose dimensions extend farther still. We may note that 'howl' and 'yelp' and 'whine' of *DS* 26, 27, and 28, are the voices of a Dog – and consequently, maybe, of a God. That is to say, they re-echo the threat of the 'monsters' (Hound of the Baskervilles or Hound of Heaven? See pp. 56–7) which 'menaced' our way (*EC* 92) in *East Coker* II, as the wave here brings its divinely paradoxical 'menace and caress' (*DS* 29). The fuller significance of this cluster of connected hints and echoes, carried indirectly but unmistakably in the secondary overtones of the text, will emerge only if we take into account the line to follow in Movement V,

> 'To report the behaviour of the sea monster' (*DS* 185).

In drawing out the full content of this allusion it will be appropriate to quote a paragraph from the *Hampshire Chronicle* of 29 June 1968. Under the heading, *150 Years Ago*, an interesting item is salvaged from the débris of the past – the issue of 29 June 1818.

> '*London* – Captain Woodward, and the mate and seamen of the schooner 'Adamant' which arrived at Hingham on Sunday last from Penobscot saw in the afternoon of the previous day, about twelve leagues east of the Cape Ann, a sea-serpent, apparently upwards of 100 feet long which frequently raised its head a considerable height from the water. It was very near the vessel for about five hours; a full view was had of it, and it appeared to be about as large as a barrel but no

> protrudances were noticed. It was fired at and appeared irritated by the explosion. Depositions were preparing at Hingham to be sent to Boston for publication.'

That the sea off Cape Ann should be the scene of a reported appearance of a sea monster establishes a link between already related clusters of overtones all hinting at that intermittently audible challenge of the preternatural or the supernatural which fitfully disturbs our waking or half-wakeful consciousness, especially when we are 'lying awake' (*DS* 40) 'between midnight and dawn' (*DS* 43).

Eliot presses farther the blended threat of the elementally natural and the incursive supernatural which always menaces our daily course of living and partly living in his richly suggestive symbolic treatment of the bell, which rings its warning from the reef to safeguard seamen who may be lost in the fog. For the bell, like a voice from outside time, speaks to us of a steady rhythm deeper than the breaking and bluster of wave and wind. The bell becomes an important symbol for the rest of this movement and its significance is carried over into the succeeding movement. It will help the reader if we anticipate what is to follow by identifying at least one of the correspondences which the symbol of the bell gradually gathers. The bell is the bell which will toll our deaths (*DS* 66). Thus the bell measures a time older than clock-time: it marks off measurements much bigger than those which sleepless women count off as they listen to striking clocks during the night; for it marks off life from death, the temporal from the eternal. The bell tolled by the groundswell, therefore, represents an 'unhurried' undercurrent beneath the normal tidal movement of time. (Cf. the word 'unhurried' here with Eliot's use of the word 'hurried', *LG* 86, and our comment on it, p. 143.) Since the word 'groundswell' is used especially of movement caused by distant storm or even seismic disturbance, it is especially appropriate to signify those indications of cataclysmic (or revelatory) temporal/eternal 'intersection' which may be experienced when we are withdrawn from hearing the usual

clamour of history's 'sea voices'. In this connection, notice that Eliot uses the word 'ground' later with overtones from Julian of Norwich (the divine Ground – 'the ground of our beseeching', *LG* 199). Here the emphasis seems to be on the bell's reminder to *us* that we must each die.

But that emphasis is not exclusive. Through the night, like anxious women, we worry over the future and re-trace the past. The words 'unweave, unwind, unravel' echo Joyce and show that Penelope was in Eliot's mind. Penelope, waiting for the return of her lost husband, Ulysses, put off the pressing suitors by agreeing to marry one of them when she had finished weaving the shroud for Laertes, Ulysses's father. At nights she unravelled what she had woven during the day. The apparent reference to Penelope coincides with previous recollections of Ulysses (*DS* 24). Moreover the scene of Sir John Davies' poem, *Orchestra* (see pp. 17–18) is set at Penelope's court. The argument that the dance is the principle of all order, harmony, and culture is voiced by Antinous the suitor, and addressed to Penelope in the attempt to persuade her to join in. Joyce's Penelope, of course, weaving and unweaving her mental fabric of past and future during the quiet hours of the night, breaks off to count the strokes of St George's clock. Thus into the image of human beings hearing the fearful reminder of mortality there is here compressed the notion of fobbing off a challenge by delaying tactics. The Penelopes here, waiting for the Great Wanderer's Return, have something in common with the Women of Canterbury. Sexual and spiritual overtones blend in the choruses of *Murder in the Cathedral* (there is more to be said about this on pp. 175 ff.), establishing a relationship which needs to be taken into account in reading *Four Quartets*.

We have not yet done with the unweaving, for Eliot's personal pilgrimage back from St Louis to Massachusetts, to England, to East Coker (and to the might-have-been Burnt Norton) represented an attempt to 'unweave, unwind, unravel/And piece together the past and the future', and, in *East Coker*, it was 'between midnight and dawn' that he

watched his dream-picture of the Eliot ancestry dancing round the fire (*EC* 25 ff.). That 'the past is all deception' (*DS* 43) in this period of 'dim light' (*BN* 92 ff.) 'before the morning watch' (*DS* 44), which is neither day nor night (neither daylight 'investing form with lucid stillness' nor 'darkness to purify the soul', *BN* 92 and 96) we have already understood. But Eliot is full of paradoxes. There are deceptions and deceptions. The 'deception of the thrush' (*BN* 22) proved a fruitful one to follow: the deceptions practised upon us by our elders (*EC* 75) proved ultimately powerless to deceive.

However, the elaborate symbolic construction *concealed here gradually acquires a sharpness and distinctness as we move towards the second and climactic sound of the bell. Eliot has taken the superstition that a mysterious bell is heard at sea when disaster approaches. He has blended this with the image of the 'groundswell' which also foretells danger. By playing with the ambiguity of the word 'ground' (the Divine Ground 'that is and was from the beginning' *DS* 46) he has once more associated the symbols of distant and approaching menace with the challenge of the Supernatural that men dimly sense in those moments of sudden insecurity, when the habitual support of the familiar and the routine is withdrawn. Time and again, in order to instance this kind of moment, Eliot uses the experience of sleeplessness in the middle of the night, when time seems to stand still, when brooding makes the past look disillusioning and the future hopeless. The echo in line 43 of Psalm 130 ('My soul fleeth unto the Lord: before the morning watch, I say, before the morning watch') is richly appropriate. The psalm begins, 'Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord'. The threat here comes from 'the deep', and the following lyric is perhaps Eliot's most moving cry *de profundis*.

* See App. III, 3 for further multi-dimensional readings.

II

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing

As in the corresponding lyrical sections opening the second movements of *Burnt Norton* and *East Coker*, the feeling is here conveyed that a distinct and acute personal experience lies behind the suggestive imagery. The reader cannot escape the impression that this lyric deals with the poet's assimilation of a real calamity – an '*agony*' as intense as the moments of joyful illumination previously recorded.

The bell foretelling death is now established as a symbol marking the point of intersection of the timeless with time. It announces our mortality. But the bell is used by the Church on other occasions than the funereal. It is used daily to ring the *Angelus* and recall the Annunciation – the angelic announcement to the Virgin Mary that she was to be the mother of the Saviour. This Annunciation, pointing to the divine Incarnation, heralds the archetypal historic intersection of the timeless with time. The established association of the Virgin Mary with the sea makes her presence in the background of the *Dry Salvages* as fitting as the presence of Christ in the background of *East Coker*, where the theme of Our Lord's suffering in the flesh was appropriate to the dominant concern with the element earth and man's rootedness in it. The association between water and the feminine is of course a constant with the symbolists. The Virgin is directly addressed only in Movement IV, but her presence is felt here in the repeated use of the word 'annunciation', in the specific reference to her response to the Angel Gabriel (*DS* 84), and perhaps in the shape of the lyric. (Each pair of lines appears to represent one toll of the bell. Three threes and a nine are rung for the *Angelus*.)

The *Angelus*, like the death bell, brings the sudden challenge of the temporal-eternal relationship before us. It is perhaps relevant to add, in view of the direct references to the Eucharist in *EC* IV, that a bell is rung in the sanctuary (and sometimes in the tower) to mark the moments of

Consecration. The point at which bread and wine are declared the Body and Blood of Christ is clearly another point of intersection of the timeless with time (cf. *BN* 87).

As is the case with the corresponding lyrical passages in *Burnt Norton* and *East Coker* it is impossible to know the autobiographical detail behind these moving stanzas, yet the note of personal authenticity is unmistakable. The particularity does not perhaps matter; the personal authenticity does. We seem to hear speaking a middle-aged man from whom the possibilities of joyful and revelatory emotional life are dropping steadily away, like falling petals, while he remains 'motionless'. The emphasis is upon a drying-up of life's positive promises, which is faced in a mood of deathlike immobility and unresponsiveness. The total and overpowering nature of the defeat or disaster is such that it leaves one incapable of emotional resistance (even the wailing is 'soundless') and likewise incapable of submission to Providence by prayer. The sense of loss imaged by the 'drifting wreckage' and the 'bone on the beach' combines associations of defeat and bereavement, which strip the spirit bare of worthwhile possession, interest, or bodily delight. (In view of later, unmistakable allusions to Shelley, it is difficult for the reader who is acquainted with Trelawny's recollections of Shelley and Byron to avoid thinking of Shelley's end when reading lines 52–3. Cf. pp. 99 and 143. There are praying bones, however, in *Ash Wednesday* II which take us back to *Ezekiel*. To follow this particular link would lead us, as so often in tracing Eliot's allusions, to a complex network of related literary references.)

There is no end, but addition

Stricken by calamity which he cannot immediately assimilate in prayer, the poet finds no 'end' – no purpose and no cessation – in what remains. He is himself for a time in that fettered condition upon which judgement has so often been passed in this poem. He exists temporarily in servitude to mere succession. The prospect before him is of meaningless

'addition', hour to hour and day to day, requiring him to adjust himself by atrophy of emotional sensitivities to a continuity of empty existence, surrounded by shattered hopes. The things he most trusted in have been taken away from him. The logic of this is sadly noted: they were the things most fitting to be removed if he was to be disciplined to 'renunciation'.

There is the final addition

It is characteristic of Eliot's poetic practice that a neat philosophical distinction should be made at the very climax of this deeply emotional lament. In the stricken life, a man cannot look for an 'end' (which word always implies roundedness and purpose in this poem). Rather he foresees only the 'final addition', the last stage in the successive running-down of existence. This appears to be the final decay of emotional responsiveness, when even pride dies, so that one cannot even resent the fading of one's own capacities. One reaches a stage of negative detachment when devotion is so devoid of objective as to be virtually non-existent. The image of the last days before death is of a man drifting in a leaky boat, waiting for the dismal call of the death bell.

Where is the end of them, the fishermen sailing

With the end of the three threefold chimes and the beginning of the ninefold chime there is an appropriate turn in the thought. Up to this point we seem to have been listening to a personal lament on the loss of hope and the gradual approach of death. After this point we are looking out more impersonally on the lives of men in general, seeing them as fishermen continually setting out on their voyages and asking what is the 'end' (purpose and conclusion) of their continual toil. What do their lives *mean*? The efforts and risks of men's ceaseless toil to survive are pressed upon us in the images of the wind's tail and the cowering fog. Surveying the continuing struggle, we find it impossible to conceive of

true end or conclusiveness on this level of thought. That is to say, as long as we stick to the idiom of succession, seeing history in terms of continuity and addition, we shall never arrive at a rounded meaning. Rather we shall look out on an oceanlike stretch of time littered with the relics and waste of the past, and foresee a future that has no finality. There will be no point of 'destination' at which purpose and conclusiveness will be realised. (The word 'destination' contains a play on the word 'destiny'.)

We have to think of them as forever bailing

So long as we conceive of time (or history) as a great ocean on which the voyage of life takes place – so long, that is to say, as we preserve our familiar concepts of lives as individual progresses-by-succession within a larger field of historic progress-by-succession, we shall be tied to a notion of meaningless, inconclusive repetitiveness. In other words, we shall have to think of men as fishermen who go on and on, struggling against the elements, bailing the water from their boats, hoisting sails, tugging at them to change direction, while the sea's own base remains changeless. One struggle follows another in life, though it is true that there will be intervals of rest and reward on the physical level, just as the fishermen dock, draw money, and dry sails between voyages. But this humanistic thinking in terms of progress-by-succession precludes the more fundamental (and religious) concept of life as a single voyage out of which one is going to make no profit for oneself and from which whatever one gathers is likely to be unfit for 'examination'. The use of the phrase 'making a trip' suggests that the religious view of life is in one sense a less solemn view than the humanistic one. One takes oneself and one's career – one's earthly well-being – less seriously. It also suggests that the main purpose of life is not to get something out of it. Life is not comparable to a money-making voyage. The voyager is not going to be paid in accordance with what he has made. (We are near to the message of the parable of the labourers in

the vineyard here.) And in so far as one does accumulate something by earthly experience, what one thus acquires will not stand divine scrutiny at the end.

There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing

The last stanza reintroduces the more personal and individual note of the first three stanzas. The 'them' of *DS* 67 and 73 are no longer in the forefront of the mind but the 'it' of *DS* 49 and 79, and Eliot stresses 'is' in reading *DS* 79. On the level of the natural (for that is where the image of withering flowers places us) there is no 'end' (neither purpose, cessation, nor conclusiveness) to the human experience of pain and failure and decay. The paradoxical phrase 'movement of pain that is painless and motionless' defines the misery of life on the natural, humanistic level in terms of decisive negativity. The suffering whose correlative is apathy contrasts sharply with the fruitful sufferings of sacrifice and self-discipline. The one-way movement of decay, whose correlative is immobility, contrasts sharply with the patterned dance whose centre is a point of still intensity. Similarly the 'drift of the sea' is towards no discernible point of repose or conclusiveness. And it is necessary to make clear again at this stage how careful Eliot is to avoid a one-sided denigration of the natural. Here, in a lyric concerned to stress the inadequacy of the natural in itself to satisfy human beings and to provide them with a purpose and meaning of things, the 'drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage' image the meaningless process of haphazardness and decay which one experiences and witnesses within the natural order when emptied of significance from outside itself. But the natural can be filled full of meaning by virtue of the revelatory moments which puncture its framework at the points of intersection of the timeless with time. And therefore we must balance the 'drift of the sea' here against the 'drift of stars' in *Burnt Norton* (*BN* 54). There man's joyful fellowship in the natural – dance in the blood matching dance of the stars – was transfigured in an experience of

positive and joyful illumination. In the *Four Quartets* as a whole the one 'drift' balances the other.

Here, however, the emphasis is upon the ultimate negativity and meaninglessness of the natural-in-itself, untransfigured by illumination. Where the revelatory moments are lacking, there is only the way of obedience and self-discipline. This is the demand which calamity and suffering impose. And the only positive response, which can find meaning at the heart of the apparently meaningless, is that response of complete humility and self-surrender to the apparently impossible demand – the response archetypally represented in the Virgin Mary's reply to the supernatural Annunciation: 'Be it unto me according to thy word.'

It seems, as one becomes older

What has already been said in highly-charged imagery is now repeated in a more conversational and direct idiom. Thus once more the poet starts again, true to his insistence that 'each venture/Is a new beginning' (*EC* 178), 'and every attempt/Is a wholly new start' (*EC* 174–5) and true to what he is even now saying, namely that meaning cannot be found in 'mere sequence'. The naïve view of the past as a prelude to the present, the view which traces pattern in the shape of succession and development is a 'partial fallacy' ('partial' in a double sense – *in part* a fallacy, and a fallacy based on prejudice or *partiality*). The popular mind, infected by ill-digested evolutionary thinking, seizes upon the philosophy of progress and development because it provides an excuse for 'disowning the past' – the historic past and the personal past. 'Disowning' is a packed word, sharply ambiguous. We are tempted to 'disown' the public past, the cultural past (dispossess ourselves of it by cutting ourselves off from tradition) and to 'disown' our private past (fail to 'own' up to it). We have to 'own' both pasts, feeding on the one, repenting of the other.

The poet has already established, but here repeats, that the true pattern of the past is to be found in the gathered

revelatory moments of illumination. These are the moments of happiness – happiness as opposed to sheer physical and emotional satisfaction and well-being experienced through the answering of bodily or psychological need or appetite, like the need for self-expression, success, 'security or affection' (cf. *DS* 11–14). And the moments of happiness do not constitute a pattern through some principle of successive accumulation or aggregation. Indeed, when the moment of happiness has passed we are left, it has been said before, with a sense of 'waste' (*BN* 174). For the memory of the experience remains but its meaning eludes us. Thus the discovery of the 'meaning' is the key to the restoration of the experience. Here we reach the heart of the argument, the point which explains why poetry is necessary, why the *Four Quartets* were written. 'Approach to the meaning restores the experience/In a different form' (*DS* 94–5). To realize the meaning of the experience is not to recover it in the sense of achieving a repetition of the happiness which it brought. Rather to realize the meaning is to *restore* the experience in such a distinctive way that the issue of 'happiness' is transcended. When the past experience is thus 'revived' through arrival at its meaning, the experience (being now 'restored', that is, re-stocked, re-fuelled, re-victualled also) is seen to have gathered to itself the content of comparable experiences in the lives of our ancestors, and indeed carries unfathomable undertones from the remote primeval ages outside the reach of 'recorded history'. It goes without saying that the *Four Quartets*, in realizing the meaning of Eliot's past moments of happiness, have found them enriched by comparable experiences in the lives of his ancestry. And his ancestry is a multiple one. There is, for instance, the family ancestry represented by Sir Thomas Elyot and the poetic ancestry represented by Dante, Milton, and other poets (see *LG* 92 ff.).

Thus far the poet has been recapitulating the argument of *East Coker* V, but now a new twist is given to the argument, bearing on the fact that the *Dry Salvages* records how the

calamitous has to be assimilated. What applies to revelatory moments of happiness applies also to 'moments of agony'. This is so, irrespective of whether the calamities are self-induced to the extent that they spring from our own misunderstanding in hoping for the wrong things or in dreading the wrong things (cf. *EC* 124–5). The implicit inference is that thus to set one's heart on 'things' beneath, not on 'things' above is inevitably to invite providentially corrective discipline: or rather, putting it another way, it is to court inevitably consequential disappointment and disillusionment. (The reiteration of the word 'things', *DS* 106, has a biblical flavour.) Moments of agony have the same kind of 'permanence' as moments of happiness. The illuminations and the agonies are alike part of the recurring experience of the individual and of the human race. We can distinguish the pattern of meaningful recurrence more clearly in the agony of others who are close to us, and in whose suffering we therefore share, than in our own private calamities. Thoughtful reflection on our own personal sufferings is difficult because our own past experience of suffering is entangled with what we did, why we did it, and what resulted from it. In other words, remembered (and much brooded over) 'currents of action' blur the clarity of our past sufferings from our own eyes. But the calamities of others, whom we have personally known, can be disentangled from the subsequent trail of regret and remorse. Individuals recover from the shocks that have overwhelmed them and learn to smile again; but the agony they have undergone remains for us who know them as an ineradicable fact of their being. In this sense 'time the destroyer is time the preserver'. (The phrase echoes Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, 'Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!' See pp. 93 and 143 for other Shelleyan echoes.) The river of time carries its load of lumber – the relics of past calamities. (It carries them away, time the destroyer; but it *carries* them, time the preserver.) And among the refuse of the calamitous past, along with the floating Negro corpses, 'cows and chicken

coops' (with the tale of human cruelty and waste which they tell) there is carried the bitter and bitten apple; perhaps the apple of discord thrown into the assembly of the gods, which set in motion the train of events behind the Fall of Troy, and therefore behind the long struggle of Aeneas to recover the past and restore the fallen city (the burnt city); certainly the apple in the Garden of Eden, whose biting was the first archetypal act of human wickedness. Thus indeed the apple is itself a fragment from 'behind the assurance/Of recorded history' (*DS* 101).

The idea of the Fall, which the symbol of the apple introduces, is crucial to our understanding of the poem as a whole. In order to explore it we must cast our eyes backwards and forwards. At the end of *Little Gidding* we learn that the tree in the *Burnt Norton* garden in which the children are hiding is an apple tree (*LG* 248), and the paradisal status of the garden is reinforced. Thus the meaning of the allusion here to the 'bitter apple' is fully realizable only by reference back to the beginning of the first *Quartet* and forward to the end of the last *Quartet*. As we gradually approach 'the meaning' of the *Burnt Norton* experience, we hit on the recovered past which it contains, the past which belongs to Eliot's ancestry and the past which belongs to the whole human race. The *Burnt Norton* garden represented the might-have-been order of unbroken family life which generations of Eliots would have enjoyed had there been no religious and civil strife and subsequent emigration. Likewise it represented the Paradise from which human generations were ejected by the Fall of Man. The modern European-American's upbringing is, for poetic purposes, that of an 'alien' in a strange land, and therefore symbolic of man's upbringing on an earth shut off from ancient hierarchy and primal innocence. Every aspect of man's alienation, homelessness, and rootlessness is thus explored conjointly in this poem: and by 'every aspect' one means the religious, the historic, the racial, and the personal.

It is necessary to do full justice to the symbol of the apple

here because the symbol in the next line is closely related to it. The 'rock' in the sea of time is of course the Church. The adjective 'ragged' is powerful. It refers no doubt to the unattractive roughness of the Church's exterior and probably also to the Church's superficial poverty, in that it suggests rags; but it also seems to echo Donne's *Good Friday, Riding Westward* where Christ's crucified flesh is described as 'ragged and torn'. (The seeming echo is worth noting because the poem contains usages of 'hurried', 'whirled', and 'restore' which appear to be echoed in *Four Quartets*.) The image of the rock, we are suggesting, carries the blended paradoxical associations of temporal threat and eternal security ('menace and caress', we might say) which are characteristic of Eliot's imagery of divine agencies and impulses as they intrude upon our steady routines. When we are confronted with the 'ruinous spring' beating at our closed doors in *Murder in the Cathedral* or with the 'ragged rock' in these 'restless waters' in which life's voyages are made, then we face that which 'itself the greatest destructive agony, constitutes the greatest preservation – the symbol of the perfected meaning, the eternal stability', as Grover Smith* says of this image. In fairweather times of prosperity and maximum calm the Church is 'merely a monument', something pleasant to look at perhaps, but useless. In navigable weather it serves as 'a seamark to lay a course by', providing guidance for those who choose to have regard to it, and perhaps appropriately defining the turning-points of life (with Christenings, Marriages, and Burials). As so often, one does not know quite how much to read into the correspondence, but the note of guidance and salvation is further strengthened if we pick up the hint of *Coriolanus* V, iii, 75 –

> 'Like a great sea-mark standing every flaw
> And saving those that eye thee!'

In times of suffering or of sudden calamity it 'is what it always was' – the indefinable destroyer and preserver.

* *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, p. 280.

The echo of *Coriolanus* must be related to other Shakespearean echoes hereabouts and elsewhere. Many of them are so slight in themselves as to make it seem improper at any given point to try to derive significance from them (cf., for instance the 'yellow leaves' of *DS* 128 and Macbeth's 'my way of life/Is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf', *Macbeth* V, iii, 23–4), but we are dealing with a poet whose every syllable is weighed and with a poem in which meaning is to be found by the gathering in of scattered hints. Thus in *The Dry Salvages* generally the clanging 'bell' of *DS* 48, in close proximity to the image of sleepless women (*DS* 39) and to the word 'unravel' (*DS* 41 – cf. 'sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care', *Macbeth* II, ii, 36) probably represents an intentional addition from *Macbeth* to the number of presences about us – an addition which we shall perhaps have to take even more directly into account when the theme of the murdered or martyred king is articulated in *Little Gidding* (see p. 166). Meantime a more immediate concern is the apparent echoing of *Hamlet* in the phrase 'currents of action' (*DS* 111, cf. 'their currents turn awry and lose the name of action', *Hamlet* III, i, 87) and in the emphatic phrase 'and smile' (*DS* 114) to which we shall return later (see p. 167). Alongside the hint of *Coriolanus* already referred to (*DS* 121), these hints of *Hamlet*, and the probable hint of *Othello* in the allusion to 'dead negroes' (*DS* 116), together represent a faintly detectable cluster which performs at least three functions. In the first place, like the image of the apple, it involves the problem of evil with the problem of suffering. In the second place, it peoples the poem, adding faces, as it were, to the anonymous sufferers whose agony we share and learn from, and thirdly it strengthens the sustained parallelism between the experience of poetry and the experience of life.

III

I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna Meant

There is reference here to thc Hindu scriptures, the *Bhagavad-Gita.* Krishna exhorts Arjuna to acquire disinterestedness. Man must always act as if there were to be no tomorrow. The advice coincides with Eliot's warnings against living for the future and justifying actions according to their results. ('You argue by results, as this world does.' *Murder in the Cathedral.*)

The images here used to represent the future seem to have been chosen in order to put the future on a par with the past. Because the future is inside a book that has not yet been opened, because it is unknown, we idealize it, just as we idealize the past. The future we picture is in fact a sentimentalized future on a par with the sentimentalized past which is cherished in faded songs and souvenirs. The implication is that just as the past, represented by the heraldic emblem (the 'Royal Rose') or the dresses preserved in a drawer with a lavender spray (public past and private past: in the latter case the associations suggest a wedding dress), is a dream past, so likewise our contemplated future is a dream future, imaged with the same kind of nostalgia and melancholy with which we preserve our treasured souvenirs of the past. Wistful thoughts of future and past alike are directed to those who are not here at present. Whether they are not here because they have gone or because they have not yet come makes little difference. The word 'regret' could properly be used either of reminiscence or of anticipation, either of the past (with its might-have-beens) or of the future (with its might-bes). The centrality of the present is again established.

The centrality of the temporal present is inevitably represented by spatial imagery. Our terminology of the temporal has a spatial character. To speak of the 'philosophy of *progress*' is to employ a concept denoting movement in space. Eliot makes clear here, as elsewhere, that the full weight of

spatial reference is relevant when speaking of the centrality of the present. He presses the full signification of the circularity symbol upon us once more. The way up and the way down are the same. They are the same because, for Eliot, centrality is not just an intellectual position (*vis à vis* the philosophy of progress) and a cultural position (*vis à vis* the poetic tradition and the need for perpetual 'recovery'); it is also a moral position (*vis à vis* the selfish obsession with anticipated future or regretted past), and a spiritual position (*vis à vis* the claims of 'the World': see *Murder in the Cathedral passim*). The Way of Affirmation and the Way of Negation are one way. The way of given illumination and the way of self-discipline are one way. All this, and more, is implicit in the single line,

> 'And the way up is the way down, the way forward
> is the way back.'

which might be used to exemplify the packed character of Eliot's cultivated surface 'vagueness'. His most transparent generalities direct the mind to a rich multiplicity of parallels and correspondences. No reader should imagine that he has exhausted them. We have certainly not yet here fully explored the content of this particular line. No doubt, in its moral implications, 'the way forward is the way back' is also a statement about the need for and the nature of repentance, while in its professional poetic implications it might be said to be perfectly illustrated in the fact that Eliot's craftsmanship achieves its maturest expression by drawing upon the resources of past poets. Again, it might be taken too as a direction on the proper way to understand *Four Quartets*; and of course its personal biographical implications seem to be evident in the long pilgrimage from St Louis to the village of East Coker.

Eliot admits the difficulty of trying steadily to 'face' the cluster of paradoxes which his doctrine of the centrality of the present comprehends. Therefore he selects one instance especially relevant in view of the emphasis upon personal

calamity in Movement II of this *Quartet*. 'Time is no healer' because 'the patient is no longer there'. We are reminded that the river of time is 'destroyer' as well as 'preserver' (*DS* 115). What time carries it carries away. We are also reminded of the hospital imagery of *East Coker* II. If 'the whole earth is our hospital' (*EC* 157) then indeed it is obvious that the earth's inmates (Staff apart!) will be patients. When the wounded surgeon has finished with us, we shall have died 'of the absolute paternal care' (*EC* 160). You do not find healed patients in hospitals. Eliot's sentence is something more than the inversion of a platitude into a paradoxical counter-platitude, partly because of the network of correspondences into which it fits and partly because of the further philosophical overtones carried by the word 'patient' – a word which Eliot elaborated richly in *Murder in the Cathedral*:

> 'They know and do not know that acting is suffering
> And suffering is action. Neither does the actor suffer
> Nor the patient act . . .'
>
> (*Murder in the Cathedral*, p. 22).

Thus Eliot's statement is not just a statement about the nature of time (that, in spite of its passing, 'the agony abides', *DS* 114), but a statement about the nature of true healing – and indeed of true action – both of which are out of time (see *Murder in the Cathedral* again:

> 'It is not in time that my death shall be known;
> It is out of time that my decision is taken
> If you call that my decision
> To which my whole being gives entire consent.'
>
> – Thomas's words, p. 79).

In so far as the patient is healed he is out of time. And in so far as he is healed he has ceased to be under treatment. No longer being operated upon, he has yielded his entire being in consent to the 'absolute paternal care' (*EC* 160) of which the patient dies. This is the only way in which we can 'do well' (*EC* 159).

Two further images are used for the purpose of dispelling self-deceptive attitudes to time (and progress). The first image, that of the train journey, has obvious links with *Burnt Norton* III and *East Coker* III. The passengers carry with them 'fruit, periodicals and business letters', the clutter and the future litter of tube and road and river (cf. 'Men and bits of paper', *BN* 104, and 'The bitter apple and the bite in the apple', *DS* 117). Though the journey offers 'relief' after the grief of parting, it cannot provide a symbol of true peace for the relief is a negative surrender to the drugged sleepiness of the measured hours beaten out by the mechanically rhythmic motion of the train. It is a shallow 'relief' which is purchased by indulging the false notion that one is escaping from the past (and its 'grief') and moving into a future which will be different. The sense of freedom thus purchased is illusory, for the idea of enjoying a present suspended in sabbatical respite between firm past ('that station') and even firmer future ('any terminus') is untenable. For one thing 'the narrowing rails slide together behind you'. The image takes us back to other images in which enslavement to selfish desire and temporality is similarly represented ('the world moves/In appetency, on its metalled ways', *BN* 124–5). The temporal journey, conceived in terms of escaping the past and riding cheerfully into the future, is made under compulsion (cf. *EC* 18, 'And the deep lane insists on the direction'). There is no continuity of identity between the imaginary self now *en route* and the self that left the past and will arrive at a future. This is because the journeying consciousness (suspended between the 'time before' and the 'time after', *BN* 91, supposedly moving 'from' and 'towards' *BN* 63) is not a true consciousness.

The second image, that of the voyage by liner, reinforces the first. The sense of mechanically determined movement is present again in the word 'drumming'. The word is powerfully suggestive, not only recalling the noise of the engines, but also subtly linking this voyage with the progress of family history whose picturesque image was conjured up by

the 'weak pipe and the little drum' in *East Coker* (*EC* 26) and with a later reminder that we must not enslave ourselves to the historic process ('We cannot restore old policies/Or follow an antique drum', *LG* 186). The voice 'descanting' in the rigging (and thereby distinguishable from 'the whine in the rigging', *DS* 28, which is a voice heard clearly within historic time) is mysteriously above what the ear can hear (the 'murmuring shell of time'). The quality of this timeless, languageless utterance links it with the 'unheard music hidden in the shrubbery' of the paradisal garden in *Burnt Norton* (*BN* 27) and with the 'music heard so deeply/That it is not heard at all' in *Dry Salvages* (*DS* 210). What this voice from outside time has to say is again that to conceive a present in which one is *en route* from past to future is self-deception. The self thus artificially withdrawn from the temporal sequence in contemplation of supposed past past and supposed future future is an imaginary self, for 'you are not those who saw the harbour/Receding, or those who will disembark' (*DS* 150–1). But there is nevertheless a possibility of realized identity and true consciousness 'between the hither and the farther shore' (*DS* 152). If one is prepared to regard past and future 'with an equal mind', in detachment from all backward regret or forward desire, all sense of escape or of anticipation, and to accept in the present the eternal decisiveness of the present (as containing past and future), then one can receive the truth which validates the voyage through time. This truth is expressed in Krishna's words. The thought which treats the present moment as though it were the moment of death is doubly authentic in that every moment is the time of death (our only way of doing well, *EC* 159–60), and that the realization of this thought is the only fruitful action men are capable of. Not that one must realize this thought *because* it will be fruitful for others, for so to subordinate the present to results (and therefore to the future) is to cancel out by contradiction the very act of freedom from temporal enchainment in which one is engaged. Man must be purely 'intent' on that 'sphere'

of being by which he is freed from servitude to successiveness. (One is reminded of Kierkegaard's dictum, that 'purity of heart is to will one thing'.)

O Voyagers, O Seamen

The effect of the break in the paragraphing at this point and of the direct address to voyagers and seamen is not only to add emphasis but also to shift the appeal on to a more personal level. Time after time in the poem Eliot adopts this device of making a 'fresh start' in a different voice. The fresh start is usually made in phrases which introduce a new degree of familiarity or intimacy at a point where fluency may have produced a sense of habituation that needs to be broken. The device is thus the poetic equivalent of re-personalizing one's conversation by breaking into one's own explanation, putting one's hand on to the hearer's shoulders and claiming fresh attention by a warmer approach. It establishes, at least for a moment, a sense of deepened personal contact and intensified sincerity.

In this particular case the device is especially potent for two other reasons. In the first place Movement III began on a ruminative, almost casual note, and only gradually has reflection ripened into exhortation. This new paragraph marks, as it were, the full accumulation of gradually gathered earnestness. In the second place, the words 'Voyagers' and 'seamen' direct the exhortation at those whose struggles and suffering were the subject of Movement II. The reader feels that a circuit is completed as the thought moves from acute personal distress, at the beginning of Movement II, through various stages of reflection and generalization, back to the personal situation, having gathered a word of wisdom on the way. In particular another answer is here given to the question asked in the fourth stanza of the lyric:

> 'Where is the end of them, the fishermen sailing
> Into the wind's tail, where the fog cowers?'
>
> (*DS* 67–8)

with its complaint that we cannot think of a future

> 'that is not liable
> Like the past to have no destination.'
>
> (*DS* 71–2)

The 'real destination' here promised is not a local destination, for Eliot uses the word in its less usual sense, 'the end or purpose for which a person or thing is destined' (see *Oxford Dictionary*). Thus the 'real destination' is the same whether one comes to port or suffers 'the trial and judgement of the sea'. It is to achieve detachment, faring disinterestedly forward without the selfish concern to 'fare well'.

IV

Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory

This lyric is rich in symbolic overtones. Some of them, however, are delicately sounded and the mere business of identifying them is apt to irritate because of the exaggeration inevitable in giving them the status of the articulate. With this proviso one may note that the Virgin Mary's central role in a poem whose subject is the need for obedient submission before the great annunciations which impose costly demands upon men and women is obvious and appropriate; but the filling out of this role so as to give it the maximum richness and universality while yet avoiding the temptation to versify dogmatic propaganda tests the poet sharply. Few people would deny that Eliot's magnificence depends greatly on the poetic skill which he brought to the resolution of this problem.

That the Virgin's shrine 'stands on the promontory' carries rich overtones. It reminds us that the Virgin's place (historic and philosophic) is at the point where the land, whose soil is the nourishment and end of life in the flesh, juts out into the waters, whose nearer waves are the waves of time but whose farther reaches represent the sea of eternity.

In asking the Virgin to pray 'for all those who are in ships', the poet seems to be making a generalized plea for all suffering and struggling people (men especially: see next stanza), but the three following lines (*DS* 171–3) appear to hint at a systematic categorization of people. Those whose 'business has to do with fish' (*DS* 171) would seem to refer to the Church. The word 'fish' has previously carried something like the symbolic overtones it carries in Joyce's *Ulysses* (see *BN* 134, *DS* 19). The word 'business', here as earlier (*EC* 189), recalls our Lord's words on the need to be about his 'father's business' and also the psalmist's 'They that go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in great waters . . .' (cf. *DS* 179). Those 'concerned with every lawful traffic' obviously constitute the world of commerce and industry; while those who 'conduct them' are presumably those who govern and administer. Thus the three estates of Church, Industry, and Government seem to be referred to.

Repeat a prayer also

The Virgin was addressed in the first stanza as our 'Lady', in her universal and historic capacity as the agent of the Incarnation standing at the central point of intersection of the timeless with time. Hence the appropriateness of the generalized prayers for all in their human and larger public capacities. In this stanza the Virgin is addressed as the Mater Dolorosa, the sorrowing Mother, daughter of her own Son, who is yet 'Queen of Heaven'. The prayer now is for women, who bear the suffering of bereavement as work or war deprives them of sons or husbands.

The conciseness and clarity of the naming of the Virgin, in a poem so characterized by unuttered words, resounds with a sudden mysterious profundity. The emphatic definition of the Virgin's paradoxical role, as the most human daughter of the divine Son and the Queen of Heaven, itself sharply elucidates the end and destination to which the poem's exploratory hints and guesses, sudden illuminations and discursive speculations, are all alike leading, and fore-

shadows the coming utterance of the word 'Incarnation' in the next movement (*DS* 215). Moreover, the use of Dante's phrase, 'Figlia del tuo figlio' (*DS* 177), by its directness and explicitness, injects into the poem a concentrated infusion of allusive overtones of a kind which oblique and less readily identifiable literary echoes establish only gradually. The technical point is important because the distinction between a diluted and a concentrated infusion of poetic correspondence is parallel to the distinction between the fitful, particular, experiential hints of an eternal intersecting a temporal order, and the decisive archetypal act of divine Incarnation of which the Virgin Mary is the instrument. What is hinted at in man's intermittent glimpses of the eternal, the sudden shafts of sunlight momentarily transfiguring the world, is rendered fully articulate in the incarnation of God in man. Similarly, we may say, what is hinted at in every poetic citation of time momentarily transcended by a glimpse of beauty or of love is rendered fully articulate at the poetic level in Dante's full-scale exploration of the Affirmative Way, when christianly understood, and as elucidated by Charles Williams, for whose work Eliot always had an immense enthusiasm.

In the corresponding movements of *East Coker* and *Little Gidding* we arrive at Christ and at the Holy Spirit, the redeeming crucified Saviour and the descending Dove, as the divine Agents of recovery and restoration through suffering and through fire (still operating institutionally in mass and absolution, through sacrament and apostolic succession). In this movement the figure of the Virgin Mary is before us as the one whose Annunciation is the pattern of all human vocations to self-sacrifice, whose obedient response should be the pattern of all human responses to vocational demands. She is also by implication the archetypal representative of all that is affirmatively granted in the experience of love, beauty, and creativity. Because she is Dante's Virgin she introduces decisively into the poem the doctrine of the Beatrician Way, the theology of love with which those who share Eliot's

enthusiasm for Charles Williams will be familiar (see *The Figure of Beatrice* and *He Came Down from Heaven*).

In this connection it should be noted that St Bernard's prayer for Dante the poet when, like the poet of *The Dry Salvages*, he has reached the point of maximum need and supplication, as it begins with the line here quoted, *Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio*, soon moves to the significant image –

> 'Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'amore
> per lo cui caldo nell' eterna pace
> così è germinato questo fiore.'
>
> (*Par.* XXXIII, 7–9.)

(Within your womb the love was made to burn again, by whose warmth in the eternal peace this flower has bloomed.)

The dominance of the Virgin in *The Dry Salvages* thus throws back upon the unfolding flower of the *Burnt Norton* garden the associations of a Virgin-born Divinity, and further enriches the central incarnational significance of the symbolic rose. (It must be understood that in thus elaborating the lyrical prayer to the Virgin we rely not only on what the poet has already said, but on what he has yet to say, notably in *DS* V and *LG* V.)

Also pray for those who were in ships

The final prayer is for those who have come to a disastrous end by accident or violence, in peace or war, whether on shore, or sea's edge, or out in the deep. The date of composition makes it likely that wartime deaths of sailors and airmen are especially in mind, but in view of what follows, the wartime reference must not be regarded as exclusive. For here perhaps we first suspect that those 'on the deck of the drumming liner' (*DS* 142), warned not to think of a future before them, may be on a doomed vessel. Thus the night voice 'in the rigging and the aerial' (*DS* 146) which speaks 'not to the ear' and 'not in any language' (*DS* 147–8), is also a radio S.O.S. in morse. For identification of the vessel as the *Titanic* see App. III, 4.

The correspondence between the fourth movements of *East Coker*, *The Dry Salvages*, and *Little Gidding* is now unmistakable. The three lyrics speak of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Holy Spirit respectively. As *East Coker* IV ends with the image of the sacramental food and drink, the body and blood of Christ, broken and shed on Good Friday, so *The Dry Salvages* IV ends here with the sound of the perpetual *Angelus*, and the two ceremonies in which points of intersection of the timeless with time are institutionally recorded themselves provide instances of that practice of 'recovery' which Eliot seems to recommend equally in the spheres of poetic composition and of religious life. Eliot's achievement of a harmonious blend in his cultural and religious thought and practice must be noted whether or not one can sympathize with his views.

The endings of Movements I and IV of this Quartet, considered together

> 'Clangs
> The bell' (*DS* 47–8)

and

> 'the sea bell's
> Perpetual Angelus' (*DS* 182–3)

strangely recall

> 'the tolling bell's perpetual clang'

of Walt Whitman's threnody on the death of Lincoln, *When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed* (already echoed in *DS* 12). The fact that the poet (Whitman) listens in this poem to the song of the thrush (who sings a song to Death) and that he emphasizes death's healing power over the combatants in the Civil War makes Eliot's echo a notable one.

The allusiveness of the imagery in this lyric gradually extends the range of reference. By imposing on obvious contemporary references to deaths in the Second World War (*DS* 180–1) the memory of the American Civil War, Eliot has once more peopled his poem, this time especially with a

vast concourse of suffering women who have shared the agony of the Virgin Mary in the loss of their menfolk. The phrase

> 'who have seen their sons and husbands
> Setting forth' (*DS* 175–6)

echoes Donne's *Good Friday, Riding Westward*,

> 'There I should see a Sun by rising set
> And by that setting endless day beget.'

The association is a rich one, packed with relevance. Sharing in the suffering of others has brought us, as readers, into the company of the Virgin Mary who is waiting at the foot of the Cross till the black cloud carries her Son away (see *BN* 128): but that is only half the story, as the quotation from Donne implies. By that 'setting' of the Sun 'endless day' is begotten, so the cloud which carries away both the Son and the sun (at nightfall) will no more have power to 'bury the day' (or the Dayspring) of *BN* 127. (After the multifarious exploitations of the word 'end', readers may well consider that 'endless day' is a rich addition to the unspoken words of *Four Quartets*.) The Virgin into whose company we have come is not only the sorrowing Mother, she is also the Queen of Heaven (*DS* 178) in the garden of whose womb the eternal flower was made to bloom, and who grants to the suppliant poet the brief glimpse of the Beatific Vision. Perhaps we can now fully understand why Eliot introduced into *Burnt Norton* I an echo of *Andrea del Sarto* (36). Andrea too watches the sun set, as 'autumn grows, autumn in everything', and listens to the chapel bell, dreaming of the might-have-been past and of the 'Four great walls in the New Jerusalem', and staring at the city of Florence. And it is the painter Andrea's Virgin 'who is his wife'. The Joycean complexity of the network of allusions and cross-references (involving Dante, Donne, and Browning) is a revealing instance of Eliot's poetic method at this stage. The total effect of its emergence at this point of the poem is to throw backward upon the garden revelation of *Burnt Norton* I and for-

ward upon the concluding vision of *Little Gidding* V glimpses of the transfigured City from *Revelations* in the form of the mystical Bride adorned for her Royal Spouse.

V

To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits

At the beginning of the last movements of the other three *Quartets* Eliot is concerned with the search for meaning and pattern in art, music, literature (the organization of words), and poetry especially. In each case the poet recognizes that the pattern established by the artist is a valid expression of the way in which pattern and meaning can be derived from experience of life. Indeed the poet's work in garnering the harvest of revelatory moments in his own life, seeing their supra-temporal inter-relatedness, first with what precedes and what succeeds them in his own personal experience, and then with the gathered intensities, the past- and future-packed 'presents' of former poets' lives – as figured and alive in their own masterpieces – is an instance of that process of self-transcending 'recovery' by which all life, alike at the personal, religious, cultural, and historical levels, can be rendered truly 'fruitful'.

Here, in the last movement of *The Dry Salvages*, Eliot turns first to pass judgement on other, and fruitless, ways of seeking for meaning. He lists a series of studies and practices in which people try to escape the limitations of the immediate present by reading the future and the past or otherwise extending their range of knowledge at the level of satisfying 'curiosity'. The apparent mingling of some genuinely scientific pursuits with pseudo-scientific explorations of the paranormal and with crude superstitious practices is remarkable at first sight. Research into the question whether there is life on other planets ('To communicate with Mars', *DS* 184) and post-Freudian psycho-analytic explorations of the subconscious (*DS* 192–4) are listed

alongside references to spiritualist seances ('converse with spirits'), the casting of horoscopes, the study of entrails ('haruspicate'), and crystal-gazing ('scry'), as well as the reading of hand-writing, playing-cards, palms, and tea-leaves. It seems to be implied that divination by lottery ('sortilege'), astrology, necromancy (fiddling with pentagrams), drug-taking (fiddling with barbituric acids), and even the emphatically archaic process of reporting 'the behaviour of the sea monster' (*DS* 185) are on a level with psychological elucidation of the racial consciousness and subconsciousness with their archetypal images and hidden fears.

In view of this vein of apparent incongruity one is entitled to ask whether Eliot is doing anything more than having a good-humoured dig at the psychologists. Eliot's sense of humour, an important and neglected element in his work, is always to be reckoned with and is certainly evident here; but he does not indulge it at the expense of reason or fitness. A telling point is made. The practices and studies listed are all attempts to probe past and future, to escape the present or the normal without proper recognition of the 'timeless'. In the paranormal and superstitious practices referred to there is an attempt to achieve a supra-temporal view, but because it is mentally acquisitive, rooted in grasping 'curiosity', and devoid of open receptiveness to what is given in the revelatory moments of personal experiences and that garnered harvest of revelatory experience which we call tradition (literary and religious), the attempt achieves only a spurious supra-temporality. The acquisitive grasp at past or future only serves to establish the self more firmly in its servitude to successiveness.

> 'Men's curiosity searches past and future
> And clings to that dimension' (*DS* 199–200).

The posture and motive belonging to popular exploration of the paranormal and the preternatural, being essentially selfish and time-locked, are to be firmly distinguished

from the posture and motive belonging to that disciplined openness to the supernatural which the poet's faith and experience present to him as the true way. It is, of course, the way of the saint.

Eliot pinpoints with great exactness three aspects of the attempts to arrive at meaning and understanding while firmly enchained to successiveness by describing these attempts as 'pastimes and drugs, and features of the press' (*DS* 195). The word 'pastimes' emphasizes both that they are trivial and that they do not free man from his time-locked status but merely help to whisk him meaninglessly along the stream of time. The word 'drugs' emphasizes both that the attempts are unhealthy (and, in the deepest sense, unnatural) and that they do not open man's mind to fuller insight but close it in a state of wasteful stupor. The word 'features' emphasizes both that they are emptily sensational and that they do not truly nourish the mind (as facts would do or even as worth-while imaginative fiction might do) but titillate it with the kind of snippetty, indisciplined journalistic informativeness which impoverishes thought.

A passage from St Luke's Gospel is decisively echoed in line 197.

> 'And there shall be signs in the sun and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon earth distress of nations with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring: Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken'.
>
> (St Luke XXI, 25–6)

This passage foretells the Second Coming of Christ. It is at times of unsettlement especially that men have recourse to the dabblers in superstition, witchcraft, black-magic, and even psycho-analysis. The poet lightly links such phases of modern unsettlement with the disturbances biblically prophesied to herald the Second Coming so as to match the half-fear of an end to all things hinted at in the earlier image of darkness between the acts in *East Coker* (115 ff.).

Over against the servitude to successiveness, Eliot defines the way of sanctity. The passage is finely compact and lucid. Indeed lines 199–215 might justly be said to provide the neatest and meatiest summary of the poem's central message, were it not that the poem is so carefully designed to discourage critics from using words like *message*. At least one may say that the lines formulate propositions and images in such a way as to provide an anchorage from which the reader may steadily and reliably explore the whole poem. It is scarcely possible to speak intelligently about *Four Quartets* without quoting the lines:

> 'But to apprehend
> The point of intersection of the timeless
> With time, is an occupation for the saint –'

since, as we have shown, those points of intersection are the starting-points of experience and reflection and (if we may be excused for using words as Eliot's own practice encourages us to use them) they point, each of them, to that central 'still point' (*BN* 62) at the heart of the turning world. They 'point to one end which is always present' (*BN* 10). They 'point to the agony of death and birth' (*EC* 132). And they are to be distinguished from the natural successiveness by which 'dawn points' (*EC* 47) compulsively to 'another day' just like the last one. The full apprehension of these points 'is an occupation for the saint' (*DS* 202), Eliot says; then he immediately cancels out the statement with –

> 'No occupation either, but something given
> And taken . . .' (*DS* 203–4).

It is plain that the first use of the word 'occupation' is the usual one. The apprehension of the point of intersection is something which will occupy the saint – keep him busy and, indeed, be his business (the double connotation is important). But it is not an 'occupation' in the professional sense: one cannot thereby earn a living: nor is it an 'occupation' in the sense that a person occupies a house or a position.

There is no rightful possession, no *occupancy*, no established footing as it were. On the contrary there is only the lifelong discipline of ardent self-surrender. What happens is that something is freely 'given' and humbly 'taken'.

Though the giving and the taking form the basis of a lifetime's disciplined service if one pursues vocationally the way of sanctity, there is for 'most of us' only the 'unattended moment', the sudden revelation, occasionally fully savoured, but more often half-glimpsed, by which we are jerked out of our habitual enslavement to time. Eliot repeats again the familiar images which instance the glimpse or the half-glimpse of illumination from 'out of time'. That they have a personal autobiographical base is not to be doubted; but the base is literary as well as directly experiential, for so the reiteration of the Shakespearean 'wild thyme' indicates. In the same way the 'waterfall' probably derives from Longfellow's *Hiawatha*.* The music 'heard so deeply/That it is not heard at all', which takes us back to the paradisal garden of *Burnt Norton* (27) somehow persistently recalls Keats's 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter' (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*), while 'you are the music/While the music lasts' has a faint Shelleyan ring. It seems likely that Eliot's conscious intention was to produce precisely this sense of moments personally authentic yet rich with the echoes of other men's comparable experiences. Such an intention would be in keeping with all that the poem has to say.

Recognizing and interpreting the revelatory moments as hints and glimpses of the meaning and the mystery lying behind our temporal framework is only one part of the Christian way: the other and complementary part is practising the traditional disciplines of prayer and worship, integrated with congruous study and behaviour. The unifying principle, the unifying word (Word), the unifying fact, historic and personal, is 'Incarnation' (*DS* 215). As God's

* On *Hiawatha*, see p. 182 and Appendix II. And see the comment on Tennysonian echoes (pp. 49–50).

incarnation in Christ (the timeless intersecting time) gave flesh and blood to the eternal, so the individual's life of self-surrender in the patterned Christian way is itself incarnational. It is important to notice the balance in line 215. The 'hint half guessed' is the revelatory moment: the 'gift half understood', taking us back to 'something given/And taken . . .' (*DS* 203–4), is the saint's 'occupation', the life of discipline, a gift because it is achieved only by grace. So every revelatory experience is an annunciation: it is also, like every Christian life, an incarnation. Christ's earthly career, the 'lifetime's death in love' (*DS* 204), is the archetypal Incarnation from which all other incarnations derive their validity.

Here the impossible union

'Here' means 'in the fact of Incarnation' as well as 'in the here and now': that is to say, in the incarnate life of Christ, and likewise in the individual Christian's recognition and practice of incarnation. The union of the two 'spheres of existence' (*DS* 217), eternal and finite, timeless and temporal, is actualized in the life of Christ at the archetypal level. The same union is actualized in every revelatory moment, properly understood, as gathering together past and future in a present illumination. Likewise the same union is actualized in every life of Christian discipline, every 'lifetime's death in love' (*DS* 204) – indeed in every act of 'ardour and selflessness and self-surrender' (*DS* 205), for each such act is an act enabled by grace, something 'given and taken', not something done from a motivating impulse within the line of temporal successiveness, not something done out of acquisitive desire directed at the future, but something done by *being 'moved'* (*DS* 221), divinely moved. The antithesis here is crucial. It is deeply interwoven in the whole Eliot canon.

Action under the dominance of the incarnational principle, by acceptance of the interpenetration of the timeless into time, is freed from that enchainment to temporal successiveness by which the world moves 'in appetency' (*BN* 125).

Such action is, in one sense, not action at all, but rather *patience* (i.e. being acted upon) and *suffering*. For it involves accepting that, morally and spiritually, man has 'no source of movement' (*DS* 222) in himself. Time-locked action based on servitude to the future is an attempt at movement on the part of an agent, the human will,

> 'which is only moved
> And has in it no source of movement' (*DS* 221–2).

Man's moral will is moved either by the divinely incarnational principle on the one hand, or by 'demonic, chthonic/ Powers' (*DS* 223–4) on the other hand. Thus

> 'right action is freedom
> From past and future also' (*DS* 224–5).

It is freedom from servitude to time. It is the act not of an *actor* but of a *patient*. The image of the whole earth as a hospital (*EC* 157 ff.) is the logical outcome of this train of thought whose roots lie back in *Murder in the Cathedral* –

> 'They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.
> They know and do not know, that acting is suffering
> And suffering is action. Neither does the actor suffer
> Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
> In an eternal action, an eternal patience
> To which all must consent that it may be willed
> And which all must suffer that they may will it,
> That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action
> And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
> Be for ever still.'

After the high definition of the incarnational vocation, the poet grants that 'for most of us' the aim is one which we shall not realize 'here'. (The 'here' suggests that it will be for us to realize it hereafter nevertheless.) We do not succeed. We are undefeated only in the sense that have not given in but have 'gone on trying'. Thus the third *Quartet* ends on a delightfully sympathetic and indulgent note which offsets the rigours of its earlier definitions with an appropriate and

humble concession to the natural man in all his unassuming yet lovable weakness. For this I take to be the note of the last four lines. As natural men we revert to the earth which bred us, naturally and unexaltedly content to think that, as our temporal course ends and the cycle of life in the flesh is fully rounded off, what remains of us will enrich the nourishing soil. This is our expectancy as unregenerate men who have set our sights too low to achieve the way of sanctity; this is the inheritance we look for as men unheroic in the ways of the spirit – that we should return to the earth, to rest, having made more meaningful the life of earth. Our modest aim as spiritual beings, but half awake to the costly and lofty religious calling, can be parenthetically summed up in the concession that we hope to lie 'not too far from the yew-tree' – not too far from the shelter of that tree which we are not even bold enough (or certain enough) to call a cross.

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DONATELLA IZZO

C'è una cosa che quasi tutti —americanisti e studiosi di buddhismo, ma anche pubblico di lettori in senso lato— sanno del buddhismo nella letteratura americana, ed è il suo influsso sulla Beat Generation, reso esplicito da titoli come *The Dharma Bums* di Kerouac e «Wichita Vortex Sutra» di Ginsberg. Quello che è meno generalmente noto è che la storia del rapporto tra letteratura statunitense e buddhismo nasce molto tempo prima e a parecchi chilometri di distanza: non nella California del 1950 ma nel Massachusetts del 1850, non sulla West Coast della controcultura ma nel cuore del New England e della più canonica stagione delle lettere americane. Anzi, quell'esplosione di visibilità e di interesse per il buddhismo che è la Beat Generation non si comprende davvero se non si tiene conto di quella storia precedente, che è cruciale per mettere a fuoco il senso e la ricorrente funzione culturale del buddhismo nella vita intellettuale degli Stati Uniti e i modi in cui esso di volta in volta si interseca con la cultura autoctona, o per meglio dire con la cultura locale di matrice anglosassone, occidentale ed europea. Questo senso e questa funzione —lo anticipo perché è un dato che a me pare qualificante (oltre ad essere una precisazione doverosa nel trattare un sistema

di pensiero per la cui comprensione e interpretazione sono determinanti la tradizione e critica dei testi)— sono legate in modo decisivo ad una caratteristica portante della cultura letteraria statunitense. Gli americani sono «un popolo non filologico»: così scrive Leo Spitzer (uno che di filologia se ne intendeva) in un saggio del 1945-6 su «il proprio e l'altro» [1]. E questo carattere «non filologico» dell'approccio americano al buddhismo spiega, a mio parere, molta della sua storia e funzione nella letteratura degli Stati Uniti.

Per cercare di rendere chiari questi passaggi fornirò, per prima cosa, una sintetica panoramica delle forme e dei tempi della penetrazione negli Stati Uniti del buddhismo come fenomeno religioso. Poi procederò (per motivi che spero diventeranno evidenti nelle varie tappe della mia presentazione) a ritroso: prima tornerò ai Beats, e passerò rapidamente in rassegna le forme e i modi del loro rapporto con il buddhismo; poi, con un salto indietro nel tempo, mostrerò brevemente come il buddhismo (insieme ad altri apporti di origine asiatica) frutti in forme specificamente poetiche nel modernismo letterario degli anni 1920 e 30, fornendo decisivi (per quanto sommersi) apporti alla Beat Generation; infine, mi concentrerò sui precursori culturali dei Beats, la generazione degli intellettuali e poeti di metà Ottocento a cui essi sono direttamente legati, cercando di mostrare i modi in cui per loro tramite il filone portante della vita religiosa e intellettuale della nazione si interseca con l'apporto delle filosofie orientali, in forme che vengono riattivate a metà Novecento. Per finire, cercherò di formulare qualche ipotesi conclusiva sul senso e sulla funzione culturale di questa presenza nella tradizione letteraria degli Stati Uniti. Si tratta, come si vede, di un percorso per grandi linee, niente più che un'indicazione sommaria di snodi principali, possibili punti di partenza per un lavoro di analisi letteraria e di sintesi critica ancora tutto da compiere.

1. *Il buddhismo negli Stati Uniti*

Il vero inizio del buddhismo come religione, negli Stati Uniti, è legato all'immigrazione: a seguito della febbre dell'oro del 1849,

[1] Leo Spitzer, «Das Eigene und das Fremde. Über Philologie und Nationalismus», *Die Wandlung*, 1, 7, Juli 1946, pp. 576-594, qui p. 594.

e poi con la richiesta di braccia legata alla costruzione delle grandi ferrovie transcontinentali (1862-9) arrivano decine di migliaia di cinesi sulla West Coast. Templi buddhisti cominciano ad apparire nella Chinatown di San Francisco, e poi per tutta la costa della California, già dal 1853; alla fine del secolo ce n'erano 400 (anche se la loro pratica religiosa era spesso un misto eclettico di buddhismo, taoismo e confucianesimo, rivelando una funzione più comunitaria e culturale che strettamente religiosa).

La presenza di templi buddhisti sul territorio degli Stati Uniti, però, non assicurava evidentemente di per sé alcun tipo di scambio religioso o intellettuale con la cultura locale: confinato ai gruppi d'immigrati, il buddhismo restava una religione «etnica». Fu piuttosto come fenomeno intellettuale in senso lato che in quegli anni, come si vedrà più avanti, il buddhismo cominciò a circolare nel New England, un'area fin delle origini della nazione animata da fermenti sociali e intellettuali spesso intrecciati a quelli religiosi; e sempre nel New England, a Yale e a Harvard, aveva inizio quello studio a livello accademico del buddhismo che avrebbe portato Henry Clarke Warren a pubblicare nel 1896, nella serie orientale della Harvard University Press, *Buddhism in Translations*, una selezione di testi tradotti dal pāli e organizzati tematicamente per illustrare i punti principali delle dottrine buddhiste.

Nel frattempo, però, il buddhismo come religione —avversato e spesso presentato in chiave negativa sui periodici dei missionari protestanti che cominciavano a frequentare i paesi asiatici— si faceva strada attraverso gli sforzi di quanti miravano ad allargare gli orizzonti spirituali della nazione alla ricerca di forme di sincretismo religioso. Nel 1875 viene fondata a New York la American Theosophical Society: ne sono promotori il Colonnello Henry Steel Olcott e Madame Helena Blavatsky (già famosa come medium capace di chiaroveggenza e materializzazioni negli ambienti spiritualisti dell'epoca), allo scopo di studiare tutte le religioni moderne e antiche promuovendone la fratellanza, e di investigare le leggi ancora ignote della Natura e gli inesplorati poteri psichici degli esseri umani. Nel 1879 e 1880, attraverso i loro viaggi in India (dove avrebbero poi trasferito la sede dell'associazione) e Sri Lanka e i loro contatti con monaci cingalesi, i due entrano in contatto col buddhismo e il 25 maggio 1880 si con-

vertono formalmente in un tempio buddhista: Olcott (che negli anni successivi, oltre a molte altre opere sull'argomento, avrebbe pubblicato a Madras nel 1881 un *Buddhist Catechism* nel quale cercava di unificare ecumenicamente i vari filoni del buddhismo individuandone il denominatore comune), fu il primo americano di una qualche notorietà a convertirsi al buddhismo, cosa che non mancò di suscitare interesse e curiosità nel paese.

Il vero momento di svolta, però, fu segnato dalla convocazione del World's Parliament of Religions che si tenne all'interno della World's Columbian Exposition (o Chicago World's Fair) del 1893, dall'11 al 27 settembre. Convocato dal reverendo J.H. Barrows, pastore protestante di idee liberali, il Parlamento mondiale delle religioni doveva avanzare la causa della «comparative theology», e cioè essere l'espressione spirituale di quel grandioso fenomeno di comunicazione commerciale planetaria, con gli USA ormai emergenti fra le prime potenze mondiali, di cui la fiera era manifestazione. Non va dimenticato, infatti, che questi sono gli anni in cui gli Stati Uniti realizzano le loro prime spinte espansionistiche extracontinentali: nello stesso anno, 1893, appoggiano il colpo di stato dei piantatori americani che sovverte la monarchia hawaiana, e fanno delle Hawai'i un protettorato USA; nel 1898 dichiarano guerra alla Spagna per il controllo di Cuba e delle Filippine; nel 1899 sarà annunciato il principio della 'porta aperta', con cui gli USA richiedono pari condizioni commerciali con la Cina da parte di tutti i paesi, e nel 1900 ci sarà l'intervento in Cina durante la rivolta dei Boxer. Chiusasi ufficialmente la frontiera nel 1890 —e il famoso saggio di Frederick Jackson Turner «The Significance of the Frontier in American History», che ne celebrava il significato legando l'espansionismo americano verso ovest all'essenza stessa della cultura nazionale, fu letto per la prima volta proprio durante la Chicago World's Fair—, l'Asia, al di là del Pacifico, era vista da molti, in quegli anni, come il naturale punto d'approdo dell'espansionismo verso ovest che aveva caratterizzato la storia del paese fin dalla sua fondazione.

Benché al Parlamento fossero presenti soprattutto i rappresentanti di denominazioni religiose cristiane, vi parteciparono anche, ed ebbero per la prima volta grande visibilità, i rappresentanti di varie scuole buddhiste. In particolare Soyen Shaku, che per primo portò negli USA dal Giappone il buddhismo zen, e che

nel 1905-6 sarebbe tornato negli USA a promuoverlo, tenendo regolarmente lezioni di zazen (il che ne fa il primo maestro buddhista negli USA) e lasciandovi al suo ritorno in Giappone tre suoi discepoli a proseguire l'opera. Tra questi, Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, che pur tornando periodicamente in Giappone soggiornò molti anni negli USA fra il 1897 e il 1958, lavorò alla traduzione di testi classici, pubblicò manuali, saggi e volumi di esercizi zen, tenne conferenze nelle università americane e nelle città (cui assistettero anche i poeti Beat), e collaborò strettamente con i centri e le associazioni buddhiste, diventando uno dei più importanti promotori del buddhismo nell'Occidente [2]. L'altro rappresentante del buddhismo che creò molta impressione nel pubblico americano fu Anagarika Dharmapala (David Hewivatarne, un buddhista cingalese che era entrato in contatto con i teosofisti, e aveva viaggiato per l'Asia promuovendo il salvataggio del tempio di Bodh-Gaya in India e l'organizzazione pure a Bodh-Gaya di una Conferenza internazionale buddhista). Personaggio fortemente carismatico, Dharmapala si presentava in vesti orientali ma parlava un eccellente inglese, e presentò il buddhismo come la religione più adatta a sanare il dissidio fra scienza e religione, così evidente nel cristianesimo, poiché non postulando un dio-creatore non richiedeva nemmeno la fede in quei miracoli che contraddicevano il sapere scientifico. Fu Dharmapala, in occasione di una sua conferenza alla Theosophical Society di Chicago, ad ammettere formalmente al buddhismo il primo convertito americano negli Stati Uniti, Charles T. Strauss. Dharmapala fondò la branca americana della Maha Bodhi Society e influenzò la successiva nascita del buddhismo Theravāda negli USA.

La conversione di Strauss e la presenza di maestri delle tradizioni buddhiste negli Stati Uniti innescò un dibattito sulle riviste americane, i cui articoli si affiancarono a quelli di pre-esistenti riviste buddhiste pubblicate in America a cura delle missioni buddhiste sulla costa occidentale, come *The Buddhist Ray* (1888-94) e poi *The Light of Dharma* (1901-7) di San Francisco. Non solo le riviste teosofiche, ma anche autorevoli riviste di cultura come lo

[2] Sul ruolo di Suzuki nella diffusione americana dello zen cfr. George J. Leonard, «D.T. Suzuki and the Creation of Japanese American Zen», in *The Asian Pacific American Heritage. A Companion to Literature and the Arts*, ed. George J. Leonard, New York and London, Garland, 1999.

Atlantic Monthly dedicarono articoli al buddhismo; *Open Court*, rivista diretta da Paul Carus e dedita al dialogo inter-religioso e alla conciliazione fra religione e scienza, pubblicò nel 1897 un dibattito fra Soyen, Barrows, Frank Field Ellinwood (docente di religioni comparate a New York) e Dharmapala. Lo stesso Carus aveva pubblicato nel 1894 il libro *The Gospel of the Buddha*, che presentava gli insegnamenti del Buddha, tratti dai testi tradizionali, in forme modellate su quelle dei vangeli cristiani: il volume, che nel 1910 era arrivato alla tredicesima edizione, fu tradotto in molte lingue, compreso il giapponese, e Soyen Shaku ne introdusse l'edizione giapponese lodandolo come frutto del crescente interesse occidentale per il buddhismo e per le religioni comparate e del grande progresso degli studi dei sanscritisti, ma aggiungendo anche che non era sicuro che i volgarizzatori occidentali avessero capito bene l'essenza del buddhismo. Indubbiamente, dei molti americani non di origine asiatica convertitisi al buddhismo in quegli anni (Olcott asserì nel 1889 che gli aderenti al buddhismo negli USA erano almeno 50.000; Tweed stima più prudentemente 2 o 3.000 fra il 1893 e il 1907), molti erano, più che puri buddhisti, spiriti inquieti volti ad ampliare i confini della tradizionale religiosità cristiana attraverso forme di religiosità sincretica, e spesso interessati a tematiche occultiste, teosofiche, swedenborghiane [3].

Dopo il Parlamento di Chicago, fu la presenza giapponese —più lenta e più tarda, e dapprima rivolta soprattutto alle Hawai'i, dove i giapponesi lavoravano nelle piantagioni— a diventare decisiva per lo sviluppo del buddhismo negli USA. La presenza di scuole zen è la più diffusa e incisiva (e registra anche la stesura di molti manuali di grande successo e diffusione, come *The Three Pillars of Zen* —1965— di Philip Kapleau [4], reporter in Giappone ai processi sui crimini di guerra, poi adepto, e infine fondatore del Rochester Zen Center, il primo sacerdote zen americano

[3] Cfr. Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism. 1844-1912. Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent*, Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1992[1]], pp. 46-47. Il libro di Tweed è un'analisi approfondita del dialogo culturale e degli intrecci tra protestantesimo e buddhismo negli Stati Uniti della seconda metà dell'Ottocento: a esso rimando per ogni ulteriore notizia e approfondimento su tutta la fase ottocentesca del rapporto.

[4] Del libro esiste anche una traduzione italiana: *I tre pilastri dello zen. Insegnamento, pratica e illuminazione*, Roma, Astrolabio, 1981.

a fondare un tempio), ma non è l'unica varietà di buddhismo legata ai giapponesi negli USA. I primi missionari inviati dal Giappone a prendersi cura degli emigrati, su richiesta di questi stessi, giunsero a San Francisco nel 1893. Furono loro a fondare la Buddhist Missions of North America (BMNA) che nel 1942 si sarebbe poi trasformata in Buddhist Churches of America (BCA), nel campo d'internamento di Topaz, dove tutti i sacerdoti della BMNA erano stati deportati in quanto percepiti dal governo come leader di una comunità nemica (anche se due terzi dei suoi componenti erano cittadini americani). A riprova della forte marcatura etnica di questa religione agli occhi dell'America bianca, e dunque della diffidenza con cui essa veniva percepita dalle istituzioni, al 442esimo reggimento (composto da giapponesi americani reclutati per provare la loro fedeltà alla nazione, e impiegato in rischiose missioni in Europa durante la Seconda guerra mondiale) fu negato, nonostante le richieste, un cappellano buddhista; tale diritto è stato riconosciuto dall'esercito degli Stati Uniti solo molto più recentemente, nel 1987. La BCA, che è stata soprattutto negli anni '60 e '70 la più importante organizzazione buddhista su base etnica degli USA, ha origine dal buddhismo Jodo Shinsu (forma di buddhismo Pure Land o amidismo, una branca del buddhismo Mahāyāna che considera il nirvāṇa inopportuno nel presente a causa della necessità di aiutare gli altri esseri, sostituendolo con la devozione al Buddha Amitābha e la recitazione del mantra come veicolo che ci porterà alla Terra pura da cui sarà raggiungibile il nirvāṇa) e rappresenta la branca non meditativa del buddhismo, più devozionale e attenta alle celebrazioni, rivolta soprattutto alla vita sociale della comunità nippo-americana (dagli anni '20 comincia a istruire sacerdoti di lingua inglese più adatti a entrare in contatto con la seconda generazione nata in America).

La cultura buddhista più recente negli USA è infine quella tibetana, arrivata dopo l'occupazione cinese del Tibet del 1950-1, e da allora in rapida crescita. Sono stati lama tibetani stabilitisi in America a fondare il Nyngma Institute a Berkeley (1973) e la Dharma Press, e nel 1974 il famoso Naropa Institute di Boulder, Colorado (l'università buddhista creata da Chögyam Trungpa dove sono passati moltissimi artisti e intellettuali e dove allo studio dei testi e alla meditazione si uniscono altre attività come la

danza, curando lo sviluppo interiore dell'individuo). Dopo lo Immigration Act del 1965, che rimuove le quote nazionali e liberalizza in parte l'immigrazione dai paesi asiatici, fioriscono altre comunità buddhiste di origine coreana, vietnamita, thailandese, cambogiana. Con gli anni '70 di fatto tutte le principali scuole buddhiste di varia origine sia geografica sia dottrinale sono rappresentate negli USA[5].

Un sondaggio condotto nel 2002-3 mostra che il 14 % della popolazione afferma di avere contatti personali con qualcuno che è buddhista, e che il 30 % dichiara di avere una certa o molta familiarità con gli insegnamenti del buddhismo. Anche l'orientamento generale della popolazione è favorevole: per esempio, solo percentuali ridotte associano al buddhismo qualità negative come violenza e fanatismo, mentre percentuali tra il 56 e il 63 % lo associano alla tolleranza e all'amore per la pace, e il 59 % guarderebbe con favore un aumento dell'influenza buddhista negli USA, contro il 32 % di contrari. Gli studiosi che hanno condotto il sondaggio suggeriscono che questo si debba alla struttura relativamente flessibile del buddhismo, le cui pratiche (meditazione etc.) possono essere disaggregate e adottate senza necessariamente aderire al buddhismo come religione: di qui la relativa diffusione del buddhismo attraverso i movimenti New Age o le pratiche olistiche e di medicina alternativa; di qui anche la relativa facilità con cui si viene in contatto con esso in corsi universitari, conferenze etc.[6]

Stimare quanti sono oggi i buddhisti negli USA è difficile, perché dipende da come si definisce l'adesione al buddhismo: molti cittadini si autodefiniscono buddhisti avendo idee molto vaghe sui principi del buddhismo, e anche le comunità buddhiste negli USA usano in molti casi criteri di ammissione molto elastici e tut-

[5] Per tutte le informazioni qui riportate cfr. Charles S. Prebish, «Buddhism», in Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience. Studies of Traditions and Movements*, 3 vol., New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988, II, pp. 669-82. Sempre di Charles Prebish, cfr. inoltre il recente articolo «The New Panditas», *Buddhadharma*, Spring 2006, pp. 62-69. Sul buddhismo in America, cfr. anche, tra i molti titoli disponibili, Richard Seager, *Buddhism in America*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999.

[6] Robert Wuthnow and Wendy Cadge, «Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: The Scope of Influence», *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 43, 3, 2004, pp. 363-380.

t'altro che esigenti. Le stime vanno da 1 a 4 milioni, c'è chi dice anche 5 o 6; secondo le stime dello International Religious Freedom Report del Dipartimento di Stato del 2004 i buddhisti sarebbero l'1 % della popolazione (quindi poco meno di 3 milioni). Di questi si stima che il 75-80 % siano di discendenza asiatica e gli altri non-asiatici convertiti. Questa ripartizione etnica ha creato tensioni tra diverse comunità e occulte gerarchizzazioni sociali e religiose fra l'una e l'altra: quelle su base più etnica o quelle cosiddette «d'importazione», importate dai paesi asiatici dietro l'impulso di americani interessati al buddhismo; quelle a forte base bianca, di solito frequentate da segmenti benestanti e acculturati della popolazione, e quelle legate alle comunità d'immigrati, spesso socialmente più disagiate. È interessante notare che quasi tutti i convertiti non asiatici sono bianchi, cristiani o ebrei; solo una piccola minoranza sono neri o latini, soprattutto nella Soka Gakkai, società di origine giapponese stabilita negli USA dopo la II guerra mondiale tra mogli giapponesi di veterani dell'occupazione USA in Giappone, e dal 1960 dedita alla conversione dei non asiatici attraverso tecniche di reclutamento aggressive e una grande semplicità di pratiche (basate esclusivamente su canti e recitazione del *Sūtra del loto*) [7].

Sull'esatto carattere del buddhismo americano —bianco o etnico, fenomeno spirituale o sociale, «autentico» o edulcorato, contaminazione della tradizione o creazione di una nuova tradizione— il dibattito è ampio e aperto [8]. Nella misura in cui la scrittura letteraria può contribuire a fornire riscontri e spunti di riflessione per questo dibattito, vale forse la pena di osservare che il buddhismo è oggi una realtà citata con una certa frequenza nella letteratura degli USA, ma —con poche eccezioni— primariamente nella letteratura asiaticoamericana o in relazione a personaggi asiaticoamericani. Il buddhismo, cioè, si associa ancora per lo più a un contesto nel quale costituisce in qualche misura un patrimonio culturale «ancestrale», sia esso fatto proprio o criticato:

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Per un'efficace sintesi di questi problemi cfr. Marta Sernesi, «Alla ricerca del vero *dharma*: modelli descrittivi in competizione e la nascita del *Western Buddhism*», in *Il buddhismo contemporaneo. Rappresentazioni, istituzioni, modernità*, a cura di Marta Sernesi e Federico Squarcini, Firenze, Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2006.

dal padre prete buddhista che contribuisce a provocare la follia della figlia nel racconto di Hisaye Yamamoto «The Legend of Miss Sasagawara» (1950), attraverso i romanzi di Maxine Hong Kingston (il cui ultimo, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, del 2003, è intessuto di allusioni al pensiero buddhista a livello tanto di eventi e personaggi quanto di simbolismo), fino agli aspramente polemici *Bulletproof Buddhists* dei saggi di Frank Chin (1997) o alla rappresentazione destabilizzante delle associazioni tra identità etnica e religione offerte dai romanzi di Gish Jen. Significativamente, però, allusioni o problematiche legate al buddhismo si ritrovano oggi anche in quella parte della letteratura asiaticoamericana che si rivolge apertamente a un pubblico *mainstream*, come per esempio *The Fourth Treasure* di Todd Shimoda (2003), nel quale si intrecciano in modo originale espliciti rimandi al buddhismo come sistema di pensiero —soprattutto attraverso la parte cruciale dell'intreccio che ha a che fare con lo *shodo*, l'arte della calligrafia, e le tradizioni ad essa legate— e una trattazione dettagliata delle neuroscienze, altrettanto centrali allo sviluppo della storia, che ripropone in chiave contemporaneo-scientifica problemi quali la sofferenza, la percezione, la consapevolezza, il risveglio, che sono anche centrali alla tradizione buddhista. Un romanzo come questo mostra come in quella parte della letteratura asiaticoamericana meno etnicamente militante e più esplicitamente cross-over (*The Fourth Treasure* è stato un best seller ed è stato tradotto anche in italiano) [9] si possa ormai dare per scontato da parte del pubblico *mainstream* non solo un interesse ma anche un certo grado di comprensione nei confronti del mondo culturale narrato. Il romanzo, del resto, mette in scena al proprio stesso interno il fenomeno della «conversione» culturale, con il personaggio del *Wapanese* o *wannabe Japanese*, un giovane studioso bianco di cose giapponesi compenetrato in tutto e per tutto nel suo puntiglioso tentativo di mimetica appropriazione di ogni aspetto della cultura da lui amata. Un fenomeno, come si vedrà, non irrelato ad alcuni dei momenti di questa storia culturale.

[9] Todd Shimoda, *Il calligrafo*, traduzione di Maria Grazia Galli, Milano, Longanesi, 2002.

2. Buddhisti famosi: i Beats

Gli artefici di quell'ampia circolazione che ha reso universalmente riconoscibile il repertorio terminologico e concettuale buddhista nella letteratura statunitense contemporanea sono stati ovviamente i Beats, la prima generazione di letterati americani a propagandare la propria adesione al buddhismo sotto l'occhio attento (e per lo più sarcastico) dei mezzi di comunicazione di massa.

La cosiddetta «Beat Generation» come fenomeno mediatico nasce nel novembre del 1959, quando la rivista *Life* dedica spazio ai «ribelli» raccontati da Jack Kerouac nel romanzo *On the Road* (che era uscito nel 1957 dopo molti rifacimenti e una lunga elaborazione). E il momento mitico della stagione Beat è il famoso *poetry reading* che si tenne nell'ottobre 1955 alla Six Gallery di San Francisco, e a cui parteciparono Allen Ginsberg —che lì lesse per la prima volta *Howl*—, Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder e Philip Whalen sotto l'egida di Kenneth Rexroth, mentre Kerouac si aggirava ubriaco tra i tavoli: l'episodio non suscitò là per là alcuna eco in America, ma fu poi immortalato da Kerouac in *The Dharma Bums* (1958) e divenne retrospettivamente un mito di fondazione. Il termine cominciò poi a essere associato a quello specifico gruppo di poeti e scrittori nell'autunno del 1957, con la pubblicazione di *On the Road* e il proscioglimento di Lawrence Ferlinghetti nel processo per oscenità intentatogli per aver pubblicato, l'anno precedente, *Howl and Other Poems* di Allen Ginsberg nella collana di poesia della sua City Lights. La reazione della stampa e della critica aumenta la visibilità del fenomeno (sia pure in chiave negativa per la gran parte del mondo culturale e politico). Ma la definizione di «Beat Generation» in realtà nasce prima, nel novembre del 1948, durante una conversazione tra Jack Kerouac, l'autore che più di ogni altro verrà identificato con questa generazione, e John Clellon Holmes (il meno famoso autore di un romanzo sullo stesso tema, *Go*, del 1952, e di un «manifesto» beat sul *New York Times Magazine*, il 16 novembre dello stesso anno); e il gruppo in quanto tale, o almeno il suo nucleo centrale (Herbert Huncke, Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Kerouac), si incontra già nel 1944.

«Beat» significava un complesso di cose contrastanti: i Beats lo prendono dal gergo degli *hipsters* afroamericani, che a loro volta

l'avevano preso dalla strada, e indicava in primo luogo l'essere «a terra», esausti e privi di risorse, in crisi d'astinenza, reietti, marginali, falliti, «battuti» dalla società, appartenenti ai bassifondi della giungla urbana (non a caso la comunità, prevalentemente associata alla California nell'immaginario del pubblico, nasce in realtà a New York, dove si incontrano originariamente Kerouac, Ginsberg e Burroughs); e di conseguenza l'essere disperati, «stanchi» e sopraffatti, come dice Kerouac, da tutte le forme della società industriale, militarista, borghese, conformista. Ma simultaneamente, Ginsberg descrive l'essere «beat» come essere anche «percettivi e a occhi aperti», e Kerouac associa il termine anche a «beatitude», lo stato di felicità che nasce dalla liberazione e dalla autoestromissione da tutte quelle restrizioni, dallo svuotamento di tutto ciò che la società considera importante. In questo senso l'implicazione è che gli integrati sono prigionieri dei loro comfort mentre i marginali, i derelitti, possono accedere a piaceri spontanei e originari [10]. E già qui è contenuta in parte l'evoluzione di molti degli scrittori della Beat Generation verso forme più o meno ortodosse e approfondite di buddhismo e di meditazione (oltre che di droga, alcolismo etc.): stanchi dell'inautenticità del mondo sociale, i Beats si concentreranno sul recupero dell'autenticità, sull'esplorazione della realtà interiore e dei limiti della «ragione» (tecnologica, sociale e borghese).

Il Beat non obbedisce alle leggi esterne ma solo a quelle interiori; valorizza la propria spontaneità, i propri moti e umori, come portatori di autenticità. Per lo stesso motivo, rifiuta la vergogna e le convenzioni sociali, nella convinzione che nulla di ciò che è umano e spontaneo possa essere vergognoso o degradante: da cui le tipiche confessioni e resoconti autobiografici scabrosi e privi d'inibizioni (sessualità, droga, funzioni corporee…) tanto nel contenuto quanto nel linguaggio, che scandalizzarono il pubblico degli anni 50. La loro dialettica con la società è bloccata: come scrive Thomas Merrill, essi assumono il ruolo di una «oppo-

[10] Sui Beats la bibliografia critica è ovviamente immensa. Per una recente, efficace sintesi critica in italiano della storia e dei temi di fondo del movimento, con particolare riferimento a Kerouac, cfr. Mario Corona, «Jack Kerouac, o della contraddizione: storie degli anni Cinquanta», saggio introduttivo all'edizione nei Meridiani di Jack Kerouac, *I romanzi*, Milano, Mondadori, 2001. Meno recente, ma sempre indispensabile, Vito Amoruso, *La letteratura beat americana*, Bari, Laterza, 1980, 1969[1].

sizione non-belligerante», «nemici indifferenti» della società, «obiettori di coscienza» rispetto a qualunque progetto di cambiamento politico o sociale perché ogni cambiamento per loro poteva venire soltanto dall'interno del singolo [11]. E solo diventando un *outcast* si può assicurare la propria libertà interiore e la propria autenticità. L'unica società cui sono legati è quella degli amici, dei compagni di strada, dei rapporti interpersonali fra marginali che partecipano alla stessa ricerca. Sono «disaffiliati» e «disimpegnati» piuttosto che oppositori [12] — un atteggiamento, come vedremo, che negli USA ha radici culturali remote e illustri.

La cultura Beat pone quindi un forte accento sull'interiorità, sull'illuminazione, sulla spiritualità, e sull'intrinseca sacralità di tutte le cose: «Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an angel!» scrive Ginsberg in «A Footnote to Howl» [13], proseguendo con lunghe serie di «Holy!». Il loro atteggiamento religioso è sostanzialmente sincretico (su una base, nel caso di Kerouac e di Ginsberg, rispettivamente cattolica ed ebraica): Gary Snyder descrive i contorni religiosi di questo atteggiamento così: «[I find] three things going on: 1. *Vision and illumination-seeking*. This is most easily done by systematic experimentation with narcotics. . . . 2. *Love, respect for life, abandon, Whitman, pacifism, anarchism, etc*. . . . partly responsible for the mystique of 'angels,' the glorification of skid-row and hitchhiking, and a kind of mindless enthusiasm. . . . 3. *Discipline, aesthetics, and tradition* . . . its practitioners settle on one traditional religion, try to absorb the feel of its art and history, and carry out whatever ascesis is required» [14]. Sono proprio il sincretismo, l'enfasi sull'individualità della liberazione interiore, e il rifiuto delle forme più istituzionalizzate di religione a portare in direzione dell'Oriente. Le religioni orientali offrono un'alternati-

[11] Thomas F. Merrill, *Allen Ginsberg*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1988; ora in Twayne's United States Authors Series Online & Co., 1999, cap. I, senza numero di pagina.

[12] «La sensibilité *beat* proprement dite, ce n'est pas la révolte, mais le stade qui la précède: le repli solitaire et boudeur, l'anomie, le diagnostic d'un écart entre ce qu'on ressent et la norme sociale»: Pierre-Yves Pétillon, *Histoire de la littérature américaine. Notre demi-siècle, 1939-1989*, Paris, Fayard, 1992, p. 215.

[13] Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980*, New York, Harper & Row, 1984, p. 134.

[14] Gary Snyder, «Note on the Religious Tendencies», *Liberation*, June 1959, p. 11.

va al dualismo e all'opposizione del bene e del male (e anche degli USA e dell'URSS, in piena Guerra fredda), e la possibilità di apprezzare in modo radicalmente democratico tutte le cose (altra posizione che ha ascendenze ottocentesche), celebrando l'integrità degli umani e del mondo. Di qui l'interesse per il buddhismo zen, per l'idea che il male è il necessario compagno del bene e non il suo antagonista, idea che aiuta a rimuovere i sensi di colpa occidentali, i conformismi e i codici artificiali e rigidi di condotta che contraddicono alle inclinazioni spontanee e impediscono l'armonia dell'uomo con l'universo. L'idea dell'armonia, della non separatezza dell'io, e dell'accettazione di tutti gli impulsi spontanei e naturali diventa la chiave di volta della versione Beat dello zen, il contenuto dell'«illuminazione» o «risveglio» che rappresenta per l'individuo non una prospettiva metafisica, ma al contrario una potenzialità presente e immanente. Un altro concetto-personaggio ricorrente è quello del «pazzo zen», lo «holy lunatic», anch'esso legato all'idea della spontaneità e al calcolato deragliamento delle gabbie della razionalità e dell'artificio per avvicinarsi alla pura esistenza naturale. Processo questo, come l'illuminazione, spesso cercato e facilitato con la sperimentazione di una serie di droghe.

L'idea della «spontaneità priva di sforzo» diventa anche un principio artistico tanto per Kerouac (la sua famosa teorizzazione della «spontaneous prose», peraltro frutto finale di anni di elaborazione, e gli «scrolls» che mentre servono a scrivere in velocità e senza pause per cambiare il foglio sono anche assimilati ai rotoli sacri del Mar Morto e ai manoscritti cinesi) e di Ginsberg: «'First thought, best thought.' Spontaneous insight–the sequence of thought-forms passing naturally through ordinary mind–was always motif and method of these compositions»[15]. «In 'Wales Visitation,'» scrive Ginsberg, «I guess what I had come to was a realization that me making noise as poetry was no different from the wind making noise in the branches. It was just as natural. It was a *very important point*»[16]. L'idea è che l'arte non discrimini ma sia un'espressione spontanea e non intellettualizzata, nella quale

[15] Allen Ginsberg, «Author's Preface, Reader's Manual», in *Collected Poems 1947-1980*, *op. cit.*, p. xx.

[16] Cit. in Paul Portuges, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, Santa Barbara, Ross-Erikson, 1978, p. 122.

tutto è degno di essere incluso perché ogni pensiero e ogni sentimento sono ugualmente sacri.

Anche se l'impatto culturale del buddhismo dei Beats negli Stati Uniti è stato tale che si è potuto parlare di un «Beat Zen» —una versione sincretica, occidentalizzata, fruibile come filosofia «alternativa» di vita [17]— il buddhismo dei Beats è in realtà un fenomeno molto articolato: l'adesione dei singoli scrittori della Beat Generation al buddhismo e l'uso che ciascuno ne fa nei propri scritti sono assai variabili. Il più vecchio dei personaggi legati al buddhismo che gravitano nel circuito Beat e il più anomalo (anche perché non è uno scrittore), ma degno comunque di essere menzionato per il suo influsso sugli altri, è Alan Watts: inglese di nascita, aveva scoperto l'Oriente nei i romanzi di Fu Manchu di Sax Rhomer e poi in quelli di Lafcadio Hearn, e si era quindi

[17] Sul «Beat Zen» come momento cruciale dell'occidentalizzazione del buddhismo e della creazione di una specifica tradizione buddhista americana si è appuntata di recente l'attenzione di storici della cultura degli Stati Uniti come pure di storici delle religioni. Ne sono esempio non solo volumi come quello di Steve Odin, *The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1996, ma anche tesi di PhD discusse presso diverse università e dipartimenti: cfr. ad esempio Michael Kenji Masatsugu, *Reorienting the Pure Land: Japanese Americans. The Beats, and the Making of American Buddhism, 1941-1966*, PhD Dissertation, Department of History, University of California at Irvine, 2004; Jane E. Falk, *The Beat Avant-Garde, the 1950's, and the Popularizing of Zen Buddhism in the United States*, PhD Dissertation, Interdisciplinary Programs, Ohio State University, 2002; Barry S. Jenkins, *Jack Kerouac and the "Beat" Sect of American Zen Buddhism*, MA Dissertation, Department of Religious Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1997. Nell'attesa che queste tesi di PhD vedano la stampa come volumi, però, non esistono studi sistematici e approfonditi dell'impatto complessivo del buddhismo sugli scrittori della Beat Generation e, per converso, dell'impatto degli scrittori della Beat Generation sul buddhismo americano: benché la diffusione del buddhismo fra i Beats sia quasi un luogo comune (o forse proprio per questo), essa non è stata affrontata se non all'interno di studi più ampi dedicati al buddhismo americano da un lato, ai Beats dall'altro, o, al contrario, in analisi puntuali di singoli testi o autori. Per un'antologia di testi legati al buddhismo che dedica un'intera sezione al buddhismo dei Beats, cfr. *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, ed. Carole Tonkinson, Introduction by Stephen Prothero, New York, Riverhead Books, 1995. Nell'introduzione, Prothero traccia con precisione una sintetica genealogia del rapporto tra i trascendentalisti e i Beats, retta proprio dal comune interesse per le religioni orientali e nella fattispecie per il buddhismo. Un'altra antologia che si focalizza sul buddhismo nella poesia americana contemporanea, identificando questo filone come un «sottogenere», è *Beneath a Single Moon. Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich, introduction by Gary Snyder, Boston and London, Shambala, 1991.

messo a studiarlo, frequentando un congresso religioso mondiale a Londra dove negli anni 30 conosce Suzuki, e scrivendo a soli 21 anni *The Spirit of Zen* (1937). Diventerà poi quello che lui stesso definisce un «religious entertainer», famoso popolarizzatore del buddhismo zen in termini 'occidentali', anche grazie all'aiuto della suocera, Ruth Fuller Everett, attiva nella Theosophical Society, studiosa di buddhismo, di sanscrito, pāli, cinese e giapponese, e in seconde nozze moglie di un maestro Zen, Sokei-an Sasaki, fondatore del primo istituto zen di New York. Spostatosi sulla costa ovest, Watts —mai preso sul serio dagli ambienti accademici ma molto famoso come volgarizzatore e conferenziere— fu considerato un guru dalla Beat Generation, essendo anche più anziano degli altri, soprattutto per due suoi volumi degli anni Beat, *The Way of Zen* (1957) e il saggio *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen*, scritto nel 1958, prima pubblicato in rivista, e poi come volumetto dalla City Lights nel 1959.

Quando entrano in contatto con Watts, però, tutti i Beats conoscevano già il buddhismo, in parte per ricerca propria, in parte per stimoli ricevuti successivamente nel gruppo. L'iniziatore di molti di loro è Gary Snyder, fin da bambino, come lui stesso racconta, attratto dalla pittura cinese per la somiglianza e al tempo stesso lontananza dei suoi paesaggi dalle montagne in mezzo alle quali viveva nello stato di Washington; poi studente di antropologia culturale al Reed College di Portland, Oregon (insieme ad altri due poeti della Beat Generation, Philip Whalen, anche lui lettore di poesia cinese e poi, dopo lunghi soggiorni in Giappone, monaco buddhista, e Lew Welch), laureato con una tesi su un mito nativoamericano, e lettore di testi canonici pāli nell'antologia di Henry Clarke Warren e di poesie cinesi nella traduzione di Ezra Pound. In seguito studia libri di filosofia e religione (tra cui i manuali di Suzuki); la passione per le montagne lo spinge a leggere resoconti di viaggio in Tibet, scoprendo così il buddhismo tibetano. Snyder diventa quindi studente di lingue orientali a Berkeley dal 1952 al 1956. Fra il 1956, quando vince una borsa di studio del First American Zen Centre, e il 1968, quando si ristabilisce in modo permanente negli Stati Uniti, Snyder passa molta parte del suo tempo a Kyoto, dove approda grazie ai consigli e all'intermediazione di Ruth Fuller Sasaki a studiare come monaco laico nella setta zen Rinzai sotto la guida del

maestro (Rōshi) Oda Sesso. Qui tra l'altro negli anni 60 entra anche in contatto con la scena Beat giapponese, fa amicizia con il poeta e maestro itinerante Nanao Sakaki, e nel 1967 partecipa a una comune detta Banyan Ashram sull'isola di Suwanose, dove (sull'orlo di un vulcano attivo) sposa, con Sakaki come officiante, Masa Uehara, studentessa d'inglese, con la quale l'anno successivo si sarebbe ristabilito in California. Nel 1958, però, aveva intanto fondato a San Francisco uno zendo informale, un luogo di meditazione da lui chiamato Marin-an, dove si riunirono regolarmente molti dei personaggi della scena Beat (e dove, in assenza di Snyder, avrebbero continuato a condurre la pratica della meditazione Lew Welch e Albert Saijo).

Ginsberg, come altri, scopre il buddhismo grazie a Snyder, ma viene galvanizzato da un viaggio intrapreso —ormai poeta famoso— nel 1962, che lo porta tra l'altro in Vietnam e in Giappone. Di questa svolta sono documento *Indian Journals: March 1962-May 1963* e «The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express»; Ginsberg si convertirà formalmente al buddhismo nel 1972 e avrà come maestro di meditazione Chögyam Trungpa; regolare frequentatore del Naropa Institute, co-fonderà con Jack Kerouac la School of Disembodied Poetics.

Il terzo e forse più famoso nome cui si associa la scoperta Beat del Buddhismo è quello di Jack Kerouac, che è il solo fra questi ad essere romanziere oltre che poeta, e che ha quindi dato la massima diffusione all'immagine dei Beats come buddhisti e come «vagabondi del Dharma», cercatori di verità attraverso la povertà, la meditazione, il contatto con la natura, lo stare fuori dalla società. È lui che in *The Dharma Bums* associa inscindibilmente le due cose nella percezione comune, descrivendo la famosa serata alla Six Gallery in cui nasce il movimento, e dedicando il romanzo alla descrizione dei Beats come una comunità di *bhikkhu*, di monaci buddhisti itineranti, fra i quali campeggia Japhy Ryder, ovvero Gary Snyder, in funzione di personaggio principale e di guru. Ed è alla pubblicazione del romanzo di Kerouac —come del resto lui stesso aveva previsto[18]— che è generalmente associata la nascita

[18] In una lettera del 1958 a Philip Whalen, Kerouac scrive appunto che il romanzo «will crash open whole scene to sudden Buddhism boom and … 58 is going to be dharma year in America»: *Selected Letters, 1957-1969*, ed. Ann Charters, New York, Viking, 1999, p. 111. Sull'influsso del buddhismo sulle opere

di uno «East-West kind of 'Beat-Zen'» [19]. Secondo quanto riporta Ann Charters nella sua biografia, Kerouac aveva manifestato interesse per il buddhismo alla fine del 1953, in un periodo di grande solitudine e depressione: leggendo Thoreau aveva voluto approfondire i suoi riferimenti alla spiritualità indiana, e aveva trovato in biblioteca un libro sulla vita del Buddha. Attratto dalle Quattro Nobili Verità e trovando conforto nell'idea che tutto ciò che si esperisce, il mondo e l'individualità non siano altro che vuota apparenza, aveva poi reso più sistematiche le proprie letture, finendo per prendere (spesso sotto l'effetto della marijuana) centinaia di pagine di appunti, che sarebbero divenuti poi la raccolta *Some of the Dharma* (pubblicata postuma nel 1997) [20]. Attraverso la lettura di manuali (di nuovo Suzuki) e traduzioni poetiche, Kerouac cercava anche nel buddhismo e nella pratica della meditazione qualcosa che potesse aiutarlo a sconfiggere l'istinto sessuale (con tutti i suoi sensi di colpa: Kerouac era e rimase un cattolico di formazione). Nel 1955 sente alcune conferenze di Suzuki alla Columbia e compie il viaggio nella Sierra Nevada che sarà oggetto di *The Dharma Bums*; nel 1956, mentre vive con Gary Snyder, produce una riscrittura del *Sūtra del diamante*, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, che Rick Fields definisce la prova del suo «Catholic Buddhism» [21]. Kerouac proseguirà lungo un proprio percorso che lo vedrà spesso contrapposto agli altri Beats a causa del loro maggiore interesse per il buddhismo zen, da lui considerato intellettualistico, rispetto alla propria ricerca di un buddhismo più «compassionevole» e meno concentrato sull'ingannevolezza delle cose: come lui stesso riportò in un'intervista del 1968, lo zen ha influenzato solo la sua scrittura («The part of Zen that's influenced my writing is the Zen contained in the haiku»), mentre il suo «serious

di Kerouac gli interventi non sono mancati: cfr. p. es. Alan L. Miller, «Ritual Aspects of Narrative: An Analysis of Jack Kerouac's *The Dhrama Bums*», *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 9,1, Winter 1995, pp. 41-53; Ben Giamo, *Kerouac, the Word and the Way. Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester*, Carbondale, University of Southern Illinois Press, 2000 e Deshae E. Lott, « 'All things are different appearances of the same emptiness': Buddhism and Jack Kerouac's Nature Writings», in *Reconstructing the Beats*, ed. Jennie Skerl, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 169-185.

[19] Steve Odin, *op.cit.*, p. 582.

[20] Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography*, New York, Straight Arrow, 1973, pp. 198 sgg.

[21] Rick Fields, *op.cit.*, p. 216.

buddhism» è quello Mahāyāna, che «referred to the continual conscious compassion, brotherhood, the *dana paramita* meaning the perfection of charity», e che «has influenced that part in my writing that you might call religious, or fervent, or pious, almost as much as Catholicism has»[22]. Come si vede, se proprio a causa della perdurante influenza del cattolicesimo il buddhismo di Kerouac è stato spesso considerato dagli studiosi, a partire da Alan Watts, come intermittente e quindi inautentico e superficiale, lo scrittore stesso era perfettamente consapevole del carattere sincretico del proprio buddhismo.

Anche da un profilo sommario come questo si può comprendere come le ricadute poetiche e letterarie dell'adesione al buddhismo di questi scrittori siano molto varie ed eterogenee. Kerouac è sicuramente il più vociferante e il più pubblico fra i tre nel suo rivolgersi al buddhismo, non foss'altro che per il fatto che lo narrativizza ripetutamente —non solo in *The Dharma Bums* ma anche in *The Subterraneans* (1958) e in *Lonesome Traveler* (1960)— e per il modo con cui ne parla continuamente e lo teorizza nei testi come aspirazione e pratica di comportamento: «I believed that I was an oldtime bhikku [sic] in modern clothes wandering the world … in order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, or Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener) and as a future hero in Paradise»[23]. Tutto *The Dharma Bums* è pervaso di espliciti sermoni buddhisti e di dibattiti sul Dharma tra i due personaggi principali Ray Smith (Kerouac) e Japhy Ryder (Snyder), il primo più orientato verso la compassione e verso una mescolanza sincretica di oriente e occidente, buddhismo e cristianesimo, il secondo più tendente verso lo zen e convinto che bisogna tenere distinti buddhismo e cristianesimo, est e ovest. Ma a parte questi discorsi espliciti (e continui, perché il narratore li ripete anche in monologo con se stesso), il romanzo è tutto organizzato come un'ascesa di tipo anche spirituale verso la «beatitudine» che coincide con l'ascensione in montagna, quando Ray segue Japhy fin quasi in cima al Matterhorn in scarpe da ginnastica e poi scende dalla montagna al modo zen, cioè a rotta di collo correndo perché «non si può

[22] Cit. in Deshae E. Lott, *op. cit.*, p. 175.
[23] Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, New York, Penguin, 1976, p. 5.

cadere da una montagna»: « 'The secret of this kind of climbing,' said Japhy, 'is like Zen. Don't think. Just dance along. It's the easiest thing in the world, actually easier than walking on flat ground which is monotonous. The cute little problems present themselves at each step and yet you never hesitate and you find yourself on some other boulder you picked out for no special reason at all, just like Zen.' Which it was» [24]. E sperimenta il *satori*, sotto forma di visione di una comunità di vagabondi muniti di zaino che si aggirano per il mondo come portatori della loro ricerca del Dharma. Alla fine del romanzo, dopo altri colloqui sul buddhismo (cap. XIII) e altre esperienze di viaggio, di impossibile reimmersione nella vita «normale» dei suoi familiari, e di fuga nella natura e nella meditazione, e dopo una seconda fase di «Zen Lunatics» (le sregolatezze, le trasgressioni sessuali e le bevute del gruppo) che fa da contrappunto a quella descritta prima dell'ascensione, Ray trascorre settimane di solitudine e meditazione in montagna come vedetta anti-incendio, e nel finale ha un altro *satori*, sotto forma di visione di Japhy (che nel frattempo è partito per il Giappone). «The vision of the freedom of eternity was mine forever» [25], e forte di questo Ray è pronto: «Now comes the sadness of coming back to cities and I've grown two months older and there's all that humanity of bars and burlesque shows and gritty love, all upsidedown in the void God bless them, but Japhy you and me forever we know, O ever youthful, O ever weeping» [26]. E con questo in conclusione Ray lascia la sua capanna sul monte e si incammina all'ingiù: «as I was hiking down the mountain with my pack I turned and knelt on the trail and said 'Thank you, shack.' Then I added 'Blah,' with a little grin, because I knew that shack and that mountain would understand what that meant, and turned and went on down the trail back to this world» [27]: come un *bodhisattva*.

Come si capisce, la presenza del buddhismo in Kerouac è in sostanza soprattutto una presenza tematica: del buddhismo dei Beats nei suoi romanzi si parla, e meditazione, visioni e risveglio costituiscono episodi e azioni ricorrenti; ma tutto questo non inci-

[24] Ivi, pp. 64-5.
[25] Ivi, p. 243.
[26] Ivi, p. 244.
[27] *Ibid.*

de particolarmente sull'assetto generale della sua prosa che è in effetti tutta basata su un io narrante sempre intento ad auscultarsi e a raccontarsi esplicitamente, spesso verbalmente compiaciuto dei suoi momenti di immersione nella natura e della sua diversità dalla gente 'normale', in una forma di autoespressione che è abbastanza lontana dallo spirito buddhista e ricorda molto di più, semmai, l'autobiografismo cristiano. Snyder commenta ripetutamente sulla sostanziale sessuofobia e sulla tendenza (discontinuamente) ascetica di Kerouac; Ginsberg osserva che Kerouac non ha mai capito veramente la meditazione e non è mai riuscito a praticarla sul serio; Kenneth Rexroth racconta con sarcasmo un episodio piuttosto emblematico in cui, in uno dei primi incontri fra i futuri Beats, Kerouac arriva a casa sua ubriaco e si butta in un angolo autoproclamandosi buddhista zen, solo per scoprire che quasi tutti i presenti erano molto più esperti di lui in materia e conoscevano almeno una lingua orientale [28].

Quanto a Ginsberg, anche in lui il buddhismo costituisce una presenza esplicita fin dai titoli di alcune sue poesie, come «Wichita Vortex Sutra» o «Sunflower Sutra». A questa citazione esplicita si aggiunge una concezione della poesia che cambia sensibilmente dall'epoca pre-buddhista di «Howl» —«I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,/dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,/angelheaded hipsters burning for the

[28] «It was from this background that the very superficial and largely factitious interest in Zen Buddhism shared by Kerouac and Ginsberg comes, not, as is often imagined, from contact with G.I.'s returning from China, Japan, and Korea. ... On the other hand, Alan Watts, Gerald Heard, Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley, and myself in California and the painters Mark Tobey and Morris Graves in Seattle were centers of interest in Oriental religion, but more especially in the revival of the contemplative life, all through the war years. Most of us conducted seminars, discussion groups, and retreats teaching younger people the elements and the techniques of nonviolence and meditation. These activities of course still go on in different forms and on a much larger scale. Gary Snyder is an ordained Zen monk and learned in the poetry and religious literature of India, China, and Japan. I will always remember the night Jack Kerouac appeared uninvited at my home, sat down with a jug of cheap port wine beside him on the floor, announced that he was a Zen Buddhist, and discovered that everybody in the room read at least one Oriental language». Il testo è tratto da una serie di interventi del 1967-69 raccolti col titolo «The Making of the Counterculture», reperibili online nel Rexroth Archive: http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/essays/counterculture.htm.

ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night»— e di «Kaddish» (1958) —«Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village/downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and I've been up all night, talking, talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening to Ray Charles blues shout blind on the phonograph»—, cioè delle poesie più direttamente politiche, ribelli e emotive, rinunciando a ogni forma di narratività o di presa sul mondo materiale [29]. Rivedendo le proprie opere per i *Collected Poems* nel 1984, infatti, Ginsberg critica la sua poesia degli anni '50 e '60 perché «politically obsessed, ephemeral, too much anger, not enough family, not enough of my personal loves» [30]. I versi di Ginsberg in questo periodo somigliano a quelli lunghi e veementi di Whitman, e la sua concezione della poesia è la stessa: bardica, comunitaria. Questo vale anche per «Wichita Vortex Sutra» (1966, nel 1968 raccolto nel volume *Planet News*), che pure come dice il titolo è posteriore alla scoperta del buddhismo, ma che ancora contiene l'idea di opporsi al potere distruttivo dell'America capitalista e militarista, con i suoi giornali e le sue TV, che —come in Vietnam— crea morte, usando un nuovo linguaggio capace di creare una nuova realtà: «I lift my voice aloud,/Make mantra of American language now, pronounce the words beginning my own millennium,/I here declare the end of the war». La meditazione cambia progressivamente questo approccio «from a negative fix on the 'fall of America'... into an appreciation of the fatal karmic flaws in myself and the nation. Also with an attempt to make use of those flaws or work with them–be aware of them–without animosity or guilt; and find some basis for reconstruction of a humanly useful society, based mainly on a less attached, less apocalyptic view» [31]. Alle rappresentazioni rivolte al mondo esterno si sostituisce dunque progressiva-

[29] Per una sintetica introduzione al mondo ideologico e artistico del Ginsberg di quegli anni, è ancora utile la voce «Allen Ginsberg» curata da Marina Camboni nel III volume de *I Contemporanei. Novecento americano*, a cura di Elémire Zolla, Roma, Lucarini, 1981, pp. 295-316. Rimando inoltre al volume di Thomas Merrill citato sopra.

[30] Cfr. Francis X. Clines, «Allen Ginsberg: Intimations of Mortality», *New York Times Magazine*, 11 November 1984, p. 92.

[31] Peter Chowka, «Interview with Ginsberg», *New Age Journal*, April 1976; cit. in Merrill, *op.cit*.

mente un'idea di poesia come forma di meditazione introspettiva, di registrazione delle successive immagini e sensazioni del presente: gli oggetti appaiono non più in relazione al sé o in chiave rappresentativa ma come oggetto di focalizzazione di un'attenzione meditativa: «[I] . . . turned away from a theistic mind, using abstractions like 'the Infinite,' and toward a non-theistic, Buddhist concentration on seeing what's there, paying attention to the thing itself» [32] (e questa nozione di «the thing itself» sul piano poetico va riportata, come vedremo, ad ascendenze precise che convergono con l'influenza buddhista). Questa pratica della poesia è ovviamente molto influenzata dalla meditazione sotto la guida di Trungpa, basata sulla respirazione (e la centralità della respirazione al ritmo poetico era a sua volta un concetto centrale del «Projective Verse» di Charles Olson come pure, dietro le spalle di entrambi, di Whitman). La raccolta *Mind Breaths* (1978), dedicata a Trungpa, contiene molte poesie scritte con l'aiuto della meditazione *śamatha*. Una delle forme stilistiche in cui si traduce quest'evoluzione è l'uso dei mantra come forme poetiche: la poesia di Ginsberg si arricchisce di ripetizioni ritmiche di suoni elementari usate per ottenere effetti spirituali, che trasformano la poesia in una sorta di preghiera o di preliminare volto a creare l'atmosfera favorevole alla meditazione.

Ma dei tre scrittori quello influenzato più in profondità dalla tradizione buddhista, sia spirituale che poetica, è probabilmente Gary Snyder. Più di Kerouac e anche più del convertito Ginsberg, Snyder nei suoi anni giapponesi ha studiato a fondo il buddhismo non solo Zen, ma anche di altre scuole (in particolare la scuola Kegon). Principi buddhisti —«cross-fertilized», come dice lui stesso, col pensiero ecologista americano e occidentale e con le tradizioni nativoamericane da lui studiate in precedenza, oltre che con vari filoni del pensiero rivoluzionario occidentale— innervano tutta la sua poesia, che si inserisce nella tradizione americana della poesia della natura ma lo fa in una chiave che tiene costantemente presenti i principi della genesi interdipendente di tutte le cose, da lui stesso spiegati ed esplicitati ripetutamente nei suoi saggi e nelle interviste. In «Buddhism and the

[32] Citato in David Remnick, «The World & Allen Ginsberg», *Washington Post*, 17 March 1985, K4.

Coming Revolution», saggio del 1961 (poi ripreso col titolo «Buddhism and the Possibilities of a Planetary Culture»), nota che la «Avatamsaka (Kegon or Hua-yen) Buddhist philosophy sees the world as a vast, interrelated network in which all objects and creatures are necessary and illuminated», e aggiunge che «The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void» [33]. In «Poetry and the Primitive», saggio poi apparso nella raccolta *Earth House Hold* (1969), espande ulteriormente sull'interrelazione degli esseri umani, degli animali e del mondo attraverso una rete di reincarnazioni che li rende tutti «interborn», in un processo di mutua creazione continuo. Questa idea della «jewelled net», della rete, della mutua relazione di tutti gli esseri naturali e di tutti gli aspetti della vita umana e universale (ibridata col pensiero e con la pratica politica della sua matrice operaia: il paragrafo citato sopra di «Buddhism and the Possibilities of a Planetary Culture», per esempio, si apre con i tre aspetti tradizionali della via del Dharma e si chiude con uno slogan degli IWW) è la base dell'ecologismo radicale di Snyder ed è la metafora centrale in *Turtle Island*, la raccolta di prose e poesie del 1974 che gli valse il premio Pulitzer [34].

Proprio le «ibridazioni» di cui si nutre la sua poesia insieme al suo ethos generale —dove i principi buddhisti si saldano alla matrice doppiamente autoctona del pensiero ecologista americano, basata sul pensiero ottocentesco (John Muir e Thoreau) e sulla visione del mondo nativo-americana (l'isola della tartaruga è il continente americano nella mitologia di molte popolazioni native)— fanno sì che il buddhismo di Snyder non sia una versione quietista e puramente contemplativa, ma si associ a un atteggiamento capace di diventare militante, usando il buddhismo (come Ginsberg prima di lui) come fonte di «incantesimi» che dovrebbero opporsi al mondo contemporaneo con i suoi effetti distruttivi. In «Spel against Demons» (parte della *Fudo Trilogy* del 1973) Snyder introduce una potente figura derivata dalla scuola

[33] Gary Snyder, «Buddhism and the Possibilities of a Planetary Culture», in *Beat down to Your Soul*, ed. Ann Charters, New York, Penguin, 2001, p. 526.

[34] Sugli influssi del buddhismo Hua-yen nell'ecologismo di Snyder cfr. Ayako Takahashi, «The Shaping of Gary Snyder's Ecological Consciousness», *Comparative Literature Studies* 39, 4, 2002, pp. 314-325.

Shindon, «Achala the Immovable» (immobile, come la montagna e la Natura) o Fudomyo-o (originariamente divinità Indù, poi oggetto di venerazione popolare in Giappone dopo la sua incorporazione nel buddhismo Shingon), considerato come un'incarnazione del Mahāvairocana Buddha o Buddha del Grande Sole, ed evocato come esorcismo contro le forze distruttive della società, che con i suoi terribili poteri e fiero cipiglio e col suo mantra dovrà imbrigliare. Allo stesso modo, in una poesia della stessa raccolta dal titolo «Smokey the Bear Sutra» (il cui tono semi-parodico mostra che la sua padronanza della tradizione buddhista permette a Snyder anche di giocare con essa, all'occorrenza), rievoca la stessa divinità sotto forma di Smokey the Bear, figura autoctona americana che rappresenta il grande Buddha del Sole, pronto a incarnarsi in America in futuro, e la cui funzione è tanto di arrestare le forze di distruzione quanto di incarnare e difendere l'armonia tra i vari esseri naturali: «Wrathful but Calm, Austere but Comic, Smokey the Bear will/illuminate those who would help him; but for those who/would hinder or slander him,/HE WILL PUT THEM OUT» [35].

Altre poesie di Snyder mostrano con grande evidenza l'operare non solo dell'idea dell'interconnessione come principio poetico, ma anche di una sensibilità zen che si riflette tanto nella rappresentazione del rapporto con la natura e con l'esistenza quanto sul piano strettamente stilistico-linguistico. Qui si vede come nella semplicità estrema del verso di Snyder operi l'influsso degli *haiku*, filtrati attraverso la linea imagista di Pound, ma anche della poesia classica cinese, e in particolare di Han Shan (650-727), poeta-eremita della dinastia T'ang molto citato anche da Kerouac, che Snyder traduce inserendo le poesie tradotte come una sezione intitolata «Cold Mountain Poems» (Cold Mountain è appunto la traduzione del nome di Han Shan) nella seconda edizione (1965) della sua prima raccolta, *Riprap* (1959) [36]. Nella poe-

[35] Per un'analisi circostanziata dei risvolti poetici del buddhismo di Snyder cfr. Katsunori Yamazato, «How to Be in This Crisis: Gary Snyder's Cross-Cultural Vision in *Turtle Island*», in *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder*, ed. Patrick D. Murphy, Boston, G. K. Hall, 1991, pp. 230-247.

[36] Su questo punto cfr. in particolare Lee Bartlett, «Gary Snyder's Han-Shan», *Sagetreib*, 2,1, Spring 1983, pp. 105-110 e Susan Kalter, «The path to 'Endless': Gary Snyder in the mid-1990s. (Nature, Law, and Representation)», *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 41, 1, Spring 1999, pp. 16-31. Sull'influsso della

sia di Snyder, è l'accumulazione dei particolari della natura e delle cose, netti, distinti e descritti in modo scarno, che crea il senso di interrelazione, la semplicità e la non-separatezza. Ciascuno è messo in rilievo da un silenzio, da un vuoto che dà ritmo alla poesia e che è anche quello della filosofia zen: «form–leaving things out at the right spot/ellipse, is emptiness», scrive in «Lookout's Journal», il pezzo d'apertura di *Earth House Hold.* L'idea stessa del «riprap» —cioè della pratica dei montanari e forestali della Sierra Nevada di raccogliere e disporre una ad una pietre di granito sui sentieri per non far scivolare i cavalli— allude, lo dice lui stesso, alla pratica della poesia come artigianato umile e preciso nella natura, con un ritmo che è quello del lavoro manuale: «Lay down these words/before your mind like rocks./placed solid, by hands/in choice of place, set/Before the body of the mind/in space and time», è l'incipit della poesia che dà il titolo alla raccolta. Poesia delle cose tangibili che non sono prese come metafora o simbolo dal soggetto poetico (la natura zen non *significa*, non è, come quella puritana o trascendentalista, un simbolo vivente), ma viste come di *per sé* significanti; è il soggetto poetico, semmai, che non figura più come il tipico io antropocentrico della poesia, ma anzi prende la minuscola e si presenta come esso stesso parte di una interdipendenza naturale. In molte di queste poesie il soggetto umano sparisce, oppure diventa del tutto accessorio e secondario rispetto agli altri elementi della natura verso cui ha compassione e di cui condivide la buddhità senza antropocentrismo, come in «The Uses of Light», una delle poesie di *Turtle Island*:

> It warms my bones
> say the stones
>
> I take it into me and grow
> Say the trees
> Leaves above
> Roots below
>
> A vast vague white

pittura cinese sulla poesia di Snyder, cfr. Anthony Hunt, «Singing the Dyads: The Chinese Landscape Scroll and Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*», *Journal of Modern Literature*, XXIII, 1, Fall 1999, pp. 7-34.

Draws me out of the night
Says the moth in his flight–

Some things I smell
Some things I hear
And I see things move
Says the deer–

A high tower
on a wide plain.
If you climb up
One floor
You'll see a thousand miles more.

Il buddhismo dei Beats non è un fenomeno isolato, ma la manifestazione più compatta e vistosa d'un interesse emerso anche in altri scrittori che non fanno parte del movimento, ma sono generazionalmente o idealmente vicini ad esso. Un nome per tutti: J.D. Salinger, nel cui *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) più d'un critico ha percepito, su dichiarazione stessa di Salinger, questa presenza, e che premette alle *Nine Stories* (1953) un *koan* zen. La popolarizzazione letteraria dello zen secondo le modalità «on the road» ormai associate indissolubilmente al nome di Kerouac (anche se la letteratura nazionale le aveva praticate negli Stati Uniti fin da Thoreau, Melville e Twain) sarebbe proseguita con l'enorme successo del libro di Robert Pirsig *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (1974), che, pur in effetti ispirato allo zen in modo abbastanza generico, trae spunto fin dal titolo da famosi manuali e trattati di zen diffusi in Occidente, e che ha a sua volta fatto molto, col suo grande successo, per far circolare immagini culturali e filosofie della vita «alternative» nella cultura americana e non soltanto (anche in Italia, tradotto da Adelphi nel 1981, fu un piccolo 'caso'). L'elaborazione di una autonoma filosofia «della qualità» che il narratore persegue nel libro troverà un ulteriore sviluppo nel successivo *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals* (1991).

Come già questa sommaria esposizione delle presenze più vistose del buddhismo nella Beat Generation ha evidenziato, il buddhismo dei Beats ha da un lato limiti evidenti, dall'altro precise genealogie culturali.

Snyder stesso ha descritto la Beat Generation come «a gather-

ing together of all the available models and myths of freedom in America that had existed heretofore, namely: Whitman, John Muir, Thoreau, and the American bum. We put them together and opened them out again, and it becomes like a literary motif, and then we added some Buddhism to it»[37]. Questa frase di Snyder è molto rivelatrice: il buddhismo, persino per chi come lui ha dedicato dodici anni della sua vita a studiarlo, appare come un ingrediente aggiunto e non come il lievito originario del movimento. La parola chiave è «libertà» e i modelli e miti evocati sono tutti autoctoni. Su questi si innesta il buddhismo come una presenza aggiunta, una sorta di spezia esotica che offre il senso di un «altrove»: e del resto, l'episodio citato prima su Kerouac e la stessa storia personale di Watts mi sembrano significativi di una caratteristica dell'approccio Beat al buddhismo che è la stessa che sintetizzavo all'inizio col dire che gli americani sono un «popolo non filologico». In modi diversi, quello che conta per ciascuno dei componenti del gruppo non è la correttezza testuale, filosofica o religiosa della loro comprensione del buddhismo come sistema di pensiero, e neppure la profondità della loro adesione ad esso sul piano personale, quanto la loro funzionalizzazione del buddhismo all'interno delle proprie esigenze personali e storico-culturali. È queste, dunque, che bisogna capire meglio.

Ginsberg, Snyder e Kerouac condividono un background di provinciali (Ginsberg è di Paterson, N.J.; Snyder cresce in una fattoria a nord di Seattle; Kerouac nasce a Lowell, Mass., da una famiglia canadese di lingua francese, che solo dopo molti anni si sposterà alla periferia di New York) di famiglia proletaria (urbana o rurale); tutti e tre vengono da esperienze familiari e tradizioni fortemente dogmatiche (Ginsberg di famiglia ebraica, Kerouac figlio di una madre ferocemente cattolica e educato dai gesuiti, Snyder di famiglia anarco-sindacalista, atea militante). Tutti e tre fanno studi accademici, pur rifiutando l'accademia. Tutti e tre trascorrono i loro anni formativi, nell'immediato dopoguerra, come intellettuali e scrittori di un'America in cui si affermano la guerra fredda come sistema ideologico bipolare e il

[37] Riportato in John Sheehy, «The Tao of Gary Snyder», *Reed Magazine*, February 1999, http://web.reed.edu/reed_magazine/feb1999/tao/4.html. Si tratta della rivista online del Reed College; il numero è interamente dedicato ai Beats che avevano studiato al Reed College, e cioè Snyder, Whalen, Welch.

maccartismo come sistema interno di repressione e controllo capillare. Un'America al culmine del conformismo sociale e della generale esaltazione del benessere materiale: per la prima volta gli Stati Uniti stanno diventando una società suburbana e il sogno piccolo-borghese si sta avverando su larga scala, grazie agli investimenti per il reinserimento dei reduci, alle nuove tecniche di costruzione economica di case nei suburbi accessibili per tutti, e al nuovo benessere indotto dal boom industriale degli anni bellici. Il buddhismo offre, rispetto a tutto questo, una via d'uscita individuale in senso spirituale, verso l'interiorità e fuori dai sistemi di pensiero «forti» di provenienza. Anche rispetto alla scena politica del tempo, offre una «terza via» che non è quella del conflitto USA/URSS della guerra fredda e che non va nella direzione di attaccare il capitalismo come sistema, in nome di un'ideologia o di un modello contrapposto. Il buddhismo permette di «evadere» materialmente, ideologicamente e mentalmente dal modello di società dominante, ma a titolo individuale, in una direzione prettamente non-istituzionale, praticando una ribellione dello stile di vita che è pre-politica e anti-politica, ben espressa dal titolo di un film epocale come *Rebel without a Cause* di Nicholas Ray (ovvero, da noi, *Gioventù bruciata*), del 1955, una ribellione che non mira a cambiare il mondo esterno, ma funziona come una sorta di «guerra privata» o di «pace separata» (entrambi, come vedremo, modelli già presenti nella cultura degli Stati Uniti fin dall'Ottocento). Al tempo stesso, non va dimenticato che i Beats, nonostante le loro ricerche di immediatezza e le loro frequenti teorizzazioni di spontaneismo letterario, sono a tutti gli effetti dei letterati, allevati su tutta la tradizione della poesia sperimentale dall'Ottocento al modernismo: e il buddhismo e l'oriente sono presenti nella tradizione statunitense che sta alle spalle dei Beats anche come modelli di sperimentazione letteraria moderna già collaudati e quindi pronti a essere utilizzati. Mi rivolgerò quindi per prima cosa brevemente a questi ultimi, per poi risalire alle radici culturali più profonde del fenomeno Beat, che coincidono non casualmente anche con la prima storia del buddhismo in America.

3. Orientalisti modernisti

Già prima ho notato, in relazione a Allen Ginsberg, che il suo punto d'arrivo in una poesia nella quale conta l'attenzione a «the thing itself» aveva un'ascendenza letteraria precisa: William Carlos Williams, il grande poeta della sua stessa città, Paterson, che aveva proposto ai poeti della sua generazione con quella famosa sentenza —«no ideas but in things»— la più scrupolosa adesione al dato sensoriale dell'esistenza e al suo scavo, come strumento di rinnovamento del linguaggio poetico. E Wallace Stevens, altro grande poeta che opera ininterrottamente dagli anni 10 agli anni 50, aveva poi fatto eco con un'altra famosa poesia intitolata «Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself» che è l'ultima dei suoi *Collected Poems* (1954) e che, come punto d'arrivo di un'inesausta ricerca autoriflessiva sulle valenze intellettuali e linguistiche della poesia, evoca la necessità di attendere alla 'cosa in sé' interrogandola in modo diretto, al di fuori del soggettivismo non solo lirico ma anche epistemologico tipico di molta arte del Novecento.

In questo senso, Wallace Stevens è una figura decisamente rappresentativa. Come i più importanti poeti americani degli anni 20, Stevens risente in modo diretto l'influenza delle culture figurative orientali, da lui (come da molti altri) scoperte attraverso la *International Exhibition of Modern Art* di New York del 1913, più nota come lo *Armory Show*, che aveva introdotto negli USA la conoscenza non solo dell'arte moderna nel suo complesso (vi erano rappresentate per la prima volta le avanguardie europee: gli impressionisti, i Fauves, i cubisti) ma anche dell'arte cinese e giapponese. Wallace Stevens diventa un appassionato collezionista di pittura e porcellane orientali e un estimatore dei loro colori (che costituiscono certamente uno degli influssi coloristici sulla sua poesia)[38]; nel primo periodo della sua scrittura, non solo adotta le tecniche che gli imagisti avevano scoperto nella poesia giapponese, ma si ispira largamente anche alla stilizzazione della

[38] Sulla questione del rapporto tra Stevens e le arti figurative cfr. fra gli altri Glen MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993. Su Stevens e l'Oriente, Caterina Ricciardi, «Wallace Stevens e l'Oriente», in *L'esotismo nella letteratura angloamericana*, a cura di Elémire Zolla, vol. I, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1978.

pittura paesaggistica cinese tradizionale, evocata in titoli come «The Evening Bell from a Distant Temple» e «Fine Weather after Storm at a Lonely Mountain Town». Una poesia famosa come «Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird» (pubblicata su *Others* nel dicembre 1917) reca in modo chiaro l'influsso congiunto delle stampe di Utamaro e Hiroshige o delle «serie» pittoriche di Hokusai, da un lato, e dello *haiku* dall'altro.

Più difficile sarebbe dire, però, se e in che misura «Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird», come pure il resto della poesia di Stevens, rechi l'influsso di una filosofia e di una visione del mondo buddhista: questa poesia complessa ed ermetica in molti punti sembra effettivamente configurare un paesaggio unitario che preesiste al soggetto e all'osservatore umano, un vuoto bianco nel quale l'uccello nero si inserisce non solo come un segno coloristico, ma anche come il segno di un essere irriducibile alla soggettività dell'osservatore, mentre la struttura e l'enunciato poetico suggeriscono simultaneamente pluralità e unitarietà, diversità e equivalenza nell'universo rappresentato. Alcuni critici riscontrano la presenza del buddhismo in Stevens soprattutto in alcune delle sue prime poesie raccolte in *Harmonium*, come quella appena citata e come «The Snow Man» (1921), poesie che sono complessi esercizi di riflessione sul, e di rappresentazione del, rapporto tra percezione e immaginazione, tra soggetto/mente e oggetto/cosa, e tra tutto questo e il linguaggio. In esse ci si confronta con un «niente» che non è soltanto la morte ma può essere letto anche come, specificamente, l'*anattā* buddhista: come nel finale di «The Snow Man», l'unica poesia che per la sua brevità possa essere citata per intero, che in questa chiave si può leggere come un vero e proprio esercizio di abbandono delle passioni, di sospensione dell' «io» (fin dall'uso dell'impersonale «one») e dell'attribuzione di coloriture emotive alla natura, proprio nell'atto, d'altra parte, di una totale compenetrazione con essa:

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
> And have been cold a long time
> To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
> The spruces rough in the distant glitter
> Of the January sun; and not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,

> In the sound of a few leaves,
> Which is the sound of the land
> Full of the same wind
> That is blowing in the same bare place
> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Altri critici vedono invece un influsso dello zen nel limite estremo di 'uscita da sé' che la riflessione di Stevens raggiunge nelle poesie più tarde come *The Rock*. «Reality is a vacuum», afferma Stevens[39], e una frase come questa mostra chiaramente la sua ascendenza duplice, non soltanto dalle filosofie decostruttive del Novecento di matrice nietzscheana, che pure sono attive in lui, ma anche dal pensiero buddhista, o quanto meno dalle forme poetiche che esso ha prodotto, e che Stevens ha studiato da vicino[40].

Se Wallace Stevens è un autorevole esempio di come le tradizioni artistiche dell'Asia orientale e la lezione buddhista abbiano fruttato poeticamente negli USA, il capostipite di ogni interesse per l'Oriente e per il suo pensiero nella poesia americana del Novecento è ovviamente Ezra Pound.

L'anno è di nuovo il 1913, l'anno dell'*Armory Show*. Pound descrive, nel saggio «How I Began» (pubblicato su *T.P.'s Weekly* il 6 giugno 1913) l'idea che porta alla poesia «In a Station of the Metro», la più famosa e antologizzata poesia dell'Imagismo (uscita con altre ugualmente intente alla ricerca del «luminous detail» su *Poetry* nell'aprile del 1913): davanti alla scena della stazione della metropolitana, Pound dispera di coglierla poeticamente

[39] Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous. Poems, Plays, Prose*, ed. Milton J. Bates, New York, Random House, 1990, p. 168.

[40] Per alcuni interventi dedicati alla questione di Stevens e lo zen cfr.: Robert Aitken, «Wallace Stevens and Zen», *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 6, 3-4, Fall 1982, pp. 69-73; Jerome Griswold, «Zen Poetry, American Critics; American poetry, Zen Criticism: Robert Aitken, Basho, and Wallace Stevens», in *Zen in American Life and Letters*, ed. Robert S. Ellwood, Malibu, Undena Publications, 1987, pp. 1-16; Robert R. Tompkins, «Stevens and Zen: The Boundless Reality of the Imagination», *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 9, 1, Spring 1989, pp. 26-39; William W. Bevis, «Stevens, Buddhism, and the Meditative Mind», *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 25, 2, Fall 2001, pp. 148-63. In italiano cfr., per la traduzione e cura di Massimo Bacigalupo, Wallace Stevens, *Il mondo come meditazione*, Parma-Milano, Guanda, 1998 e *L'angelo necessario. Studi sulla realtà e l'immaginazione*, Milano, SE, 2000.

finché «only the other night, wondering how I should tell the adventure, it struck me that in Japan where a work of art is not estimated by its acreage and where sixteen syllables [sic] are counted enough for a poem if you arrange and punctuate them properly, one might make a very little poem which would be translated about as follows:–The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough–And there, or in some other very old, very quiet civilisation, some one else might understand the significance».

Di nuovo, l'errore sulla struttura dello *haiku* —che è naturalmente di 17 e non di 16 sillabe— ci conferma la caratteristica funzionale, in questo caso poetica, e non filologica dell'interesse letterario per l'Oriente: Pound sta qui usando la tradizione poetica giapponese senza preoccuparsi di precisare la propria conoscenza e comprensione di essa, a fini di rinnovamento della poesia occidentale (e anche, indubbiamente, di promozione di sé come intellettuale poliglotta dalle competenze poetiche universali). Lo stesso farà nelle successive teorizzazioni sulla poesia ideogrammatica, basate sull'idea del cinese come lingua visiva e non fonetica, i cui segni sono pittogrammi e ideogrammi che riproducono immagini condensate della realtà, immagini che a loro volta nella loro giustapposizione liberano associazioni ed emozioni e costituiscono la base della poesia. È questa la poetica dell'imagismo, di cui Pound dirà poi che aveva «sought the force of Chinese ideographs *without knowing it*».

Nel frattempo, come è noto, Pound stava anche traducendo dal cinese e dal giapponese senza conoscerli. La vedova di Ernest Fenollosa —americano che aveva insegnato filosofia in Giappone e aveva studiato l'arte giapponese— aveva conosciuto Pound nel 1913 e lo aveva ritenuto la persona giusta per affidargli i 16 taccuini di suo marito. Questi aveva compiuto osservazioni e formulato ipotesi sulla lingua cinese —quelle appunto sulle quali Pound avrebbe fondato la sua teoria del «metodo ideogrammatico», pubblicando e facendo circolare lo studio di Fenollosa con una propria prefazione [41]— e aveva tradotto parola per parola poesie dal cinese e drammi del teatro Nō dal giapponese. Pound si impe-

[41] «*The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* by Ernest Fenollosa–*An Ars Poetica*, with a Foreword and Notes by Ezra Pound», *The Little Review*, VI, 5, 6, 7, 8, Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec. 1919; il saggio fu poi ristampato in volume nel 1936.

gnò a rendere in modo letterario quelle traduzioni lineari, spesso non capendo cosa Fenollosa avesse voluto dire, spesso integrando là dove Fenollosa non aveva capito — un'opera poetica, appunto, che peraltro passò come traduzione. Dei drammi Nō, *Nishikigi* uscì su *Poetry* nel maggio 1914, *Kinuta* e *Hagoromo* sulla *Quarterly Review* nell'ottobre dello stesso anno, mentre la raccolta completa con le osservazioni di Fenollosa e di Pound sarebbe stata pubblicata nel 1916 a Londra a nome di Fenollosa e Pound, col titolo *'Noh' or Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan*. Le poesie tradotte dal cinese (molte delle quali di Li Po) divennero la raccolta *Cathay*, pubblicata nell'aprile 1915 [42]. Su questa, e sul valore dei testi di Pound come traduzioni o come riscritture, il dibattito critico è ancora aperto: il giudizio espresso da T.S. Eliot nella sua introduzione all'edizione 1928 dei *Selected Poems* di Pound —«Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time»—, con tutta l'inevitabile ambiguità di giudizio insita in quell'«inventor», ha polarizzato il campo critico tra difensori del risultato poetico poundiano in termini di rinnovamento della poesia di lingua inglese, e denigratori della sua incompetenza linguistica e filologica e del suo sostanziale atteggiamento orientalista (nel senso saidiano) [43]. Il che non toglie che la scarnificazione e condensazione del verso, l'intensità delle immagini visive e l'oggettivazione degli elementi emotivi e dei significati concettuali operate da Pound nelle sue «versioni» abbiano fatto scuola nella poesia delle generazioni successive (Snyder incluso).

È a partire da questo momento che Pound intensifica l'interesse per la cultura cinese, e in particolare per Confucio, che diven-

[42] Ezra Pound, *Cathay*, London, Elkin Mathews, 1915.

[43] Cfr. fra gli altri: Achilles Fang, «Fenollosa and Pound», *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 20, 1-2, June 1957, pp. 213-38; Wai-Lim Yip, *Ezra Pound's Cathay*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969; Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971; Gyung-Ryul Jang, «Cathay Reconsidered: Pound as Inventor of Chinese Poetry», *Paideuma*, 14, 2-3, 1985, pp. 351-362; Ronald Bush, «Pound and Li Po», in *Ezra Pound among the Poets*, ed. George Bornstein, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985; Zhaoming Qian, «Translation or Invention? Three Cathay Poems Reconsidered», *Paideuma* 19, 1-2, 1990, pp. 51-75; Id., *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1995; Robert Kern, *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; Eric Hayot, «Critical Dreams: Orientalism, Modernism, and the Meaning of Pound's China», *Twentieth Century Literature*, 45, 4-5, Winter 1999, pp. 11-33.

terà protagonista di alcuni dei *Cantos*, il XIII (del 1925) e poi di quelli dal LII al LXI pubblicati nel 1940. In questi Pound si concentra (basandosi sulla *Histoire generale de la Chine* di Joseph-Anna-Marie de Moyriac de Mailla) sulla storia cinese, presentando Confucio come un grande saggio e filosofo politico, e facendo affiorare un'affinità tra sé e lui come grandi profeti inascoltati. Per Pound, Cina vuol dire Confucio; egli ha, invece, poca affinità col buddhismo, che considera una filosofia mistica, quindi antipolitica. L'idea del raggiungimento del nirvāṇa e del distacco dalle passioni terrene come impedimento, per esempio, gli è completamente estranea: in generale, Pound ha una visione approssimativa e parziale del buddhismo, che identifica con una filosofia dell'evasione dalla vita pratica nella vita contemplativa, rinunciando ad agire nella società e a migliorarla, e che quindi rifiuta. Del resto lo conosce poco, tanto da fraintendere in modo sistematico gli elementi buddhisti trovati nelle sue fonti, come ad esempio il poeta e pittore cinese Wang Wei (699-759), anche lui conosciuto attraverso gli appunti di Fenollosa, anche lui —seppure in modo meno esplicito del contemporaneo Li Po— forte influsso sull'elaborazione del «metodo ideogrammatico» di Pound, e pervaso di buddhismo zen, la cui presenza Pound intuisce solo in modo molto parziale[44]. Pound non si rende conto, apparentemente, di quanti elementi buddhisti ci siano nell'estetica zen dei drammi Nō da lui tradotti o nel pensiero neo-confuciano, che invece esalta. Anche qui, il rapporto con il buddhismo che emerge è quello con una specie di «cassetta degli attrezzi» dalla quale si prende e si scarta a proprio piacimento senza troppo guardare al contenuto completo della cassetta o alla coerenza degli arnesi in essa contenuti.

[44] Per un'analisi di questo apporto, cfr. Zhaoming Qian, «Ezra Pound's encounter with Wang Wei: toward the 'ideogrammic method' of the *Cantos*», *Twentieth Century Literature*, 39, 3, Fall 1993, pp. 266-83. Su Pound e la Cina, cfr. anche, a cura dello stesso autore, *Ezra Pound and China*, ed. Zhaoming Qian, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2003, che contiene tra l'altro il saggio di Britton Gildersleeve «'Enigma' at the Heart of Paradise: Buddhism, Kuanon, and the Feminine Ideogram in *The Cantos*», che riesamina la questione dell'atteggiamento di Pound nei confronti del buddhismo. Su Pound e il teatro Nō: Nobuko Tsukui, *Ezra Pound and Japanese Noh Plays*, Washington, D.C., University Press of America, 1983; *A Guide to Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa's Classic Noh Theatre of Japan*, ed. Akiko Miyake, Sanehidee Kodama and Nicholas Teele, Orono, ME, National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, Otsu, Japan, Ezra

Tutto questo è tanto più notevole, in quanto profondamente imbevuta di buddhismo era invece la fonte di Pound: Ernest Fenollosa, l'autore di quei taccuini di osservazioni e traduzioni dai quali Pound prende spunto per le sue escursioni orientaliste. Fenollosa era nato nel 1853 e aveva frequentato a Harvard filosofia e storia dell'arte seguendo le lezioni, tra l'altro, di Charles Eliot Norton. Giunto in Giappone come professore di filosofia, economia politica e logica all'Università imperiale di Tokyo, si era ben presto appassionato all'arte cinese e giapponese, l'aveva raccolta, collezionata e inventariata fino a diventare commissario imperiale per le belle arti. Nel suo studio dell'arte tradizionale della Cina e del Giappone —che lo portò a compiere un lavoro di ritrovamento, valorizzazione e ricostruzione storica che lui stesso definì simile a quello che gli archeologi avevano compiuto per la Grecia e Roma— Fenollosa entrò inevitabilmente in contatto col buddhismo, ai cui principi si ispirava l'arte da lui studiata: conobbe il maestro Sakurai Ketoku e sotto la sua guida apprese i principi del buddhismo Tendai. Al suo ritorno in America Fenollosa si dedicò non soltanto alla diffusione dell'arte cinese e giapponese (come curatore, dal 1890, della sezione asiatica del Museum of Fine Arts di Boston: fu lui, per esempio, che scelse gli esemplari di arte giapponese per la *Columbian Exposition* di Chicago del 1893, ed è al suo *Masters of Ukiyoe* che si deve la voga di Hokusai e delle stampe giapponesi in USA) ma anche alla difesa del buddhismo dalle incomprensioni e dalle volgarizzazioni scorrette. Entrò in polemica con Rhys-Davids, presidente della Royal Asiatic Society e fondatore della Pali society, il quale riteneva che l'unico buddhismo originale fosse quello Theravāda e che il Mahāyāna fosse una sua corruzione, presentando invece il buddhismo come una «progressive religion» in evoluzione nel tempo. Attaccò il popolare romanziere Francis Marion Crawford per la sua versione occultistica e teosofica del buddhismo in alcuni suoi romanzi di successo, mostrando che non ne aveva compresi neppure i rudimenti. Scrisse un grande poema, «East and West», che lesse a Harvard nel 1892, nel quale tracciava la storia dei due mondi e dei loro momenti di incontro identificando nel buddhismo il lievito e la

Pound Society of Japan, Shiga University, 1994; Ursula Shioji, *Ezra Pound's Pisan Cantos and the Noh,* New York, Peter Lang, 1998.

parte migliore delle culture cinese e giapponese, e preconizzando un momento di sintesi futura tra Ovest (maschile) e Est (femminile), cioè tra le forze congiunte della «Scientific Analysis» e dello «Spiritual Love». Nel 1897 Fenollosa tornò in Giappone come professore di letteratura inglese alla Scuola Normale di Tokyo, e fu in quel periodo che studiò il teatro Nō, ne raccolse i testi, studiò la poesia cinese, stese un trattato su *The Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* e formulò le sue ipotesi sulla lingua cinese, che poi Pound avrebbe pubblicato, con il ben noto impatto sulla poesia novecentesca.

4. Il punto di partenza: Concord, Massachusetts

Fenollosa era nato nel cuore del New England puritano, a Salem, Massachusetts: il teatro della caccia alle streghe del 1692. E così, risalendo lungo i rami della scoperta americana del buddhismo e muovendosi all'indietro non solo nel tempo ma anche nello spazio —dalla West Coast dei Beats, attraverso lo Idaho che è lo stato di nascita di Pound, al Massachusetts— si arriva al vero inizio della storia. È nel Massachusetts che avviene infatti la prima significativa ibridazione tra la tradizione di pensiero locale e quelle asiatiche, e nella fattispecie il buddhismo, creando il modello che abbiamo visto riprodurre fino ai Beats.

I protagonisti di questa ibridazione —come pure, i protagonisti della prima riconoscibile stagione intellettuale della nuova nazione americana— sono i Trascendentalisti: un gruppo di filosofi, saggisti, poeti e intellettuali, quasi tutti nati e abitanti nei dintorni di Boston, quasi tutti provenienti da famiglie benestanti (anche se non necessariamente ricche) della vecchia classe dirigente del New England, quella dei pastori e dei professionisti. Nel mezzo di una società in profonda e rapidissima trasformazione —la prima rivoluzione industriale degli USA— i trascendentalisti col loro pensiero asistematico, aforistico, ma animato da una profonda coerenza interna, fondono la lezione delle filosofie post-kantiane idealistiche e romantiche europee con l'eredità laicizzata del puritanesimo locale, in forme che costituiscono al tempo stesso un'interrogazione critica dei valori di una società sempre più secolarizzata e materialista, e sempre più volta alla conquista del progresso tecnologico e del benessere materiale, come quella a loro contemporanea, e un'esaltazione del profondo significato

spirituale dell'America e dell'individualismo (economico e morale) che ne costituisce ormai l'ideologia dominante. In questo senso il Trascendentalismo nel suo complesso diventa simultaneamente la base ideologica dell'espansione economica, capitalistica e imperialistica degli Stati Uniti che sta avendo luogo, e la base ideologica della sua critica.

Come altri trascendentalisti, Ralph Waldo Emerson —il loro capofila e l'intellettuale americano forse più cruciale di tutto l'Ottocento— è educato come ministro del culto unitariano, cioè di quella versione razionalistica, anti-trinitaria, antisettaria, «liberale» e «modernista» del congregazionalismo che era emersa nel New England lungo il corso del Settecento, trovando in Harvard a metà secolo la sua punta avanzata e nella King's Chapel di Boston la prima congregazione che la facesse ufficialmente propria. La dottrina unitariana —che nel 1825 dà origine alla American Unitarian Association di Boston, da dove la nuova denominazione comincia a diffondersi per tutto il paese— sposta inizialmente l'accento dall'enfasi calvinista sul peccato originale alla fondamentale perfettibilità della natura umana, e dall'idea della Grazia come dono imperscrutabile e predestinato di Dio a quella della scoperta di Dio attraverso la riflessione personale e razionale (secondo quanto proposto dall'empirismo di Locke), e la meditazione sulla Bibbia e sulla natura. I trascendentalisti, con enfasi variabili, si ribellano a questa razionalizzazione ed empiricizzazione dell'esperienza religiosa e recuperano l'idea dell'autorità assoluta dell'intuizione spirituale dell'individuo, eredità del pietismo mistico e del filone antinomiano del puritanesimo bostoniano, integrandola con l'idea propria del romanticismo europeo (e formulata ad esempio da Coleridge) della distinzione delle facoltà umane tra «understanding», cioè capacità di ragionamento empirico-deduttivo, e «reason», cioè capacità di cogliere per intuizione diretta la verità. Il principio trascendente così è interiore e intuitivo, ma è ugualmente distribuito fra tutti gli esseri umani e non distingue più tra eletti e dannati; uomo, natura e divinità compartecipano della stessa sostanza spirituale e la divinità non è più il Dio della Bibbia, ma un principio spirituale onnipervasivo che talvolta viene chiamato God, altre volte, Soul, Spirit, Oversoul, etc. C'è quindi una corrispondenza metafisica tra lo spirito individuale, la divinità e la natura: di qui la capacità

dell'essere umano di comprendere in profondità la Verità attraverso la natura e attraverso la comunicazione col proprio spirito, che è esso stesso di per sé divino, purché sia «self-reliant», cioè purché sia capace di discernere in sé la Verità senza lasciarsi distrarre e sviare dai dogmi, dalle istituzioni, dalle tradizioni, dalla società e dal suo conformismo. L'individuo *self-reliant* di Emerson non è, quindi, il *self-made man* o l'*homo oeconomicus* dell'ideologia frankliniana, laica, capitalista e borghese: è l'uomo *sub specie aeternitatis*, l'individuo centrale in quanto fonte e mediatore di esperienza spirituale ma valorizzato non in quanto meramente personale bensì in quanto emanazione e parte di un'anima sovrapersonale e cosmica. Un concetto nel quale si ritrova la sfiducia puritana nel *self* in quanto peso materiale della Caduta portatore del peccato originale, e il senso romantico di alienazione dell'individuo moderno (del «poeta sentimentale») dall'armonia universale della natura; ma in cui non è difficile sentire anche echi precisi delle filosofie orientali. Echi che non sono frutto di pura suggestione.

La voga dell'orientalismo in America predatava gli interessi di Emerson di molti anni. Le opere di Sir William Jones, fondatore della Royal Asiatic Society e dello studio scientifico del sanscrito negli anni 1770, e autore dei primi saggi di religioni e mitologie comparate, avevano avuto notevole circolazione negli USA di fine Settecento, dove erano state pubblicate anche le sue traduzioni di inni induisti. La sua scoperta dell'Indoeuropeo e la creazione della filologia comparata avevano profondamente influenzato Friedrich Schlegel, che era divenuto il primo sanscritista tedesco; e in quanto romantico, Schlegel avrebbe a sua volta influenzato i trascendentalisti. Fin dagli anni dell'università Emerson segue questi scritti attraverso riviste e recensioni, e il 4 aprile 1820, citando dalla lezione introduttiva di Edward Everett sulla Grecia, annota sul suo diario un appunto: «All tends to the mysterious East» [45]. Legge gli inni tradotti da Jones, legge poesie orientaliste come *Lalla Rookh* di Thomas Moore, legge volumi di storia comparata della filosofia che contengono capitoli sul pensiero orientale. Il *Cours de Philosophie* di Victor Cousin risveglia il suo entusia-

[45] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1820-1872*, ed. E. W. Emerson and W.E Forbes, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1909, I, pp. 21-2.

smo per la *Bhagavadgītā*: il fatto che questo avvenga tramite un volume francese che si basa su un saggio di un inglese (Colebrooke nelle *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of London*) su antichi testi in sanscrito e pāli ancora di incerta decifrazione, la dice lunga, come nota Carl Jackson, sui problemi di trasmissione e di comprensione che questi contatti portavano con sé [46]. In questo momento, anche gli intellettuali, i diplomatici e i missionari che mostrano interesse per le religioni asiatiche, tanto in Europa quanto in America, tendono a vederle come un'unica indifferenziata entità, quando non a liquidarle in blocco come «paganesimo», in opposizione alle tre religioni monoteiste riconosciute. Significativamente, ancora nel 1845 —ormai un intellettuale pubblico e affermato— Emerson scriverà in una lettera del proprio entusiasmo per l'arrivo di una copia della *Bhagavadgītā*, il «much renowned book of Buddhism, extracts of which I have often admired» [47]: si tratta ovviamente di un testo induista e non buddhista, ma in questo momento non c'è differenza ai suoi occhi; e del resto, non sono molti all'epoca a saperne di più. Il suo giudizio sul buddhismo è ambivalente: a quanto si evince dai suoi diari, lo vede prevalentemente in chiave nichilistica, conformemente del resto alla tendenza allora prevalente: «This remorseless Buddhism lies all around threatening with death and night. Every thought, every enterprise, every sentiment, has its ruin in this horrid infinite which circles us and awaits our dropping into it», scrive nel 1842; e ancora: «*Buddhism.* Winter, night, sleep, are all invasions of the eternal Buddh [sic], and it gains a point every day. Let be, *laissez-faire*, so popular now in philosophy and in politics, that is bald Buddhism» [48]. In altri luoghi, però, come nella conferenza «The Transcendentalist» (tenuta a Boston nel gennaio del 1842), apparenta il trascendentalismo e il buddhismo come entrambi reazioni dello spirito contro il materialismo, e assimila il distacco buddhista alla *self-reliance* del trascendentalista:

[46] Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought. Nineteenth-Century Explorations*, Westport and London, Greenwood Press, 1981, p. 47.

[47] *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph R. Rusk, New York, Columbia University Press, 1939, III, p. 179.

[48] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1820-1872*, ed. E. W. Emerson and W.E. Forbes, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1909, VI, p. 318, p. 382.

> In like manner, if there is anything grand and daring in human thought or virtue, any reliance on the vast, the unknown; any presentiment; any extravagance of faith, the spiritualist adopts it as most in nature. The oriental mind has always tended to this largeness. Buddhism is an expression of it. The Buddhist who thanks no man, who says, "do not flatter your benefactors," but who, in his conviction that every good deed can by no possibility escape its reward, will not deceive the benefactor by pretending that he has done more than he should, is a Transcendentalist[49].

Sulla reale conoscenza delle filosofie e religioni orientali da parte di Emerson il dibattito è ancora aperto: l'attenzione per l'India —anche a causa del prestigio culturale acquistato dal sanscrito dall'epoca della sua prima scoperta europea— è chiara e ricorrente nei suoi scritti, e da questa deriva ovviamente la sua maggiore familiarità con l'induismo che non col buddhismo: la *Bhagavadgītā* è citata con grande frequenza e ammirazione in tutti i suoi scritti, dove non mancano anche i riferimenti alle Upaniṣad, ai Purāṇa e ad altri testi della letteratura sacra dell'induismo. Verso la Cina invece Emerson esprime, soprattutto nei diari giovanili, una forma di dispettosa e quasi sprezzante insofferenza, e ne guarda con sospetto le religioni come manifestazioni d'infantilismo culturale, anche se più avanti, dopo essere entrato in possesso, nel 1843, della traduzione di David Collie di *Chinese Classical Works*, apprezzerà la saggezza confuciana, che da quel momento identifica come la tradizione cinese; del Giappone non parla praticamente mai, e del resto è solo dagli anni '70 che una conoscenza del paese comincia a filtrare negli Stati Uniti tramite viaggiatori e diplomatici. Theodore Parker, contemporaneo e amico di Emerson, lo accusa di aver molto citato testi orientali senza veramente capirli, e riportandoli tutti ai suoi interessi preesistenti[50]. E a fine Ottocento —quando le filosofie orientali

[49] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte, New York, The Library of America, 1983, p. 197.

[50] Cfr. Carl T. Jackson, *op.cit.*, pp. 56-57. A riprova dell'atteggiamento «non filologico» di cui parlavo all'inizio, Jackson cita anche nello stesso luogo un passo del diario di Emerson che vale la pena di riportare: «If the picture is good, who cares who made it? … The authorship of a good sentence, whether Vedas or Hermes or Chaldean oracle, or Jack Straw, is totally a trifle for pedants to dis-

cominciavano a essere meglio note negli USA— John Jay Chapman ha accusato Emerson di aver usato l'Oriente solo come fonte di «a few trappings of speech», come coloritura esterna di una filosofia già tutta formata fin dal suo primo scritto, *Nature*, anteriore alla lettura dei classici indiani[51]. Probabilmente l'accusa non è del tutto infondata, ma oggi possiamo dire che almeno per quel che riguarda l'induismo, Emerson era fra i più competenti fra i suoi contemporanei, e la pubblicazione dei suoi taccuini «orientalisti» lo conferma[52]. Ma il fatto stesso che questi taccuini siano stati pubblicati solo nel 1993 la dice lunga su un fatto: l'americanistica non ci ha tenuto particolarmente a indagare sugli eventuali apporti asiatici nel pensiero del filosofo nazionale per eccellenza. E lo stesso Emerson, probabilmente, ha inteso almeno in qualche misura coprire le tracce dei suoi eventuali 'prestiti'. Nella sua opera, infatti, la menzione dei testi sacri di altre culture serve soprattutto a universalizzare le idee di Emerson stesso, evidenziando come esse siano condivise da pensatori di ogni tempo e di ogni luogo e dagli antichi saggi della costantemente mitizzata India, culla dell'umanità: Emerson enfatizza volentieri la consonanza tra il suo pensiero e quello dei sapienti e dei filosofi che lo hanno preceduto, ma al tempo stesso è il filosofo che predica che l'uomo non deve essere «retrospective», guardando al mondo attraverso gli occhi del passato e della tradizione, ma deve avere una «original relation to the universe», come è scritto nella memorabile apertura di *Nature* (1836). Di qui

cuss»: Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1820-1872*, *op. cit.*, VIII, p. 570.

[51] John Jay Chapman, «Emerson, Sixty Years after», *Atlantic Monthly* 79, January 1897, p. 40; cit. in Carl T. Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 50. Per ulteriori dibattiti e approfondimenti sulla questione del rapporto di Emerson con le religioni asiatiche rimando, oltre che al documentato capitolo del libro di Jackson, a Yoshinobu Hakutani, «Emerson, Whitman, and Zen Buddhism», *The Midwest Quarterly*, 31,4, Summer 1990, pp. 433-448; Alan D. Hodder, «'The Best of Brahmans': India Reading Emerson Reading India», *Nineteenth-Century Prose, Special Issue: Ralph Waldo Emerson Bicentenary*, 30, 1-2, Spring-Fall 2003, pp. 337-368; Mario Faraone, «'The Light from Asia': Oriental Cultural and Religious Influence in Ralph Waldo Emerson and Transcendentalist Thought», in *Emerson at 200. Proceedings of the International Bicentennial Conference. Rome, October 16-18, 2003*, ed. Giorgio Mariani *et al.*, Roma, Aracne, 2004, pp. 297-312.

[52] Ralph Waldo Emerson, «The Orientalist», in *The Topical Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, ed. Ronald A. Bosco, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1993.

la sua cura di sottolineare che gli apporti orientali non sono che la condivisione, o la formulazione in altre parole, di idee da lui stesso originate, come in questo brano di diario: «My best thought came from others. I heard in their words my own meaning, but a deeper sense that they put on them» [53]. Come dire, anche quando i pensieri sono altrui, sono sempre suoi: la continua evocazione dell'antica sapienza asiatica serve in realtà a sottolineare la condivisione tra est e ovest, passato e presente di un'identica spiritualità, cioè a rinforzare l'universalità del pensiero di Emerson stesso. Per questo, anche, è difficile valutare fino a che punto siano effettivamente influssi, e non semplici affinità, le frequenti analogie col pensiero tanto induista quanto, in alcuni casi, buddhista che si trovano negli scritti di Emerson — e in particolare in alcuni saggi, come «Fate», «Compensation» e «The Oversoul». L'interesse per l'atteggiamento contemplativo e meditativo che dissolve le spoglie apparenti e illusorie del mondo per percepirne l'unità profonda; il monismo implicito nell'affermazione dell'essenziale unità spirituale di tutte le culture, dell'uomo con la natura e la divinità, dell'universo; la corrispondenza abbastanza precisa tra il suo concetto di Oversoul e quello induista di Brahman; la sua descrizione delle nozioni di «compensazione» e di «fato», che richiamano molto da vicino le idee di reincarnazione e di *karman*; tutte queste coincidenze indurrebbero a pensare che l'apporto delle filosofie indiane nel suo sistema di pensiero sia stato molto più forte di quello che Emerson stesso non desiderasse ammettere. Si prendano brani come questi, tratti da «Compensation»:

> POLARITY, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female; in the inspiration and expiration of plants and animals; in the equation of quantity and quality in the fluids of the animal body; in the systole and diastole of the heart; in the undulations of fluids, and of sound; in the centrifugal and centripetal gravity; in electricity, galvanism, and chemical affinity. Superinduce magnetism at one end of a needle, the opposite magnetism takes place at the other end. If the south attracts, the north repels. To empty here, you must condense there. An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that

[53] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1820-1872*, *op. cit.*, VIII, p. 528.

each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; as, spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay.
[...]
The same dualism underlies the nature and condition of man. Every excess causes a defect; every defect an excess. Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good. Every faculty which is a receiver of pleasure has an equal penalty put on its abuse. It is to answer for its moderation with its life. For every grain of wit there is a grain of folly. For every thing you have missed, you have gained something else; and for every thing you gain, you lose something. If riches increase, they are increased that use them. If the gatherer gathers too much, Nature takes out of the man what she puts into his chest; swells the estate, but kills the owner. Nature hates monopolies and exceptions.
[…]
These appearances indicate the fact that the universe is represented in every one of its particles. Every thing in nature contains all the powers of nature. Every thing is made of one hidden stuff; as the naturalist sees one type under every metamorphosis, and regards a horse as a running man, a fish as a swimming man, a bird as a flying man, a tree as a rooted man. Each new form repeats not only the main character of the type, but part for part all the details, all the aims, furtherances, hindrances, energies and whole system of every other. Every occupation, trade, art, transaction, is a compend of the world and a correlative of every other. Each one is an entire emblem of human life; of its good and ill, its trials, its enemies, its course and its end. And each one must somehow accommodate the whole man and recite all his destiny. The world globes itself in a drop of dew. The microscope cannot find the animalcule which is less perfect for being little. Eyes, ears, taste, smell, motion, resistance, appetite, and organs of reproduction that take hold on eternity,–all find room to consist in the small creature. So do we put our life into every act. The true doctrine of omnipresence is that God reappears with all his parts in every moss and cobweb. The value of the universe contrives to throw itself into every point. If the good is there, so is the evil; if the affinity, so the repulsion; if the force, so the limitation.

Thus is the universe alive. All things are moral. That soul which within us is a sentiment, outside of us is a law. We feel its inspiration; out there in history we can see its fatal strength. "It is in the world, and the world was made by it." Justice is not

postponed. A perfect equity adjusts its balance in all parts of life. Hoi kuboi Dios aei eupiptousi,–The dice of God are always loaded. The world looks like a multiplication-table, or a mathematical equation, which, turn it how you will, balances itself. Take what figure you will, its exact value, nor more nor less, still returns to you. Every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and certainty. What we call retribution is the universal necessity by which the whole appears wherever a part appears. If you see smoke, there must be fire. If you see a hand or a limb, you know that the trunk to which it belongs is there behind.

Every act rewards itself, or, in other words integrates itself, in a twofold manner; first in the thing, or in real nature; and secondly in the circumstance, or in apparent nature. Men call the circumstance the retribution. The causal retribution is in the thing and is seen by the soul. The retribution in the circumstance is seen by the understanding; it is inseparable from the thing, but is often spread over a long time and so does not become distinct until after many years. The specific stripes may follow late after the offence, but they follow because they accompany it. Crime and punishment grow out of one stem. Punishment is a fruit that unsuspected ripens within the flower of the pleasure which concealed it. Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be severed; for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end preexists in the means, the fruit in the seed.

[…]

There is a deeper fact in the soul than compensation, to wit, its own nature. The soul is not a compensation, but a life. The soul is. Under all this running sea of circumstance, whose waters ebb and flow with perfect balance, lies the aboriginal abyss of real Being. Essence, or God, is not a relation or a part, but the whole. Being is the vast affirmative, excluding negation, self-balanced, and swallowing up all relations, parts and times within itself. Nature, truth, virtue, are the influx from thence. Vice is the absence or departure of the same. Nothing, Falsehood, may indeed stand as the great Night or shade on which as a background the living universe paints itself forth, but no fact is begotten by it; it cannot work, for it is not. It cannot work any good; it cannot work any harm. It is harm inasmuch as it is worse not to be than to be [54].

[54] Ralph Waldo Emerson, «Compensation», in *Essays: First Series* [1841], in

Le fortissime assonanze percepibili in questi brani con l'idea di genesi interdipendente sono solo un campione minimo degli echi riscontrabili negli scritti emersoniani, e molti altri campioni si potrebbero estrarre da altri saggi. Al tempo stesso, qui come altrove, come si vede, Emerson ha cura di ricondurre il discorso costantemente alla sua filosofia (che è anche pratica e attenta ai risvolti etici della concezione dell'essere presentata, oltre ad avere una matrice cristiana).

Comunque si valuti l'orientalismo di Emerson in generale —che è stato oggetto di studio fra la fine dell'Ottocento e gli anni 30 del Novecento, e solo di recente è tornato ad attirare l'attenzione critica— e il suo più o meno preciso rapporto col buddhismo in particolare, una cosa è certa e documentata: è grazie a Emerson, in ambito trascendentalista, che si creano le condizioni per la prima traduzione inglese di un testo buddhista, e quindi per l'ingresso ufficiale del buddhismo negli Stati Uniti. Nel 1842 Emerson inaugura su *The Dial* (la rivista del trascendentalismo fondata nel 1840 e diretta per i primi due anni da Margaret Fuller e per i due successivi da Emerson stesso) una serie di «Ethnical Scriptures», aperta da lui stesso con selezioni del *Vishnu Sarma*; seguiranno testi confuciani[55] a cura di Henry David Thoreau —l'autore di *Walden* e di *Civil Disobedience*, pupillo di Emerson e insieme a lui l'esponente più famoso del Trascendentalismo—. Nel gennaio 1844, esce su *The Dial* «The Preaching of the Buddha», parziale traduzione del *Sūtra del loto*, tratta dal volume di Eugène Burnouf *Introduction à l'histoire du Buddhisme indien*, da poco uscito a Parigi[56]. La traduzione e cura del testo, a lungo attribuita a Thoreau, si doveva in realtà a Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, educatrice, riformatrice, scrittrice, pubblicista, e socia fondatrice del circolo transcendentalista (oltre che sorella di Sophia Peabody, che solo due anni prima aveva sposato Nathaniel Hawthorne, l'autore di *The Scarlet Letter*: un intreccio di nomi,

Essays and Lectures, *op. cit.*, pp. 283-303, *passim.*

[55] Henry David Thoreau, «Ethnical Scriptures: Sayings of Confucius», *The Dial* III, 4, April 1843; «Ethnical Scriptures: Chinese Four Books», *The Dial* IV, 2, October 1843.

[56] Anon., «The Preaching of the Buddha», *The Dial* IV, 3, January 1844, pp. 391-401. Una parte del brano è rinvenibile online all'indirizzo http://www.buddhistinformation.com/henry_david_thoreau.htm.

contiguità e parentele che conferma la vicinanza di questa traduzione al nucleo più canonico della cultura statunitense dell'epoca)[57]. È questo, per riconoscimento generale, il primo ingresso ufficiale e diretto, attraverso un testo pubblicato da intellettuali americani, del buddhismo nella cultura degli USA[58].

Questo ingresso è anche la vera matrice di molti dei fenomeni successivi. Quando dal 1845 al 1847 Thoreau si ritira nella capanna sul Walden Pond per il suo famoso esperimento di vita contemplativa, praticando la riduzione sistematica di ogni falso bisogno e tornando alla natura, vista come il fondamento nudo dell'esistenza, per trarne il minimo necessario per il sostentamento e gli spunti per la propria meditazione, Thoreau non sta soltanto praticando un ecologismo *ante litteram* che poi avrà molto seguito nella Beat Generation —la capanna di tronchi di J. Ryder in *The Dharma Bums* riecheggia da vicino quella di Thoreau, e

[57] L'attribuzione si deve a Wendell Piez, e viene ripresa, a correzione dell'erronea attribuzione a Thoreau da lui stesso in un primo momento accreditata, da Thomas A. Tweed nella seconda edizione del suo *The American Encounter with Buddhism*, *op. cit.* Sul rapporto fra il Trascendentalismo e le religioni asiatiche, cfr. inoltre Shoei Ando, *Zen and American Transcendentalism*, Tokyo, Hokusei Press, 1970 e Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993.

[58] Di lì a poco, il 28 maggio 1844, Edward Elbridge Salisbury (studioso di lingue e religioni orientali, e professore di arabo e sanscrito a Yale dal 1841 al 1854) avrebbe dato lettura della sua «Memoir on the History of Buddhism» in occasione del primo incontro della American Oriental Society. Sempre nell'ambiente degli intellettuali del New England, Lydia Maria Child —intellettuale unitariana e famosa abolizionista— avrebbe pubblicato nel 1854 *The Progress of Religious Ideas through Successive Ages*, nel quale si proponeva di offrire un resoconto attento e rispettoso delle religioni del mondo, pur filtrandole in effetti attraverso categorie fondamentalmente cristiane. Altri intellettuali, missionari, attivisti radicali, pubblicisti avrebbero proseguito il dibattito religioso sul buddhismo, sottolineandone di volta in volta, a seconda delle proprie percezioni e finalità, l'elemento nichilistico e immobilista, oppure la sostanziale congruenza con lo spirito cristiano: fra questi James Freeman Clarke, uno fra i primi studiosi americani di religioni asiatiche e religioni comparate; Samuel Johnson, predicatore riformista e trascendentalista, autore di *Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religion* (uscito in 3 volumi dal 1872 al 1885); Thomas Wentworth Higginson, pastore unitariano autore di diversi articoli sul buddhismo nei primi anni 70, abolizionista e colonnello del primo reggimento composto da ex-schiavi durante la Guerra civile, e per gli studiosi di letteratura famoso soprattutto come corrispondente e mentore letterario di Emily Dickinson (un'ulteriore attestazione della stretta e troppo poco esplorata contiguità fra il dibattito religioso e intellettuale sul buddhismo e alcune delle fucine della letteratura americana della metà Ottocento).

Snyder viene appropriatamente chiamato il Thoreau della Beat Generation— e dopo di questa negli hippies e oltre loro nella sensibilità New Age; sta anche praticando quello che Rick Fields ha chiamato un «non-theistic mode of contemplation» che somiglia da vicino a quello buddhista, e che come tale fu visto anche dai suoi contemporanei[59]. Dopo la sua morte, nel 1862, il suo amico John Weiss lo descrisse così: «His countenance had not a line upon it expressive of ambition or discontent; the affectional emotions had not fretted at it. He went about like a priest of Buddha who expects to arrive soon at the summit of a life of contemplation» [60]. La cosa è degna di nota perché, prima del trascendentalismo, nessuno negli USA sarebbe stato in grado di usare la similitudine del «prete di Buddha» con tanta precisione. Pure, sarebbe difficile quantificare l'influsso su Thoreau del buddhismo, anche se con ogni evidenza ne conobbe direttamente o indirettamente alcuni testi e principi, che paiono spesso incorporati non solo nel contenuto concettuale del suo *Walden* e nelle modalità della sua esperienza contemplativa[61] e della visione del mondo che essa

[59] Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake. A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, Boulder, Co., Shambala, 1981, pp. 62-3. Questo testo, scritto in forma narrativa da un giornalista convertito al buddhismo, presenta le vicende del buddhismo americano in modo documentato, anche se talvolta approssimativo.

[60] Citato in Fields, *op.cit.*, p. 64.

[61] Un esempio minimo, tra i mille possibili, tratto ovviamente da *Walden* (1854), quasi all'inizio della sezione «Sounds»: «I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans. Nay, I often did better than this. There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands. I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sing around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works. For the most part, I minded not how the hours went. The day advanced as if to light some work of mine; it was morning, and lo, now it is evening, and nothing memorable is accomplished. Instead of singing like the birds, I silently smiled at my incessant good fortune. As the sparrow had its trill, sitting on the hickory before my door, so had I my chuckle or suppressed warble which he might hear out of my nest. My days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen

trasmette —«It was fit that I should live on rice, mainly, who love so well the philosophy of India», scrive autoironicamente nella prima sezione del testo, «Economy»— ma anche nella sua forma aforistica e nel suo frequente procedere per domande che ricordano i *koan* del maestro zen. Ma proprio il buddhismo zen, così vicino alla sensibilità di Thoreau, gli fu con ogni probabilità inaccessibile, dato che gli scambi col Giappone, aperti dalle cannoniere del Commodoro Matthew Perry nel 1853, non cominciarono a intensificarsi che dopo il 1868, con l'era Meiji (Thoreau morì nel 1872) [62]. E gli apporti buddhisti, quali che essi possano essere stati, si mescolano nella sua scrittura con quelli, ben più numerosi, dei testi sacri dell'induismo, che documentabilmente lesse, e con quelli delle altre religioni e filosofie da lui studiate. Del resto, e significativamente, Thoreau —che pure era un grande lettore di testi— nega in modo esplicito e autoconsapevole qualunque interesse per un approccio storico e filologico al buddhismo come a qualunque altro pensiero religioso, e adotta un atteggiamento coerentemente trascendentalista di rifiuto delle scritture in quanto «imposizione» del passato sul presente: «In my brain is the Sanskrit which contains the history of the primitive times. The Vedas and their Angas are not so ancient as my serenest contemplations», scrive nel suo *Journal* il 23 marzo 1842 [63].

Su questo aspetto tornerò più avanti nel tirare alcune provvisorie conclusioni. Prima voglio completare il discorso sul Tra-

deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock; for I lived like the Puri Indians, of whom it is said that 'for yesterday, today, and tomorrow they have only one word, and they express the variety of meaning by pointing backward for yesterday forward for tomorrow, and overhead for the passing day.' This was sheer idleness to my fellow-townsmen, no doubt; but if the birds and flowers had tried me by their standard, I should not have been found wanting. A man must find his occasions in himself, it is true. The natural day is very calm, and will hardly reprove his indolence».

[62] Walter Harding riferisce che nel corso di un ciclo di conferenze a Tokyo «The Japanese would say to me, 'What did Thoreau read of Zen Buddhism? He obviously understands it so much better than most of us do.' And when I said, 'Well, he simply hadn't read anything of Zen Buddhism, it wasn't available in his day,' they were astounded»: «Panel Discussion on Thoreau, by Walter Harding, Donald Harrington, and Frederick T. Mc Gill, jr.», in Walter Harding, George Brenner, and P.A. Doyle, eds., *Henry David Thoreau: Studies and Commentaries*, Rutherford, NJ, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1962, pp. 82-102, qui p. 87.

[63] *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen,

scendentalismo portandolo a ricongiungersi storicamente alla storia istituzionale del buddhismo negli USA così come l'ho presentata all'inizio. Dopo il Trascendentalismo, è come se il buddhismo fosse uscito allo scoperto, una volta per tutte distinto dalle altre religioni e filosofie indiane e orientali insieme alle quali è stato trasmesso. Quando nel 1855 scrive la prima edizione di «Song of Myself» (che Emerson saluterà dicendo che è un libro di «Oriental largeness of generalization, an American Buddh [sic]» e Thoreau considererà «wonderfully like the Orientals»), Whitman ne sa abbastanza da distinguere nel suo repertorio di religioni il lama dal bramino; e quando molti anni dopo (1871) scrive «A Passage to India» —una sorta di grandiosa celebrazione dell'universalismo del futuro impero americano sotto forma di una ricomposizione e incontro tra Oriente e Occidente— nel ripercorrere la storia dell'incontro est-ovest distingue, pur coniugandoli nello stesso verso, «Old occult Brahma interminably far back, the tender and junior Buddha». Di lì a pochissimi anni, nessuno potrà più sbagliare: nel 1879 lo scrittore e giornalista inglese Edwin Arnold, che aveva sposato la figlia di William Henry Channing —un altro intellettuale e saggista del circolo trascendentalista, corrispondente di Emerson e nipote di quel William Ellery Channing che era stato figura preminente nella fondazione della dottrina unitariana— invierà al suocero una copia del suo lungo poema *The Light of Asia, or The Great Renunciation. Being the Life and Teaching of Gautama, Prince of India and Founder of Buddhism*. Channing lo manda immediatamente all'amico e altro trascendentalista illustre Bronson Alcott, che entusiasta lo fa pubblicare a Boston, e recensire da altri noti intellettuali della stessa cerchia, come George Ripley e Oliver Wendell Holmes: il volume —che narrativizza poeticamente tutta la vita del Buddha, accentuandone in ossequio ai gusti del pubblico vittoriano i dettagli sentimentali e quelli di colore locale (grazie a un breve soggiorno in India di Arnold che dava veridicità alle descrizioni), ed enuncia e spiega i principali punti del pensiero buddhista com'era allora inteso (le 4 nobili verità, l'ottuplice sentiero, il *karman*)— conobbe un successo enorme negli USA, ebbe 80 edizioni, e vendette secondo le stime da mezzo milione a un milione di copie, altrettante quanto i più fortunati bestseller dell'epoca. Da quel

New York, Dover, 1962, p. 104.

momento data la voga letteraria e culturale del buddhismo, che nessun alfabetizzato più ignorò negli Stati Uniti.

5. *Ipotesi conclusive (e punti di partenza)*

Essendo così tornati indietro fino alle origini della storia letteraria del buddhismo negli Stati Uniti, cerchiamo di interrogarci, per concludere, sugli elementi di continuità e di ethos comune che uniscono l'inizio di questo discorso, che ne è il punto d'arrivo culturale —la generazione Beat e il suo massiccio e condiviso interesse per il buddhismo— con la fine, che ne è l'origine cronologica. La frase di Thoreau —«In my brain is the Sanskrit»— mi sembra una chiave culturale preziosa per capire quell'atteggiamento che ho ripetutamente definito per niente filologico ma fortemente etico.

C'è un'ulteriore radice culturale che anima il trascendentalismo e che attraverso di esso si trasmette, in varie forme, alla cultura laica dell'Otto e del Novecento: è il cosiddetto «filone antinomiano» del puritanesimo —l'idea cioè che il fedele non sia tenuto a obbedire alle leggi imposte dall'autorità esteriore ma solo alla norma interiore della fede— che prende il nome da un conflitto dottrinale presente già nei primi secoli cristiani (concetti spesso considerati analoghi si ritrovano in Paolo di Tarso, anche se i primi cristiani a esserne accusati sembrano essere stati gli gnostici), ma che nel contesto americano si riferisce all'eresia di Anne Hutchinson, la ribelle processata ed esiliata nella Boston puritana del 1637. Di contro al conformismo sociale, politico e religioso imposto dalla teocrazia —per Anne Hutchinson, una perversione dell'originaria enfasi puritana sulla *justification*, cioè sulla conversione interiore operata dalla Grazia— Hutchinson afferma l'autorità assoluta della «inner light», la luce interiore di origine direttamente divina che ciascun santo esperisce nella propria coscienza, e che è quindi non negoziabile con qualunque autorità esterna, sia essa civile o religiosa. È l'antico dilemma di Antigone, ma attraverso i conflitti dottrinali dell'epoca puritana si trasmette alla cultura successiva. I trascendentalisti, eredi della tradizione bostoniana, lo ravvivano laicizzandolo: è la società con le sue istituzioni, i suoi conformismi e le sue ortodossie (incluse quelle religiose), ripete costantemente Emerson, che offusca i nostri occhi, impedendoci di accedere alla Verità e di godere di una «original

relation with the universe». Solo nella luce interiore sta la guida, non nei testi scritti né nelle leggi, nelle tradizioni, o nelle religioni. Ancora più di Emerson, Thoreau si spoglia di ogni conformismo sociale col suo esperimento di vita tra i boschi, che azzera polemicamente tutto ciò che ai suoi contemporanei sembra indispensabile a garantire il benessere e il progresso economico. E sperimenterà di persona il conflitto tra la coscienza e le leggi quando si farà incarcerare per non pagare le tasse a uno stato che condona la schiavitù e sferra guerre espansioniste, in quell'atto di disobbedienza civile che è il famoso precedente di Gandhi e poi, attraverso lui, di Martin Luther King e di tutto il movimento non violento nel mondo. «If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away», scrive Thoreau nelle conclusioni di *Walden*, e una frase come questa mostra bene quanto ancora giochi, nell'individualismo etico trascendentalista, l'eredità antinomiana. Al tempo stesso, però, l'atteggiamento di Thoreau è riconoscibilmente diverso da quello fieramente conflittuale e spiritualmente aristocratico degli eretici seicenteschi, e non mi sembra esagerato dire che trae qualche spunto dalla pratica della meditazione buddhista e del distacco dalle apparenze del mondo: «If a man is thought-free, fancy-free, imagination-free, that which is *not* never for a long time appearing *to be* to him, unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally interrupt him», leggiamo in «Resistance to Civil Government», il saggio più noto come *Civil Disobedience.* Di qui la caratteristica particolare della disobbedienza civile di Thoreau, che non è un'opposizione politica attiva ma una presa di distanza individuale e interiore: «I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. … In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is usual in such cases».

In queste parole di *Civil Disobedience* riconosciamo chiaramente la «disaffiliation» dei Beats, giocata sulla liberazione interiore e sullo stile di vita ai margini della società e delle sue leggi ma senza mai ribellarsi attivamente contro di esse[64]. E del resto non è una

[64] Sulla continuità Emerson-Beats, cfr. Mario Corona, «The (American)

novità osservare che la tradizione di Emerson e soprattutto di Thoreau è il filone culturale più riconoscibile e attivo dietro il fenomeno Beat. Quello che è forse meno noto, però, è che *Civil Disobedience*, in origine una conferenza presentata da Thoreau al Lyceum di Concord il 26 gennaio 1848, fu pubblicato (col titolo «Resistance to Civil Government») nel maggio del 1849 su *Aesthetic Papers*, una delle tante riviste trascendentaliste di breve durata. A dirigerla era Elizabeth Peabody, già traduttrice del *Sūtra del loto* sul *Dial*. E con questo, il cerchio si chiude.

L'influsso di Thoreau sui Beats (come pure su un robusto filone della controcultura degli anni '60), si diceva, non è certo una novità. Vale la pena però di soffermarsi sulla coincidenza del marcato interesse per il buddhismo che si registra in entrambi i momenti e in entrambi gli ambienti, pur in epoche così diverse, e che non si registra altrettanto negli altri, molti momenti della vita letteraria e culturale degli Stati Uniti fortemente influenzati dal pensiero trascendentalista[65]. Provo a questo punto a formulare, per concludere, un'ipotesi articolata:

1. Che il buddhismo si inserisca attivamente nella cultura filosofica e letteraria americana in momenti di crisi e di repressione che non hanno ancora trovato uno sbocco e una risoluzione storica: nell'Ottocento, il tumultuoso sviluppo di una società capitalista che nel giro di pochi decenni cambia per sempre i modi di vita e i rapporti di produzione, e la crisi politica, economica ed etica suscitata dalla questione della schiavitù e non ancora precipitata nella guerra civile; nel Novecento, il binomio guerra fredda all'estero-maccartismo all'interno, con la nuova vertiginosa espansione economica del dopoguerra e la nuova egemonia mondiale, e il decollo dell'America suburbana, medio-borghese e conformista, il cui benessere e la cui integrazione sociale sono basati su una rigida repressione ideologica, politica e dei comportamenti individuali.

2. Che in queste situazioni il buddhismo (nella lettura soggettiva e tendenzialmente approssimativa che ho cercato di illustrare) si innesti in modo funzionale su una tradizione autoctona cul-

Time of Ecstasy. Emerson, Ginsberg, Kerouac», in *Emerson at 200*, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-208.

[65] Carl T. Jackson sottolinea il parallelismo fra i due momenti, interpretandolo però in chiave strettamente interna al campo religioso, come «a mood of

turalmente portante —quella legata al filone antinomiano del protestantesimo— che legittima il non-conformismo attraverso il riferimento a leggi spirituali superiori. Di questa riprende l'idea cruciale della «luce interiore» individuale, sotto forma di «risveglio» o «illuminazione»; lo fa in una chiave non più selettiva, come quella legata alla nozione calvinista di predestinazione, ma «democratizzata» — tutti partecipano della divinità/tutti possono essere Buddha; lo fa in una chiave non-dogmatica e non-repressiva, in nome di una religiosità più diffusa e spirituale che non rigorosamente istituzionale, che serve da veicolo liberatorio alternativo rispetto alle tradizioni religiose più rigide e oppressive (il calvinismo per i trascendentalisti, il cattolicesimo e l'ebraismo per Kerouac e Ginsberg); in tal modo si pone come doppiamente liberatorio, tanto rispetto all'oppressione della religione dogmatica e istituzionale, quanto come veicolo di evasione, distacco e liberazione interiore rispetto alla pressione di dinamiche sociali altamente conflittuali o competitive; e in questo senso risulta doppiamente funzionale, tanto allo *status quo* (per il suo sostanziale quietismo sociale e politico) quanto all'esigenza individuale di «salvarsi» di fronte alle pressioni sociali e in mancanza di una alternativa storica concreta, in entrambi i casi ancora in fieri (la guerra civile, i movimenti degli anni '60: non è un caso che tutti gli scrittori che compongono la vicenda culturale qui delineata, nessuno escluso, siano bianchi) [66].

In questo senso è davvero l'Ottocento il momento cruciale, perché è il Trascendentalismo che per primo opera una sintesi o un sincretismo tra un ceppo puritano ancora molto vivo, una esaltazione nazionalistico-romantica della natura americana, e il buddhismo come apporto funzionale che contribuisce a de-dogmatizzare la spiritualità locale del New England simultaneamente universalizzandola, in quell'equilibrio dinamico tra potenzialità con-

restlessness and deep dissatisfaction with the received religious tradition»: *op.cit.*, p. 153.

[66] Per un intervento duramente e sarcasticamente polemico sul Naropa Institute come sedicente «centro» della poesia americana, denunciato come un giro d'affari e di autopromozione di matrice fortemente bianca e razzista, cfr. Ishmael Reed, «American Poetry: A Buddhist Take-Over?», *Black American Literature Forum*, 12, 1, Spring 1978, pp. 3-11. Reed cita in proposito il drammaturgo cinese americano Frank Chin, dicendo che questi «regarded the Buddhists as just another Christian sect» (p. 11).

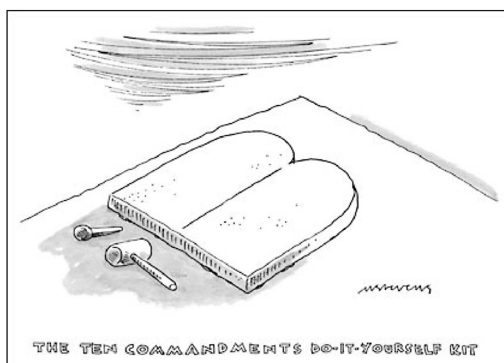
trapposte di autoliberazione meditativa e di ribellismo/riformismo sociale radicalmente democratico che caratterizza la peculiare e vitale combinazione trascendentalista, che verrà ripresa dai Beats un secolo dopo.

Se questa ipotesi è sostenibile, allora va detto che il buddhismo letterario americano diventa culturalmente significativo proprio perché è per lo più un buddhismo funzionale piuttosto che filologico, strumentale piuttosto che dottrinale. Cioè, diventa culturalmente significativo proprio perché nel contesto dato funziona come una religione di basso profilo istituzionale e dogmatico, una sorta di grado zero della religione. È illuminante in questo senso un'osservazione di Slavoj Žižek in un articolo dal titolo «Il fallimento papale» pubblicato il 7 aprile 2005 sul *Manifesto*. Commentando la contrapposizione tra i rigori dei dogmi cristiani e la richiesta di permissività rivolta dall'epoca attuale anche alla religione, nella sua versione «liberal» e «new age», Žižek scrive:

> Su questa falsariga, possiamo immaginare una riscrittura dello stesso Decalogo. Qualche comandamento è troppo severo? Regrediamo fino alla scena sul Monte Sinai e riscriviamola! «Tu non commetterai adulterio, a meno che esso non sia emotivamente sincero e non serva alla tua realizzazione profonda...» ... L'estrema ironia postmoderna è lo strano scambio tra Europa e Asia: nel momento stesso in cui, a livello dell'«infrastruttura economica», la tecnologia e il capitalismo «europei» stanno trionfando in tutto il mondo, a livello della «sovrastruttura ideologica» l'eredità giudaico-cristiana è minacciata nello stesso spazio europeo dall'assalto del pensiero «asiatico» New Age. Quest'ultimo, nelle sue diverse guise che vanno dal «buddhismo occidentale» (odierno contrappunto al marxismo occidentale, in contrapposizione al marxismo-leninismo «asiatico») ai diversi «Tao», si sta affermando come l'ideologia egemonica del capitalismo globale. In questo risiede la più alta identità speculativa degli opposti nella civiltà globale di oggi: pur presentandosi come un rimedio contro la tensione e lo stress della dinamica capitalistica che ci consente di liberare e mantenere la nostra pace interiore, la *Gelassenheit*, in realtà il «buddhismo occidentale» funge da perfetta appendice ideologica a questo tipo di dinamica. Dobbiamo qui menzionare il tema ben noto del «future shock», ossia di come oggi, psicologicamente, le persone non riescono più a tenere testa al ritmo abbacinante dello sviluppo tecnologico e dei cambiamenti

> sociali che lo accompagnano. Semplicemente, le cose si muovono troppo in fretta: prima che abbiamo il tempo di abituarci a un'invenzione, questa è già soppiantata da un'altra, sicché siamo sempre più privi della più elementare «mappa cognitiva». Il ricorso al taoismo o al buddhismo offre un'uscita da questa situazione, decisamente più efficace della fuga disperata nelle vecchie tradizioni: invece di sforzarci di stare al passo con il ritmo in accelerazione del progresso tecnologico e dei cambiamenti sociali, dovremmo piuttosto rinunciare al tentativo di mantenere il controllo su ciò che avviene, rifiutandolo in quanto espressione della moderna logica del dominio. Dovremmo invece «lasciarci andare», vivere alla giornata, opponendo una distanza interiore e un atteggiamento di indifferenza alla danza folle del processo di accelerazione: una distanza basata sulla nozione che tutto questo sconvolgimento sociale e tecnologico è in fin dei conti solo un proliferare non sostanziale di sembianze che non riguardano il nocciolo più recondito del nostro essere... Si è quasi tentati di resuscitare qui il vecchio, famigerato cliché marxista della religione come «oppio dei popoli», come appendice immaginaria della miseria terrestre: la posizione meditativa «buddhista occidentale» è probabilmente il modo più efficace, per noi, di partecipare pienamente alla dinamica capitalistica conservando allo stesso tempo l'apparenza della sanità mentale. Se oggi fosse vivo, Max Weber scriverebbe senz'altro un supplemento al suo *L'etica protestante e lo spirito del capitalismo* intitolato *L'etica taoista e lo spirito del capitalismo globale.*

Proprio come nella vignetta del *New Yorker* riportata qui sotto —apparsa, forse casualmente, pochi giorni dopo, il 18 aprile



2005— che mi sembra riassumere efficacemente il senso di quello che sono venuta argomentando.

Quel bianco centrale possiamo immaginarlo come il buddhismo nella letteratura americana: un «vuoto» fungibile e quindi «pratico» (e anche, commerciabile sul mercato: «religion market» è l'espressione che usano i sociologi della religione per analizzarne il crescente successo) su una struttura culturale che è ancora quella, marmorea, delle tavole della legge d'origine giudaico-cristiana (anche nella loro versione secolare), la cui rigidità di sottofondo, svuotata però di contenuti religiosi specifici, è proprio quella che dà una funzione culturale e un senso —liberatorio— al vuoto dello zen.

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FIORENZO IULIANO

IL CORPO RITROVATO

Storie e figure della corporeità negli Stati Uniti di fine Novecento

shake edizioni

IlCorpoRitrovato.qxd 23-01-2012 15:54 Pagina 6

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4.
L'IMPERO DEI MALI. RIDEFINIZIONI DELLA MALATTIA TRA DISCORSO E MATERIA

Aveva cominciato a spogliarsi e a stendere bene gli indumenti sulla sedia nella sua camera in cui il nuovo lampadario di Burano drenava dal grande specchio un'infiorescenza opalescente. Le piaceva questa luce boreale così potente e eccessiva che non l'abbronzava, si sentiva bianca come una statua di gesso. Arrivata al reggiseno – che si toglieva sempre per primo, perché non erano i piedi a dolerle di più – provò il bisogno di girare la testa da una spalla all'altra. Non era la prima volta che avvertiva una presenza estranea alla camera e al suo contenuto.
S'impossessò esausta dei movimenti necessari per arrivare alla nudità completa e infilarsi la camicia da notte. Grazie a questa sensazione non sua o sensazione di sensazione altrui, percepiva che nel suo corpo c'era un oltre *a lei ignaro mirato da questa presenza misteriosa. Il fluido non era in sé malvagio, ma frugava e sollevava una dopo l'altra le sette pelli, arrivava a organi senza nome dentro, a gigantografie di cellule immaginate lì attorno ai piccolissimi capezzoli e alle ermetiche grandi labbra, cellule fantasmatiche attorno a cui qualcuno stava soffrendo e godendo da lungo i muri.*

(Aldo Busi, La Delfina Bizantina*)*

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4.1. SCIENZA E POLITICA ALLA FINE DEL XX SECOLO

> The 1990s [are] the Information Age. The term refers to a range of developments in science and technology which come to redefine media, communications and the human body, from the mass manufacturing of cell phones to the digitisation of text, music and image, the genetic modification of foods to the Human Genome Project. Most of all, though, it is associated with the exponential growth of the internet and the creation of its most popular resource, the World Wide Web. (Harrison 2010, 7-8)

Nell'ottobre 1990 la rivista *Science* pubblica un breve saggio, dal suggestivo titolo "Mapping Terra Incognita (Humani Corporis)". L'autrice, Barbara Culliton, è una giornalista che si occupa dello sviluppo degli studi nell'ambito delle scienze mediche e delle biotecnlogie, un nome famoso dell'informazione e della divulgazione scientifica negli Stati Uniti. Il testo ricorda il lavoro di Andrea Vesalio, fondatore della moderna anatomia, e affianca la sua figura agli studi che, al momento, si stanno occupando del genoma umano. Culliton definisce il progetto di mappatura del genoma l'ultima conquista dell'anatomia, il passo decisivo perché la conoscenza scientifica del corpo umano possa dirsi finalmente compiuta. Il lungo percorso iniziato nel XV secolo con Vesalio, nelle parole di Culliton, aveva vissuto una fortunata accelerazione a ridosso degli anni '90, procedendo a una velocità prima impensata. L'idea secondo cui "[m]apping is fundamentally a visual process, as pictures from past to present show" (Culliton 1990, 210), sostenuta dall'autrice, si affianca alle parole di Victor A. McKusick, ricercatore della Johns Hopkins University, riportate nell'articolo: "We have now arrived at a sort of 'last frontier' of anatomy – that of the human genome" (Culliton 1990, 210). Lo Human Genome Project, iniziato nel 1989 presso il Department of Energy e i National Institutes of Health degli Stati Uniti, si proponeva di realizzare la mappatura completa del genoma umano, identificando e catalogando le migliaia di geni che costituiscono il corredo cromosomico delle cellule dell'organismo. Nello stesso periodo un altro progetto segna lo sviluppo delle ricerche scientifiche, quello del Visible Human Project, condotto presso la National Library of Medicine del Maryland, che utilizza un cadavere allo scopo di digitalizzarne ogni minima componente e renderla disponibile a chiunque sulla rete di internet, la cui popolarità e diffusione capillare proprio in questi anni conosce una crescita notevolissima.

I concetti di mappa e, ancora di più, di frontiera, così ricorrenti nel dibattito scientifico e nella saggistica divulgativa dell'epoca, hanno una connotazione politica evidente e non casuale. Le parole di McKusick implicano un'appropriazione diretta da parte della ricerca e della di-

vulgazione scientifica di un dato politico e discorsivo che ha storicamente marcato la costruzione dell'identità nazionale degli Stati Uniti, e che vedeva nella frontiera geografica il limite in continua espansione della nazione americana, segno tangibile del destino manifesto. Questi stessi concetti, riferiti non più alla conquista di nuovi territori, ma alla visibilità totale del corpo umano, realizzano una perfetta analogia tra l'antica necessità di definire e denominare le terre, nel momento stesso in cui venivano inglobate all'interno del paradigma-nazione, e un equivalente bisogno di identificare e rendere pienamente visibile il corpo umano, così urgente nel momento in cui il sapere scientifico cerca di appropriarsene pienamente, così da controllarlo fino alla sua più piccola articolazione.

Sempre all'inizio degli anni '90, inoltre, un altro elemento di primissimo piano si impone come parallelo e complementare a quanto sta accadendo sul piano degli studi di microbiologia. L'espansione vertiginosa e capillare delle tecnologie dell'informazione ha giocato, con un peso pari a quello delle innovazioni prodotte nel campo della ricerca medica, un ruolo fondamentale nel ridefinire i criteri ontologici ed epistemici del vecchio umanesimo, stabilendo nuove modalità di rappresentazione e di comunicazione destinate a trasformare, in questi anni, i vincoli interpersonali e la percezione dello spazio-tempo su larghissima scala.

Le nuove tecnologie biomediche e informatiche si intrecciano con le trasformazioni politiche in corso nei primi anni '90, rafforzando la percezione di questa fase del passato recente come il momento nel quale si dovrebbe addirittura consumare la fine della storia. Il libro *The End of History and the Last Man* di Francis Fukuyama, pubblicato nel 1992, afferma che, hegelianamente, la storia aveva trovato il suo punto di sintetica conclusione nella teoria e prassi politica liberale e capitalista incarnata dagli USA e destinata a imporsi su scala globale dopo la caduta dell'URSS. Come ricorda Collin Harrison, contestualmente a questo discorso, che incarna una sorta di messianesimo pan-americano, una costellazione composita di utopie segna l'immaginario collettivo dell'epoca, tutte originate a diverso titolo tanto dagli sviluppi politici recenti quanto dalle nuove scoperte delle scienze. Tra queste, per esempio, il pensiero *extropianista* (formulato sul concetto di extropia; Harrison 2010, 191) teorizza la sintesi postumana tra l'evoluzione dell'uomo e l'evoluzione dei prodotti della sua stessa mente, in quella che sembra la risposta o la logica conclusione dell'ingenua utopia *cyborg* che aveva segnato l'immaginario collettivo dagli anni '60 in poi.[1]

Le scoperte scientifiche hanno un ruolo decisivo nell'affermare la supremazia del potere politico americano sulla scena mondiale nel momento in cui lo storico rivale sovietico veniva meno. Per questo motivo, in momentanea assenza di un nemico tangibile, lo sciovinismo reto-

rico, rivestito di una discutibile patina soteriologica e messianica, può spingersi fino a proclamare gli Stati Uniti propugnatori e custodi di un nuovo universalismo dell'umano, fondato sulla conoscenza assoluta dei codici genetici e, conseguentemente, sul primato politico che ne deriva. È uno scritto dell'ex presidente Richard Nixon a riassumere in modo efficace il ruolo che la scienza si appresta ad avere sul piano politico.[2]

> We will see great advances in medical technology. In biotechnology, we will develop reliable artificial human organs for transplants. We will invent ways to regenerate damaged brain and nerve tissue. We will devise substances to lubricate arthritic joints. We will build machines that can scan inside the human body to diagnose problems and illnesses. Through DNA research, we will eradicate scores of disease, perhaps even cancer and AIDS. For our descendants, life spans of 100 years will no longer be unusual.
> We will be finally able to solve the problems of world hunger and poverty. We will see DNA researchers create new strains of crops that produce greater yields, that make more efficient use of sunlight, that resist disease and insects, and that thrive in poor soil. (Nixon 1988, 10-11)

Pubblicato per la prima volta nel 1988, questo scritto è assai significativo proprio perché ribadisce il ruolo delle scoperte scientifiche nella implicita valorizzazione di un generico *we* che identifica implicitamente le conquiste degli Stati Uniti con quelle dell'umanità. Nel momento in cui la minaccia nucleare sembra ormai consegnata al passato, le risorse del sapere possono finalmente essere investite in un nuovo campo, così da diventare il mezzo in grado di garantire un benessere diffuso. Non essendo inoltre ancora in agenda la necessità di 'esportare la democrazia', è la prospettiva di una vita eterna e appagante a incarnare, per quanto temporaneamente, la cifra dell'eccezionalismo americano e il ruolo degli Stati Uniti come redentori dell'intero pianeta. Nel testo di Nixon sono menzionate le ricerche sul DNA che, oltre a essere una risorsa per contrastare il sottosviluppo e la denutrizione, potrebbero perfino aspirare a debellare le minacce di malattie come il cancro e l'AIDS. È, quest'ultimo, un riferimento da non sottovalutare, non solo per una fiducia nella scienza tutto sommato ingenua e più viziata da un trionfalismo di circostanza che sostenuta da prove o fonti documentate, quanto perché rappresenta, nuovamente, la fusione di due piani di discorso diversi. Da un lato c'è l'emergenza dell'AIDS, che nel momento stesso in cui Nixon scrive rappresenta una questione molto spinosa per la società americana nel suo complesso, probabilmente più per la sua traduzione in termini ideologici e discorsivi che per le questioni mediche e scientifiche ad esso realmente connesse; dall'altro si

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auspica che da questo problema controverso, immediatamente strumentalizzato dai settori conservatori e fondamentalisti della società e della politica americana in chiave repressiva e soprattutto omofoba, si possa uscire grazie a una risorsa quasi miracolistica, che consenta di neutralizzare, allo stesso tempo, l'AIDS in quanto sindrome e i dilemmi di natura etico-politica che ne sono derivati.

La frontiera rappresentata dalle ricerche sul DNA ha l'aria di essere, di conseguenza, una via d'uscita provvidenziale rispetto alla stagnazione politica e culturale che sta affossando gli Stati Uniti alla fine degli anni '80, e bene si affianca alla prospettiva di una umanità che, ormai libera dalla minaccia del comunismo, può legittimamente sperare in una liberazione integrale da qualsiasi altro male. Il discorso sulla scienza si colloca in una sicura affermazione della giustezza dei valori impliciti della *Americanness*, ed è a essi del tutto organico e consequenziale. Il testo di Nixon si chiude, in maniera prevedibile, ribadendo che le nuove, ottimistiche prospettive di un futuro di benessere per l'intera umanità sono il frutto e la naturale evoluzione dei principi costitutivi degli Stati Uniti, declinati ogni volta in maniera diversa in base alle caratteristiche e alle necessità di ogni epoca:

> We need to restore faith in our ideals, in our destiny, in ourselves. We are here for more than hedonistic self-satisfaction. We are here to make history – not to ignore the past, not to destroy the past, not to turn back to the past, but to move onward and upward in a way that opens up new vistas for the future. (Nixon 1988, 18)

Se le parole di Nixon sono emblematiche rispetto al ruolo della scienza sul piano della macro-politica, nei termini di una rappresentazione ideologica e propagandistica degli Stati Uniti in quanto faro del progresso e speranza per il genere umano nel suo complesso, è sul piano micro-politico che le ricerche scientifiche acquistano un significato decisivo e straordinario, diventando il mezzo attraverso il quale l'amministrazione della giustizia sembra avere ottenuto un nuovo strumento a propria disposizione per garantire la sicurezza ai cittadini e la certezza della pena ai criminali. All'ufficialità delle parole di un ex presidente, infatti, fanno da contrappeso le numerose e spesso irriconoscibili articolazioni del medesimo discorso all'interno della percezione comune e della cultura popolare, a dimostrazione di quanto forte fosse la fiducia dei cittadini americani nella scienza e nella giustizia, il cui sforzo congiunto è assoluto appannaggio e beneficio della nazione e della collettività.

Il primo romanzo di Patricia Cornwell, *Postmortem*, pubblicato nel 1990, è un esempio lampante della nuova percezione del ruolo che scienza e tecnologia poco per volta acquistano nella vita quotidiana dei cittadini. Per la prima volta nella letteratura poliziesca, infatti, al cen-

tro della scena del crimine c'è una scienziata, Kay Scarpetta, responsabile dell'istituto di medicina legale della Virginia, personaggio destinato a diventare celebre nei romanzi successivi dell'autrice. E per la prima volta, attraverso le parole di Scarpetta, viene fuori in maniera enfatica non solo l'importanza attribuita dall'immaginario comune alle ripercussioni degli studi sul DNA sulle indagini di una serie di omicidi ("But now there was the DNA profiling, newly introduced and potentially significant enough to identify an assailant to the exclusion of all other human beings", Cornwell 1990, 16), ma anche come questa pratica sia frutto di scoperte così recenti e innovative da essere ancora poco accettate dai non specialisti e, nella fattispecie, dalle giurie popolari.[3] Si tratta, in altri termini, di un'innovazione di cui si percepisce la portata grandiosa, destinata a stravolgere e a potenziare i mezzi a disposizione della giustizia, e che tuttavia proprio in questi anni sta prendendo piede come strumento di utilizzo comune nelle indagini.[4]

I parametri di indagine e valutazione delle prove, unico strumento a disposizione della giustizia prima che il ricorso agli esami del DNA prendesse piede, cominciano a rivelare la loro natura aleatoria e per certi aspetti fallace, essendo il mero prodotto del giudizio umano, mai del tutto accreditato come infallibile in quanto frutto di un percorso più o meno coerente di deduzioni e conferme. Al contrario, utilizzando l'analisi del DNA dei sospettati, l'investigazione è implicitamente percepita come più affidabile, proprio perché basata non più semplicemente ed esclusivamente su un meccanismo di deduzione logica, ma sui dati indiscutibili e inoppugnabili del sapere scientifico. L'utopia della scienza si traduce, in questo modo, in un oltrepassamento dei limiti dell'umano e nell'affermazione di un principio di oggettività e certezza assoluta dei fatti, tale da rassicurare il cittadino medio non solo dell'efficacia e del rigore delle indagini ma anche della esattezza matematica dei risultati raggiunti, in ragione della natura non più esclusivamente umana dei mezzi di investigazione.

Due pratiche discorsive differenti, quella ufficiale e propagandistica, incarnata dalle parole di Nixon, e quella popolare e di consumo della *detective fiction*, filtrata nel romanzo di Cornwell, sono rivelatrici rispetto all'affermazione di un principio di autorità della scienza da una parte, e della sua immediata ricaduta e riutilizzo in ambito politico dall'altra, che, agli inizi degli anni '90, si affermano come principi ordinatori di un ampio apparato di regolamentazione ideologica, giuridica e biopolitica della società americana.

Tuttavia, i rischi impliciti in questa tangibile trasformazione non sono pochi. Il biologo Michael J. Flower e l'antropologa Deborah Heath, in un articolo pubblicato nel 1993, mettono in luce le numerose implicazioni di natura culturale e politica proprie della ricerca sul genoma. In particolare, il loro studio sottolinea che il progetto Human Genome

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possa generare, attraverso una sorta di catalogazione completa degli individui, una mappatura microscopica del corpo e dei corpi, in quello che sembra sempre meno un processo di ricognizione delle possibili categorie biologiche attraverso cui classificare gli esseri umani, e che al contrario assume la fisionomia di una schedatura integrale delle specifiche e individuali singolarità di ciascuna persona, immediatamente identificabili grazie all'unicità del DNA e della sua mappatura:

> It appears then that the political stakes of the Human Genome Project are high. Examination of any one person's DNA would fix a *particular individuality* as a singular and unique variation from molecular consensus relative to any of our currently recognized genetic categories or those yet to be defined. We claim that this process constitutes a disciplinary mechanism that both defines and seizes genetic singularity. As the "meaning" of individual genetic difference or variation within these categories is sought, the occasion will arise to instantiate relations of power both in populations (the target of disciplinary bio-power) and in the body of particular persons (or, more properly, the presumed genetic foundation of that body – a microanatomo-politics). (Flower and Heath 1993, 35)

I toni ottimistici che annunciavano gli esiti delle nuove ricerche scientifiche e che, tanto sul piano della propaganda politica quanto su quello della ricaduta culturale su larga scala, si ritrovavano nei testi prima ricordati, si scontrano qui con un rischio più concreto e tangibile, quello che la dimensione microscopica del corpo biologico possa tradursi in un ulteriore apparato di controllo e di sorveglianza a disposizione del potere politico, tanto più pericoloso e potenzialmente inarrestabile perché in grado di travalicare i confini dell'umano e, in definitiva, di de-umanizzare gli oggetti controllati, riducendoli alle loro microscopiche e indifferenziate suddivisioni cellulari:

> Mapping and sequencing the human genome will unearth a whole range and multiplicity of variants – variants of differing interest to persons and institutions. Molecular genetic technologies have come to function as "political technologies," forms of bit-power that invest the human body at the macromolecular level, i.e., at the level of DNA and proteins. (Flower and Heath 1993, 36-7)

Perplessità simili sono espresse anche in merito al Visible Human Project:

> what is most startling about the cryosections is the way they disclose the body as meat: since the 'slice' pays no respect to separate organs, it vio-

> lates the traditional ordering of anatomy and produces images that confront the viewer with the less than sublime fact of their own corporeal reality. Thus the VHP both dematerialises (body as data) and rematerализes (body as mere flesh and bone) – both operations posing a profound challenge to humanist beliefs in the body as a hallowed vessel of the spirit. (Harrison 2010, 196)

Al di là delle sue legittime ambizioni di carattere medico-scientifico, la visibilità integrale del corpo umano mette altamente a rischio i più basilari concetti di intimità e riservatezza collegati all'esperienza delle singole corporeità individuali, producendo, inoltre, una frattura epistemica netta rispetto alla passata tradizione scientifica e all'ordine con il quale l'anatomia tradizionale ha definito e organizzato i corpi, dal momento che la possibilità di visualizzare direttamente specifiche sezioni del corpo di fatto nega qualsiasi armonia e rapporto gerarchico tra gli organi e le parti. Attraverso il progresso scientifico, e allo scopo di assecondarne le necessità e i bisogni, il corpo umano finisce per essere integralmente ridotto a semplice mezzo di indagine e mero oggetto di consumo.

4.2. CONTAGIO, STORIA, SCRITTURA. I PARASSITI DELL'IMPERO

Lo scenario tratteggiato, in maniera necessariamente sommaria, in queste pagine, è la cornice nella quale si collocano i testi e le pratiche discorsive oggetto di analisi in questo capitolo, che si concentrerà sulla malattia in quanto tropo che convoglia in un'unica, stratificata struttura macrotestuale una serie di produzioni discorsive negli Stati Uniti tra il 1990 e il 1997, e ne mette discussione, al tempo stesso, l'autorità ideologica e la forza retorica. Le pagine che seguono cercheranno di analizzare, attraverso la lettura del romanzo *The Calcutta Chromosome* di Amitav Ghosh e del racconto "Saturn Street" di David Leavitt, le modalità attraverso cui la malattia riesce a diventare uno spettro semiotico in grado di riassumere e interpretare specifici processi culturali che hanno avuto luogo nel periodo in questione, quali la ricerca in ambito biotecnologico e informatico-cibernetico. Le malattie rappresentate nei due testi funzionano come implicite tracce segniche di dinamiche storiche diverse; entrambi i testi, scardinando il portato utopico espresso dai momenti storici ai quali fanno riferimento, tentano di recuperare una dimensione materiale dell'esperienza umana, spogliandola delle utopie, fallimentari e distruttive, prodotte dalla scienza medica e dalle tecnologie informatiche, che la proiettavano in un futuro mai destinato a realizzarsi.

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La rilettura della malattia in quanto piano di confluenza semiologica di pratiche discorsive differenti, tuttavia, presenta una serie di problemi, dovuti essenzialmente alla complessità di porre su un unico livello di articolazione discorsiva temi e figure che appartengono a domini diversi, sia sul piano ontologico sia su quello epistemico e speculativo. Sintomatico, rispetto a questa apparente inconciliabilità di approcci, è un libro pubblicato nel 1997 che ripercorre la complessità del dibattito tra scienza, sapere e potere politico negli anni '90. In *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium*, testo dall'articolazione assai complessa e dagli infiniti spunti e rimandi, Donna Haraway espone innanzitutto un problema, che, retrospettivamente, pare racchiudere il dilemma di questa fase storica, e che ruota intorno alle relazioni di causa/effetto che legano le recenti scoperte scientifiche e gli eventi storici. Il quesito di fondo del testo di Haraway può così riassumersi: fino a che punto i dispositivi di potere e sapere che producono le scoperte scientifiche sono in grado, poi, di controllarle, e fino a che punto non finiscono con esserne, più o meno scientemente, fagocitati? La scienza si configura come un discorso che riesce a muoversi ubiquamente tra piani differenti di produzione del sapere, avvalendosi della propria autorità per ridefinire e trasformare, in maniera spesso decisiva, i paradigmi epistemici sui quali i saperi istituzionali tradizionalmente si fondano. Sin dall'apertura del libro, Haraway conferma la complessa fusione sia dei piani concettuali sia dei canali retorici di argomentazione, in ragione degli eventi storici recenti:

> I use technoscience to signify a mutation in historical narrative, similar to the mutations that mark the difference between the sense of time in European medieval chronicles and the secular, cumulative salvation histories of modernity. [...] I emphasize figuration to make explicit and inescapable the tropic quality of all material-semiotic processes, especially in technoscience. (Haraway 1997, 3-4; 11)

Il nesso *material-semiotic* riassume al meglio il complesso tentativo, portato avanti da Haraway nell'interezza della sua argomentazione, di infrangere le barriere che dividono le pratiche di significazione dalla pura materialità dei corpi. Tuttavia, Haraway è ben consapevole della natura storica di questa controversia, esito diretto delle ricerche scientifiche degli ultimi anni e della loro ricaduta sugli apparati discorsivi retorici e politici. Questa consapevolezza si traduce nell'impossibilità di scindere i termini dei singoli casi analizzati da Haraway in una tassonomia rigorosa che separi gli oggetti dell'investigazione scientifica dai loro referenti linguistici, ampiamente connotati in termini storici e culturali. L'*oncomouse* menzionato sin dal titolo del testo è in un certo senso la figura emblematica degli esiti epistemologici della ricerca, e l'autrice ne

sottolinea la natura, in primo luogo, tropologica più ancora che ideologico-discorsiva: esso sarebbe infatti stato creato "through the ordinary practices that make metaphor into material fact" (Haraway 1997, 79).

All'interno del complesso percorso di Haraway trova ampio spazio la figura del vampiro, il vettore di contagio che funziona, al tempo stesso, come luogo semiologico e materico di identificazione di dinamiche tanto biologiche e molecolari quanto storico-culturali. Proprio alla categoria dei vampiri, "narrative figures with specific category-crossing work to do" (Haraway 1997, 79), Haraway dedica pagine assai interessanti, soffermandosi sull'atto di infettare il sangue in quanto elemento non solo metaforicamente fruttuoso (ritradotto appunto nella figura del vampiro come espressione emblematica di precise istanze politiche, psicologiche o estetiche), ma pure produttivo sul piano semiotico e tropologico:

> The existence of vampires tropes the purity of lineage, certainty of kind, boundary of community, order of sex, closure of race, inertness of objects, liveliness of subjects, and clarity of gender. Desire and fear are the appropriate reactions to vampire. Figures of violation as well as of possibility and of escape from the organic-sacred walls of European Christian community, vampires make categories travel. [...] vampires are ambiguous – like capital, genes, viruses, transsexuals, Jews, gypsies, prostitutes, or anybody else who can figure corporate mixing in a rapidly changing culture that remains obsessed with purity. (Haraway 1997, 80)

Il motivo della contaminazione è cruciale nell'intera discussione. La contaminazione, trasmissione di codici e di dati da un corpo all'altro, procede attraverso un percorso trasversale rispetto ai corpi coinvolti, secondo un tracciato che afferma la supremazia della dimensione spaziale, per così dire orizzontale, del contatto e del flusso di materiale biologico infetto, rispetto a quella temporale, organizzata secondo la successione propria della riproduzione, e, per estensione, delle istituzioni ad essa strettamente connesse, come la famiglia tradizionale. I termini della biologia e quelli della storia, della cultura e dell'identità diventano strettamente connessi e quasi inscindibili; la questione della purezza e dell'uniformità delle trasmissioni genetiche si carica immediatamente di un significato allo stesso tempo semiotico e politico.

In questo modo, inoltre, è l'umano nel suo complesso a ridursi a una "information structure" (Haraway 1997, 247). La vocazione antropocentrica dell'umanesimo precipita così in una pura tassonomia biologica, e quest'ultima in un altrettanto indifferenziato sistema di segni che si combinano tra loro e necessitano di nient'altro che un'operazione di codifica. È motivo di particolare interesse che Haraway faccia ricorso a una metafora ricca di rimandi letterari, come quella del vampiro, per dare conto dei processi di trasmissione e contaminazione che, dalla

materialità microscopica presa in esame dalla biologia, si trasportano sul piano articolato delle dinamiche discorsive ed epistemiche:

> the vampire: the one who pollutes lineage on the wedding night; the one who effects category transformations by illegitimate passage of substance; the one who drinks and infuses blood in a paradigmatic act of infecting whatever poses as pure; the one that eschews sun worships and does its work at night; the one who is undead, unnatural, and perversely incorruptible. […] vampires are vectors of category transformation in a racialized, historical, national unconscious. A figure that both promises and threatens racial and sexual mixing, the vampire feeds off the normalized human, and the monster finds such contaminated food to be nutritious. […] the vampire is the figure of the Jew accused of the blood crime of polluting the wellsprings of European germ plasm and bringing both bodily plague and national decay, or that is the figure of the diseased prostitute, or the gender pervert, or the aliens and the travelers of all sorts […] the conjunction of Jew, capitalist, queer, and alien […] the cosmopolitan […] who speaks too many languages and cannot remember the native tongue. (Haraway 1997, 214-215)

Il dispositivo che produce il contagio preclude ogni possibilità di rintracciare, anche sul piano puramente formale e simbolico, una perduta purezza originaria. Lo scambio tra particelle minime di materia e di informazione, reso icasticamente vivido e impressionante dall'immagine del vampiro, è, nelle parole di Haraway, una potenzialità da sempre racchiusa nei corpi, che le recenti biotecnologie si sono semplicemente limitate a esplicitare e realizzare.

Il romanzo *The Calcutta Chromosome* di Amitav Ghosh attraversa la ricchezza del tessuto metaforico e materiale dipanato da Haraway identificando i numerosi attributi riservati al vampiro, figura tropologica della metropoli moderna, in un 'vettore di trasformazione delle categorie' reale. Laddove Haraway rivendica la necessità di un continuo ricorso alla metafora, nel romanzo di Ghosh la metafora implode su se stessa e diventa superflua, perché già, immediatamente, sostituita dalla materia. Il romanzo, ambientato a cavallo tra la New York degli ultimi anni del Novecento e la Calcutta ottocentesca, si sviluppa a partire dalle ricerche mediche realizzate nel XIX secolo sulla malaria e sulla sua trasmissione realizzata dalle zanzare anofele; fuori da ogni metafora, quindi, il vampiro *è* la zanzara, e la distanza tra figura metaforica e referente reale si annulla fino a diventare assoluta coincidenza di identità.

Il momento storico dell'imperialismo e il suo radicamento nel tessuto culturale e linguistico dell'India del XIX secolo sono toccati e trasformati dalle proprietà, attribuite alla malaria, di sovvertire i contenuti della soggettività individuale e politica dell'impero attraverso una di-

namica di interscambio di informazioni e creazione di nessi incrociati tra una dimensione corporea e l'altra. Questa dinamica, retrospettivamente, riusciva a frammentare la presunta identità monolitica dell'impero e dei suoi fautori. Christopher Shinn così riassume il meccanismo narrativo messo in opera dal romanzo:

> The key to the technology of transference – that is, to a scientific investigation into Hindu reincarnation – resides in the function of the host, which evolves in the novel from past carriers such as the mosquito or the pigeon to the present-day locus of the computer. (Shinn 2008, 146)

La storia della scienza viene rivisitata e riletta come una delle numerose tracce della storia dell'impero.

Più in generale, è la *science fiction,* genere letterario al quale *The Calcutta Chromosome* può essere legittimamente ascritto, a offrire un mezzo privilegiato per mettere in discussione gli assunti più autorevoli del sapere scientifico ufficiale, ribaltandone i paradigmi costitutivi e i fondamenti indiscussi. In questo senso, quindi, è possibile collocare il romanzo di Ghosh sulla scia di una produzione letteraria che, sin dagli anni '50, ha utilizzato i dispositivi retorici e narrativi della *science fiction* per sovvertire la nozione stessa di corpo come dato fondamentale dell'episteme, sondandone, al tempo stesso, i limiti più estremi. In uno studio sulla *science fiction* che rilegge questo complesso percorso a partire dal romanzo *Limbo* di Bernard Wolfe, del 1952, fino a *Neuromancer* di William Gibson (1984), così scrive Scott Bukatman:

> So far, the body has remained largely protected, a boundary that might be transgressed, but a boundary and limit point nevertheless. Yet, within these discourses, the body is hardly inviolate – it is instead a site of almost endless dissolution. […] the subject is simulated, morphed, modified, retooled, genetically engineered, and even dissolved. (Bukatman 2003, 244)

Se, da una parte, la *science fiction* insiste sull'assolutezza materiale, per quanto microscopica, dei corpi (Bukatman 2003, 246), dall'altra il romanzo di Ghosh utilizza la malaria come artificio linguistico e narrativo attraverso cui diventa possibile recuperare una dimensione discorsiva del corpo, rimossa proprio a causa di quella ipersaturazione materica che la distopia fantascientifica ha determinato.

Per questo motivo è proprio la malaria a produrre una stratificazione semantica e un plusvalore paradigmatico e strutturale rispetto all'intera economia del testo, in un gioco di perenne transizione tra le diverse cornici di significazione e i diversi piani di interpretazione del romanzo stesso. In un primo momento, essa viene percepita come mani-

festazione dell'alterità radicale e originaria delle terre dell'impero, volto minaccioso di una diversità impossibile da registrare, che si rivela nel suo potenziale distruttivo, segno tangibile e temuto del rischio del contagio e della morte. Sulla base di queste premesse, quindi, si colloca il discorso del colonialismo, retoricamente assunto come opera di bonifica e civilizzazione da parte del potere imperiale britannico, che in questo modo vede ribadita e rafforzata la giustezza della sua missione. Il piano metaforico prodotto da questa cornice testuale e storica ritrae, quindi, la civiltà occidentale come portatrice di salvezza in senso esteso. Il ruolo dell'impero non è più solo distruggere la barbarie asiatica con i mezzi del progresso e del sapere, ma, su un piano più ampio, sconfiggere la minaccia mortale della malattia e consolidare il potere della scienza medica, in grado di affermare la vita sulla morte.

Tuttavia, fin dal sottotitolo, *The Calcutta Chromosome* è "a novel of fevers, delirium and discovery": non semplice ricostruzione di eventi storici alla luce di una prospettiva postcoloniale, quindi, ma commistione continua e fitta tra piani diversi di diegesi e di referenza extratestuale. Il romanzo si apre su Antar, un dipendente della società LifeWatch, che, nel chiuso del suo appartamento di Manhattan, scopre il frammento di una carta d'identità. Da qui riesce a risalire alle vicende occorse anni prima a Murugan, singolare personaggio che si proclamava massimo esperto vivente di Ronald Ross, lo scienziato britannico che nel diciannovesimo secolo aveva realizzato le scoperte più significative sulla malaria. Antar riesce a districarsi tra gli infiniti rimandi che questa scoperta determina grazie all'utilizzo del software AVA, immenso archivio informatico, versione domestica e familiare di una macchina di controllo universale, potente mezzo di trasmissione dati e traduttore plurilingue.

Il romanzo comincia così a dipanarsi attraverso la giustapposizione e il continuo rimbalzo tra strati narrativi e temporali differenti. Nella scoperta del cromosoma Calcutta, così come è ricostruita da Murugan, emerge la consapevolezza che la malaria, piaga generatasi nel cuore dell'impero, potesse incubare una potenzialità rivoluzionaria e distruttiva, effettivamente realizzata grazie all'appropriazione degli strumenti della ricerca scientifica coloniale e il loro sfruttamento parassitario. Artefice di questa complessa operazione, come ricorda Murugan, è Mangala, l'aiutante di Ronald Ross, una figura a metà strada tra la strega e l'alchimista, che era riuscita a utilizzare le ricerche di Ross sulla malaria (in particolare la terapia per la sifilide ottenuta dall'induzione dei parassiti della malaria) per ottenere qualcosa di simile alla trasposizione della personalità, e, per estensione, all'immortalità:

> her treatment often produced weird side effects – what looked like strange personality disorders. Except that they weren't really disorders

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> but transpositions. […] a crossover of randomly assorted personality traits, from the malaria donor to the recipient […] Mangala stumbled on something that neither she nor Ronnie Ross nor any scientist of that time would have had a name for. […] let's call it a chromosome, it's only so by extension, so to speak – by analogy. […] that is, different, non-standard, unique – which is exactly why it eludes standard techniques of research. […] the Calcutta chromosome.[…] this is a chromosome that is not transmitted from generation to generation by sexual reproduction. It develops out of a process of recombination […] it simply isn't present in regenerative tissues. It only exists in non-regenerating tissue: in other words, the brain. (Ghosh 1995, 249-250)

Le informazioni mediche recuperate da Murugan sono facilmente riassumibili. La cura per la sifilide può essere effettuata attraverso l'inoculazione dei parassiti malarici, e gli effetti collaterali di questa terapia, raggiunti attraverso una curiosa mescolanza di empirismo estemporaneo e antichi riti magici, producono lo sfaldamento dei confini della corporeità.

La storia di Murugan si intreccia, inoltre, sia con le vicende di due donne, Sonali e Urmila, coinvolte in eventi poco chiari legati a misteriosi riti religiosi i cui celebranti sono, in qualche modo, custodi dei segreti del cromosoma Calcutta, sia con la figura del poeta Phulboni, a sua volta implicato in gioventù in avvenimenti oscuri connessi agli studi sulla malaria, e ora raffigurato come il custode di quel silenzio che, nonostante il caos apparente, sarebbe il vero dominatore della città di Calcutta. Phulboni è pure autore di una raccolta di racconti, *The Laakhan Stories*, che rivelano la sua familiarità con il misterioso servo di Ross, vissuto molti anni prima di lui. Questa raccolta è menzionata come "some kind of elaborate allegory – with each character being different but also the same and all of them being mixed up and so on" (Ghosh 1995, 111), definizione che, oltre a riferirsi, in un chiaro gioco di rimandi metatestuali, alla struttura stessa di *The Calcutta Chromosome*, rinvia al tema della trasmigrazione delle identità, cruciale per l'intero testo. Nel corso del romanzo proprio a Phulboni sarà concessa la condivisione di questo sapere esoterico, in quella che pare una celebrazione della figura onnisciente dello scrittore-vate, o, come più prosaicamente suggerisce James H. Thrall, "a possible tongue-in-cheek reference to Ghosh himself" (Thrall 2009, 297).[5] La complessa costruzione del romanzo di Ghosh appare così delimitata da due estremi, che ne definiscono il campo di azione: il surplus di informazione prodotto dal flusso di codici biologici e informatici è, infatti, compensato dalla ricerca e della celebrazione del silenzio. Phulboni, che in gioventù "grew up in the jungle, speaking the language of the local people, running wild" (Ghosh 1995, 113), ritrova nel silenzio la vera essenza della

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città, nell'elegiaca celebrazione di un umanesimo ormai destituito di ogni valore conoscitivo, che è solo possibile rievocare con i toni nostalgici e malinconici della poesia. Nelle parole di Christopher Shinn:

> By elevating Mangala and her followers of Silence as postcolonial symbols of a new post-human race that affirms the rightful sovereignty of subaltern rule, Mathur and Romanik, among others, have in effect turned the opposition to Western science into an idealized cyborgian community that triumphs over historic oppressors. This construction enables Haraway's cyborg "politics of hope" to contain both scientific and new utopian dimensions. (Shinn 2008, 151)[6]

In *The Calcutta Chromosome* la malaria è, simbolicamente, la malattia dell'impero britannico, il dispositivo scientifico attraverso cui l'Inghilterra afferma la sua supremazia sulla regolabilità e la irreggimentabilità del corpo medicalizzato dei colonizzati, e allo stesso tempo la traiettoria attraverso cui l'impero, silenziosamente, in modo minaccioso e quasi impercettibile, risponde. Il resoconto romanzato dell'esperienza indiana di Ross, così come viene esposto da Murugan, è una complessa rievocazione del normale atteggiamento del governo coloniale, riflessa nel microcosmo del laboratorio scientifico:

> It's May 1895. We're in the military hospital in Secunderabad […] That's Ronnie and the other guys are the chorus line, or so Ronnie thinks anyway. 'Do this', he says, and they do it. 'Do that', he says and they scramble. That's what he's grown up with, that's what he's used to. Mostly he doesn't even know their names, hardly even their faces: he doesn't think he needs to. As for who they are, where they're from and all that stuff, forget it, he's not interested. (Ghosh 1995, 68-69)[7]

La malaria tuttavia, in quanto custode e generatrice del cromosoma Calcutta, assume un ruolo strutturale essenziale nel romanzo, la proprietà di trasferire le informazioni tra un corpo e l'altro. Nel testo, il sottobosco della cultura ufficiale dell'impero, traccia sotterranea ai suoi dispositivi di sapere rigidamente organizzati e protetti,[8] passa attraverso la ventriloquizzazione della scienza ufficiale e la sua riduzione ad arma inconsapevole di autodistruzione. Inoltre, sfidando ogni parametro elementare dell'episteme a base soggettiva che, nella visione di Ghosh, caratterizza i meccanismi di potere e sapere dell'Europa coloniale del XIX secolo, la trasmissione del cromosoma Calcutta avveniva attraverso un processo di interazione e combinazione tra i microrganismi, e non attraverso la riproduzione sessuata, in una radicale ridefinizione delle gerarchie non solo biologiche, ma pure etiche, che hanno disegnato i limiti della conoscenza scientifica tradizionale, e che hanno

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individuato nella riproduzione sessuata il paradigma di perpetuazione e conservazione della vita.

Le ricerche svolte sulla malaria dai vari studiosi britannici – Farley, Lawrie, Cunningham, e infine Ross – rivelano un'inquietante controparte esoterica nel lavoro parallelo svolto dai due aiutanti di Ronald Ross, Mangala e Lakhan, che appartengono alle caste più basse della popolazione indiana, e che tuttavia portano avanti una serie di sperimentazioni, il cui scopo, solo accennato verso la fine del romanzo, è scoprire il cromosoma Calcutta, che consente la trasmigrazione da un corpo all'altro e, in una sorta di oltrepassamento delle barriere del corpo, la comunicazione genetica tra i diversi organismi. L'idea tradizionale di reincarnazione, propria delle culture indiane, viene rivestita delle dinamiche della *science fiction*. Inoltre, in maniera assai più significativa, essa acquista un valore aggiunto proprio perché si colloca nella temperie culturale e scientifica degli anni in cui il romanzo è pubblicato, riferimento implicito e tuttavia lampante a quanto veniva portato alla luce dagli studi sulla genetica e sulle biotecnologie, che vagheggiavano l'idea di una trasmissione intercellulare realizzabile sui piani multipli dell'organizzazione molecolare della materia, così da bypassare la riproduzione sessuata.

> And just because those biological correlates aren't transmitted by sexual reproduction, it doesn't mean that they can't be transferred between individuals by other methods. […] one of the extraordinary things about the malaria bug is that it has the capacity to 'cut and paste' its DNA […] So by the time the body's immune system learns to recognize the threat, the bug's already had time to do a little costume-change before the next act. (Ghosh 1995, 251)

In un articolo dedicato al romanzo, Claire Chambers sostiene che "Ghosh projects the possibility of the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation becoming a material reality in the future" (Chambers 2003, 59). È, questa, un'ipotesi interessante per quanto assolutamente ribaltabile: più che immaginare che le dottrine della reincarnazione sarebbero diventate una realtà futura, il testo suggerisce che esse siano state una realtà da sempre, e che i recenti studi nel campo delle biotecnologie si siano semplicemente limitati a ricodificare, nel linguaggio della scienza moderna, quanto era già stato acclarato e poi rimosso per volontà del potere coloniale.

In definitiva, il romanzo configura come portato del contro-sapere parassitario delle colonie ciò che per il sapere scientifico occidentale tardo ottocentesco era al di fuori di ogni portata e che sarebbe diventato oggetto di un'utopia collettiva solo un secolo più tardi, in seguito agli studi sul DNA e sul genoma. Le tassonomie ricostruite da Donna

Haraway si limitano a rendere conto del solo XX secolo; tuttavia, non sarebbe inopportuno, anticipando le corrispondenze tra piani della ricerca medico-scientifica e pratiche culturali che Haraway elabora a partire dagli inizi del '900, collocare la malaria tra i "diseases of the blood" che, al pari della sifilide prima e dell'AIDS poi, realizzano quel "boundary crossing" che diventa, in questa prospettiva, "more interesting than boundary maintenance" (Haraway 1997, 222). La riflessione di Diane M. Nelson è in questo senso illuminante, quanto al ruolo della malattia all'interno della complessiva economia strutturale del romanzo:

> Malaria is less "a" disease than an interaction of processes, actors, and actants (itself perhaps a lab as Latourian machine). It is caused by a parasite, not the *mal aires* or bad air from which it gets its name, entering the blood stream from a mosquito bite and then migrating to the liver to replicate and hide from the immune system. (Nelson 2003, 258)

Il cromosoma Calcutta, trasmesso dalle zanzare della malaria e, come si scopre in seguito, dai piccioni utilizzati per i rituali sacri officiati da Mangala e Lakhan, in seguito celebrato dalla voce stentorea e tetra di Phulboni, e infine incarnato nel corpo femminile di una giovane donna della piccola borghesia indiana emergente, sovverte la struttura ideologica dell'imperialismo e ne mette in discussione la necessità, in senso hegeliano, all'interno del percorso storico, facendo emergere le zone d'ombra e i punti deboli che reggono l'impalcatura del discorso coloniale. Urmila, che nel romanzo è identificata come la portatrice del cromosoma Calcutta e non a caso è ribattezzata 'Calcutta' da Murugan, diventa la depositaria inconsapevole del dispositivo di transizione tra un individuo e l'altro, prodotto dal cromosoma Calcutta stesso. E che Ghosh abbia scelto di affidare a lei questa funzione è quanto meno significativo: Urmila è una giornalista, e nell'intero romanzo è la dinamica della comunicazione, dello scambio ininterrotto di informazioni e delle loro continue codifiche a esprimere in maniera appropriata la dimensione globale cui Ghosh fa, in definitiva, riferimento. Urmila è inoltre un'esponente tipica della nuova borghesia di Calcutta, anglofona e pienamente occidentalizzata, espressione di una cultura metropolitana e cosmopolita che si colloca in maniera trasversale rispetto ai paradigmi di appartenenza nazionale, etnica o religiosa, chiaro emblema, nel continuo gioco di transizione tra passato e presente che caratterizza il romanzo, del superamento dei vincoli di identità nazionale, propri del XIX secolo, a favore di una cittadinanza planetaria e globale definita più propriamente in termini di comunicazione orizzontale e transizione all'interno di una costellazione composita ed estesa di realtà urbane, analoghe a quella di Calcutta.

The Calcutta Chromosome, quindi, configura la malaria come una "interaction of processes, actors, and actants". È una annotazione importante, questa di Nelson, in primo luogo perché, dando conto della malaria come insieme di concause e di fattori interdipendenti, ben giustifica il suo ruolo nel romanzo di Ghosh in termini semiotici e strutturali, indipendentemente perfino dagli ovvi motivi di congruenza storica. Un romanzo interamente costruito sulla tropologia dello scambio e della comunicazione, e che fa di questi due termini la chiave per il proprio sviluppo strutturale, tematico e, in senso più ampio, ideologico, trova nella malaria un perfetto meccanismo di articolazione e riproduzione semiotica, oltre che il referente storicamente più proprio. Ancora più interessante è, inoltre, l'immediata traduzione della malaria stessa in termini linguistici e retorici: parlare di "processes, actors, and actants", infatti, mette in luce la potenzialità discorsiva, pienamente sfruttata, della malattia, e la sua assoluta sovrapponibilità strutturale agli apparati discorsivi e ideologici che da essa stessa sono prodotti.

È, questo, il tratto più essenziale del romanzo di Ghosh nel momento in cui se ne voglia considerare la potenzialità retorica. Non è solo la struttura a scatole cinesi del testo a rappresentare un elemento di interesse, sia dal punto di vista narrativo sia per quanto riguarda la pertinenza ai temi affrontati. Il romanzo, infatti, si caratterizza per una dimensione performativa che non si limita a utilizzare la malaria come tema portante del proprio apparato diegetico, ma che al contrario sfrutta la sua funzionalità all'interno dell'economia strutturale dell'opera. La malaria, come viene ribadito da Nelson, è causata da un parassita, ed è a partire da questo assunto, apparentemente nient'altro che una semplice annotazione di tipo medico-scientifico, che lo status discorsivo dell'intero romanzo, e la sua autorità retorica, vengono sostanziati e problematizzati. Il romanzo di Ghosh, in altri termini, non si limita a raccontare la malaria, ma si spinge fino a mettere in atto il suo intero decorso. In questo senso, la metanarrazione non è più un semplice meccanismo tecnico di articolazione del racconto, ma la sua stessa causa immanente. Il romanzo, infatti, si costruisce attraverso un continuo differimento dei riferimenti ultimi di causalità, tanto che, fino alla fine, non è possibile risalire all'origine della macchinosa concatenazione narrativa messa in atto, né stabilire con chiarezza cosa effettivamente sia il cromosoma Calcutta e da chi o da cosa sia originato. Costruito attraverso l'affiancamento di quadri tematici e narrativi apparentemente autonomi e in realtà interdipendenti, il romanzo si snoda in una dinamica di continui rimandi interni dei nessi di causalità, tanto che la traiettoria della narrazione potrebbe essere resa graficamente con la figura del nastro di Möbius: essa si articola infatti in un progressivo e ininterrotto slittamento di eventi che, tuttavia, finisce con l'avvilupparsi su se stesso e ripercorrere incessantemente lo stesso tragitto.

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È proprio questo meccanismo di fagocitazione concatenata dei nessi causali a poter essere definito parassitario. Gli eventi e i protagonisti hanno la necessità, al fine di realizzare e preservare una propria autosufficienza narrativa e strutturale, di alimentarsi dei loro omologhi collocati sul piano di articolazione diegetica immediatamente successivo, in una sequenza che non è rettilinea ma spiraliforme, secondo una prassi che già il romanzo postmoderno aveva ampiamente adoperato, e che nel romanzo di Ghosh viene complicata dalla stratificazione degli elementi non solo strutturali, ma pure tematici e retorici in atto nel testo. La struttura parassitaria del romanzo, infatti, rinvia e rispecchia la natura parassitaria della scienza medica coloniale, così come dal romanzo stesso viene descritta. I piani di articolazione dell'opera (strutturale, tematico, ideologico) si riverberano e si intrecciano all'insegna del paradigma retorico e tropologico dato proprio dal parassita da cui ha origine la malattia. Un accenno a questa eterogenesi delle cause, o dei nessi causali, del romanzo, è contenuto nelle parole di Nelson, che a proposito dei rapporti incrociati tra i diorami narrativi messi in atto da Ghosh e la consapevolezza metanarrativa dell'opera in quanto tale, così scrive:

> Ghosh imagines the science of malaria, a disease dependent on multiple connections, enmeshed in the logics of a colonial counterscience. In turn, I argue that the hybrid form of social science fiction may be the most adequate way to think about the delirious products and unlikely networks of these colonial laboratories. […] I suggest that social science fiction may itself be a tropical laboratory where one might dissect and examine the labor of other colonial labs and produce new ways of figuring the human. (Nelson 2003, 246-7)

E, in maniera non molto dissimile, così Murugan espone la continua rifrazione degli eventi narrati, ciascuno dei quali sembra avere una sua controparte nascosta e tuttavia necessaria per la sua stessa autonomia:

> let's say there was something like science and counter-science. … It would have to use secrecy as a technique or procedure. It would in principle have to refuse all direct communication, straight off the bat, because to communicate, to put ideas into language, would be to establish a claim to *know* – which is the first thing that a counter-science would dispute. (Ghosh 1995, 104-5)

La complessità del testo di Ghosh, quindi, non si ferma a una metaforizzazione articolata su un semplice schema binario, che contrappone oriente e occidente, fosse pure in chiave decostruttiva; al contrario, la ricchezza dell'orchestrazione testuale dell'opera passa per il suo inin-

terrotto muoversi dal piano della referenza storica al piano metaforico, rispetto al quale la malaria viene a essere configurata come un vettore di disintegrazione della soggettività individuale e politica della tradizione consolidata dell'imperialismo. Il corpo dell'impero, di conseguenza, diventa l'equivalente simbolico e semiotico della corporeità sana del soggetto epistemico del sapere medico e scientifico dell'epoca e della sua metanarrazione imperialista. La traiettoria rettilinea dalla storiografia imperialista, che vede nella fondazione dell'impero il culmine della potenza politica ed economica, e anche, in senso hegeliano, spirituale, dell'Inghilterra dell'Ottocento, deflagra all'improvviso e si scinde in una concatenazione proliferante di microrganismi, batteri e parassiti.[9]

L'articolazione multipla del romanzo, infine, snodandosi simultaneamente nella capitale dell'impero britannico e nella New York dei primi anni '90, dove il romanzo prende le mosse, risemantizza la nozione stessa di trasmissione virale, accentuandone la doppia articolazione, biologica e informatica, e la sua assoluta, per quanto perturbante e temibile, sovrapposizione e coincidenza. Il transito di codici da un corpo all'altro, in altri termini, caratterizza tanto il corpo affetto dalla malaria, all'interno del contesto storicamente dato dell'imperialismo, quanto un ipotetico e distopico corpo 'postmoderno', definito dai *feedbacks* informatici, che trova in New York City la sua collocazione più appropriata e che viene rappresentato da Ghosh nel software AVA, miniera indistinta di dati e motore immobile dell'intera macchinazione dell'opera.

Sempre in termini di appropriazione semiotica, la malaria sostituisce alla narrazione dell'impero la sua traduzione, o quanto meno la sua traducibilità, intesa letteralmente come trasposizione di dati minimi di informazione e capacità di assimilare e fondere al suo interno, in senso ampio, ogni altra traccia significante:

> artificially induced malaria could cure syphilis – at least in the dementia paralytica stage when it attacks the brain. […] Malaria was the cold fusion of his day; […] it's just about the most prevalent disease on the planet. And besides, it's a master of disguise: it can mimic the symptoms of more diseases than you can begin to count. (Ghosh 1995, 55-56)

In maniera speculare, la New York descritta nel romanzo, nella quale poco per volta si riposizionano gli stessi attanti degli eventi accaduti un secolo prima, diventa una sorta di risultante prima della composita tessitura di codici e di scambi informatici messi in opera, in maniera non molto diversa da quanto sarebbe stato configurato dal film *The Matrix* solo pochi anni dopo l'uscita del romanzo.

Se la malaria è un trasparente riferimento alle dinamiche di transizione e trasmissione tra i corpi prodotte dalle biotecnologie e dall'in-

contro tra le ricerche scientifiche sul DNA, la mappatura del genoma e le tecnologie informatiche, questa analogia viene qui preconizzata e sussunta in una narrazione eziologica, rivendicando la primogenitura coloniale di un discorso che sarebbe diventato comune nella cultura americana e occidentale soltanto un secolo dopo.[10] Il dispositivo discorsivo che traduce la malattia in un apparato di produzione e significazione storica, nel percorso narrativo e retorico strutturato da Ghosh, è così riassunto in termini assai efficaci da James H. Thrall:

> Caught in machinations beyond his ken, Antar discovers that he has been the focus of a conspiracy devised by overlapping identities of Murugan, Urmila and Sonali who have been, first, the characters of the narrative Ava has helped him tease out; second, members of his expatriate social group; and third, transmigrated identities existing somehow within but also beyond the cyber world accessible through Ava. (Thrall 2009, 300)

Nonostante siano numerose le letture del romanzo che hanno prediletto esclusivamente l'approccio in chiave postcoloniale, il centro propulsore del romanzo è riposto nella figura di Antar, vera vittima dell'intera macchinazione narrativa nel suo complesso. È a New York che si trova AVA, custode ultima di tutte le informazioni su Murugan, la cui mente informatica rappresenta l'affermazione di un regime di controllo totale e panottico, tale da abbracciare e racchiudere all'interno delle proprie griglie la temuta traducibilità degli assemblati della materia. Nelle parole di Christopher A. Shinn,

> Suspicion about the Internet's potential to do massive harm increased during the mid-to-late 1990s, causing many to be concerned that, as James Saynor observes in his review of the book, the World Wide Web would "swallow us up – minds, personal identities, credit-card numbers and all – in a manner more scary than anything the electric brains managed in 'Nineteen Eighty-four' or '2001.'" […] Much as the mosquito has "recombinatory powers," Ava has the ability to transpose information and data, merging with Antar and other subaltern subjects. Like the mosquito that merely channels and redistributes the malarial virus, the computer unleashes a potent biological force that it aims to control while maintaining its autonomy. (Shinn 2001, 145-146)

È inoltre la New York di Penn Station, con il suo viavai di immigrati, a rappresentare la controparte moderna della Calcutta ottocentesca di cui si parla nel resto del romanzo. Ghosh realizza un parallelismo e una sovrapposizione tra una storia ormai consolidata e accettata, quella ottocentesca del colonialismo britannico, e una tutta da scrivere, diretto

prodotto del capitalismo biodigitale (o di quello che Antonio Negri ha efficacemente definito impero) che trova proprio negli Stati Uniti e nella New York panottica delle tecnologie informatiche e delle strategie di controllo il suo centro propulsore.[11]

Dati questi presupposti, appare lecito sfidare i limiti metanarrativi del romanzo mettendo in discussione la sua stessa gerarchizzazione degli elementi narrativi interni, e leggendolo, nella sua interezza, come un grande gioco metaforico attraverso il quale Ghosh ricostruisce lo sviluppo delle ricerche scientifiche dei primi anni '90 proprio a partire da quella New York dalla quale la sua storia prende le mosse. Lo stesso Ghosh, negli "Acknowledgments" contenuti in fondo al romanzo, esplicita questa diretta connessione del testo con il dibattito scientifico del momento, esprimendo il suo debito agli studi di genetica e di informatica:

> I am very grateful to Raj Kumar Rajendran of the Department of Computer Science, Columbia University, for his advice on certain details. I am especially indebted to Alka Mansukhani of the Department of Microbiology, New York University Medical Center: her ideas and support were essential to the writing of this book. (Ghosh 1995, 312)

In questo senso sembra che il romanzo, quasi una grandiosa novella esemplare, voglia raccontare il progetto utopico degli studi sulla mappatura del genoma, e il possibile e vagheggiato disvelamento delle unità minime dell'umano, per rivelarne non solo le più dettagliate articolazioni, ma soprattutto gli inevitabili, e temibili, limiti. È profondamente dubbio, infatti, che la solidità di ogni episteme a base soggettiva e individuale possa mai essere superata una volta per tutte per venire sostituita da una corporeità materica diffusa e pluriarticolata. La conclusione aperta e tuttavia disperata del romanzo getta un'ombra cupa sugli ottimistici slanci utopici che caratterizzavano le chimere fantascientifiche del tempo.

4.3. LA NATURA INCORPOREA DEL MALE

Nel tessuto narrativo di *The Calcutta Chromosome*, la scomposizione delle identità e dei soggetti in entità minime e in continuo, turbolento scambio, non afferisce alla sola dimensione dell'umano. Al contrario, la città di Calcutta diventa parte integrante di questa parcellizzazione infinitesimale dei corpi che, realizzata dalla malaria, tramuta gli assemblati individuali, siano essi corporei, culturali, o urbani, in flussi ininterrotti di microunità di informazione. Calcutta è parte di quest'economia esattamente come qualsiasi altro personaggio della narrazione; la