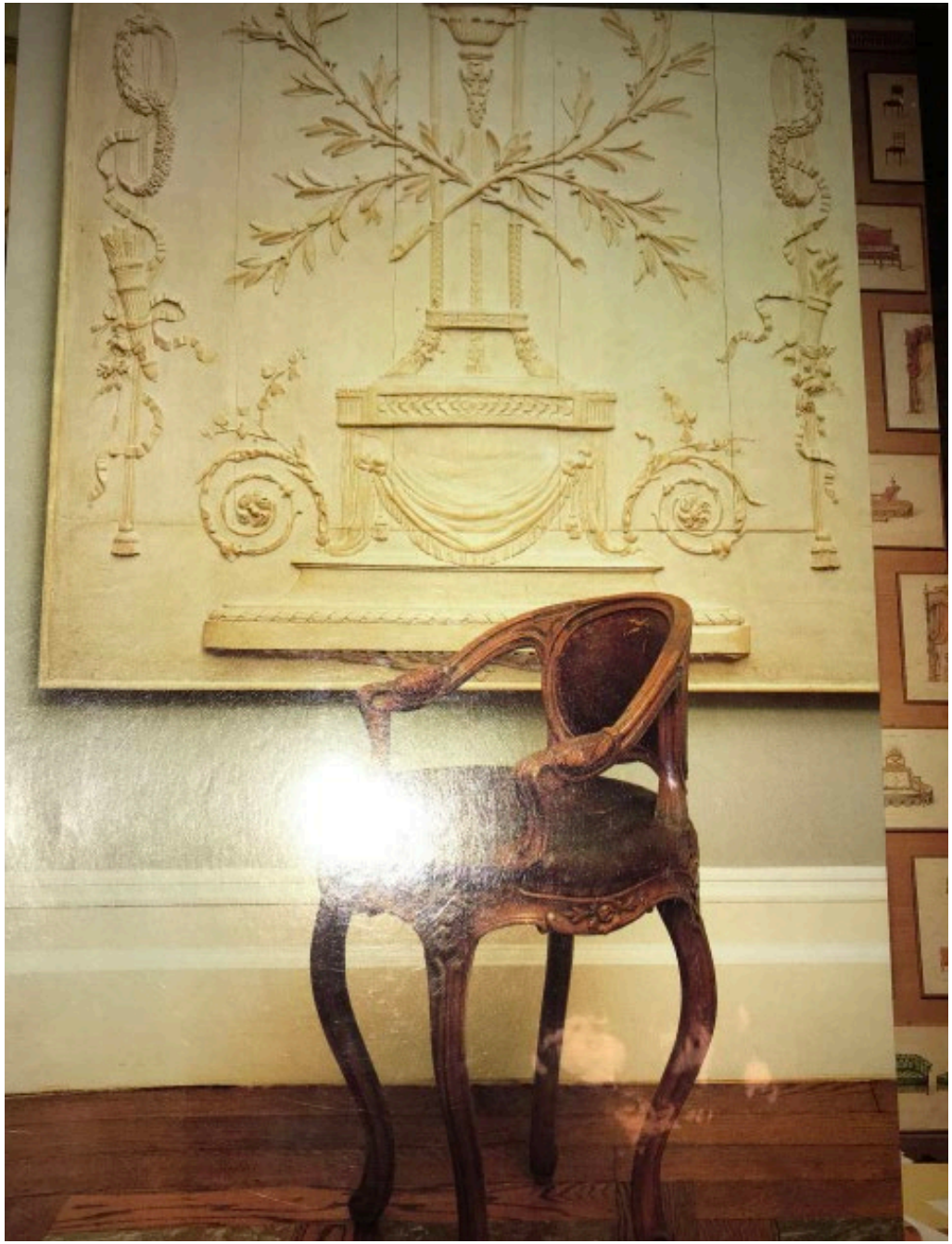

The Return of a Lost Cause

Abraham Adams

One day in the year 1239, Dōgen, the Japanese founder of Sōtō Zen, spoke at a temple in what is now Kyoto on the correct techniques of Buddhist hygiene. After reminding the assembled monks of the importance of regularly cutting their finger- and toenails and of shaving their heads, he went on to address excretion, devoting a lot of detail in particular to what a monk should do in the event that outdoor meditation practice deprived him of the use of a toilet.

First he was to take off his robes, then to pick up a hunk of dirt and divide it into fourteen balls—so Dōgen specified—and, after relieving himself where he would, to take three of these balls to the closest body of water, dissolve them to the "consistency of rice gruel," and use them as lather to respectively cleanse his anus, urethra, and soiled hand. Here, the patriarch's instruction ended.

In an annotation to their 1994 translation of Dōgen's work in which the lecture is collected, Gudo Nishijima and Chodo Cross observe that "it is not clear what was done with the remaining eleven balls of soil." Fourteen were to be prepared, three consumed in washing; as for the rest, what might have happened to them seems clear enough to me: nothing. Dōgen probably forgot about them, having proposed the number fourteen arbitrarily in the first place. But readers who notice the episode at all have tended to view his omission as a secret message.[1]

Such readers have embodied what some philosophers call the principle of charity, by which we are purportedly obligated to seek maximum rationality in a speaker's statements. This "principle" is also

simply a normative readerly practice, which intensifies according to preexisting organized investment in a given text (e.g., centuries of Dōgen commentary). Where reading is formalized to the point that it mimics the affect of logical proof (as in much literary- and art-historical discourse), the principle of charity, which lacks a logical limit, predisposes readers to project limitless depths into texts.

In everyday reading, that is, the subjective reception of ordinary life, this pattern of projection can take on the character of what Freud called delusions of reference. To him, attributing meaning to cast-away balls of mud, or, for that matter, the attitudes of strangers in a passing bus, was pathological. "Everything is language," Lacan wrote of Freud's theory of the symptom: all phenomena are receptive to the projection of meaning, which could be normal or else pathological. Some contemporary psychoanalysts, such as Christopher Bollas, have been more generous about the practice than Freud, arguing that it serves the protective function of controlling experiences that might otherwise be uncomfortably uncertain.

A story of one such anxious subject seeking to assert interpretative control over the ambiguity of lived experience appears in a recent essay by the philosopher Timothy Morton: he writes of Lacan himself, encountering a Buddha statue in a Japanese shrine. The statue, according to Lacan, was androgynous and emotionally inscrutable, and it provoked questions in him that no one else present seemed to be worrying about. "Is it 'for you' or completely inward looking? Further, is this male or female?" Noticing that Lacan's interpretative preoccupations were specifically related to sex and sexuality, Morton writes that the object had become a kind of "test of queerness."

The physical androgyny of the statue as well as the uncertain state it provoked characterize depictions of the Buddha in general, and the latter in particular is at the heart of Zen praxis. Lacan's attendant anxiety, Morton argues, provides a figure that explains a general intellectual aversion to Buddhism that he terms Buddhaphobia—which, as the name suggests, is related to homophobia, via "a fear of intimacy, a fear of ambiguity, a fear of inwardness and introversion." Meditative devotion, Morton states, is a "nonconceptual intimacy of the mind with itself"—an inwardness and a practice of introversion par excellence. Why does this provoke homophobia?

In my reading of Morton's story, the "test of queerness" appears less related to the statue's physical appearance (its sex, etc.) and more to a queerness belonging to the experience of readerly reception itself. Perhaps the answers to Lacan's questions could be called dynamic or multiple (it's male and/or female, it's for you and for itself, etc.), but more importantly it seems that the statue possessed an opacity that brought into metaphysical clarity what any answers would be: they would objects secondary and external to his experience of looking, and there was no way to choose among them. He was effectively stuck in himself and the conceptual contents of his original experience.

The "nonconceptual intimacy" of Zen meditation is not a magical form of emptiness but the product of a mind's effort to witness its own contents. In this sense, meditation is a concerted version of the act of reading, in which the reader comes into contact with herself in the experience of noticing, and of noticing that noticing. Meditation and reading in general both enact a paradoxical self-intimacy within something that is both other and the same (homo); Morton's argument implicitly reminds us that self-intimacy is inherently homo-sexual. It is the same with the inward listening that reading is, prior to interpretation, which puts the mind in contact with itself, immerses it in its own contents.

The works collected in this book grew out of Dōgen's forgotten mud. It is quickly evident to their viewer that they are mostly compositions of tchotchkes, juxtaposed in proximity. What is a tchotchke? It is

a fragment of narrative, an excerpt of an imaginary environment, whose ambiguities—of what it is and what it is about as readable in its qualities and gestures—increase as the object is decontextualized. When it is recontextualized, as in these sculptures, emergent narrative possibilities begin to proliferate. What these sculptures do, not unlike Lacan's Buddha, is create a saturation point, where the mind begins to become aware that there is no way to choose among the valences arising within it, and thus that the experience of looking consists in witnessing them together. An interpretation, as the ostensive explication of conceptual contents, can only be a retrospective narrative of a given navigation through its semantic nexus. Reading, instead, affords a nonconceptual self-intimacy.

Writing this, I have felt a misgiving: Aren't ideas of preferring reading to interpretation Susan Sontag's, Roland Barthes'? But I do not believe that their calls for an end to interpretation and a new erotics of reading ever really experienced a second movement. Interpretation is still the order of the day, especially in writing about art; it is indeed difficult to avoid, even though (for honest writers, I think) it always carries the generative misgiving that one risks writing something like fiction, in the sense that it tends to lend the affect of logic to an arbitrary improvisation. Here's an example that enters that territory:

I look at Hayley Silverman's sculpture Thankfulness*, and I see that it consists of a ceramic soup bowl containing what seem to be two plastic boys of apparently different provenance (fragments of different narratives). They are both in the Hummel style, named for the German Franciscan Maria Innocentia Hummel, on whose saccharin midcentury drawings of children various German manufacturers modeled their figurines. Hummel herself died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-seven, and she died no doubt because of the squalid conditions of her convent—which were the result of the Third Reich appropriating half the income her art produced. The government allowed her to continue her drawings despite one Nazi magazine's 1937 complaint that the figures were "brainless sissies" unworthy of the Fatherland.*[2] *Given that* sissy *is a homophobic slur, I could conclude that the tenderness with which the plastic boys seem to face off encrypts a kind of memorial to gay people persecuted by the Nazis, and to the artists such as Hummel on whom they perversely relied even while antagonizing them (the dynamic of the "Degenerate Art Exhibition").*

I do think this is the beginning of a plausible interpretation. But I am also under the impression that, as with Lacan's Buddha statue, the real nature of my reception of this object—not only in the synchronic sense of my physical encounter with it but also as it reoccurs to me and I take up a diachronic companionship with it as a figure—is not so confined to one valence of its literal subject matter.

The artist has referred to the series as something like the return of a lost cause, which I first understood to mean that its materials are largely things that were once forsaken. Then I began to think of them in reference to Dōgen because he forgot eleven out of fourteen of his mud balls, and they returned to readers who wrote about them mostly through a sense of what they might have meant. But I think the return of a lost cause—especially here in Silverman's work, where lost causes gather and take on emergent dynamics—presents more than an opportunity to project given meanings onto historical traces. Looking at *Thankfulness* is not really *about* Nazis—if we are to speak of aboutness, and try to extend a manner of reading that embraces the readerly experience of aboutness. My interpretation is a story of a given navigation of the historical abyss the Hummels' combination conjures for me. The experience of reading them is more one of witnessing the entire abyss at once, something like looking at the ocean.

I will end this encounter with a transcription of some excerpts of notes I took over a single period of two hours looking at *Thankfulness*.

0:00 Two Hummel boys surrounded by clams,
8 clams

0:02 One boy, slighter, brown monochrome, is holding a candle aloft with his left arm, his hand positioned flat like a waiter

0:05 Boys, facing each other, tenderly, are making contact at the larger, multicolored boy's right cheek, at nose level, the smaller boy's chin on the right side—no, the larger boy's nose

0:12 Sissies meeting in secret, hence the candles

0:30 A feeling of not knowing which angle to observe from, leading to a sense of centripetal intimacy . . . It may be that the element of opacity is what remains unattended in general . . .

0:40 Single fragment of green sea glass. Noodles very gestural, wrapping. Spare hands tensely splayed

1:04 Sculpture smells poisonous, really intensely of lacquer

Where are these boys? Recollection of Dane Zajc: "Man is nowhere."

1:30 Coziness, containment. Mock-ontology of bedtime: Being tucked in.

A feeling that senses have left and the form endures

1:38 After interpretations are gone, the encounter of the boys remains, like a guarantee, more confounding than illuminating; philosophy's task of disarming the subject of authority

1:57 First moment I consciously considered the fact their framing in a bowl could imply they are to be eaten (conversely, that the bedpan pieces have been shit)—by whom?

1:58 Encounter as consumption. "Here, eat this. . . ."

Notes

[1] For example, see Hubert Nearman's annotated translation to *Shōbōgenzō* (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2007); Brad Warner, *Don't Be a Jerk: And Other Practical Advice from Dogen, Japan's Greatest Zen Master* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2016).

[2] Patrick Killough (February 24, 1999). "Adolf Hitler versus Sister Maria Innocentia Hummel." Asheville *Tribune*; found via Wikipedia.