REFLECTIONS ON *THE WISDOM ANTHOLOGY OF NORTH AMERICAN BUDDHIST POETRY*

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ABSTRACT

A detailed study of Andrew Schelling's *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry* (2005), with particular attention to the intersection of Buddhist poetry and innovative poetry. By taking a flexible and indeterminate approach to what constitutes a contemporary Buddhist (or Buddhist-influenced) poem, Schelling produces one of the most excitingly democratic anthologies of recent times. Finally, I take up the question "do we still read poetry for wisdom, and, if so, how might the nature of that wisdom have changed?"

KEY WORDS: Anthology, Buddhist, Jacques Derrida, translation, Zen, wisdom.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo estudia minuciosamente la antología editada por Andrew Schelling, *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry* (2005), con especial atención a las intersecciones que se producen entre la poesía budista y la poesía innovadora. Al acercarse de manera flexible e indeterminada a lo que constituye un poema budista (o influenciado por el budismo) contemporáneo, Schelling ha publicado una de las antologías más fascinantemente democráticas de los últimos tiempos. Finalmente, me ocupo de la cuestión de si todavía leemos poesía buscando la sabiduría y, si es así, cómo ha cambiado la naturaleza de esa sabiduría.

PALABRAS CLAVE: antología, budista, Jacques Derrida, traducción, Zen, sabiduría.

Often our most productive thinking begins with a fortuitous error. When I first came across the title for Andrew Schelling's book, *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry*, I had no idea that the publishing company for the book was Wisdom Publications. My mistake allowed me —during the time lag between when I ordered the book and when the book arrived— to begin some sustained thinking about what might constitute "wisdom" today. Such an old and seemingly sentimental term! A concept and a label that hearkens back to a naïve (non-academic, unprofessional) mode of reading. I knew Schelling's work well enough to assume that the anthology itself would *not* be a set of oh little grasshop-

per fortune cookie proverbs and that it would include a significant selection of experimental, innovative poetry. So, my mistake-based thinking continued. Do we still read poetry —perhaps covertly, perhaps not in a way that we wear on our sleeves nor in our critical prose— as a quest for "wisdom"? Is such a language credible; is the term subject to rescue? More on that later...

Many of our best projects are well-served by delays and deferrals. This anthology has been steeped for at least twenty years. That is smart. It is also a project, as Schelling realizes, that can not be completed with any sense of finality or definiteness.[1] Like the best projects, it must remain a work-in-progress, an open-ended anthology subject to revision and reconsideration. The end of his Preface hints at the inevitable specificity and partial nature of the anthology: "There is an old Zen phrase from the tea ceremony: *Ichi go, ichi e.* "One chance, one meeting," or "this moment, just now"" (XVII).[2]

When Andrew first conceived of the anthology many years ago, he knew that at that time the book inevitably would have become the record of one particular generation: "From what I was reading in those days –the early 1980s– the major drawback [in making such an anthology] seemed to be that only a single generation of poets had written into their books poetry that resulted from adherence to Buddhist ideas. These were of course poets who had emerged in the post-World War II era, mostly the Beats" (XIII). Andrew sensed that a more amorphous, complex, variegated Buddhist poetry was beginning to take root. The new anthology represents the emergence of that multi-faceted Buddhist poetry.

Schelling's Introduction generously informs and guides readers —from those who have little familiarity with Buddhism's history in North America to those with quite a bit of background knowledge, from those who are quite comfortable reading a range of contemporary poetry to those who have a more fearful, timid relationship to the genre (particularly the more innovative versions of it). Schelling writes his own version of the confluent history of Buddhism and recent American poetry:

> There occurred a landmark event in May, 1987, which one day will get properly written into the annals of Buddhism, and come to be seen as one of the legendary gatherings that gave impetus to a specifically American form of Buddhist thought. Zoketsu Norman Fischer, a practice director at Green Gulch Farms Zen Center (about forty minutes by car up the winding coastal highway from San Francisco) put together a weekend retreat at which poets could talk to one another about

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[1] "Funny that no sooner did the anthology appear than I began to see many who could have also entered. More and more I realize writing, and its accessory acts like editing, are actually preliminary explorations, not summations at all." Andrew Schelling, e-mail to Hank Lazer, August 10, 2005.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers in parentheses refer to Andrew Schelling (ed.), *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005).

meditation and poetry. He called the Green Gulch gathering "The Poetics of Emptiness," and opened it to the public. (XIII)

I concur with Schelling's historical narrative. Norman Fischer's event and Fischer's own work (as poet and zen practitioner) define a place for many important intersections: of experimental writing (Language writing; Bay Area writing) and new versions of the spiritual; Jewish and Buddhist practices; poetry and translation. Schelling notes as well an important earlier anthology project: Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich's *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry* (1991), a collection of work by "a delightfully rag-tag group of forty-five poets" (XIV). While Gary Snyder's introduction to that anthology was crucial, so too was the living presence of two major poets of the time: Allen Ginsberg and John Cage. As Schelling observes, "one can't overstate the impact Ginsberg and Cage had on bringing Buddhist practice and thought into authentic discussions of modern poetry. Their influence compelled not only poets but academic critics and book reviewers to recognize Buddhist ideas as central to an American poetry" (XIV).

As for the present moment, Schelling notes how pervasive and ubiquitous Buddhist publications, sites, books, and journals have become:

> ... suddenly Buddhism, Daoism, yoga, martial arts, and other practices from Asia seem naturalized to this continent. Grocery stores sell *Tricyle*, *Shambhala Sun*, *Buddha-dharma*, *Yoga Journal* and similar periodicals. But I'm also thinking of the emergence of a generation of young poets who have come to Buddhism not as something exotic, rather as a gradation they grew up with. (XV)

Schelling's historical narrative and his anthology make we wonder, "why Buddhism?" What makes Buddhism in particular such a congenial and generative form of spiritual experience for a wide range of contemporary American poets?

For a few days, I thought that the title for this essay would be "How Buddhist Is It?" Drawn toward the humor of the title and its play on Walter Abish's *How German Is It?*, I had begun to locate something crucial to Schelling's book (even if this initial stab at a title was eventually to be discarded). The complexity and indeterminacy of the object, subject, identity, and taxonomy of his book are among its prime virtues. The range of writing comfortably and unselfconsciously admitted into this anthology suggests, by contrast, how many other anthologies (regardless of their ostensible purpose) are severely segregated anthologies (into rigidly defined aesthetic or professional camps or tribes). Since Buddhism itself is so hard to define —particularly its fundamental beliefs— Schelling from the very beginning seeks out a fair and representative variety of poetry that will suggest the many ways that Buddhism can, has, and will inflect, alter, determine, inform, and enrich contemporary North American poetry. The result is one of the most excitingly democratic anthologies of recent times —though this result was never part of the project. Thus the anthology itself becomes a definitively Buddhist labor?

What makes a poem a "Buddhist" poem? Reference to a Buddhist text or term? A kind of thinking? A particular mode of attention to particulars? Deliberately, and wisely, Schelling's anthology does not answer this initial question —a

question that cannot be answered, except through a reading of the poems, a consideration of what might be construed as a Buddhist poem. It —the Buddhist element— is not something that is added to a poem; it is not a separable element; it is not a seasoning added to a steamed vegetable. What then is it? How do you know it's there? Why this poem and not that poem, why this poet and not that poet?

Various strands and lineages, explicit and implicit, abound in Schelling's anthology. One key element that he delineates involves magical elements of sound or other language endeavors that stray from common uses of language to convey information. In Buddhist writing there is a considerable range

> From brief instructional aphorisms, goads to meditation, ceremonial changes, mealtime prayers, and benedictions, to the sort of uncrackable kernels of language that serve as magic spells and spiritual formulae (later formalized into mantra and dharani). Among contemporary poets the influence of these types of verse is most observable when you turn to the use of meaningless or non-sensical (call them *magical*) linguistic techniques brought to bear on the poetry. Here you can find the use of spells and chants built on seed syllables, or phrases of psycho-spiritual power meant to conjure (or instill) non-ordinary states of mind. Other possible directions influenced by religious or mystical texts include the direct violation of syntax and grammar. In these gestures, language is put forth not to tell stories or convey information but to render the mind susceptible to a supernatural or spiritual effect. (2)

Schelling concludes that such poetry *moves* us: "Poetry actually carries or transports you. The next question is where, and that's a tricky one" (3).

Schelling's attention to this "magical" or nonsensical strand exposes both the most cogent overlaps with contemporary innovative poetry and, at the same time, the site of an anxiety or difference. Yes, a short-circuiting of customary modes of meaning-making is a comfortable praxis in contemporary innovative poetry (of the past thirty years, but truly of a much greater duration as well). So, too, is a resistance to a constrained sense of language as principally a conveyor of information. But when Schelling refers to the magical power of language, the spiritual effects of language, and the ability to conjure non-ordinary states of mind, the overlapping assumptions may also become the site of skepticism and anxiety.

Schelling notes, "A belief many times documented among archaic or tribal traditions holds that hidden forces —deities, animal powers, protective spirits— can be called up through sounds made by the human voice" (4). As an anthropological or ethnographic conclusion, particularly when applied to a culture or a verbal tradition with some remoteness, one might remain quite comfortable with such an observation. But as a contemporary practice, the stakes, the identifications, and the beliefs involved change. Perhaps the complexity of a present practice of magical powers is best illustrated by the writings/performances of Jerome Rothenberg, a poet who defines himself in intensely secular terms, but whose writings (especially his anthologizings) are deeply involved in the shamanic and the magical.

For Schelling, as for Rothenberg, Dada and Surrealism provide a bridge for European and North American poetries into the magical elements of Buddhism and other practices:

> Dada and Surrealism had brought a politics of the non-rational into poetry, seeing the modern nation-state as dependent on banishing patterns of thought and speech that didn't conform to a narrow sense of the human as an economic animal. Surrealists used a host of techniques to provoke a revolution that would open human consciousness to alternate realities: dream imagery, automatic writing, and collaborative writing practices[.] ... Performers among the Dada crowd and other groups influenced by contact with folklore and tribal traditions made poems out of sheer sound (the Futurists called them *zaum* poems). You could say that these explorations prepared the North American ground. (5)

They prepared the North American ground for a generative and profoundly multi-faceted relationship to Buddhist texts and practices. But within contemporary experimental poetry, one might also identify —perhaps too schematically, perhaps in too binary a manner— a resistance and a skepticism. It would be easy to over-state such a difference. One would not expect an affirmation of transcendental experience or spiritual transformation or magical transport to non-ordinary consciousness in the writings or poetics of Charles Bernstein, Bob Perelman, Ron Silliman, or Barrett Watten. There is a long-standing critique within experimentalism —consider the disagreements between Charles Olson and Robert Duncan over such matters— of the allegedly sentimental and romantic excesses of a poetry of inwardness and a poetry of spirit.

But what makes Schelling's Buddhist anthology a more welcoming home for a wide range of interesting poetry is that Buddhist thinking too is radically and decisively indeterminate. If we return to Schelling's question —transport to where? — Buddhism too refuses the task of definition and refuses to offer an answer.

My own passion over the past few years has been to read and think through what I'm beginning to understand as a series of overlapping radical indeterminacies. Before returning to a more direct, sustained consideration of the poetics and poems of Schelling's anthology, I propose a detour. The precise indeterminacy of Buddhism —as a kind of spirituality and a poetic practice— perhaps may best be understood through an indirect approach.

In Derrida's late writing, a faith defended against faithfulness, or a spiritual experience that exists apart from religious determinisms emerges: "Derrida differentiates the "determinable" faiths, which are always dangerous, in order to differentiate their triumphalism from faith "itself," the *indeterminate* faith and open-ended hope in what is coming, in the incoming of the *tout autre*, the passion for which is what deconstruction is all about, what deconstruction "is"" (Caputo 47-48).[3] "How Buddhist Is It?" makes little sense as a lens through which to view Schelling's anthology, except as a kind of ironic question that itself suggests that a prime virtue of

[3] John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997).

Buddhism is that it is without object, without essential beliefs, without a recitable or knowable dogma. How Buddhist Is It? can be answered by a process, by a movement, but not by a destination or a certified subject matter. Similarly, "it is no business of deconstruction, indeed it goes against the grain of deconstruction–to specify some *determinable* faith, to specify what faith is faith in, to calm the storm or arrest the play in which faith takes shape by proposing a determinate object of faith" (Caputo 64).

An axiom for Derrida's later writing might be: "Deconstruction means to be the delimitation of totalization in all its forms" (Caputo 126). I am tempted to say that the same axiom may apply equally well to Buddhism, to mystical Judaism, and to innovative poetry. What each strives to preserve in its resistance to totalization, its refusal of finality, its insistence upon a perpetually active and ongoing hermeneutics, its passionate engagement with thinking as ever open at one end, is the preservation of an ever-changing phenomenology of spiritual experience. Or, as Caputo concludes about "deconstruction" (where, as I think it, "deconstruction" becomes a counter or a term subject to substitution with the aforementioned off-rhyming cognates), we are "able to see how deconstruction is a certain way of putting something that is *also* religious, but over which the religions do not have exclusive rights or hegemonic power, a way of freeing something religious from the religions" (190).

The phrase "a way of freeing something religious from the religions" might also serve as a brief description for an American poetics/spiritual lineage from Emerson through Thoreau and Whitman and Dickinson, on to Robert Duncan, Ronald Johnson, and on to Donald Revell, Harryette Mullen, Norman Fischer, and many others.

In Schelling's history, "Two thousand years ago, when Buddhist practice entered China (already a great and ancient civilization) and encountered Daoist and Confucian ideas, it generated an unprecedented flowering of culture. Some think this set off the greatest unfolding of poetry in world history" (13). One telling of American literary history might suggest a similar road map, with the first great wave of Eastern texts in translation being the spark and the collision at the heart of the American Renaissance, a collision and collusion that reaches a new flowering in Schelling's current anthology. Or, as Schelling wonders (after tracing the remarkable range of translations of Eastern texts by American poets over the past fifty years), "At this point could one imagine our own poetry without the influence of Tu Fu, Li Po, Su Tung-p'o, Li Ch'ing-chao, and Wang Wei? If I open a current poetry magazine, I hear Li Po but rarely John Dryden" (17).

Ezra Pound's translations can be said to jump start the modern era of translation of Chinese poetry. Though Pound's name and deeds figure prominently in this history of an American encounter with Chinese poetry, as Schelling notes, translation more generally conceived than Pound's specific contribution plays a key role in the erratic entry of Chinese and other Asian poetries into a generative relationship with American poetry. Schelling points to dulling effects of many poor, florid, convoluted Tennysonian translations of key texts (such as the *Theragatha* and *Therigatha*, as well as most classical Sanskrit poetry) (2). Schelling cites Pound's

Cathay (1915) as constituting a turning point in the quality and generativity of translations. Schelling's emphasis is on a process of translation, initiated by Pound, that makes Eastern poetries sound and feel contemporary:

> What Pound actually did was to change American poetry forever by introducing tones of voice and ways of writing that seemed waiting to arrive. More modestly, he ushered in a century-long practice of American poets translating the master poets of Buddhist and Daoist China, and of course getting their translations into the hands of readers. Pound's work from the Chinese introduced a clarity or directness of expression suited to the twentieth century. (14)

Schelling notes that in the wake of Pound's translations, many other fine translations followed "from the British poet Arthur Waley, the American Witter Bynner, and with terrific influence on Americans after the Second World, from Kenneth Rexroth" (15), a wave of poet-translators that Schelling traces (in his own anthology) to the more recent work of Gary Snyder, Sam Hamill, Mike O'Connor, Arthur Sze, Eliot Weinberger, and Shin Yu Pai (17).[4]

Schelling's history can re-enforce an oversimplification through an almost formulaic equation of Eastern poetry (and, by extension, Eastern consciousness) with directness of perception. The American-made story of Eastern poetry as the essence of directness (and of an egoless and harmonic relationship to nature) is most pronounced in our estimation of the Japanese haiku form. As Schelling notes, one characteristic of haiku "is its near universal identification with Zen practice and the cultivation of present-moment awareness. The other is that it is surely the best-known and most practiced form of poetry on the planet today" (20).

But the Pound/Imagism railway express that tracks into the present and that still has considerable momentum departed from a rather unusual (and not exactly as advertised) station. Yunte Huang's *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* presents a well-researched chapter on Pound which delineates the imaginary and invented nature of Pound's "Chinese poetry." Huang reminds us that Pound "never stepped on Asian soil, although he had a lifelong craving for Confucian culture, and he was an avid traveler. His earliest encounter with the Far East came from his

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[4] While Schelling's anthology provides a generous guide to "Translations of Buddhist Poetry from Asia" (388-393), there is one radically innovative book of translations which casts a very different light on the implicit goal of transparent, immediate, "contemporary" translation as the goal of such work. I am thinking of Yunte Huang's *SHI: A Radical Reading of Chinese Poetry* (New York: Roof, 1997). Huang's book presents a crucial reconsideration of the premises of translation and offers multiple translations of several classic poems from China. The result is a radical re-orientation which Charles Bernstein (in a back cover blurb for *SHI*) describes as transforming "our sense of 'Chineseness' by replacing the Orientalized scenic and stylistic tropes of traditional translations with multilevel encounters with the Chinese language."

frequent visits to the British Museum in London and from his reading various books on Chinese literature" (65).[5] Huang concludes, "From the Chinese legends to the Japanese interpretation, to Fenollosa's reinterpretation and re-creation, and to Pound's editing and his intertextual transposition that gave birth to his Imagistic poems was not a simple process of forgery, but a complex process of remaking culture" (92).

Huang's critique of Pound's imagined Chinese poetry of the direct, immediate image is worth noting:

> There is one aspect of the Chinese that Pound and most of his followers have either refused to recognize or simply blocked out of their imagination: The Chinese are not always a people "close to nature" when it comes to linguistic practice. Indeed, the Chinese have fashioned a textual tradition that cherishes scrupulous, at times even seemingly tedious, annotation as a companion to their "close-to-nature" poetry. To make it worse, the poetry and its intimate companion are very often printed neck to neck on the page, with poetry lines being ruthlessly interrupted by the annotation. (76)

It is important, I think, to remain skeptical of an American imagining of another culture's written immediacy. So, too, while not waxing nostalgic for a florid Victorian mode of translation, we should retain some skepticism about an often unquestioned desire for a contemporary, easy-to-read translated poem (in the mainstream American poetic mode of the transparent scenic variety).

But there is another version of immediacy that Schelling identifies and which is quite different from the haiku-imagistic ideal. Schelling points to a range of activities —calligraphy, painting, the tea ceremony, martial arts, flower arrangement— that have been linked to Zen practice. On calligraphy specifically, Schelling observes,

> In China, Ch'an/Zen approaches to calligraphy had long maintained that the character of a man —his level of individual realization— could be observed in the *ch'i* or life-energy that moved through his brush and left an imprint of its passage in ink on the rice paper. The same Zen insight suggests to American poets that the practice of writing poems is not so much to make a thing (let alone to secure prizes, awards, or grants) as it is to trace the way the mind moves. (20)

It is this notion of the poem as a location for the immediacy (and grace) of a mind's movement that I find most appealing. Though his work is not included in Schelling's anthology, the best example of such a poetics in action is Robert Creeley's poetry. As Charles Bernstein (in a recent memorial essay) summarizes, "Creeley's

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[5] Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002).

first principle is that you find out what you have to say in the process of saying it: poetry becomes a way of making not representing" (194).[6] Whereas the Pound-imagism-haiku ideal proposes a transparency of language and the poem as a site for transmission of a principally visual experience, Creeley insists that "*poetry is not made of ideas but words*" (194). As such, the words are not subordinated to the re-presentation of a prior scene or experience, nor are the words of the poem a vehicle for the indirect or direct expression of an idea. As John Cage liked to say, "I have nothing to say, and I am saying it." For Creeley, the fact and infinitely variable particularity of the poem (and of the line breaks and infinitely variable pauses and cadences of the poem) point toward a real time improvisational opportunity, very much like the momentary, concentrated act of the calligrapher in Schelling's example:

> ...a poem is not a summary of something thought but an arc of thinking. This is the temporal dimension of poetry, in which words move in time; in this sense, poetry is allied not to the visual arts but music and film. (194)

That is when the poems of Schelling's anthology are most exciting: when there is a fresh approach to the poem as a location for the manifestation of the mind's movement in time. As Bernstein summarizes: "For Creeley, a poem is the fact of its own activity: it exists in itself and for itself so that we can relate to it not just as "expression" but as enactment" (195).

To his credit, Schelling includes many poets and poems in his anthology that do have that quality of (innovative) enactment. Schelling wonders,

> What of the poems here that offer something new or unprecedented for Buddhist art? The ones through which you can't trace impulses or origins to earlier Asiatic models? These perhaps should fire our passion the most. Such poems introduce a decidedly indigenous flavor to American Buddhism. (23)

That is my own preference in the anthology: for new forms, for unexpected "Buddhist" poems, for perhaps unprecedented ways of enacting an intersection of poetry and Buddhism. Specifically, I am most drawn to "something new" in the selections by Will Alexander, Norman Fischer, Robert Kelly, Michael McClure, Harryette Mullen, Hoa Nguyen, Shin Yu Pai, Dale Pendell, Leslie Scalapino, Andrew Schelling, and Cecilia Vicuña.

For me, one of the great pleasures of Schelling's anthology is encountering many poems and poets unfamiliar to me. My own reading habits in poetry lean toward the contemporary and the experimental. Another joy of reading Schelling's anthology is taking unexpected pleasure in work by more conventional poets. As I've suggested several times in these notes, it is the amorphous nature of what con-

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[6] All references are to Charles Bernstein, "Hero of the Local: Robert Creeley and the Persistence of American Poetry," *Golden Handcuffs Review* 1.5 (Summer-Fall 2005): 191-196.

stitutes "Buddhism" (or evidence of Buddhism in the poem) that inadvertently provides Schelling the opportunity to create an excitingly democratic and wide-ranging anthology.

My own anthology within the anthology —my personal favorites— includes Diane di Prima's "Tassajara, Early 1970's" and "I Fail as a Dharma Teacher," Norman Fischer's "I've Changed" and "Poetry's a Way Not a Subject," Sam Hamill's "What the Water Knows," Jane Hirshfield's "Lighthouse," "Studying Wu Wei, Muir Beach," "After Long Silence," and "Why Boddhidharma Went to Howard Johnson's," Michael McClure's "Fourteen," Hoa Nguyen's "Shred," "Captive and Able," "Dark," and "[Roll in Your Skull Gone Green]," Shin Yu Pai's "Yes Yoko Ono," Dale Pendell's "Amrta: The Neuropharmacology of Nirvana," Miriam Sagan's "Contentment," Andrew Schelling's "Haibun Flycatcher" and "Hymns for the Perfection of Wisdom in Paradise," Gary Snyder's "Waiting for a Ride," Arthur Sze's "Thermodynamics," Chase Twichell's "Marijuana" and "The Quality of Striving," Cecilia Vicuña's extraordinary "Fables of the Beginning and Remains of the Origin," and Eliot Weinberger's "Wind." Occasionally, there are poems of tired conventionality and the manipulative poetic MSG that urges the reader to say and feel "wow," poems that lean too heavily on clichéd Buddhist postures: "Reply to T'ao Ch'ien," "Against Certainty," and "My Listener." On balance, though, Schelling has done an extraordinary job of picking a range of poets and poems full of surprises and discoveries. Equally noteworthy —a nearly miraculous achievement— he has created a site where these varied poets and poems are at home. Perhaps that is possible because, as Norman Fischer puts it, "Poetry is a way not a subject" (86).

Inadvertently, I have been speaking about poetry and poets as if such a pursuit were simply and unequivocally consistent with Buddhist practice. But as Schelling points out, "poets have always regarded poetry as a Way, a path towards realization, though in Buddhist circles arguments have flown both for and against poetry" (21). Thus, Plato was not the only one a long while ago to develop an anxiety about the effects of poems and poets. If, as I've been suggesting, Buddhist practice fosters an affinity for the non-totalizable, the same might be said for most of the poetry in Schelling's anthology. Poetry, regarded as a Way, bears an off-rhyming relationship —a similarity with differences— to Buddhist practice. As Schelling describes it:

> The Way of Poetry became seen as a *practice* in and of itself. Moreover poetry draws a certain kind of practitioner —as Basho saw it— who is not exactly a priest, not exactly a layperson, but something other. The poet in his or her devotion to language and experience tries to realize the Unconditioned. From the Daoist perspective, such a practitioner approaches the realm of the "perfectly useless." (21)

If the practice of poetry does involve "a path towards realization," one might reasonably ask, "realization of what?" I would suggest that it is a realization of the oblique present tense grace of the experience of poetic practice itself. Call such a practice a fully attentive playful uselessness which constitutes an enactment and enhancement of essential human qualities.

But what of my initial question, based on a misunderstanding of the word "wisdom" in the book's title? In some ways, to ask the question —do we still read poetry as part of a search for wisdom— puts us in proximity to an embarrassing and often repressed question, repressed as naïve or amateurish by those of us who over the years have become professionalized and disciplined and serious about poetry: why do we read poetry? I doubt that the answer (or an answer) really veers much from the accustomed course: for pleasure and instruction. What has changed, I believe, is the way we describe and experience that pleasure and instruction. The nature of the pleasure and instruction has, I believe, changed radically.

Do we read for wisdom? Yes, but of a rather indefinite sort. I read, in part, for a kind of exploratory experience: to see and hear how others have explored the resources and possibilities of living and thinking in language. A far cry perhaps from a notion of wisdom as a beautifully stated fortune cookie message. I really do not read for that kind of wisdom —though it occurs at times, and can be a pleasure. And as I've suggested throughout these reflections on Schelling's anthology, an indefinite sort of wisdom is a major virtue of his anthology and of Buddhist thinking generally: they resist totalization; they resist fixating on a definable object or a catechism or dogma, aside from a belief in the value of a lucid, attentive, alert open-endedness.

Our sense of what "wisdom" means has shifted. It is no longer the moment of sudden clarification that Robert Frost avowed: "The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom" (18).[7] But even by Frost's time and in his thinking, a certain skepticism and limitation had entered into the conception of "wisdom": "It [the figure a poem makes] begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life —not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion" (18). Not an enduring solution or dogma; no basis for a religion; at best, a momentary experience.

Today, we are not so inclined to think of the poem as something that fights against a surrounding confusion but rather as a complex instance of an elusively complex dialectical play of order and disorder. If the poem tends toward "wisdom" —particularly wisdom linked to clarification— it is not a wisdom that occurs only at the end of the poem. It is not a concluding statement that unifies or brings into a thematic order all the verbal exploration that precedes it.

If contemporary poems offer a kind of clarification, then that clarification must be reconceived as a momentary intensely engaging encounter with the infinitely variable particularity of the poem itself (rather than the reception of a "message" or a concluding "point" or thematized epiphany that pulls it all together). By

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[7] Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox & Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

the particularity of the poem itself I mean the poem in all its contingency —down to the line breaks, the oddly particular (this once) form of the poem as an inseparable instance and enactment of a momentary wisdom. I mean what Creeley describes as the arc of thinking. It is not a conclusive wisdom; it is an exemplary wisdom that beckons forth more activity and that calls for more thinking and conversing. It is a kind of choreography for the page —an instance of grace or of graceful movement. Admittedly, that graceful movement may initially be called ugly or jarring, though "beauty is beauty even when it is irritating and stimulating not only when it is accepted and classic."[8]

Why call such a reading experience "wisdom," particularly when the term has such a quaint, nostalgic feel to it? In part, I do so out of trust for the fortuitous error of my initial misperception (thinking "wisdom" to be a decisive word in Schelling's title rather than the name of the publishing company). But more importantly, I would ask that we keep that word in mind as a reminder of what's at stake in reading —what we stake when we devote a substantial portion of our lives to reading and writing poetry.

As one gets older, the desert island game becomes less fanciful and more exactingly pertinent: if you knew you were going to be stranded on a desert island, and you could only take three books with you, which three books would you pick? Those of us who have many demands on our time play the game in a less definite way every morning and every day. Increasingly, the mad rush to read and read and see what's new and read it all gives way to a deliberate return to those books, poets, poems that matter most to us. Perhaps fortunately, it is not at all easy to figure out which books these are. That's why we look at our bookshelves and have trouble each morning deciding what to read and why. I wish that the climate for critical prose writing in our time encouraged greater consideration of how and why these few key books matter to us. It is not an easy thing to discuss truthfully.

[8] Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," *A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla Dydo, (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1993) 497.