

Answering the Koan

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The Blue Cliff Record: Zen Echoes
by David Rothenberg, Codhill Press,
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*But the poetry that thinks is in truth the
topology of Being.* —Martin Heidegger

David Rothenberg's book of poetry is based on his response to "The Blue Cliff Record," the venerable koan collection, and has been launched with kudos from Sam Hamill, Frederick Franck and Mark Rudman, all esteemed poets themselves. (See also "Sound Like the Buddha, Save the Cat: Translating the Blue Cliff Record without Credibility" by David Rothenberg, KJ # 33.)

Rothenberg, the author of *Sudden Music* and *Hand's End*, is the former editor of *Terra Nova*, a magazine devoted to deep ecology, and is also a contributing editor at *Parabola* magazine.

In the book's foreword, Hamill, the poet and translator, notes the long tradition of writers reinterpreting the work of other writers, giving new birth to enduring texts. Rothenberg has written his poems, or "echoes," freely playing with the words, images and ideas embedded in each of the 100 koans to reveal his own perspectives and poetic sense.

From "The Cat Could Have Lived,"
Case 64:

*I took off my sandals, placed them
on my head.
If you had been there, you could
have saved the cat.*

*Of like hearts, like minds.
You two on the same road
would know that.
You may murder the cat,
it's none of my business.
The sandals don't purr,
and torn
they won't scream.
If someone dies for them
these puzzles matter.
You must try to care,
if you wish to live.*

Cumulatively, these poems work something like waterfalls in Nature. We see the dazzling surface, and we are even anesthetized by it, but we're led to wonder what's behind the flow of words that spark inside our minds and seem to circle endlessly around. These poems challenge, cajole, dare and nudge us deeper inside our self and are worthy aesthetic compan-

ions to the seemingly impenetrable koans.

Rothenberg knows his Zen aesthetics. Slashing directness, grandiose overstatement and sharp minimalism are esthetic staples and are frequently back to back in a line of Zen poetry. He understands the effect and mines this tension — "The great waves rise up a thousand feet" — but "only a single shout is needed" — leading the reader one way only to be snapped back to simple reality.

Poems based on fine points of Buddhist arcana were originally written by Zen teachers as pointers to help students' experience a koan. The poems offered further glimpses of mind working: mind rooted in self viewing the world. Koan collections are primers on the effects of language on the mind, on the effects of language as the dancer-magician between our sense of external and internal.

Certainly, the best Zen poetry rests on compression. For that reason, koans and poetry have always had a kinship in the hands of people like Rothenberg, who have something to say beyond mere words.

A taste, from "It Takes A Word," Case 11:

*One right word is all it takes
it can smash the chains and
break down the gates
Who knows such words?
— Look around you and see,
What's the use of today?
shock the country, stir up the crowd
swallow all in one gulp and dwell
in the clouds
Look back at that monk
who could walk across water
Don't let him get away with it:*

*"You smug fellow, if I had known
you could conjure up wonders,
I would have broken your legs!"
Then he who speaks disappears
(he has said the word).*

Zen teaching has always divided its methods between the body and the mind. Break down the body in unrelenting, regular sitting — allow the body to come to silence like a horse to water. Break down the mind in linguistic confusion — allow the mind to sever the bind of language to meaning; make language revelatory; allow it to reveal the truth of being. Such approaches might be either nonsensical or aesthetically beautiful.

Walter Benjamin, the astute critic of culture and mind, saw language itself as the primary subject of interest — not just its role in creating a subject and object. He preferred to see language as a medium (in his case spiritual) where the absolute and the relative may be / are bridged. Rothenberg's sense of poetry fits this view.

These poems have a sure, unforced lyrical touch. But they are not about lyricism. They are about unending mentality, about the mind's naming and circling from the expressible to the inexpressible. They take the reader on an exhilarating ride through knotty koans and Zen poetry. Their goal is small, to give pleasure, and large, no less than to reach the other side of the river of words that poets have voyaged upon over the centuries.

THEORY 11.

