

Book Review



***Encountering Buddhism in Twentieth-Century
British and American Literature***

Edited by Lawrence Normand and Alison Winch,
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Reviewed by John L. Murphy, *DeVry University*

While cross-cultural studies of the transmission and reception of Buddhism within historical and sociological contexts multiply, those examining literary aspects remain less common. These eleven essays examine American and British authors during the past century who have taken up Buddhist themes; some of them have taken refuge in Buddhism. Aimed at an academic audience, these entries generally remain accessible to a broad readership. This collection, despite its high price as sold by an academic press, may appeal to many inquirers intrigued by its wide coverage.

Introducing this book's range, co-editor Lawrence Normand surveys the reception and adaptation of Buddhism in the West. He cites Donald S. Lopez and David McMahan. He supports their responses to the ways in which Buddhism has been reshaped for twentieth-century concerns. Lopez and McMahan have analyzed how meditation and modernism influence recent cultural trends. Normand notes an emphasis on the needs of the body and the contemporary insistence on concentrating on the breath and focusing on the mental flow of images. This shift engaged more than one of the authors investigated by Normand's international colleagues in this volume.

Erin Louttit in "Reincarnation and Selfhood in Olive Schreiner's *The Buddhist Priest's Wife* and *Undine*" reminds readers that this South African writer, despite her late-Victorian period of production, looks forward in time. Both the story of the priest's wife and Schreiner's novella *Undine* humanize and normalize Buddhism. Death is blurred. The self survives the body in her post-Christian perspective. Schreiner considers and acknowledges possibilities of reincarnation.

Normand's "Shangri-La and Buddhism in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* and W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6*" contrasts two treatments of this earthly paradise. Thanks to its film adaptation, Hilton's 1933 novel endures as certainly more popular than Auden and Isherwood's ambitious if flawed drama. Incorporating historical crises and struggles of personal alienation, both channel the appeal of late-Victorian

Corresponding author: John L. Murphy, Humanities, DeVry University, jmurphy2@devry.edu



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romances. Hilton's quest entices the reader as if the dream were possible; Auden and Isherwood's satire demolishes the dream as futile. However, the limitations of the duo's Buddhist sources (including Alexandra David-Neel's *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet*) blunt the impact of their barbed points.

Erin Lafford and Emma Mason take up another poet's mid-century approach to Buddhist content. In "'ears of my ears': e. e. cummings' Buddhist prosody," the pair (sticking to that author's conventionally unconventional spelling) look at Cummings by way of Martin Heidegger and D.T. Suzuki. Both thinkers issue challenges to the ego that atomize the sense of self. Similarly, in Lafford and Mason's report, Cummings' poems, grounded in the breath's rhythms, aspire not to human voice but to birdsong, and reward listening, meditation, and silence.

The center of this anthology finds many names repeating, as Cummings and Suzuki begin to sway other writers and thinkers. "Zen Buddhism as Radical Conviviality in the Works of Henry Miller, Kenneth Rexroth, and Thomas Merton" features three leading advocates during the period during and especially after WWII who begin to react against conformity. Manuel Yang applies Ivan Illich's "radical conviviality" as akin to the "creative spontaneity and non-attachment" connecting these three countercultural creators (72). Promoting "spontaneous convergence," the trio shares a commitment to a "non-action, non-institutional" form of "spiritual assonance," their non-conformity appealing to dissidents. Yet, many then conformed.

They conformed as the Beats. The appeal of Buddhism for 1950s seekers rebounded off of two other poets based in the Bay Area during this restive postwar period. "Radical Occidentalism: The Zen Anarchism of Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen" offers James Patrick Brown's analysis. He shows how the Beats adapted Suzuki's teachings into a nascent counter-cultural milieu. Brown avers: "Suzuki translated Zen into an American idiom that hit some of the keynotes of American anarchism: a rejection of cultural conditioning, institutionalism, and traditionalism; an affirmation of individualism and radical self-reliance in the Thoreauvian vein; and a language of revolutionary aspiration" (94-95). (For more about these anarchist roots within American Transcendentalism, a translation of the Slovenian professor Ziga Vodovnik's *The Living Spirit of Revolt: The Infrapolitics of Anarchism* [Berkeley, CA: PM Press, 2013] is recommended.)

Unsurprisingly, "Buddhism, Madness and Movement: Triangulating Jack Kerouac's Belief System" follows. Any analysis of American Buddhist literature should include Kerouac. What has been less examined, as it lacks pop culture appeal, is his retreat back to boyhood Catholicism after his 1950s immersion into Buddhism. Bent Sørensen explains the breakdown of his "hybrid system of faith," triggered by a 1960 visit to those whom Kerouac called the "Mexican Fellaheen" or poor peasants (106). He pivoted from a romanticized fatalism to "a complete lack of compassion" for those who refused to better their condition. Kerouac, fueled by drink, flirted with madness as his guilt persisted and his sense of sin returned. His characters by the 1960s often entered into silence before death. Kerouac accounted for their dire straits by resorting to the Christian rationale of "punishment for sin" (118). Like their author, his protagonists try to move on, but *samsara* catches up with them and thwarts their doomed quests to escape divine justice.

Another gloomy fiction from the early 1960s depicts this “cyclical nature of suffering” (136). “Biology, the Buddha and the Beasts: The Influence of Ernst Haeckel and Arthur Schopenhauer on Samuel Beckett’s *How It Is*” displays Andy Wimbush’s recovery of Haeckel’s *A Visit to Ceylon* (1882). Beckett mentions this author in his grim 1964 novel (translated from *Comment C’est* (1961)). Both Haeckel and Schopenhauer plunge into an unsparing reduction of existence through an agonizing series of reincarnations. This view enables the torture of lower life-forms by the Sinhalese, witnessed by Haeckel. While the natives do not kill beasts and creatures, the Sinhalese justify treating them badly. For, they reason, if they had not merited life in such debased conditions, they would not be such as they are. This application of Buddhist concepts to real-world *dukkha* sobers the reader.

A return to Isherwood, now living in a more congenial incarnation in Southern California, finds him thriving. In “‘That Other Ocean’: Buddhism, Vedanta, and The Perennial Philosophy in Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man*,” Bidhan Roy shows how not only the author’s well-known immersion into Vedanta but his exposure to Buddhism and fellow British expatriate Aldous Huxley enters the 1964 novel, based on Isherwood’s own sojourn. Filtered through popular reinterpretations of Buddhism in vogue by then, Isherwood’s novel reveals his sympathy with Buddhism, contrasted with the arch satire he and Auden had deployed for *The Ascent of F6*.

Two chapters treat writers closer to our time. “Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior as Mahayana Meditation*” finds Sarah Gardam examining Pure Land *sutras* and *Mahāyāna* emptiness doctrines. Gardam uses these to explicate Kingston’s Chinese “talk-story” in her 1986 memoir. Elena Spandri’s “The Aesthetics of Compassion in Iris Murdoch’s *The Sea, the Sea*” affirms another doctrine, that of the Middle Way, as a complement to Murdoch’s philosophical career. Her 1986 novel champions humanism rather than a Kantian or utilitarian ethics. A compassionate ethics wins out in Spandri’s articulation of Murdoch’s plot and character choices.

The final entry tackles one more formidable topic, arguably more arcane than any philosophy. “Strange Entanglements: Buddhism and Quantum Theory in Contemporary Nonfiction” unravels the tangle of two popular if recondite genres. Sean Miller’s energetic chapter asserts that Anglo-American popularizations of physics and debates (or attempts to reconcile debate) between science and religion both seek to posit parallels between physics formulae and Buddhist or Taoist descriptions of phenomena. Fritjof Capra, B. Alan Wallace, Matthieu Ricard, and Trinh Xuan Thuan typify decontextualized efforts. Miller doubts their truth-claims for *dharma* as science.

Miller finds futile their attempts to reconcile Sanskrit texts full of “imaginative parataxes” (205). Contemporary exegetes wind up at dead-ends. They wriggle in fudge factors and they refuse to admit their results, which tally only as logical incoherence. Miller pinpoints irony in the Vietnamese-born, American-educated astrophysicist Thuan’s deferral to the “ecclesiastical authority of a French-born Buddhist monk who resides in Nepal” (214). On the other hand, according to the French-language version of his eponymous website, Ricard earned a Ph.D. in cellular genetics in 1972, after which he entered monasticism. Miller could have delved deeper into Ricard’s scientific training, since how much Ricard has kept up with his past field and that of astrophysics alongside his Tibetan adaptation and

practice remains a relevant topic to debate. All the same, Miller relishes the chance to tackle a topic which diverges drastically in tone and approach from his predecessors, and this intriguing chapter deserves attention for that.

Miller concludes by summing up the current position of Buddhism in the West. “Stripped of its literary and cultural contingencies, in its mildest form, Buddhism becomes a form of self-help therapy contained by a consumerist market-logic, a happy face put on a liberal humanism purified of reductive materialism. And at its most stringent, Buddhism becomes a form of submission to a hierophantic theocracy, however benign” (213). This collection needed this voice calling out what some of the writers treated tended to sidestep or gloss over: the manner in which messages of Buddhism are warped through our capitalist mindset into globalized commodities.

Normand in his introduction noted how, pre-1945, the textual approach of T.S. Eliot and Hermann Hesse’s Buddhist “engagements” dominated Western reactions (15). But, neither Normand nor subsequent contributors elaborate sufficiently as to how these “engagements” entered texts during the last century. As J. Jeffrey Franklin has begun to show, the earlier impact of Edwin Arnold’s bestselling life of the Buddha as *The Light of Asia* (1879) reverberated into the 20th century. This does not earn any mention beyond Normand’s few references.

All the same, this book’s emphasis on the Beats, more than its scattered coverage of writers after the 1960s, should encourage more research by scholars. Additionally, Sean Miller’s divergent if necessary exploration of a dimension of Buddhism in non-fictional literature may encourage scholars to pursue the portrayals of Buddhism in other scientific and philosophical contexts, a subject needing as much if not more attention than, say, Kerouac’s appropriations of the *dharma*. For now, this anthology serves readers as a portal, opening out onto a display of a century of texts integrating Buddhist characters, settings, debates, and insights.