“More Skilled Practitioners of Wanting”: Buddhism and Romanticism in the Market World

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“The Buddha,” notes R. F. Gombrich, “was not an essentialist. [He] . . . was interested in how things worked rather than in what they were.”(1) Buddhism, many commentators have argued, is pragmatic.(2) It teaches us how to live better, how to see more clearly; how, in the words of David Webster, to “become more skilled practitioners of wanting.”(3) Generative anthropologists may well hear in this last phrase the human project writ large—certainly the project of any and all of us who seek or at least entertain the possibility of human progress. The most consequential of all human innovations, the sign, is very precisely a praxis of safer and more productive wanting, a means of accommodating ever *more* wanting, and more having. More having and more wanting, of course, are not the terms in which Buddhist doctrines have traditionally been framed, to say the least, and to use GA to inquire into the nature of the skills Buddhism might be offering is to ask, in effect, how it co-exists with, or whether and in what ways it might contribute to, the ethical development of our own epoch.

Buddhism’s trajectory through modernity, through a world increasingly dominated by the structure and practices of the market, does resemble those followed by other great faiths. Comparison—invidious or liberating as the case may seem—has irrevocably intervened. Where once, from the security of their discrete, pre-modern domains, the major religions offered means by which to apprehend the human condition in its ostensibly universal character, and the communal comforts and protections to be derived from such an apprehension, they have now been required to take their places as particularist options—individual and proprietary paths to salvation—or in more familiar terms, attributes of identity, postures of difference in a global market. Not, we should of course add, that any of them have ceased at the same time to be experienced by substantial populations in older or more fully embedded ways, in societies passing through a long transition which need never, in

principle, be considered complete.(4) But even in the most isolated or defensive places, the brilliance of erstwhile certainty is shaded by, if not fully “gone gray” from the breath, the various breathings, of the Other.(5) Buddhism’s position is notable, however, in that it seems never to have been the sole religion in the countries in which it has been practiced—it has always been in competition and debate, which may have bearing on its eventual posture in the modern market. Where Constantine imposed,(6) Asoka famously tolerated, and indeed this most significant of early Buddhist converts may even be seen as anticipating the modern pluralist state with his doctrine of religious diversity, his aversion to sacrificial violence, and his conception of the role of political power as facilitating rather than restraining human desire.(7) And ever since, though it has had its reverses, Buddhism has been more adaptable than most,(8) its successes including the penetration of the Western reaches of that market, to which it has offered a prestigious, which is to say, effective set of differences.(9) Above all, and this is fairly widely understood, its particularly forceful rejection of worldly desire has modelled a potent serenity from within which to dominate modern humanity’s feverish struggles to avoid subjection.

Prevailing in those struggles, fashioning a posture in that market, has also been the pragmatics of the set of practices and ideals generally referred to as Romanticism. And many more commentators have worked to understand and define the connections and commonalities between Buddhism and the Romantics than have, for example, those between the Romantics and Islam, or the Romantics and Confucianism. Indeed, this has been true more or less from the beginning of the relationship between the Western world and Buddhism, whose most important texts arrived in Europe during the Romantic period, and were indeed, by some accounts a crucial determinant of what Raymond Schwab memorably proclaimed its “Oriental Renaissance.”(10)

Very broadly speaking, then, Romanticism and Buddhism have both offered modernity desirable postures or identities through a strategy of resisting desire or, more properly, as René Girard characterized it, resisting the mimetic contagion, the universal gravitational pull of the desires of other human beings.(11) In both cases, resistance has proceeded by a process of at least ostensible demystification, the assumption of a position of superiority and control, a personal denial of the power of desire.(12) This strategy, too, framed as paradoxical or, less sympathetically, as hypocritical or deluded—Girard’s *mensonge romantique*—has been quite widely understood. Not that it has always been given its due, by Girard or by others. The strategy can surely be characterized as having been genuinely productive of human good, as *having* reduced our suffering, whether we attribute that suffering to mediated or unmediated desire itself, or to the violence produced by desire. It has arguably contributed, in particular—and for all that some more radical confrontation

with the truths of desire has been called for by the sages or ascetics—to the easing of anxieties and distresses attendant on the advent of market structure, and done so by charting a path which the Buddha called a “middle way” or Romantics often characterized as a striving to be *in* the social world, but not *of* it.(13)

The case for the parallels, as well as differences, between the two would doubtless benefit from a fuller demonstration than is possible here, but let us offer a couple of hopefully suggestive comparisons. There might at first glance seem few less similar figures than the bodhisattva of compassion and a Byronic hero like the imperious Manfred of the English romantic poet’s 1819 play of the same name. Such a bodhisattva, as for example Avalokiteśvara in the Mahayana tradition, delays his own ascent to enlightenment until it can be shared by all humanity.(14) Indeed, their “awakening, or *Bodhi* . . . enables bodhisattvas to ‘leave the world’ while still remaining in it and to work with compassion towards the salvation of all beings.”(15) Lord Byron’s heroically alienated and transgressive protagonist, meanwhile, loudly and repeatedly proclaims his difference from the “herd” of other human beings. But in his famous final words, having found at last the mortal transcendence he has been seeking, Manfred turns back to the representative of the rest of us (an Abbot) not with his usual disdain, but with an expression and a gesture of surprising comfort. “Old man,” he says, taking his hand in unprecedented fellowship, “’tis not so difficult to die.”(16) This might, of course, be more vaunting, but may also be, more potently, an offer, a modelling of serenity and confidence, even an altruism. *Here, let me show you*: if you can finally purge yourself of socially mediated desire, if you are willing to stake all on the cause of autonomy, you too can be free, both of such desires and of the fears that always accompany them. Truly to live, to be in the world, is to be prepared thus to leave it, as I authenticate for you now with my own self-willed extinction.

Or one might see the two postures combined, after a fashion, in Rudyard Kipling’s one great novel (of 1900): the Tibetan Buddhist lama who turns back from his own ostensible salvation, his long-sought sacred stream, to remain with and guide that other if later romantic seeker, that equally paradigmatic child of the global market, the “friend” indeed “of all the world,” its eponymous hero Kim. That the modern novel’s necessary irony whispers to us that Teshoo Lama’s belief is but a foible, a charming feature of an identity picked out of the world’s rich pageant of differences, doesn’t finally so much undercut as somehow amplify the nobility, the generosity of the action, and the value of its prospective human outcomes.

There is a case, in short, for a deep and pragmatic compassion in both Romanticism and Buddhism. There are reasons to believe, however the effects are to be measured, that they have indeed offered operative ethics, better ways of wanting.

All this we take, with the reader's indulgence perhaps, as given, grounds for further inquiry. The remainder of this essay will look more closely at the approach to desire in both systems, their ethics, using the heuristic offered by GA. In particular, we will try to test an intuition that the core praxis or technique offered by both Buddhism and Romanticism is what might be called an aestheticization of experience.

Many disclaimers are of course due, especially with regard to the scale of such generalizations. It should quickly be admitted that a deep familiarity with historical Buddhism, through the study of original texts or lived experience of Buddhist culture, is unavailable to the present discussion—we must work largely from easily accessible or common knowledge. And there are many Buddhisms, with a number of major streams of thought and practice—we must try to confine ourselves to features consistent to all or most of them, most particularly as they are received and able to exercise influence in the modern world. This perhaps amounts to conceding that we will deal here with something close to what Bernard Faure denigrates as "Neo-Buddhism," a "sort of impersonal, flavorless and odorless spirituality" (139).(17) In justification for such a procedure, we can only appeal to the minimality of the GA hypothesis, as permitting one to ask at least the most basic questions about human experience of any kind. GA, too, is concerned with how things work. Human things.

The aesthetic, like every other fundamental category of fully human experience, is established on GA's hypothetical originary scene, as is human desire (as distinct from the appetitive impulses experienced across the sensate spectrum). Eric Gans defines aesthetic experience as "the oscillation between the contemplation of the sign representing the central object and the contemplation of the object as referred to by the sign."(18) Aesthetic contemplation, however brief, aesthetic pleasure, however fleeting, contributed crucially to the deferral of appropriation and violence that enabled the human. Fully human *desire* is the primordially appetitive attraction to that object as mediated by the sign. Such mediation, even as it qualifies, defers and ultimately intensifies the appetitive or appropriative, refracting it into the broad spectrum of human wanting, is never entirely divorced from it, from mere appetite.

Appropriative desire is thus, at least as hypothesized by GA, always part of the aesthetic experience; the aesthetic experience is always involved, paradoxically, with the desire to *have*. Paradoxically, because only by not—*yet*—having, may one experience beauty, but only that which can be experienced as beautiful, is desirable, ultimately or imaginably susceptible of appropriation. The human experience of such paradox is an unstable, restless shifting of attention, an oscillation. To end paradox, to achieve complete serenity let us say, is, must be, to still this oscillation, to abolish it. The experience of beauty is productive of pleasure but, in its paradoxical contingency, its alluring inaccessibility, it is also troubling.

The greater the beauty, the more troubling. But might the experience of a beauty so great that it abolishes itself be different?

It is perhaps useful to remind ourselves here that the distinction between the sacred and profane is also a product of the originary scene. The sacred center is established by the shared sign, in contrast with the profane periphery from which the sign is issued. Sacrality is a result of the competing desires for the object at the center, and of the potential violence inherent in those desires—experienced as a repulsive force exerted by the center. The experience of sacrality resembles but is distinct from the aesthetic experience in that the latter is of the inseparability of the sign and the object of desire—the object is at some level understood to be desirable in its connection to and because of the sign, and unattainable for the same reason—as Gans puts it, "oscillation between imaginary possession and recognized inviolability is characteristic of all aesthetic experience."(19) The path to literal appropriation of that which occupies the sacred center runs through ritual, and culminates in the *sparagmos* or sacrificial feast, which enables appropriation but leaves memorable the locus of sacred centrality for re-deployment in deferring and then reconciling the potentially antagonist wantings of the future, in the community the completed process creates. But appropriation *ends* the aesthetic effect, which is inseparable from a suspended wanting that the sign intensifies as it sustains.

I think this distinction matters when we turn our attention to Buddhism, where the question of sacrality as opposed to what I'm calling aesthetic contemplation has often seemed basic, even to the point where it has been debated whether Buddhism is indeed accurately to be called a religion at all.(20)

Musashi Tachikawa helpfully conceptualizes the relationship of sacred and profane as that between "two poles of single unity . . . between which electricity flows. Even in the simplest religious phenomenon there exists the 'direct current' of human action in the form of the movement of energy between these two poles . . . . The 'voltage'," as he ingeniously extends the metaphor, "varies according to the form assumed by a particular religious act." However, when there is no flow, no sense by anyone that the poles are different, one may no longer speak of a religious phenomenon.(21) And it is the character of Eastern thought, and Buddhist thought most rigorously, to deny a fundamental difference between sacred and profane, between, for example, delusion and enlightenment, man and Buddha, or conventional and ultimate truth.(22) Furthermore, "The sacred and profane are meaningless in the absence of human action."(23)

Into an intensified, oppressive but diffuse atmosphere of competition, frenzied appetite and impending violence, the emission of the first human sign flashes, the aborted gesture of appropriation, establishing a great and lasting polarization. This

is the GA hypothesis, its version of what Mircea Eliade calls “hierophany”—the manifestation of the sacred.(24) The production of that sign, that pointing, is the first human action, creating the meaningful distinction between sacred and profane, activating the circuit. The alternating human actions of sign production and literal, sparagmatic appropriation sustain the polarity, keep the current of human experience running—we cannot do without the sacred, in the GA analysis, even where the word or concept designating it is absent.(25) Wherever there is centrality—that which converging human desires and the signs that create them designate—there is sacrality. Wherever there is centrality, there is a periphery, the profane. Wherever there is centrality, we may say, a wheel turns. Even the aesthetic oscillation of attention, repeating in individual consciousness the pulse of deferral and appropriation which animates the human scene, may be thought of as an action, virtual and invisible as it may be. The end of that action, again, is the end of oscillation. And because it is the action of the human mind created by the human sign that establishes them, the abolition of *all* differences, not merely the foundational difference of sacred and profane, is the necessary condition or indeed consequence of the end of all distinctly human action.(26)

It is in this broader sense that I think we must understand the pursuit of unity that both Buddhism and Romanticism mandate, rather than merely, as it has often been framed, as a rejection of an arid Western philosophical dualism. Although no doubt the contention does play out in the philosophical dimension as well. But as with paradoxical aesthetic experience itself, the value or ethical productivity of this pursuit may lie in its processes rather than in any measurable achievement of its ostensible or formal goals.

Romantic demystification involves the rejection of the validity, the centrality, of the public scene.(27) It denounces that scene as mere form, mere spectacle, in favour, for example, of Hamlet’s famous claim that “I have that within which passeth show.”(28) Lord Byron, one of the Danish prince’s better-known progeny, echoes his prototypical words in one of his own most celebrated passages, identifying even more explicitly the antagonistic character of the struggle between the public flow of desire and the private centrality of individual experience, whose power and authenticity is guaranteed by suffering, isolation, and victimhood.

> But I have lived, and have not lived in vain:
> My mind may lose its force, my blood its fire,
> And my frame perish even in conquering pain,
> But there is that within me which shall tire
> Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire;
> Something unearthly, which they deem not of,
> Like the remembered tone of a mute lyre,

Shall on their softened spirits sink, and move
In hearts all rocky now the late remorse of love.(29)

Victorious victimhood, that is; heroic, not tragic suffering; towering, indeed commanding isolation. Of course, in a grammatical turn which has become almost the emblem of market society, there is no explicit antecedent for the pronoun "they" in this passage. None is needed. They, them, other people. Us. And indeed, don't we love him now? We appreciate him, not in resentful rivalry as at first we might have done, but as remembered music, the tones of a lyre just now fallen mute. We see his beauty. We see the beauty of his posture. We too can have that beauty, the rapt aesthetic appreciation of others. That confidence, that serenity.

The Byronic posture does not, of course, exhaust the range of Romantic responses to desire and the market world, of Romantic demystifications and denials. These have been fairly widely discussed, however, and we perhaps need not tarry here.(30)

The Buddhist resistance, as noted, also proceeds through demystification. But Buddhism does not see the operation of desire in the socially mediated way that Hamlet and Byron, or for that matter, Girard and GA do. "They" do not feature so openly in its diagnosis of the human predicament. Rather, desire is deemed part of a broader illusion that Buddhism approaches through the foundational concept of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppadda* in Pali). This is, of course, an idea of great, indeed, potentially engulfing complexity. The Buddha, pragmatist that he was, warned against the attempt to formulate it in any metaphysical way.(31) For present purposes, perhaps the crucial element is the doctrine's denial of causation, or at rate of any singular or distinguishable relations of cause and effect. Conditions, rather than agents, allow for the arising of other conditions.(32) Causation proceeds, can only proceed, from one unity to another—in one metaphor, "multiple fruit from multiple causes."(33) Dependant origination is thus a vision of innumerable successive unities, a *process*, that permits no meaningful distinctions, no consistently extant things, no identities, only relationality. Buddhists plausibly point to the way this view of things anticipates developments in modern physics.(34)

The ethical and aesthetic significance here is that in Buddhism desire, too, is denied any specificity of cause, very much—if implicitly—including the social nexus of mediation. Other people don't cause desire, either in Girard's vaguely osmotic way or, as GA has it, through the mediation of the sign. Nor, we might add, is there a first cause of desire, as GA's punctual theory of human origination insists. Rather, there is a constant co-dependency, as it were, of such elements as ignorance, consciousness, sensation, craving, clinging—with a numerological referent of

twelve: twelve *nidanas*, twelvefold path—but suggestive of indefinite extension.(35) These are sometimes called a “chain”—at least for the purposes of ordinary human consumption (and motivation), in the language of “conventional truth,” the Buddha’s compassionate concession to the limitations of human understanding.(36) But there are hints of the deeper or “ultimate truth” in their illustration as positions around the rim of the *bhavachakra* or symbolic wheel, with all its implications of motion without displacement, activity without fundamental change, a constant condition of birth and rebirth, of self-reinforcing human experiences, all recurring endlessly.

Rather than a counsel of despair, however, dependant origination offers, in the very grasping of its totality, potential transcendence. This transcendence, however, the route to *nibbana* (or nirvana), is once again not something to be theorized and abstracted, but a matter of seeing and experiencing. One sees when one is no longer distracted by what GA might call the rivalries of identity, of mediated desire, by any or all of the mendacious and distracting inducements to craving and sensation. One sees when one is able to ignore the temporality implied by linear cause and effect, or for that matter, by deferral and appropriation. Transcendence involves, in the familiar exhortation of both Romantic and Buddhist, living in the present moment. Escaping the wheel.

One may meditate. At any rate, action ceases. Wanting ceases, and thus also both explicit and imagined sacrificial appropriation. “In Buddhism,” points out Raffaele Pettazoni, “one suppressed the sacrifice to retain only the vigil.”(37) One waits and watches. Life itself suspended, or almost, one sees in a qualitatively different way, as in the paradigmatic lines of another important Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, surely evoking a liminal condition closely analogous to that sought for in Buddhism:

> . . . that blessed mood
> In which the affections gently lead us on,—
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things.(38)

With a “quiet” eye one sees, in Buddhism itself, not isolate causes and effects, but the autonomous creativity of everything at every moment. “Each *dhamma*,” asserts Nolan Pliny Jacobson, making what will perhaps seem to us now the inescapable

comparison, each moment “inherits along innumerable lines, synthesizing the relevant qualities into a world that is creative in every cell. Each such organic unity is like a work of art in the wholeness it confers on every part, and the serenity the Buddhist finds in such ‘pulsations of experience’ is the same serenity the art lover finds in great art. The movement in this process of the ‘many’ into the eminent ‘one’ of the fulfilled now is the rhythm of the universe as an organic whole.”(39)

“We Japanese,” according to one Buddhist of that nation, “do not *believe* in religion. We enjoy it!”(40)

But in GA’s conception of the human, as we have said, such pleasure, such serenity or joy, is only one phase of an oscillation, at least in our encounter with *human* art, even the greatest we have thus far known. No doubt the apogee of religious experience, in any tradition, approaches and/or imagines transcending the limits of the human. And while GA may leave undecidable, as Eric Gans has repeatedly made clear, the question of our origin in either the human gesture or the divine word, on the originary scene the hypothesis is emphatic about the ineluctability of the paradox of aesthetic experience.(41) The trouble of art, that inviolability, definitively prevents a complete embrace of the moment-as-artwork, prevents the absolute “fulfillment” of now. One recalls the potent *longing* awakened by art-works which strongly affect us, a longing for the absolute and impossible fulfillment of the world of possibility they evoke, a longing for the art-work to continue, never age, never end—that dying strain, that beloved human face, that magical kingdom—even as we intuitively understand that such continuation, such violation of form, would destroy the beauty that awakened our desires in the first place. Not that originary thinking doesn’t allow us to develop important differences of degree. GA distinguishes between the poles of high and low art—the former emphasizing, or lengthening the contemplative phase of oscillated attention, the latter the moment of imagined consumption or appropriation of the object designated by the sign. Perhaps meditation is the experience of the highest of high arts, and *nibbana* the ultimate degree of art, an art that abolishes itself. Perhaps indeed art and even aesthetic experience itself are to be thought of as functioning like the raft, in the Buddha’s famous image for his teachings, which allows us to cross the river but is to be abandoned once we do.(42)

Doubtless, then, the sign itself must also be left behind. For the important early Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, the profane is to be associated with “linguistic proliferation.”(43) As Tachikawa summarizes his position, “action and mental defilements arise from ‘discriminating thought’. . . born of linguistic proliferation . . . the ‘division’ into diverse elements that is unavoidable in verbal expression.” Language, in short, is a system of differences, and if this sounds familiar, so also does Nāgārjuna’s “method of refutation,” which “was to negate the validity of

propositions . . . by bringing to light the contradictions into which these propositions, expressed by language inevitably characterized by ‘expansion’ had to lapse,” leading the philosopher to such oracular or shall we say proto-deconstructionist utterances as “things do not arise” and a “traverser does not traverse.”(44) This second-century Derrida’s “relentless . . . determination to exhaust the subject under discussion is overwhelming” but, we are assured, “at the conclusion of this long and gruelling process to completely extinguish linguistic proliferation there awaits the perspective of a vision of emptiness in which ‘nothing exists (or everything is empty)’.”(45) *Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*?(46)

In GA’s history of the human, of course, that first sign does nothing *but* proliferate, and the project Nāgārjuna pursues sounds in GA terms like the determined rolling back of that process, back and back, perhaps to the mere ostensive itself, and then to the pre- or post-human condition of stilled oscillation, the unified sacred and profane, the end of desire.

Buddhism seeks, as other commentators on Nāgārjuna consistently assert, “to set free the sense of the real from its moorings in abstractions”(47) and the sign is, of course, the first and most consequential abstraction, inflicting in its deferral of appropriation that wound, that division or alienation from the intuitively “real,” mourned ever after in myriad ways by a humanity thus imprisoned in its own wanting. This is at bottom a mourning—we alluded to it above in the form of aesthetic longing—over the ineluctability of that which we may finally also call the paradox of desire, or broadly summarize, extending Freud’s great insight, as “the human condition and its discontents.”(48)

How, then, to conclude, would or could an experience of beauty be so great as to abolish itself—or to abolish at any rate the paradox which makes it troubling? We must surely answer: by ceasing to oscillate. By becoming an experience exclusively of sign or, what may finally be no different, of referent. The problematic of inaccessibility is of course overcome when sign and object merge—when one can have the object as easily and completely as one possesses the sign, on one’s internal, virtual scene. Or, when the object’s solidity guarantees the satisfactions once merely beckoned to by the sign. One might add, the cessation of oscillation implies or must be accompanied by the cessation of human community, or at any rate, human community as understood as an ethical praxis necessitated by the mimetic and rivalrous character of desire. René Girard, contemplating the inexorable and to his mind inevitably violent operation of mimetic desire, once spoke of a community with no scapegoat, no outsiders, an entire society “with no outside” as the only possible solution.(49) A return, or leap forward, to a Christian universalism. The end of oscillation which would seem to be the final goal of Buddhist pilgrimage might also imply such a world. A community—if that is still the

word—with no boundaries, nothing which is not and nothing which is the community. A world of process and no things, process and nothing.

How might seeing or seeking this contribute to human betterment in the market world we currently experience? Can the model of an individually experienced transcendence of oscillation, call it even a personal "aesthetic apocalypse," *replace* the communally acknowledged sacred in its life-preserving work?

Eric Gans, in his own recent reflections on Nāgārjuna and Buddhism, does not put this question in explicitly aesthetic or oscillatory terms. Rather, the idea of Buddhist enlightenment at the end of linguistic proliferation demonstrates a "truly minimal" faith:

> Whereas in the West we insist on the object of consciousness (Husserl's "consciousness is always consciousness of something"), Buddhism understands that the scene of representation itself, although it can only come into being occupied by a sacred object, does not need such an object to maintain itself. On the contrary, it is as an empty scene that it reveals itself in its minimal essence. Buddha-like understanding of the sacred is the enlightenment that empties, whether it be through paradoxical thought or meditation or the repetition of a mantra or by some other means, the phenomenal world of words and their meaning, leaving only the universal faith in shared meaning itself that connects all humanity. (*Chronicle* 516)

This perspective, Gans generously suggests, in contrast with that of the ostensibly more violent West in the midst of its present convulsions of victimary resentment, might provide the market world its very means of survival, modelling the "solution of putting our object-desire away from us to let everyone share the universal human scene that offers humanity its one remaining chance of salvation."(50)

No doubt any thoroughgoing renunciation of mediated human desire, whether offered by Buddhism, Girardian Christianity, or Romanticism, if carried, universally, to its logical or literal conclusion, would indeed save humanity. Short of that, one would need to enter into comparative calculations of efficacy, measuring relative incidences of human violence, and trying to understand more fully than now we do the causes both of the continuation and, where it unquestionably has happened, of the diminishment of such violence.(51) This work too is well beyond the capacity of the current essay, and its prospect must bring us to a pause.

We might only add that prominent amongst our premises has been the conviction that originary thinking is not apocalyptical thinking. As we note above, GA does not have a version of the human without sacrality, without the current running between the poles, without language, or the community of shared attention. It contemplates

no replacements, only a long and perhaps never to be completed transition, a steady shifting of balances, emphases, experiences of mediation. A pursuit, a praxis that leads to the relative or even near-perfect attainment of serenity it can certainly comprehend, though. It must watch and weigh and indeed celebrate the contributions made by both Buddhism and the many strands of Romanticism to the safety and peace of modern human culture. It must treat with respectful agnosticism the experiences of transcendence to which they attest, confident that even at the utmost remove from the originary scene representations of such experiences continue to perform the functions of protecting and developing the human. From its minimal set of presuppositions, that is, originary thinking needs to remain maximally receptive to the variety of human solutions to the ever-changing problem of desire. This, we would argue, constitutes—is the extent of—the "faith" GA itself is able to offer the present world.

Notes

1. Quoted in David Webster, *The Philosophy of Desire in the Buddhist Pali Canon* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 173. (back)

2. See for example, the "Culama-lunka sutta" in which a man wounded by an arrow seeks answers to the question of its origins, its pedigree, its trajectory. Meanwhile, dryly observes the Buddha, he dies. J. P. Pathirana, *Pragmatism in Buddhism* (Nedimala, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 2003), 6. (back)

3. The Philosophy of Desire in the Buddhist Pali Canon, 145. (back)

4. "Human history may be described as the never-completable transition from the ritual system of distribution inaugurated on the originary scene to the market system, where no central authority is necessary to mediate between human beings beyond the universal human order of representation through signs." Eric Gans, "The Free Market" (March 16, 1996), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/view34.htm. (back)

5. "O gods dethroned and deceased," somewhat histrionically mourned Swinburne. He would certainly not be the last or the most bitter thus to greet a putative End of History. "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has gone gray from thy breath." "Hymn to Proserpine" (1866). In the Buddhist context, one might note, amongst many others, the view of the noted philosopher Keiji Nishitani: "At present Buddhism exerts practically no influence on life in society . . . . [It] has turned into social habit, and has fallen into a state of inertia." Quoted by Jan Van Bragt, in *On Buddhism*, Trans. Seisaku Yamamoto and Robert E. Carter (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), viii. It is not the intention of the present essay to dismiss these and the

multitude of other similarly themed laments accompanying the advent of modernity. We will, however, focus on that which still may be operative in our era. (back)

6. Admittedly, the record is complicated, and Constantine seems to have been more transitional a figure than Christian memory usually presents, with one foot still in the pagan world and permissive of some variety of religious practice. Still, this "murderous egotist" as Jacob Burkhardt memorably called him, (*The Age of Constantine the Great*, trans. Moses Hadas, 1949, New York: Vintage, 1967, 293.) exhibited rather a Stalinist strain and actively intervened in theological debate, convening the Council of Nicaea and enforcing the Nicene Creed. The longer outcomes are also to be considered. The modern version of the empire he ruled is certainly still more Christian than Asoka's India remains Buddhist. Holloway, R. Ross, *Constantine and Rome* (Yale UP, 2004), Ch. 1. (back)

7. For a more detailed treatment of Asoka's principles, see Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India* (London: Penguin 2002), 200-204. (back)

8. For details of some of Buddhism's historical adaptations, see Bernard Faure, *Unmasking Buddhism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 20-22. Or, "compromises": 37. (back)

9. In support of the claims made in the last two sentences, one might point, from amongst numerous possible examples, to the capacity of one representative spiritual seeker of the late 20th-century, Leonard Cohen, simultaneously to engage Buddhism to the point of being ordained a monk, remain a practising Jew, and embrace the role of hyperbolically self-indulgent pop star with all the usual sexual, pharmaceutical and financial benefits. (For the typically messy details various sources might be consulted. For example, Ira B. Nadel, *Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen;* Toronto: Random House, 1996; chapters 10 and 13.) This gifted celebrity-poet, one might say, emblematically incorporates the "various positions" of the modern market into a single, highly successful identity. But a significant source of his power has been his ability to remain detached from the commitments of desire, romantic or political, to which he at the same time has borne eloquent witness. At times this has involved the crafting of elegant rationalizations for the "me generation," but at its best it has offered a profoundly humane perspective on the fervours of our day. (back)

10. *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, 1950, Trans. Gene Patterson-King and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). (back)

11. The image is Jean-Michel Oughourlian's. *The Puppet of Desire*, trans. Eugene

Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 4. (back)

12. Eugene Webb usefully links the Girardian and Buddhist critiques of desire. “The goal of Buddhist practice is not to eliminate desire as such; it is to acknowledge it (to ‘note’ it as Buddhists sometimes say) without grasping and clinging, that is, without identifying with the desire . . . . Buddhist thought connects on a deep level with Girard’s, since Girard’s also has at its center the problem of identification.” Webb also points, however, to a crucial difference, the absence in Buddhist thought of an emphasis on the mimetic character of desire. “Girard, Buddhism, and the Psychology of Desire” in *For René Girard: Essays in Friendship and in Truth*, ed. Sandor Goodhart et al (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2009), 153-54. (back)

13. “I stood,” proclaims Byron’s paradigmatic Childe Harold, “among them, but not of them; in a shroud / Of thoughts which were not their thoughts.” *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* Canto III, Stanza 137 (1816). (back)

14. For a brief description, see Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 176-78. Faure also provides a useful overview: *Unmasking Buddhism*, 34-35. (back)

15. Faure, *Unmasking Buddhism*, 42. (back)

16. *Manfred: A Dramatic Poem*, Act 4, Scene 3, 151. (back)

17. Faure, amongst others, deplores exactly our procedure, calling it a “refusal to take the diversity of Buddhism as a living tradition seriously.” He distinguishes at least three fundamental forms: “Tibetan Buddhism, Zen and Theravāda.” *Unmasking Buddhism*, 7. At other points he speaks of a “Buddhist nebula” (18) and details the ways historical Buddhism has most frequently been experienced over its long tradition—versions in many ways at odds with the more philosophical and ascetic system encountered by Western students and devotees, and the main subject of the present essay (59-82). (back)

18. *Originary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 117. (back)

19. *Originary Thinking*, 118. (back)

20. For a summary of this debate, see Faure, *Unmasking Buddhism*, 27-34. (back)

21. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*, Trans. Rolf W. Giebel (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997), 9-10 *(back)*

22. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*, 6. (back)

23. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*, 10. (back)

24. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*, 7. (back)

25. ". . . we cannot simply go without sacrality. . . . Sacrality, properly understood, is nothing other than the reverence for the personhood of what cannot simply be appropriated by our appetite." Eric Gans, "On Celebrity" (September 6, 1997), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw108.htm. (back)

26. For the seventh-century Tibetan Buddhist scholar Candrakīrti, Tachikawa notes, "it was impossible to attain to *nirvana* as long as the world remained an object of cognition." *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*, 186. (back)

27. "With the metamorphoses of the neoclassical esthetic into the preromantic, the public scene inherited from ritual loses the sacred aura through which it had recalled to life the originary crisis. The romantic replaces the esthetic primacy of the public scene with the private." *Originary Thinking*, 164. For definitions and development of the idea of the public and private scene, see the earlier chapters of this work. (back)

28. *Hamlet* (1600-1601) 1.2.85. Gans (*Originary Thinking* 156-57) and Richard van Oort (*Shakespeare's Big Men: Tragedy and the Problem of Resentment; Toronto:* University of Toronto Press, 2016; 57-96) have both illuminated this significant moment using a GA heuristic. (back)

29. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto IV (1818), Stanza 137. (back)

30. Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, to pick one example out of many, call Romanticism "opposition to capitalism in the name of precapitalist values" ("Figures of Romantic Anticapitalism" in G.A. Rosso and Daniel P. Watkins, eds., *Spirits of Fire: English Romantic Writers and Contemporary Historical Methods*; Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990; 26). For a GA-inflected discussion of the particular case of Byron, readers might consult the present author's *Lord Byron and The History of Desire* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009). (back)

31. Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, *Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination* (Nonthaburi, Thailand: Vuddhidhamma Fund, 1992), 3-6. (back)

32. For one fairly clear account of this difficult concept, see Harvey, 65-73. (back)

33. Webster cites the fifth-century scholar Buddhaghosa, 148. (back)

34. For a brief summary of the parallels, see Nolan Pliny Jacobson, *Buddhism and the Contemporary World* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 59-61. The connection has not been without its controversies, however, as the debates following upon the publication of Fritjof Capra's 1975 *The Tao of Physics* and other works following it its train might remind us. The fraught relationship between Buddhism and the enthusiasms of the "New Age" is worth a study in itself, and one for which GA might provide an ideal heuristic. But this exceeds our current purposes. (back)

35. See Harvey, 66-67, for versions of the concept that continue "beyond link twelve." This same author provides a brief summary of the *nidanas*, or "conditioning links," 66-72. (back)

36. The distinction between conventional and ultimate truth in Buddhism is foundational and discussed in many sources. One brief account is Harvey, 118. Faure applies the distinction to the present subject matter in a similar way: *Unmasking Buddhism*, 42. (back)

37. Cited in Bernard Faure, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 69. Eugene Webb raises the possible cultural and historical context of Buddhism's non-sacrificial character, 154. (back)

38. "Tintern Abbey" (1798), 37-49. (back)

39. Jacobson, 43. This author devotes a full chapter (65-83) to "Nirvana: The Aesthetic Center of Life." Despite protestations to the contrary, the experience described seems, certainly by comparison to that articulated by GA, largely of a mystical character, by definition unmediated by other human beings, and unambiguously joyous. In short, it imagines the goal of human progress as the capacity to remain forever in the contemplative, non-appropriative phase of the aesthetic. To escape desire completely. (back)

40. Jacobson, 51. Emphasis added. (back)

41. I am indebted, in the reflections immediately above, to Eric Gans for remarks made in Nagoya after the presentation of the first version of this essay. (back)

42. Webster, 166. (back)

43. Tachikawa, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*, 6. (back)

44. Tachikawa, 25. (back)

45. Tachikawa, 25. (back)

46. The similarity of Nāgārjuna and Derrida is indeed something of a truism. Faure, however, makes the comparison instead to Wittgenstein. *Unmasking Buddhism*, 31. (back)

47. K. Venkata Ramanan, *Nāgārjuna's Philosophy: As Presented in the Mahā-Prajñāpāramitā-Sāstra* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1966) 329-30. Also cited in Jacobson, 56. (back)

48. See *Civilization and its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*), 1930. (back)

49. "Interview with René Girard" by Bruce Bassoff, *Denver Quarterly 13* (Summer 1978), 38. (back)

50. "Nagarjuna and Zeno: Paradox East and West II" (July 9, 2016), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw516.htm. Readers will want, of course, to assess the entire argument, as well note the personal way Gans has framed this final insight, using a detail from his uncle's funeral. (back)

51. The causes proposed by Stephen Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011) seem partial at best, inadequate at worst, even as his fundamental claim concerning the phenomenon itself is firmly supported by a broad array of research. (back)