

Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism. By Dale S. Wright. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xv + 227.

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As “philosophical meditations” on the Zen of Huang Po, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* by Dale S. Wright is an impressive work. Philosophers will appreciate it, for it well shows how far Zen studies in America have moved ahead since the days of D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts. Just as Bernard Faure has deconstructed “Suzuki Zen,” Dale S. Wright has here de-romanticized John Blofeld’s 1959 book on Huang Po, the third “house” in the Hung-chou lineage of Ma-tsu Tao-I, being the successor to Pai-chang and master to Lin-chi.

Wright’s “post-romantic” reading strives for relevance in contemporary discourse. Each of the chapters takes up a key topic that dovetails into the next and escalates from Textuality, Reading, Understanding, Language, Rhetoric, and History to Freedom, Transcendence, Mind, and Enlightenment. Concerning the first, Textuality, it is shown how Blofeld has taken the records of Huang Po as true and holistic—a view that has been disputed by modern scholarship, which details a complex history of accretion instead. Renouncing the former romance with its single portraiture, Wright accepts the critical approach. Huang Po exists, then, as a series of images projected by the respondent Zen community. Wright then recalls the Buddhist doctrine of “no-self” (in the context of there being no unchanging Huang Po) and notes how a number of masters in that mountain-based lineage were also named Huang Po. In short, whereas Bernard Faure has dissolved the early images of Bodhidharma into a number of literary skandhas (heaps), fragments that do not even add up to a *pudgala* (fictive whole), Wright finds these socially constructed images to be born out of (Buddhist) “dependent origination” vis-à-vis the Zen community.

This leads to the next topic, on how one should read a text. Wary of Blofeld’s strong belief, a hermeneutics of faith that is possibly masking modern, subjective bias and projections, Wright sees a need for critical distance while granting the text its own horizon or an “otherness” that engages the reader anew. All ten chapters follow this format of pitting point against counterpoint before ruminating on some lead gleaned from the repertoire of Buddhist doctrines. Some chapters are more subtle than others, but all work to jog the reader into a sudden recognition of some past prejudice while offering a fresh take on the material. The book, though not always easy, nonetheless deserves a close reading by any and all Zen enthusiasts.

Wright’s choice of target—Blofeld and Huang Po—is somewhat of an unexpected delight. As with Buberism in Hasidic studies, D. T. Suzuki has perpetuated a certain “Suzuki-ism” in the Zen field, but compared with Suzuki or even Watts, Blofeld is never known to be that independent a thinker as to deserve similar attention. An eclectic collector of Eastern esoterica, Blofeld’s “romance” with the Orient is not always that reflective; sometimes he just reports what he was told, unvarnished. His “romanticism” is thus often second- or thirdhand. The introduction to his 1959 work is anything but aggressive; he sounds at times all too apologetic. But

precisely because of this, Wright is able to cite Blofeld and use him to get at a more general but pervasive set of European “romantic” assumptions about the Buddhist East and submit that to a coherent and intriguing critique. He also whets our appetite for a good, intellectual biography of Blofeld, which we do not have. We do not really get a good picture of Huang Po either—but then, asking for that might be chalked up to a yearning for “romance” or just wishful thinking. One longs for some middle ground.

That is because, unlike Descartes’ *Meditations*, which set forth a singular, modern rationality, Wright’s postmodern Meditation cannot help but suggest just one way of dealing with the polysemy of the text. Perhaps some *histoire de mentalité* in the future can restore some sense of the significance of Huang Po the person and his historic hour. Maybe a different literary deconstruction of Textuality can unlock the Hung-chou school’s reliance on intertextuality. Maybe Reading can uncover a new disjuncture between the spoken *Yü* (sayings) and the transcribed *Lu* (record) in the then emerging genre of *Yü-lu* or Recorded Sayings. Maybe Understanding can locate that new, semiotic “emptiness of reference”; Language that “excess of meaning”; and Rhetoric the “figures of speech” (the abuse of metaphors, perhaps)—so that History can be more than just a “genealogy of mind” (Wright) and be a story of mind-sets instead. Perhaps then Freedom could be about “paradigm shifts,” and Transcendence (“going beyond Huang Po”) a “trope” to aid the “poetics” of Mind at unleashing this “myth” of Enlightenment. Granted, a lot of “perhaps” here.

A minor point: Blofeld’s translation of Huang Po is wanting, but his choice of “Void” to render what seems to be the Sanskrit *ākāśa* (space) captures Huang Po’s use of it as a contrast to “form” (reality). In this, Huang Po was just following Chinese convention, for the Chinese had already so conflated what would in Sanskrit be two things, namely “space” (*ākāśa*) and “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*). This had already happened by the sixth century C.E. So Wright’s use of “space,” though philologically exact, might lose out on Huang Po’s intended dialectics of “Form is emptiness; emptiness is form.” Perhaps “empty space” would replicate that Chinese conflation better.