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Poetry as Meditation: Buddhism, Daoism, and Han Shan

Emily Hunt

Introduction

A role of poetry is to relieve the existential weight of one's existence. For many, poetry is a means of survival, not a luxury. It is not readily seen as something that preserves humanity. Yet, it does. The role of the poet is to express more lucidly what is concealed beneath the skin. Language exists because one has an innate need to establish things that have not been previously established. Words are not founded in reality, and what is said is hardly ever what is meant. However, one does not notice this when she is merely perceiving the world around her. Poetry, however, seeks to move past mere perceptions and explore the importance of language as meditation. It offers a deeper, more scrupulous form of communication. Unlike other forms of writing, poetry more readily unearths depth and recognizes that one's inner chaos is dynamic rather than paralyzing. Through writing poetry, one learns to dance with disorder. The poet understands life has something beneath it, so she begins to peel away the skin with a careful hand. Through writing she is illuminated amidst the shadows of her depths. Through a process of igniting thought and burning away pain, a poem emerges in a smoky haze. In this way, poetry is synonymous with the art of mindfulness. It is a meditation in which one learns to accept things for both what they are and what they are not readily seen as. With each poem that is birthed, the author experiences a removal of self. This sort of transformation is highlighted through the examination of poetry in light of Buddhist and Daoist practice via the poems of T'ang poet Han Shan.

§1. Daoism: The Dao, Language, and Writing

In order to understand the purpose of poetry within Daoist thought, one must first understand the role of the *Dao*. This is best done through examination of the *Zhuangzi*, a popular Daoist text that has a lot to say about language and writing. Zhuangzi describes the *Dao* writing, “The constant is the useful; the useful is the passable; the passable is the successful; and with success, all is accomplished. He relies upon this alone, relies upon it and does not know he is doing so. This is called the Way” (Zhuangzi, 36). Here, he is referring to the *Dao* and writing as a way of making one’s home in the world. It is a metaphor of spiritual familiarity with the movements of Heaven, or life and death, and one’s capability to create a home in it all. In this way, poetry is a survival mechanism. It is existentially therapeutic. There is an answer to both why Zhuangzi wrote and why writing is necessary. However, the answer is not singular, which is part of the overarching answer. To understand the *Dao*, one must dissect it in a way that is opposite to what she initially reads it as meaning. This requires *following* him through the undoing that takes place in the first few chapters of *Zhuangzi*. If the poet cannot dislodge any sense of the self as Zhuangzi does in Section 1 or take on his attitude in Section 2, the meaning of the following chapters are restricted. In this way, there is a fundamental intimacy between reading and writing, or seeing and writing. Knowing why one would write in the eyes of *Zhuangzi* one must *read* him. For example, people typically learn via their senses. Yet, the *Dao* lacks the sensory qualities that allow one to perceive the world in that way. Even if one were to attempt to investigate the *Dao* as an ordinary object of physical perception, she would discover the nature of the *Dao* lacks tangible qualities. In *Tao Te Ching* Laozi explains this writing, “We look at it, and we do not see it, and we name it ‘the Equable.’ We listen to it, and we do not hear it, and we name it ‘the Inaudible.’ We try to grasp it, and do not get hold of it, and we name it ‘the Subtle’”(Laozi, 16).

Poetry functions much like the *Dao*. What is the *Dao*'s appearance? It is invisible. What noise does it make? It is soundless; inaudible. What is its form? It is formless. Although one may attempt to list the *Dao*'s characteristics, she is invariably left with nothing but empty descriptions. The same can be said of the dynamic, often uncommunicable nature of poetry. Furthermore, the role of meditation within Daoism is a "sitting forgetting" (Han Shan, 8). This orientation towards meditation is meant to free one from the memory of words, which is a memory separating one from the *Dao*. The eternal *Dao* cannot be described in words so all language results in separation. However, poetry is a release of language that allows one to release the weight of her memories. In this way, poetry is a form of sitting in forgetfulness and a vehicle for meditation.

§2. Buddhism: Meditation and the Writing of Poetry

Although Buddhism speaks less directly about the roles of language and writing, Buddhism offers critical insight to the role of meditation in the writing of poetry. This begins with understanding the Buddhist orientation towards anguish. That is, anguish is only powerful as long as one allows it to intimidate her. Batchelor describes this writing, "If we try to avoid a powerful wave looming above us on the beach, it will send us crashing into the sand and surf. But if we face it head-on and dive right into it, we discover only water" (Batchelor, 7-8). The Buddha acknowledged the existential condition of anguish and held that its origins lie in self-centered cravings (Batchelor, 6). The challenge then, is to see people and experiences for what they are rather than reacting to them out of habit. Meditation is the practice that allows one to approach the world calmly and clearly, which ultimately allows her to let go when needed. It is

important to note the letting go is not a rejection or suppression of one's feelings, but rather allowing them to be what they are. The poet understands what this means in that by allowing herself to both feel her feelings and let them go she is, by nature, free. With this freedom comes the recognition of the importance in saying "I do not know" and being okay with that declaration. At its core, Buddhism is centered on a deep agnosticism that lends itself to a life of mindful awareness (Batchelor, 19). A crucial aspect of mindful awareness and its relationship to poetry as meditation is the recognition that mindfulness is not merely introspective. Within Buddhism, deep mind meditation is a means of becoming free of illusion and suffering (Han Shan, 9). It is the ultimate source of enlightenment. Meditation is not an emptying of the mind, but rather, it expands one's attention to the world around her. Every mental state can be known through a corresponding physical sensation. To become aware is to participate in a shared reality with the world and people around one's self. Writing poetry, like meditation is "to probe with intense sensitivity each glimmer of color, each cadence of sound, each touch of another's hand, each fumbling word that tries to utter what cannot be said" (Batchelor, 65). In this way, poetry goes beyond ordinary language and attempts to say what otherwise cannot be said.

§3. Han Shan's Poetry as an Illustration of Daoism and Buddhism

Moreover, the poems of Han Shan encompass both Buddhist and Daoist thought in order to give a clearer picture of how poetry manifests itself as lived meditation. Han Shan was a hermit-poet who found his home on Cold Cliff during the T'ang dynasty. However, he was not the first hermit to seek refuge in these mountains, and Daoists had been residing on the mountain for millennia. As institutionalized Buddhism arrived from the west both Buddhists and Daoists

meditated on the mountain (Han Shan, 8). Han Shan's poetry emphasizes the importance of sitting meditation as the door to enlightenment within both Buddhism and Daoism. For the Buddhist, this means reaching the eighth step of the Buddha's Eightfold Path, and for the Daoist it leads to oneness with the *Dao*. During the T'ang dynasty, Zen was breaking away from institutionalized Buddhism and establishing itself as the "most Chinese of Buddhisms" (Han Shan, 3). Zen is most readily seen in Han Shan's work. Although Han Shan did not observe the monastic discipline of either Buddhism or Daoism, his poems give insight to what their practice looks like lived out. "Allegory lives between the lines" in his poetry (Han Shan, 12). Within his poems he hides truth regarding the light he has found.

9

People ask about the Cold Mountain way:
plain roads don't get through to Cold Mountain.

Middle of the summer, and the ice still hasn't

melted.

Sunrise, and the mist would blind a hidden

dragon.

So, how could a man like *me* get *here*?

My heart is not the same as yours, *dear sir*...

If your heart were like mine,

you'd be here already (Han Shan, 26).

In the midst of his voluntary poverty on the mountain Han Shan is rugged, but always laughing (Han Shan, 2). Notice, in this poem how he is calling out those who mock him

wondering how he made a life on the mountain saying, “If your heart were like mine, / you’d be here already.” Although this gives insight to Han Shan’s character and jovial attitude towards life, it also sheds light on Daoist thought towards playfulness in language. A playfulness that can only be discovered through meditation and movement of the *Dao*. Zhuangzi contemplates the nature of language and writing through a series of questions concerning whether or not words are merely “wind” or “like the piping of earth” (Zhuangzi, 30). He discusses support, injury, and the varying effects our minds have on the way of Heaven within us. Zhuangzi describes various sages who manifested these modes of being by playing or not playing their lute writing, “Great understanding is broad and unhurried; little understanding is cramped and busy. Great words are clear and limpid; little words are shrill and quarrelsome” (Zhuangzi, 32). This leads to questions that come with any *deep* contemplation of the *Dao*. Namely: what is freedom, how does Nature precede one’s actions, how does using the precedence of Heaven allow one to live effortlessly (wu wei), how does one act in accordance with Nature or Heaven, what does it mean to be limited in view, what is death, and so on. Completion of the *Dao* is referred to as wu wei. Wu wei is the effortlessness the sage lives by (Zhuangzi, 39). Overall, it is a social statement against striving for an empty reward. It is also the quality of life that comes with one’s ability to act in accordance with the spontaneous nature of the universe. The sage simply embraces things. Zhuangzi describes the nature of the sage writing, “The sage embraces things. Ordinary men discriminate among them and parade their discriminations before others. So I say, those who discriminate fail to see” (Zhuangzi, 39). It is in this lack of discrimination and seeing that language is able to be established. This is what Han Shan is revealing in this poem, that he has

reached the completion of the *Dao* and is able to live in wu wei. In is only in not trying to make it anywhere particular that Han Shan allowed the *Dao* to lead him to Cold Mountain.

68

Living on Cold Mountain, I got free of the world,

Not even a mantra hung on my heart.

Maybe a line of a poem might get scribbled on a rock wall.

Me, drifting *home*, like the unmoored boat (Han Shan, 57).

Here, Han Shan is giving insight to the removal of self that occurs within Buddhist enlightenment. He has learned how to be free of the world. Nothing “pulls at his heart” or hinders him any longer. He is made free. Han Shan meditates via writing on leaves, stones, etc. This shows the impermanence of language which is an outward manifestation of the letting go that comes with meditation. He is not holding on to his poetry, but releasing it and in turn taking on freedom. His “drifting home” is not apathetic, but the result of deep mindfulness and freedom. It is also a revelation of the agnosticism within Buddhism. He is simply drifting because he does not know where home is. It may even be an allusion to death and how he is fearless in the face of death because he does not know what will happen after life, if anything. Zhuangzi also speaks to this looks like in Daoism. The parable of Lady Li tells of a daughter who was taken captive so she cried because she had been removed from her home. However, once she went to live in the palace and experienced its luxuries she wondered why she had ever wept questioning, “How do I know that the dead do not wonder why they ever longed for life?” (Zhuangzi, 43). It is this

stillness amidst life's circumstances that leads to transformation in Daoism. Han Shan has grasped this fully.

Conclusion

In brief, Buddhism and Daoism each offer unique insight to how poetry works as a mode of meditation. Through examination of Han Shan's poetry the role of meditation is further established. In many ways it is existentially therapeutic. Writing is a process of crushing and pressing thoughts in such a way that the sweetest wine may flow forth as ink passes from the pen to the page. The poet is not merely charmed by the appearance of depth, but knows she contains an abyss within herself. Through entering the abyss and pouring her thoughts on paper she is able to resurface in a new light. Her brittle bones cannot bear the weight of her thoughts, so by purging them as poetry she is able to exhale the dust from her hollow body and become bright again, shrouded in clean light. In this way, she meditates as a means of examining her thoughts for what they are and releasing them.

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