

‘Less like marching, more like meditation’: Zen Buddhism, Haiku, and the Theme of Tolerance in the Work of Chris Arthur

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One of the most interesting and impressive texts published within the field of Irish studies, post-millennium, is Joseph Lennon’s *Irish Orientalism* (2004). Although clearly influenced by Edward Said’s groundbreaking *Orientalism*, and the latter’s contention that Western scholarship invented the Orient from its own political and psychological needs to create a dehumanised “Other,” Lennon’s text is more obviously indebted to the theoretical perspectives of the practical philosopher and semiotician Charles Saunders Peirce.¹ By enlarging upon Peirce’s doctrine of synechism – the idea that elements in culture continue over time and are transmitted through the generations – Lennon takes issue with those scholars who have refused to acknowledge Irish Orientalism as constituting even a peripheral discourse within Irish literature and culture. Claiming that Irish Orientalism has a distinct history which differs significantly from other European Orientalist projects, Lennon’s text attempts to trace the semiotic history, as well as the cultural contexts and ramifications, of Ireland’s Oriental imaginings. Through a detailed examination of origin legends, philology, antiquarianism, historiography and literature, Lennon explains how a tradition of Irish contact, both real and imagined, with what is commonly termed “the Orient”, has existed from the ninth century up to the present day. Claiming that

¹ Charles Saunders Peirce, *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings*, ed. Justus Büchler (1940, London: Routledge, 2000).

“textual links between Celtic and Oriental cultures existed independently in native Irish and Gaelic culture as far back as Irish writing extends” (Lennon x), he reveals how, throughout the course of Irish cultural history, this marginalised discourse has served as an important imaginative and allegorical realm for Irish writers and intellectuals. Lennon traces the multiplicity of Irish-Oriental comparisons and the pervasiveness of their impact and reflects how “to countless writers and historians representation of the Celt and the Oriental have seemed [like] twins separated at birth” (Lennon 63). This symbiosis is partly attributable to the enduring cultural influence of Ireland’s origin legends, which specifically placed the ancient beginnings of the Irish in the geographical area known as the Asian Steppes. For a complex variety of reasons, these origin legends outlived their original – and unhistorical – context and retained their currency much longer than other, similar, European legends.² However, in the nineteenth century as Irish Orientalist origin narratives became discredited within academic disciplines such as philology, Ireland’s Oriental links moved into more allegorical and literary realms. Claiming that this development “contributed to the historical doubleness that became a hallmark of much Irish literature” (Lennon 116), Lennon describes how, by the end of the eighteenth century, tropes of the Oriental and the Celtic had taken root within various literary genres, including imperial romances, Gothic literature and Romantic poetry. In purely literary terms, however, it is the Celtic Revival which stands as the recognised high-point of Irish Orientalism, as during this period, Irish cultural nationalists wrote plays, essays

² Lennon notes how most European cultures abandoned their medieval origin legends by the thirteenth century and certainly by the sixteenth. He claims that the reason behind the persistence of Irish origin legends “may stem from Irish culture’s collective need for a certain and noble past in light of its uncertain present and future”. Imperial British texts had long compared Ireland with Oriental cultures in order to, as Lennon explicitly states “textually barbarize Ireland” and images of the barbaric Scythian ancestry of the Celt were often explicit in sixteenth and seventeenth century depictions of the Irish. One infamous example was Edmund Spenser’s *Views on the Present State of Ireland* (1633) in which Spenser “analyses” ancient Oriental influences on seventeenth century Irish culture. According to Lennon, Spenser’s text contained “the most spurious invective against Irish culture yet written” (Lennon 52).

stories, poems and novels which contained Oriental themes and ideas (Lennon xxi). Images of the Orient allowed Irish writers an avenue for indirectly representing Irish-English relations, colonialism, and cultural resistance and such works often revealed the liminal position occupied by Irish writers within the British Empire.

Interestingly, although some Irish Orientalist authors were frequently complicit in the creation of a discourse of European imperial domination, they usually had a somewhat different agenda from their counterparts in Britain, France and Germany. Unlike the Anglo-French discourse which was predicated on binaries such as “cultural-savage” and, “religious-superstitious”, Irish Orientalist writings “frequently reflect more triadic structures in which a hybridity is immediately foregrounded” (Lennon 167). Many of these Irish texts, either through the ecumenical appreciation of other faiths, or the promotion of religious syncretism, promote pluralism and, most importantly, cultural and religious tolerance. Indeed, according to Lennon, “Tolerance is a dominant theme in most of the literature of Irish Orientalism” (Lennon 141).

One modern Irish writer whose work has been deeply influenced by Eastern or Orientalist philosophical concepts - particularly those pertaining to Zen Buddhism – and who consciously promotes the ideas of religious plurality and tolerance, is the Northern Irish essayist Chris Arthur. Arthur, who has completed a trilogy of collected essays composed of *Irish Nocturnes* (1999), *Irish Willow* (2002), and *Irish Haiku* (2005),³ is undoubtedly one of the most innovative voices of creative non-fiction currently active within contemporary Irish letters.⁴ By combining intensely absorbing

³ Parenthetical references to these essays will use the following abbreviations: *IN* (*Irish Nocturnes*), *IW* (*Irish Willow*), and *IH* (*Irish Haiku*).

⁴ At the time of writing (February 2009), only one full-length academic article on Arthur’s work has appeared in print: Mairtin Howard’s “The Otherworld and the Here and Now: An Introduction to Religious Themes in Chris Arthur’s Essays” contained in *Studies in Religion* (2004). This lack of critical attention is no doubt partly attributable to the difficulty in defining Arthur’s literary oeuvre, and equally, the relatively low status accorded to creative non-fiction within academia in general. In addition, his engagement with the non-sequential, fragmentary nature of the essay genre undoubtedly imbues his writing with a somewhat idiosyncratic colouring. His predilection for avoiding definitive categorization involves a degree of narrative digression which, in Arthur’s own words, doubtless

personal meditations with abstract philosophical ruminations, his essays navigate the terrain of personal experience, cultural identity and concepts of displacement. In a meditative, reflective and introspective manner, his work illuminates questions relating to metaphor, exile and memory and attempts to unravel the interconnections that exist between the apparently mundane and the extraordinary. Invariably starting from the familiar and the small-scale, his essays seek to reveal the sense of wonder that is often hidden in the banal, everyday routines of our existence. These explorations often seem to have some kind of meditative aspect to them, as they explore how our ordinary, habitual perspectives are inextricably linked to a realm of experience which embodies an astonishing potential for recognising wonder and significance. What is particularly noteworthy about Arthur's work – and relevant in terms of situating his ideas within the field of Irish Orientalism – is that although the Irish dimension provides a linking thread throughout his essays, his perspectives are nevertheless informed by a broad range of metaphysical concerns which reflect the aesthetic sensibilities of what can loosely be termed “Eastern philosophy”. These interests are frequently addressed in terms which reveal his intimate knowledge of, and relationship to, concepts which reside within the domain of traditional Buddhist thought. This article will attempt to illustrate how Arthur's knowledge of Buddhist concepts such as *anicca*, *upaya*, *dharma*, and *Samsara*, etc informs not only *what* he writes, but *how* that writing is constructed. It is my contention that his essays incorporate into their very narrative design strategies particular to Zen Buddhism, and which are designed to trigger an essential reconfiguration of perspective on the part of the reader. These strategies are designed to operate as significant signposts on the

“annoys those readers who like their literary containers neatly labeled and tightly sealed” (*IN x*).

Interestingly, Mairtin Howard's article, a thoughtful and provocative examination of the more meditative or mystical aspects of Arthur's essays, concludes by stating that “Perhaps the most obvious area for future enquiry [. . .] would be to examine the Buddhist themes that are so strongly evident in these collections (84).

road to achieving new forms of meaning and prompt us to engage with our experience at levels which suggest that our conventional grasp of reality is both constraining and superficial. Advocating a broadening of perspective that incorporates spiritual rather than political concerns, Arthur's work, like the teaching stories within the Zen tradition, seeks to extend our normative vision beyond its ordinary restrictions. As he himself states: "We need to cultivate an element of mysticism to help season our customary looking and prevent it snagging on those blinkers that custom has a tendency to impose" (*IW* 47). This is why, by employing the Zen strategy of following threads and connections in order to reveal hidden patterns and relationships, he invites us to step outside the clamour of conventional discourse and embrace the charge of meaning and significance that resides within the seemingly innocuous and banal. In doing so, we can connect with that realm of experience which Georgia O'Keefe has memorably referred to as "the faraway nearby" (*IW* xiv). Moreover, Arthur seemingly holds a tentative belief that such a connection can induce a rejection of the partial view and the embracing of complexity, plurality and tolerance; qualities of particular relevance in terms of the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland.

In the foreword to *Irish Nocturnes*, Arthur's first collection of essays, he concedes that, although the Irish dimension provides a linking thread between the nocturnes' central concerns, the latter are nevertheless the result of "many intermarriages, brief encounters and unexpected alliances which often take them faraway from their ancestral roots" (*IW* viii). The "intermarriages" and "unexpected alliances" alluded to here, are the eclectic mixture of Irish and Eastern influences so identifiable in his work.⁵ It is this hybridity which lends his writing its highly original colouring, and it appears grounded in a need to engage with "Patterns. Stories.

⁵ An obvious example of such an "unexpected alliance" would be the cojoining of the words "Irish" and "Haiku" in the title of his third collection of essays.

Meaning. These are what I search for” (*IH* 200). Admitting that he “incline[s] more to the Buddha than to Calvin or Knox” (*IH* xiii). Arthur, on a number of occasions, evokes his early alienation from the “eschatological scaremongering” and inane pieties of orthodox Presbyterianism. He recalls how the latter did little “to address or celebrate life’s wonders or ease its terrors” (*IW* 88) and confesses that he feels a greater affinity “to Tripitaka’s snow white paper than to King Calvin’s iron pen” (*IW* 98). In the essay “Takabuti’s Tears”, he reflects upon the metaphorical distance he has travelled from the religion of his birth, when recalling how, when attending his mother’s cousin’s funeral, he engaged in conversation with the local Presbyterian minister. Impressed by Arthur’s grasp of metaphysical questions and informed of his interest in religious studies, the Minister enquires whether he believes himself to have a “calling” or vocation. Arthur ponders if “the Moderator [would] have genuinely welcomed into the fold someone who inclined more to the teachings of Zen than to any of the practices he cherished [and] who inclined as much to the wisdom of Buddha, as to Jesus ‘parables’?” (*IW* 80).⁶

However, even if such autobiographical snapshots make clear his estrangement from what he terms the “sectarian semioticians” (*IW* 37) of his acquaintance, they do not fully convey the extent to which Arthur, in numerous essays, pays homage to a veritable litany of Buddhist texts, historical figures and concepts. In no less than eighteen of the forty one essays included in his three published collections, he refers

⁶ Such criticism does not, however, exclude the possibility that certain aspects of Arthur’s writings could be said to reflect a Protestant sensibility, or traces of what can loosely be termed as a “Protestant mind-set”. Indeed, it could be argued that the essay genre itself, with its self-conscious exploration of the fragmentary and its fascination with hybridity, is uniquely suited to express the provisional nature of Irish Protestant identity (particularly in its Ulster, Presbyterian manifestation). I would claim that it is possible to define the Northern Irish variant of Britishness – a particularly elusive identity which has been subject to a myriad of influences – in terms which resonate with the defining characteristics of the essay form itself. Arthur gives credence to this belief when, in the preface to *Irish Nocturnes*, he mentions the appropriateness of a Belfast born Protestant writer, variously defined as “British”, “Irish”, or simply “Northern Irish”, embracing a genre which is “neither one thing or another” (*IW* x). This is an interesting aspect of Arthur’s work which requires further investigation.

to texts such as *The Gateless Barrier* by Zen Master Hui-Kai, *Samyutta Nikaya* (relating to human suffering), *A Guide to Walking Meditation* by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, Edward Conze's *Buddhist Meditation* – an illustration of which appears on the first page of the essay “Witness” - and the Great Buddhist Text, Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purity). In addition, he specifically mentions the concepts of *paticca-samuppada* (the Buddhist theory of causation), *dukkha* (loosely translated as “suffering), as well as those of *dharma* and *samsara* (the invisible karmic burden of debt and credit). Finally, he also refers to a number of important historical, or quasi-historical, figures within Buddhism, such as Bodhidharma (the first Zen Patriarch), the monk Tripitaka who, together with his three companions, journeyed to India to acquire copies of the Buddhist scriptures; *bodhisattva* walkers, and Sirima, a wealthy prostitute in India at the time of the Buddha.

Informative though it is, such an extensive – and by no means exhaustive – list, while revealing Arthur's impressively erudite grasp of Buddhist philosophy and history, does not, in itself sufficiently illustrate the use he makes of such knowledge or the extent to which it informs the very core of his writing. It is to this question that we must now turn if we are to fully grasp the manner in which his essays are imbued with a Zen Buddhist atmosphere and why they can be viewed as contemporary versions of Zen teaching stories.

In his essay “How to See a Horse”, Arthur mentions how “All our framings however elaborate they may be, act to trim what's there into manageable proportions. Can we bring into focus, if only momentarily, what is behind such attenuations?” (*IH* 108). His conviction that such attenuations can be circumvented by becoming more attentive to the seemingly banal and ordinary reveals the indelible influence which the

aesthetics and poetical vision of Haiku have had on his work. Frequently described as the essence of Zen expressing itself in seventeen syllables (seventeen syllables being thought to be the number that can be uttered in a single breath), Haiku are slivers of verse said by R.H. Blythe to express “a temporary enlightenment in which we see into the life of things” (*IW* xiv). Discovering Haiku in his adolescence via a tattered paperback anthology found in a second-hand bookshop in Belfast, Arthur vividly recalls how the words of the Japanese masters “peppered my mind like creative shrapnel tearing at a scab” (*IH* xvi). Operating as pinpoints of intensity, Haiku, with their startling directness, are designed to help us discern “what’s here, right now, in front of us” (*IH* xv) and according to Arthur, they “put us in touch with things that seem electrified” (*IH* xv). Grounded as we are in the partial perspective, we often seem incapable of perceiving the filaments of meaning which lie behind the surface of things. Haiku, by cutting to the heart of perception, challenge such familiarity and, by acting as a portal into realms of connection and complexity, help us see “the vast penumbra of complication encircling all our simplifications” (*IH* 186). Arthur’s conviction that we all have the possibility of accessing different registers of complexity and experiencing, what John Stewart Collins has termed “the extraordinary nature of the ordinary”, is indebted to the Haiku belief in the transfiguring potential of the everyday and the prosaic. Both Arthur’s essays and the Haiku of writers such as Matsuo Basho (the originator of the modern Haiku form) could be said to be engaged in helping us to recognise the remarkable possibilities which lie intertwined with the seemingly ordinary patterns of life. They suggest that if we recognise the extent to which, beneath our common frames of reference, fluidity rather than rigidity informs all aspects of life, then “all our easy, mundane tunes soon burgeon into orchestral complications” (*IW* 116). Such an insight serves as an antidote

to the impoverishing myth that “there’s no more to things than meets the eye” and encourage us to ask whether, “it is not reasonable to claim that there are miracles woven into every moment” (*IH* 83).⁷

This raises the question of how such a reconfiguration of perspective can be achieved. Although Arthur writes what has been termed “creative non-fiction” rather than Haiku, his essays share the latter’s fascination with paradox, fluidity and non-rational forms of consciousness. It appears that, by incorporating into his work a variety of approaches integral to both Haiku and Zen, Arthur is attempting to encourage the reader to follow unfamiliar and non-linear paths. By “swimming against the tide of what’s expected” (*IH* xvii) such approaches are intended to estrange the habitual and entice the mind into operating in a different manner. As Arthur himself writes in “Obelisk”: “We should not forget how easily, with what small alterations put into place, things can be arranged to show altogether different patterns” (*IH* 13). This desire to induce such an enlargement of vision is facilitated by Arthur’s use of the Buddhist concept of *upaya*, or “skilful means”. If one of the major features of Buddhism is the manner in which it can operate elegantly at very different levels of complexity, then *upaya* is a key concept in terms of grasping how such a difficult task is accomplished. A central principle within the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism and first set out extensively in the *lotus sutra*, it originates in the Buddha’s desire to help others transcend the ceaseless round of birth and death which defines our common existence. Essentially a teaching strategy, it was originally devised to accommodate pupils of varying degrees of aptitude. This is not to suggest that the notion of “skilful means” signifies a form of ethical relativism; rather, it would

⁷ As Arthur points out, there is such a thing as Irish Haiku in a more literal sense, as there exist short verses in the Haiku tradition written by Irish poets. He mentions *Blithe Spirit* – the journal of the British Haiku Society – and how Gabriel Rosenstock, a regular Irish contributor to the journal has argued that the compressed form and “clear-eyed view of nature” evident in centuries old Irish verse, makes writing Haiku “the logical continuum of almost two thousand years of poetry” (see *IH* xvii).

perhaps be more accurate to define it as embodying an approach which is essentially “situation-orientated”. According to *upaya*, it is possible to achieve enlightenment through the application of a variety of devices which serve to sever the individual from an ego-centred existence, and I would argue that a general knowledge of its basic precepts helps us to place several of Arthur’s preoccupations into a useful interpretative frame. Interestingly, in his essay “Water-Glass”, Arthur seemingly alludes to the very concept of skilful means itself when he writes: “I can only hope that *wielded skilfully* (my italics), separate words and sentences may yet paint a picture [. . .] and suggest something of the whole with which, moment by moment, we are so stupendously confronted” (*IH* 163).

One clear example of the influence of *upaya* on Arthur’s work is the manner in which it serves as a point of connection to his belief in the transcendental value of metaphor. Metaphor, together with story telling in general, holds an important position within the Zen Buddhist tradition. The latter claims that, through the use of metaphors we can penetrate the nominal significance of meaning and entice the mind into operating in a different manner. They help us move beyond the limitations of our normal dimensions and establish a degree of communication with a non-verbalised truth. By creating new mental constructions which take the mind along non-linear paths, they represent a distinctive mode of achieving insight. In viewing one entity in terms of another, metaphors are capable of presenting us with new understandings of our experience, and contain elements which enable us to absorb concepts which ordinary patterns of thought prevent us from digesting. As religious consciousness is primarily concerned with experiences which language struggles to express, metaphors can serve as a bridge to a form of awareness that would otherwise be non-communicable.

If Earl McCormac suggests that metaphors generate expressions which “disturb the status quo of ordinary language [. . .] which, if left, undisturbed would be unable to cope with the new” (in Arthur 2000: 11), Arthur goes further and argues that they stretch our vision beyond its ordinary confines and embody “a warhead of devastating power” (*IW* 135). For him, as for Zen, metaphors provide a key locus for understanding and are uniquely suited to cast light on areas which are traditionally thought to be beyond words. In his academic article “Silence, Metaphor and the Communication of Religious Meaning”, Arthur suggests that rather than attempt the impossible task of successfully forcing a unique human experience into a particular linguistic format, the use of metaphor:

helps to ensure that we will never be entirely speechless when we are forced with experiences which we have not had before, and which do not fall within our already established linguistic repertoire. Metaphor is perhaps the major factor contributing to the enormous flexibility and reach of the net of language with which we can trawl through all sorts of different situations and only very rarely be absolutely lost for words. (483)

According to Zen, if the metaphors used are fresh and new, the “shock” their use induces contrasts with one’s normative understanding and for the brief period of the shock’s duration, it is possible to enjoy a kind of “double-consciousness” which is at the heart of mystical and aesthetic experience. In particular circumstances, conventional modes of perception can be superseded by employing a method whereby the individual is subjected to a psychological “jolt” or “shock”. The application of a “shock” can act as an incision into our ordinary thought processes and by penetrating the barrier of the habitual, reveals the depths which reside beneath the veneer of the seemingly solid. For a brief moment, shocked out of the sleep of daydreaming and rumination, the pupil gains a sudden insight into his/her reliance upon subjective phenomena. Although such moments are often experienced as being emotionally traumatic, they provide a necessary recognition of our amenability to conditioning.

John Shirley, in his text on the legacy and teachings of Gurdjieff, has noted how the latter believed that our:

[. . .] tendency to accumulate programming tends to have a life of its own – or more accurately to steal the life that belongs to us. We go on “automatic pilot” in a thousand different ways and while we’re on it we’re not really present, we’re drifting along in a sort of daydream, vaguely present.⁸ (Shirley 22)

Equally, William Segal and Marielle Bancou-Segal, both prominent students of Zen Buddhism and Gurdjieff, have suggested that experiencing a shock which emanates from an extraneous source makes it possible to enter into a psychological realm quite distinct from our ordinary consciousness. They mention how “in the absence of a shock – a conscious impulse carrying us through to the next level – we tend to go round in circles [. . .]” (Segal 159).

Arthur appears to share the Zen perspective on the importance of experiencing a shock which “jars our ordinary orientation [and] fractures all our everyday measures” (*IW* 111). In the foreword to *Irish Willow*, he confesses that the essays contained in the collection can be seen as a “series of accounts of falling through” (*IW* 111) and states:

There’s another dimension beneath our customary surfaces. Sometimes we fall through and find ourselves out of our depths in a strange element. Such fallings can be shocking [. . .] but I believe they offer a kind of rich complication out of which the buoyancy of meaning and wonder can emerge. (*IW* wiii)

⁸ G.I. Gurdjieff (1874?-1949) was the founder of the Fourth Way school of metaphysics. Born in the Southern Caucasus to a Greek father and an Armenian mother, certain aspects of his “system” reveal clear affinities to Zen Buddhist ideas. James Webb has surmised how Gurdjieff “may have picked up theory from many different varieties of Buddhism, including odd sects like the Tantrics, and there is one influence on his technique which is glaringly obvious – the heterodox Buddhism known as “Cha’an or Zen” (Webb 529). D.T. Suzuki, a great populariser of Zen in north America and Europe, once attended a demonstration of Gurdjieff’s movement’s in New York, and is said to have called them “Zen for the West” (Webb 529).

One obvious influence – and which is of particular relevance to Zen Buddhism’s and Arthur’s belief in the veracity of experiencing a “shock” – was Gurdjieff’s frequent use of the so-called “stop” exercise. This involves the teacher suddenly commanding the pupil to cease all movement, no matter what physical activity he/she is engaged upon. It was felt that the practical application of a shock such as this provided a sudden insight into the mechanical nature of our daily lives.

The essay “Malcolm Unravelling”, is arguably the best example of how he incorporates this idea into his work as, like a Zen teaching story, it essentially functions as an attempt to “estrangle the familiar” (IH 198). Although it is ostensibly concerned with a seemingly innocuous incident involving Arthur (aged eleven or twelve), his cousin, and a close neighbour called Malcolm Smith, the essay is noteworthy for the way in which it evokes how, when the latter appears apparition-like under the dim light, his presence touches Arthur “with explosive interruption” (IH 200). He experiences “the same kind of shock as [in watching] entrails tumble out of their neatly fleshed enclosures” (IH 109); it is almost as if the moment itself, and the seismic quake it entails, functions as a flash of *Satori*.

According to Arthur, such shocks, which induce seemingly disparate fragments to intersect and “explode into insight” (IH 200), rupture our customary understandings, shake our usual sense of self and stimulate an altogether different scale of relatedness. Acting as “a razor slash, a bladed incision into the ordinary” (IN 86), they trigger a recognition of interconnectedness and reveal the essential unity which underlies the multitudinous forms of phenomena to which we are exposed. An identification with the fallacy of separateness distorts our relationship to the network of connection in which we are embedded and merely induces a form of false consciousness. We must move towards an appreciation of the whole, as nothing in existence is enclosed within its own impenetrable boundaries. Individuals are not units complete in themselves, separate from other forms of life; rather, they are composed of many elements constantly in a state of flux, always dissolving and combining with one another in new ways. Everything is interdependent and every fragment embodies a nexus of connections. In this respect, the material and the metaphysical are linked in a form best regarded as a continuum and an appreciation of

the miracle of unity endows the individual with an alternative perspective which undermines excessive identification with other, more fragmentary viewpoints. Arthur refers to John Muir's conviction that "when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe" (*IW* 177) and in the essay entitled "A Tinchel Round My Father", he introduces the concept of "Indria's net", a Buddhist image that offers a metaphorical picture of the manner in which every moment is deeply embedded in the fabric of reality:

Imagine a vast, cosmically encompassing net. Each of the billions of intersections of its threads is marked by a jewel. There are an infinite number of these multifaceted gems perfectly reflecting each other. Each is lucidly transparent, so that any movement, any change in light, ripples through the entire structure. Any change in any of these jewels (variously interpreted as individual sentience, conscious moments, the irreducible atoms of being) affects all the others, however slightly. Any occurrence shimmers its happenings across the whole reach of this subtle and delicate structure and contributes to the intricately seamless tapestry. (*IW* 229)

This depiction of the essential interdependence of all things has a clear affinity with the Buddhist concept of causation or interdependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*), which stipulates that a complex network of interrelationships leads to an indefinite number of consequences and alignments for all living things. Everything interconnects and all events, no matter how distinct and separate they may appear to be, are in fact interdependent.

Arthur emphasises the aspect of unity and commonality by suggesting that we are all subject to what Buddhism terms, "the law of impermanence" (*anicca*). This "law" describes how the principle of change affects all aspects of life. Its occurrence is entirely universal and is considered by Buddhists to be one of the so-called "marks of existence". Referring to it as a "hallmark of being", Arthur draws our attention to the fact that "nothing temporal or spatial can avoid being branded by it" (*IN* 136). An understanding of how the experience of *anicca* affects everything in existence helps

us to grasp that we are all subject to the same patterns and inalienable laws. Equally, in “Invasions”, Arthur refers to a verse contained in the *Samyutta Nikaya*, a Buddhist scripture which states that “any suffering one witnesses in another being has been undergone by oneself at some time” (IN 99). “Invasions” is, in itself, seemingly designed to reveal how universal suffering can be experienced as something more than just an abstract concept. Arthur suggests that by using what he terms “imagined biographies”, it is possible to “pass over” into the reality of another and experience their suffering in a way which is not confined by conventional time-space limitations. He mentions how, through the use of imaginative sympathy, he can “momentarily share the terror of a girl in eleventh century Kiev as the Mongol army breaches the city’s walls” (IN 95), or might feel “some nameless famine-struck father’s sense of utter frustration” (IN 94). By focusing on the universality of human suffering, he becomes “an innocent man in a condemned cell” (IN 95). The experience of “passing over” into such imaginative situations and returning with an enlarged and clearer understanding of them, help us not only to see beyond the harmful distinctions of race, class and gender, but also understand the essential commonality of the human experience. As Arthur writes in the same essay, “it is possible [. . .] to let the imagination carry us towards some sort of apperception of the whole, of consciousness *in toto*” (IN 98).

By perceiving that we are all part of the same pattern, we are able to surmount the partial vision so aptly described in the following parable, popularised by the Persian poet Jal-al-Din-Rumi, in his famous *Spiritual Couplets*. Allegedly originating in Buddhist scripture, it captures not only the difficulty of overcoming the partial perspective, but also our tendency to quantify reality according to a crudely-cut singularity:

In a darkened room stands an elephant
 brought by Hindus promoting spectacle
 Throngs enter the pitch black to see it
 But eye-blind, they grope with palms to see it
 Each in turn describes aloud
 what he feels he sees, as follows:
 (Touching the trunk) It's shaped like a drainpipe
 (Reaching the ear) It appears to be a fan
 (Feeling the leg) An elephant's a pillar
 (Petting the back) Feels like I'm touching a plank!
 And so it goes: each knows the beast
 by the part where he feels it
 Their words seem to outward eye in discord
 one calling P what the other called Q.
 But give them a candle to hold up to it
 and discord departs from what they intuit. (in Lewis 5)

The candle referred to here symbolises the contemplation of unity which helps us to perceive individual entities as constituting a component of something much larger. If this is accomplished, we will intuitively grasp the meaning behind the dictum “the more ourselves we are, the less self is in us” (Feuerstein 165).

Interestingly, Arthur appears to deliberately design and construct his essays in a manner which is consciously intended to guide the reader away from the partial perspective, and it is precisely in this area that the influence of the Buddhist concept of “skilful means” in his work is most striking. In the foreword to *Irish Willow*, entitled “Falling Through” he writes how, “The fact that the same person, object, or event can appear very differently when the angle of perception is changed even slightly, is one of the recurrent motifs in what follows” (*IW* xiii). Equally, in an interview conducted by the *Charlotte Austin Review*, Arthur reveals how, in regard to *Irish Nocturnes*, “although in one sense each essay is independent [. . .] it is like looking at the same scene from different angles and perspectives” (“Author Interview”). He implies that by using narrative in a way that escapes the limiting confines of linearity, it is possible to bring differing viewpoints sharply into focus. A belief in the inexorably pluralistic nature of life leads him to depict the “wider

picture” by frequently altering the angle of perception, in order that alternative perspectives can be introduced into the narrative structure. Rather than conveying a dogmatic commitment to a single, narrow view, his essays provide deliberate entanglements and seemingly opposing threads. This encourages the reader to approach the subject matter from different vantage points. Such an approach enlarges our understanding of the multifaceted nature of an apparently banal incident or story and reveals Arthur’s awareness of the Zen approach to narrative, which works according to what can loosely be termed “the application of impacts”. This involves the introduction of different perspectives through the use of incongruities, and paradox, both of which can lead the reader to think in a clearer, sharper, fashion. Through the various disjunctions of the text, we are subjected to numerous upheavals of narrative ground and forced into using our minds in a new way. Literature which subscribes to this pattern of impacts, aims to induce a type of mental alchemy by unifying and fusing fragments which had previously been viewed as separate. This unconventional, non-sequential approach is designed to replicate “the sheer diversity of ways reality falls upon us, registering its contours against our individual scales” (*IW* 102), and represent the basis of what Arthur has termed “the quotidian miracle of reading’s transmutation” (*IW* 107).

This approach is perhaps best exemplified by the essays “Water-Glass” and “Getting Fit: An Apology for Mrs Nolan”, both of which are contained in *Irish Haiku*. The former seeks to create a Kaleidoscope of impressions based around upon an unremarkable street in Lisburn, Co. Antrim, called Bachelor’s Walk. Arthur is unusually frank concerning his intentions with this particular essay and the avowed aims of “Water-Glass” make it appear remarkably akin to a Zen teaching story. He writes of his hope that “the reading eye will be led towards viewpoints where the

ordinariness of Bachelor's Walk falters, shimmers mirage-like, then fractures into a new perspective" (*IH* 62). In seeking to "peel back the skin of the ordinary and show another way of seeing this Lisburn street", Arthur builds what he terms "a network of verbal pathways" for the mind to follow. These pathways or meditative imaginings deliberately eschew the linear and guide the reading eye along narrative trajectories which are deliberately meandering and circuitous. These series of lenses into the heart of Bachelor's Walk "sometimes lead away from it, sometimes run beside it [and] sometimes penetrate its fabric" (*IH* 162). Such an approach is intended to lead towards a recognition that even a dull provincial street can, if approached from sufficiently different viewpoints, "shimmer mirage like" and "fracture into a new perspective" (*IH* 162).

"Getting Fit: An Apology for Mrs Nolan" is also noteworthy in the way it draws upon such a wide and multifarious variety of approaches in order to reveal how an object, individual, situation or idea can, when "turned in one direction, show one thing [when] turned in another [. . .] something else" (*IN* 6). Ostensibly an investigation into the Confucian idea of "correct naming", the essay is divided into five, interconnected sections, all of which investigate the lack of obvious fit between the name of Mrs Nolan's house – 'the Beeches' – and the unmitigated ugliness of its redbrick construction. What is particularly noteworthy is how Arthur meshes such a range of seemingly disparate literary, scientific, theological and linguistic references into his essay. It is as if, by putting us in touch with what can be termed "views within views" and presenting a situation through alternating lenses, Arthur challenges our propensity to see things through a single, blinkered perspective. Texts such as Gerald Ebeling's *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language* sit comfortably with George Steiner's *Real Presences* and Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific*

Revolutions. Hugh Brody's *Maps and Dreams* rubs shoulders with Angus Trumble's *A Brief History of the Smile* and Rudolph Otto's *Das Heilige* (the idea of the Holy). Philosophical texts such as Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* are mentioned in tandem with the theories of Russian Formalists such as Victor Shklovsky, and the literary works of writers such as Brian Friel, Oscar Wilde, and R.S. Thomas. The cumulative effect of this approach is to show how such seemingly arbitrary and disparate perspectives can, when placed together, approach a sense-bestowing whole. This essay could be said to exemplify, in concrete form, Arthur's belief that "We can cut the world into a billion different facets with the deftness of a jeweller and standing beside the kaleidoscopic constructed, can look at things from sufficiently different perspectives to gain some sense of their nature" (*IW* 95).

According to Arthur, our failure to embrace such a perspective has had profound implications in terms of the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland. The Province's reluctance to adopt a pluralistic and inclusive view of history has led to the obdurate inflexibility and blinkered mind-set of the Ulster psyche. In many of his essays, Arthur questions the validity of pledging allegiance to disfiguring tribal totems which serve only to accentuate rigid and endemic simplifications. In "On the Face of It" for example, he mentions how "when you grow up with only a set of captions, invariably you interpret the pictures in your album according to their rubric" (*IW* 36). By investing too much authority in the versions of events we are conditioned to accept, we fail to recognise how such a selective view has been configured out of a constellation of convenient sectarian slogans. Arthur mentions how the disfiguring pattern of partisan divisions crudely reflects a poisonous lack of imaginative empathy, resulting in obdurate opposition and garish rhetoric. Castigating his compatriots' tendency to simplify the complex, interwoven patterns and subtle hues of history, he

laments how “doggedness edges into unconditional immovability” (*IH* 162). In “Miracles”, he writes:

It is almost as if, lodged like cankers in the archetypal skull of each tradition, deep in the inner ear of its own narrative and mythology, tribal otholiths of pathological dimensions have congealed, swelling to a monstrous size around grains of fear, recrimination, bitterness and hatred. Our sense of equilibrium and gravity have become deranged... it is as if the whole country lurches drunkenly, now this way, now that, its fundamental bearing lost. (*IH* 80)

However, by seeing beyond the antagonism of tribal loyalties and escaping the mental confines of our own indigenous settings, it is possible “to renounce our small-scale herdings which follow merely sectarian senses of order” (*IW* 175). For this to happen, we need to adopt a vision whereby meaning emanates from an appreciation of the diversity of life itself, rather than simply accepting the blinkered perspective imposed by our dominant cultural consciousness. It is imperative that we embrace “a multi-threaded understanding of Irish history [which] is more sensitive to the reality of what happened than the picking out of any simple thread can ever be” (*IW* 16). In terms of Northern Ireland, the acceptance of a pluralistic view of life offers the hope of overcoming the spurious identity politics and bitter enmities which continue to disfigure the Province. In this respect, Arthur’s work can be viewed as representing a continuation, in contemporary form, of the tradition of Irish Orientalism, which has had the promotion of tolerance and cultural understanding as its central thematic concern.

It is important to recognise therefore, how the major preoccupations of Arthur’s writings all converge upon a pivotal concern that appears to absorb him; that is, the necessity of rejecting the partial view and the importance of celebrating complexity and pluralism. For the individual however, the achievement of such a perspective is a fluctuating, arduous and unending process. This is why Arthur often concentrates on drawing our attention to the small-scale and familiar in an attempt to reveal something

potentially comprehensible to us all, i.e., the mysterious nature of the everyday, He argues that, as a species, we are wired to find meaning and possess a faculty for finding patterns in the raw material of the apparently unconnected fragments which surround us. Such an awareness must be rooted in our own experience if it is to have a practical application. As the Buddhist Sangharakshita has noted: “Spiritual enlightenment does not consist in seeing new sights with old eyes, but in seeing the old sights with new eyes” (61). In this respect, it is possible to view “religious life” as reflecting, not a different kind of life per se, but the same life lived in a new way. Arthur suggests that it is possible to discover the emotional equivalent of spiritual truths by perceiving the significance of ordinary events and experiences. Within the habitual routines of our lives there reside scales, patterns and complexities of a different order, and by expanding consciousness beyond the merely commonplace, we can connect with “the massive voltage that surges through everything around us” (*IW* 106). Arthur’s work, with its discernable Buddhist and Zen Buddhist influences, challenges us to replace our limited vision with a sense of wonder in order to make, in the words of Joseph Brodsky, “The monotone of the infinite more audible” (*IW* xiv). As Arthur himself so eloquently puts it: “Within the literal, another voice is always singing. Why are we so deaf to it?” (*IH* 66).

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