

Thomas Berry in Dialogue with Whitehead, Basho, and Ryokan

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In celebrating the legacy of Thomas Berry, Herman Greene's following words, written in a critically appreciative vein, sound profoundly charming to my mind:

In the Berry community, the Universe Story is often presented as a timeline, a factual account of the history of the universe, though never only that. As I worked through these things over a period of years, I began to see there is a different way of understanding where the universe is in Thomas Berry's and Brian Swimme's Universe Story than in the timeline they present.¹

In so saying Greene pays attention to the fact that the Universe Story as presented in *The Universe Story* is clearly something more than the telling of the scientific account of the universe. At the very beginning, as Greene notices, the authors separate their work from the work of science.² For they state, "The scientists have arrived at detailed accounts of the cosmos but have focused exclusively on the physical dimensions and have ignored the human dimension of the universe. [As a result] we have fractured our educational system into its scientific and its humanistic aspects, as though these were somehow independent of each other."³

What is crucial here is to differentiate between scientific or physical cosmology concerned with mechanistic facts and philosophical cosmology concerned with the web of relationships within the universe. As Greene says, in tandem with Swimme's and Berry's vision of a new cosmology in terms of which we perceive that we live in a cosmogenetic universe, a universe with a story.

The universe cannot be understood apart from any being in the universe because all beings are expressions of the universe. This being the case, the universe can be understood not only from our understandings of how beings emerged in the universe, but also from our understanding of what those particular beings that emerged late in the universe's history say about the universe. The universe is no longer 'out there' for humans, it is also 'in here' in ourselves.⁴

Here a new vision of the universe is presented in such a way that the emergence of particular beings is inherently inclusive of the future events as they explicate it. This vision reminds me of Whitehead's idea of "envisagement" which he explains with these words:

Finally, to sum up this train of thought, the underlying activity [*i.e.*, creativity], as conceived apart from the fact of realization, has three types of envisagement. These are: first, the envisagement of eternal objects; secondly, the envisagement of possibilities of value in respect to the synthesis of eternal objects; and lastly, the envisagement of the actual matter of fact which must enter into the total situation which is achievable by the addition of the future.⁵

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¹ Herman Greene, "Where is the Universe in the Universe Story?," *The Ecozoic*, No. 1 (2008), 11.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 1.

⁴ Greene, 64 (footnote omitted).

⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 105.

The third type of envisagement is valid here. What Whitehead says by this is that there is no fact as a mere fact in the universe. Rather, it is envisaged to be entering into the total situation which is achievable only by the addition of the future events. Let me speak of this state of affairs as the fact-future-entirety linkage. Scientific cosmology deals with mechanistic facts; but organic cosmology deals with the holistic linkage inclusive of actual matter of fact, the future, and the total situation of the universe.

If Berry's understanding of the Universe Story can be taken to be akin to Whitehead's idea of the third type of envisagement in some way or another, the Story may certainly be expressed in some poetic form as well, as by Basho (1643-94) in the following haiku:

Furu ike ya!
Kawazu tobikomu,
Mizu no oto.
 The old pond, ah! (Stage A)
 A frog jumps in: (Stage B)
 The water's sound! (Stage C)

According to D. T. Suzuki, this haiku poem was a reply Basho presented to his Zen master Buccho, when the latter asked him, saying, "What Buddhism is there even before the moss has grown greener?"⁶ And this interchange (Jpn., *mondo*) was preceded by an ordinary greeting by Buccho, "How are you getting on these days?" and by Basho's answer, "After the recent rain the moss has grown greener than ever." Explicating the real intention implied in the haiku, Suzuki writes:

This question is tantamount to Christ saying, "I am even before Abraham was." The Zen master wants to know who this "I" is. With Christians probably the mere assertion, "I am," was enough, but in Zen the question must be asked and a more concrete answer must be forthcoming. For this is an essential part of Zen intuition. So Buccho asked, "What is there even before the world came into existence?" That is to say, "Where is God even before he uttered, 'Let there be light?'" Buccho the Zen master is not just talking about the recent rainfall and the green moss growing fresher; what he wants to know about is the cosmic landscape prior to the creation of all things. When is timeless time? Is it no more than an empty concept? If it is not, we must be able to describe it somehow for others. Basho's answer was, "A frog jumps into the water, and hear the sound!"⁷

At this juncture it would be to the point if I mentioned that this haiku consists of three phases, each of which is brilliantly explicating by Suzuki as we shall see below. Incidentally, it is noticeable in this connection that

⁶Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 239.

⁷Ibid.

Basho's oral answer at the time it was uttered did not have the first line, 'the old pond,' which he reportedly added later on to make a complete haiku of seventeen syllables. This fact shows that 'the old pond' for Basho is the ineffable Reality in its essence. Now let us see what Suzuki says:

[Stage A] Basho's old pond lies on the other side of eternity, where timeless time is. It is "old," indeed, that there is nothing more ancient. No scale of consciousness can measure it. It is whence all things come, it is the source of this world of particulars, yet in itself it shows no particularization. We come to it when we go beyond the "rainfall" and "the moss growing greener." But when this is intellectually conceived, it becomes an idea and begins to have an existence outside this world of particulars, thus making itself an object of intellection.

[Stage B] It is by intuition alone that this timelessness of the Unconscious is taken hold of. And this intuitive grasp of Reality never takes place when a world of Emptiness is assumed outside of our everyday world of the senses; for these two worlds, sensual and supersensual, are not separate but one. Therefore the poet sees into his Unconscious not through the stillness of the old pond but through the sound stirred up by the jumping frog.

[Stage C] Without the sound there is not seeing on the part of Basho into the Unconscious, in which lies the source of creative activities and upon which all true artists draw for their inspiration.⁸

It seems to me that stage B is the stage of concrecence (self-creative activity) by an agent: in Basho's case, a frog. And at stage C there arises a crucial question: 'Is the water's sound the sound of the frog or of the old pond?' Let me answer, saying, 'Of course, it is the sound of both at once—*i.e.*, the sound of the individual and the Trans-individual Reality.' It is an inseparable sound of unity, thus manifesting pure experience (or life-in-unity) in itself. As such, it resounds and leads us into a deep reflection upon what lies at the base of stage A.

Basho's "the water's sound," it seems to me, is correlative to Swimme's and Berry's understanding that "the universe is integral in its functioning"⁹ and that "in everything that acts, it is the universe acting."¹⁰ It is what "mystical communion" is all about which both scientific inquiry and poetry have as their purpose.

Finally, let me turn to the issue of the Great Work. I quote a passage from Greene's essay under consideration:

Telling the Universe Story is very important in the Great Work. The Great Work is to re-integrate humans into the dynamics of Earth with the understanding that Earth is a communion of subjects and

⁸ *Ibid.*, 241-2.

⁹ *The Universe Story*, 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

not a collection of objects. The Universe Story gives us language for an integral understanding of human and nature and awakens awe at the grandeur of existence. When thinking of the new cosmology, however, one should recall that Thomas has also said “ecology is a functional cosmology” and that our effort is to bring into being an ecozoic society.¹¹

Another Japanese Zen poet Ryokan (1758-1831) practiced what Berry refers to as “ecology as a functional cosmology” to the full when he left the following tanka before departing this life on his deathbed:

Katami tote
Nanika nokosan
Haru wa hana
Natsu hototogisu
Aki wa momijiba
 I would like to leave
 Something as a memory:
 Flowers in spring,
 Cuckoos in summer,
 Tinted leaves in fall¹²

Ryokan’s memento was the entire universe as it will be unfolding of itself in manifold ways of its beauty, not his ego-centered achievements of whatever kind. He also created a tanka such as the following while being ill in bed:

Waga nochi o
Tasuke tamae to
Tanomu mi wa
Moto no chikai no
Sugata nari keru
 While beseeching thee
 For mercy after my death
 Lo I find myself
 Already embodying
 The Original Vow now!¹³

¹¹ Greene, 24.

¹² See Sanford Goldstein, Shigeo Mizuguchi, and Fujisato Kitajima, trans. *Ryokan: Selected Tanka Haiku* (Niigata: Kokodo, 2000), 116, 181. This is one of the poems Yasunari Kawabata (1899-1972) referred to in his Nobel Prize address in Stockholm in 1968 entitled “Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself.”

¹³ See Tokiyuki Nobuhara, *Ryokan in a Global Age* (Niigata: Kokodo, 2001), E35.

The truth which inheres in this tanka is commensurate with the insight of Paul Tillich into the mystery of faith which he discloses with these words: “He who speaks through us is he who is spoken to.”¹⁴ It is only by envisaging rightly the future events, whether the future generations or our own future life, that we are able to be at one with the universe here and now. For the universe (as what Jorge Luis Nobo calls the “Creative-Receptacle, or existential matrix”) is *sensitive* to “its own successive states of actual and potential determinateness.”¹⁵ Nobo states, “This sensitivity of the matrix to itself is what Whitehead referred to as an *envisagement* belonging to the underlying activity of the universe.”¹⁶

Nobo’s words of wisdom herein disclosed are, I think, compatible with Kitaro Nishida’s correlative insight which he expresses in these words: “When absolute free will turns and views itself, or, in Boehme’s terms, when the objectless will looks back on itself, the infinite creative development of this world is set up.”¹⁷ In the matter of philosophical cosmology East and West go hand in hand in the midst of mutual learning. There is no need for developing another meta-narrative to be imposed by the West on others, as Paul Knitter fears.¹⁸ And I believe Dr. Thomas Berry agrees with me.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 192.

¹⁵ Jorge Luis Nobo, *Whitehead's Metaphysics of Extension and Solidarity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 308.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Kitaro Nishida, *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, trans. Valdo H. Viglielmo, Yoshinori Takeuchi and Joseph S. O’Leary (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 143.

¹⁸ See Greene, 71 (footnote omitted).