LEWIS HYDE

To Complete the Incomplete

An essay on *Oxherding*

I met the painter Max Gimblett in the early 1990s when we were both in residence at an art and study center in Italy. Soon thereafter Max began inviting me to work with him in his studio on the Bowery in New York City. Usually when I would arrive I'd find he had covered the flat surfaces of the studio with wonderful, large sheets of drawing paper and laid out pots of sumi ink mixed in varying degrees of black and gray. Max would place a brush in my hand, and he and I would proceed to fill the paper with words and images.

At some point in this process Max suggested that we try to make new versions of a set of medieval Chinese poems and drawings known as the *Oxherding Series*. *Oxherding* presents a parable about the conduct of Buddhist practice. In the most common version there are ten drawings, the first of which shows a young herder who has lost the ox he is supposed to be tending. In subsequent images he finds the ox's tracks, sees the beast itself, tames it and rides it home. In the seventh drawing the ox disappears: it "served a temporary purpose" the poems say; it was a metaphor for something, not to be mistaken for the thing itself. The herder too disappears in the next drawing; the image simply shows a circle (Japanese: *enso*), a common symbol for enlightenment. The ninth drawing implies that the person who has achieved enlightenment does not then retreat from the world; called "Returning to the Roots, Going Back to the Source," it usually shows a scene from nature. The final drawing shows a chubby fellow with a sack "entering the village with gift-giving hands."

The *Oxherding Series* has appeared in a number of different forms over the centuries. What I've just described is the version attributed to the twelfth-century Chinese Rinzai Zen master Kakuan Shion (Chinese: *Kuo-an Shih-yuan*). Kakuan composed a four-line poem to accompany each of his *Oxherding* drawings and, at some later date a student or disciple of Kakuan, Jion (Chinese: *Ciyuan*), added poetic "prefaces" or "harmonizing verses" to each of these. (The poems have survived; Kakuan's original drawings have not, but many copies exist including a set from Japan dated 1278.) [Wada 10]

The idea that Max and I might try our hand at twenty-first century American versions of *Oxherding* took concrete form in the spring of 2002 when we were invited to spend several weeks together at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village, Colorado. That short period of intense work gave the project a good foundation, but it was just the beginning of what turned out to be six years of periodic engagement. Over and over again Max came at the drawings, finding his way into the spirit of the series. I did the same with the translations.

On my first approach to putting the *Oxherding* poems into English what I did was to gather all the existing translations I could find and try to intuit what lay behind them. In this way (I call it "translating from English to English") I made my own first drafts. I then decided I needed to go deeper and therefore sought out a tutor, Jascha Smilack, at the time a doctoral candidate in Chinese literature in Harvard's Department of East Asian Languages. Jascha and I worked one whole summer, moving character by character through the Chinese originals until I had a fairly sure sense of how the poems were constructed and what they had to say.

One of the pleasures of translation lies in the play of choices that must be made as a foreign work comes over into English. Take this line by Pablo Neruda: *Sucede que me canso de ser hombre.* The first time I saw an English rendering of this sentence (in Angel Flores' 1946 translation) it read: "It happens that I'm tired of being a man." [59] Here are four later versions (by Ben Belitt, Robert Bly, Donald Walsh, and Mark Eisner, respectively):

It so happens I'm tired of just being a man. [77]
It so happens I am sick of being a man. [29]
I happen to be tired of being a man. [119]
Comes a time I'm tired of being a man. [43]

Belitt adds a few words for emphasis; Bly tries a more vernacular verb; Walsh plays with the subject; Eisner gives the line a formal turn. Any Spanish sentence can be brought into English in many ways. I think of the task of juggling the choices (what's best for that verb, *cansarse*? – to get tired? to weary? to get fed up?) as adjusting the colors of the sentence, shifting the lighting. Some things stay the same, but the reds deepen, or a touch of iridescent blue gets added. A shadow here, a bright spot there. A great aesthetic pleasure comes when one finally gets the sentence properly lit in English so that it seems

both true to the original and well fitted to its new tongue. Never, of course, is it *the* sentence. There can always be another draft.

"When I read anyone else's translation I keep altering and transposing the words in my brain, and the result is something light, ethereal, like lacework," Chekhov once wrote to a friend. [*Letters* 254] When we read something in its original language we are not normally drawn to think about how it might be changed; reading in translation, however, can be an invitation to get involved, to freshly imagine. (I'm quoting Chekhov in Constance Garnett's translation. Is "brain" the right word or would "mind" be better? "Light" or "weightless"? "Lacework" or "lace"?) A simple way to prompt this kind of participatory engagement is to come at a foreign text through multiple English versions, as I first did with *Oxherding*. Compare two approaches to the Bible:

> And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. (King James, 1611)

> And God saith, 'Let light be;' and light is. (Robert Young's "Literal Translation," 1862)

Or compare a piece of Alexander Pope's 1715 *Iliad* (concerning Paris and Helen) –

> The enamour'd Phrygian boy
> Rush'd to the bed, impatient for the joy.
> Him Helen follow'd slow with bashful charms,
> And clasp'd the blooming hero in her arms.

 – with Robert Fagles's 1990 version:

> He led the way to bed. His wife went with him. [143]

"That isn't what I meant to say," we sometimes say, and then restate the thing we had in mind, using different words. All sentences are "translations" of something we once had in mind and are the fruit of many small, usually unknown choices. When it comes to written texts, where a foreign original is available in multiple translations, the choices are made more evident and the reader can more readily enter, more easily become co-creator of the new articulation.

As for *Oxherding*, when it came to putting the Chinese poems into English I found that my interest in multiple versions reappeared on new grounds having to do both with the way the original poems are made and with the Buddhist teaching they convey. The syntax of classical Chinese turns out to be much looser than anything available to us in English. By 'syntax' we most simply mean the rules by which the words in a sentence are arranged, these rules in turn reflecting the many assumptions we've made about how the world itself is arranged – how events unfold in time, for example, or how human perception operates, or how we distinguish between subjective and objective knowledge. In the introduction to his masterful anthology, *Chinese Poetry*, Wai-lim Yip points out that while English demands "rigid syntactical cooperation between and among parts of speech," in Chinese the "syntactical demands are sparse, if not absent." [2] English verbs always have tenses, for example, but "the classical Chinese language is tense*less*." [3] English often moves from subject to verb to object, each one linked to the next in a clear causal order; Chinese, on the other hand, may be 'parasyntactic,' meaning that things are simply placed in a line, the problem of intuiting how they are connected being left up to the reader. Chinese is silent about gender and number, too. The character for 'person' could mean 'he' or 'she' or 'people.' In all these ways and more, Yip writes, the "user of the classical Chinese language" has a "degree of syntactical freedom" not available to those of us who use English or, to put it the other way around, translation into English often involves adding seeming explanations to what was originally quite spare. [2]

Take, for example, the texts that accompany the first *Oxherding* drawing. The fourteen characters of the opening two lines of the Kakuan's poem signify, more or less:

| without | bounds | stirring | grasses | leaving | tracking | down |
| waters | broad | mountains | distant | road | more | obscure |

The Chinese is not wholly without syntax; in this case there are verbal units within each line so that certain sets of characters are understood to hang together:

| [without | bounds] | [stirring | grasses] | [leaving | tracking | down] |
| [waters | broad] | [mountains | distant] | [road | more | obscure] |

Beyond this, much is obviously left unsaid. There's no indication of who the actor is (if there is one), nor are verbs conjugated in regard to person or time. Admittedly, there is a

title, "Search Ox," so it makes sense to say that the lines describe a herdsman (or boy) tracking down a lost ox – but none of that is stated in the poem.

Jion's preface doesn't fill in the picture any better. The first three lines might be put into English, character-by-character, as:

[From	start	not	lost]	[what	use	search	for]
[Because	abandoned	awakening]	[so	become	scarce]
[Living	near	dust]	[and	therefore	loss]

Again, no actor is named, no oxherd. In *Oxherding* as a whole, in fact, the character for 'person' (*ren*) does not appear until the last line of Poem 5 (the ox "willingly follows the person") and in Poem 7 we are told that this person should be forgotten, that he is "empty." A returned human presence is implied in the last two drawings (someone sees the green mountains; someone comes to the village with gift-giving hands) but once again no actor is named.

All this said, it is almost universally the case that translators treat what the Chinese leaves unstated as if it were a blank space that must be filled in. In his *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, D. T. Suzuki renders the lines just cited from Jion's Preface 1 as follows:

> The beast has never gone astray, and what is the use of searching for him? The reason why the oxherd is not on intimate terms with him is because the oxherd himself has violated his own inmost nature. [129]

Philip Kapleau's version in *Three Pillars of Zen* is similar:

> The Ox has never really gone astray, so why search for it? Having turned his back on his True-nature, the man cannot see it. [314]

Note that both translators have not only filled in the subject, they have provided an object as well, the ox, even though it too doesn't actually appear in the original. In the *Oxherding* texts, the character for 'ox' (*niu*) does not show up until Poem 6 where we find the oxherd riding on the beast's back. Not only is the sequence more than half over before readers get the name of the thing being sought but it's taken away as soon as it's given. Preface 7 names the ox again only to say that, as with the person, we should forget about

it. It was just a device, a metaphor, a fish-trap not to be confused with the fish it was meant to catch.

All this said, it will here be useful to pause and reflect on the meaning of this metaphorical ox. Even admitting that "ox" is a device used in teaching and not the thing itself, a symbol and not the actual object of the search, how are we to understand it? What does the metaphor represent?

There are two traditional answers. In some readings, the ox is taken to be the self of appetites and delusions that must be confronted, tamed, and disciplined. It represents the mind (or body) that wanders from correct practice and proper attention, the restless self that the oxherd-meditator must attend to, patiently pulling it back to the path of proper attention. [Sheng-yen, *Hoofprint* 202-03] More often, and conversely, the ox is taken to represent the "True Self," the "Original Face," the "Buddha-Nature." Understood this second way, Preface 1 points out that there isn't really any need to search because the True Self is already present, the oxherd's problem being not so much to find something he has lost as to wake from ignorance and see things as they are.

One modern teacher, Master Sheng-yen, kindly points out that we needn't resolve these conflicting readings of the image. "Both views are admissible…; the ox is… ambiguous." [Ibid. 203] All metaphors allow for a range of readings so why not let the ox stand simultaneously for the mind of vexation and the mind of enlightenment? After all, "affliction and enlightenment define one another" [Ibid. 203]; as we face the one we actualize the other. (In some versions of the *Oxherding* drawings, the ox turns slowly from black to white – a simple way to represent and resolve this ambiguity.)

To come back to my earlier train of thought, the point here is that whatever meaning we give to it, the ox as a named object of the search scarcely appears in the poems. As with the actor who does the searching, this is a presence only lightly asserted.

The consequent spareness, it should be said, is typical of all classical Chinese poems, not just of those with overtly Buddhist themes. Yip illustrates the point with a five-character line from eighth-century poet Meng Hao-jan:

move boat moor smoke shore

Brought over into English this might read "I move my boat, mooring on the smoky riverbank," a plausible rendering, but still – it is the reader (or translator) who has provided a subject, chosen a tense for the verb, and then linked the other elements in a presumed commonsense manner. Most translations of classical Chinese "explain" the

original in this manner, as if the Chinese were a compact code in need of being unpacked by the recipient of the message.

There is much to be said about the general puzzle of how the syntactic looseness of Chinese might be represented in English but for now the point is that the spareness of *Oxherding* is not unique. That said, it is also the case that this spareness is especially well fitted to the teaching that *Oxherding* offers. In *The Book of Tea*, Kakuzo Okakura has this to say about the "conception of perfection" for both Buddhists and Taoists:

> The dynamic nature of their philosophy laid more stress upon the process through which perfection was sought than upon perfection itself. True beauty could be discovered only by one who mentally completed the incomplete. [49]

If the observer is called upon to complete the scene, both an aesthetics and a pedagogy follow: an artist or a teacher should resist presenting a perfected picture because doing so will only produce a passive student. To rephrase Okakura in the context of *Oxherding*: *The true dharma can only be discovered by one whose practice completes the incomplete.*

To say this more fully, the classic Chinese poem invites its readers to inhabit its field of elements, images presented one after another without the kind of explanatory connections we expect in English. It gives us this (in Poem 3):

> luxurious dense head horn
> painting difficult complete

rather than this (in Suzuki's version):

> That splendid head decorated with stately horns –
> what painter can reproduce him? [130]

The reader, instead of being told how the poem's elements are related, is left to imagine those relations. The images in a Chinese poem, writes Yip,

> form an atmosphere or environment, an ambience, in which the reader may move and be directly present, poised for a moment before being imbued with the atmosphere that evokes (*but does not state*) an aura of feeling…. [6]

The reader is invited into a context that allows him (and here Yip echoes Okakura) to "participate in completing the aesthetic experience of an intense moment, the primary form of which the poet has arrested in concrete data." [6]

In the opening *Oxherding* poem, for example, the "aura of feeling" is weary despair and the assumption of the poem's syntactic spareness is that a reader is more likely to feel her own hopeless fatigue rise as she reads if she finds no actor in the poem than if she finds herself asked to witness that lost boy. English versions that augment the Chinese by naming the actor are not exactly mistranslations, but they are likely to preclude participatory reading. Consider, for example, Suzuki's rendering of one phrase in Poem 1: "He knows not where to go." [129] The Chinese characters, as usual, name no subject (they mean simply "no / place / to-hunt"). Adding a subject makes a proper English sentence, of course, but doing so also suggests to the reader that this is a scene to be observed, not entered; as such, it is less likely to evoke an intimate response, one in which the feeling the poem arouses in the reader would be closer to "*I* know not where to go."

Even that, of course, would posit a subject not present in the Chinese – but with an important distinction: the subject appears in the reader's mind, not in the poem. To offer it in the poem would be to beg the very questions that *Oxherding* sets out to pose: What is this "self" that feels it has lost something? What exactly has it lost?

Leaving the poem silent in regard to both the searcher and the thing sought not only leaves such questions open, it suggests how they might be answered. For note that the mind that reads the poem (like most translators) can hardly help supplying an actor to operate in the field of offered elements. Be it "*he* knows not" or "*I* know not," if the Self-That-Doesn't-Know, the Self-of-Weary-Despair, appears as the poems are read, then before our eyes we see manifested one link in "the chain of dependent origination" (Sanskrit: *pratitya-samutpada*), the arising, that is to say, of a sense of self out of the conditions at hand. What I've been calling the poem's "field of elements" includes these: a move toward dust, endless forking roads, preoccupation with "gain and loss," etc. And the poem implies that once all these things are disposed in the field of consciousness, the Self-of-Weary-Despair will come into being. It will arise, yes, but not as an independent and substantial thing; it exists in relationship to the conditions that surround it, and it will disappear (it can be forgotten, it will prove to be empty) as soon as they are altered or dispersed. By implication, there is a way of being that would not so readily create a self, a subject, out of any given field of elements, that would not so swiftly "translate" experience into selfhood. Preface 9 gives a sketch of that way:

See the thriving and withering of forms;
Live in the still and quiet of non-action;
Do not identify with illusion and change.
How could anything be improved?
The waters are blue, the mountains are green.

The spareness of Chinese syntax can do more than raise the kind of questions about identity that I've just outlined. Much else can be put in play. As I've said, an English sentence typically moves from subject to verb to object: "John hit the ball." In a Chinese line, the elements are less determined. What if "The ball hit John"? Could that be an allowed reading? Consider what Gen P. Sakamoto does in his version of Preface 10. He casts the poem in the first person ("I enter the market; ...I return home," etc.), then does something surprising with the closing lines. The Chinese characters in question mean, more or less:

[wine   shop] [fish   shop]
[influence make] [become Buddhas]

Kapleau's English rendering gives the conventional reading: an unnamed "he" enters the market and at the close of the poem "He leads innkeepers and fishmongers in the Way of the Buddha." [323] Sakamoto, however, flips the subject and object: "Wine shop and fish market / Become Buddha / And enlighten me"! [Wada n.p.]

In a similar vein I myself have wondered if the usual reading of Image 4 might not be turned around. This is the moment when the oxherd has caught the ox and we see the two of them pulling in opposite directions, the herder's rope stretched taut between them. If the ox is a metaphor, this is the one place where it seems most clearly to stand for the restless, unruly self, the flesh full of desire or the constantly wandering mind. After all, if the ox were a metaphor for the "True Self," "Buddha Mind" etc., why would the herder need these tools of discipline, the whip and the rope?

Perhaps because we are reading the image backwards. Perhaps it is the ox who is disciplining the oxherd and maybe the title "Catch Ox" doesn't mean "the oxherd catches the ox" but rather "the ox catches the oxherd." After all, sometimes we submit ourselves to discipline once we have a clear sense that it will yield results. The oxherd sees the ox in Image 3; in Image 4 the ox, the True Self, demands practice of the oxherd. He may think he's caught an ox, but it is the ox that's caught him!

This is an idiosyncratic reading, I realize, but the looseness of the Chinese syntax allows it. From the field of offered images, this meaning may arise. Who's to say which way the energy runs in that herder's rope? As for the fish shop at the end of Preface 10, there lie the fish, their eyes open on beds of ice: who's to say they cannot be the near cause of someone's awakening? Who's to say how any one seeker is to complete the incomplete?

Translators of *Oxherding* obviously respond variously to the incongruities between Chinese and English. As we've seen, many simply fill in the blanks, providing subject and object, choosing tenses for the verbs, a gender for the actor, and so forth. Most *Oxherding* translations imagine a male, third-person actor such that the first line of the first poem –

[without bounds] [stirring grasses] [leaving, tracking down]

– becomes:

Alone in the wilderness, lost in the jungle, the boy is searching, searching! [Suzuki 129]

Occasionally translators cast the scene in the first- or second-person:

In the pasture of this world, I endlessly push aside the tall grasses in search of the Bull. [Nyogen Senzaki & Saladin Reps *Ten Bulls* [n.p.]]

Vigorously cutting a path through the brambles, you search for the ox. [Kazuaki Tanahashi and John Daido Loori 1]

Sakamoto, whose inventive ending to Preface 10 I've just cited, combines all of these, varying the pronouns as he moves from poem to poem, as in these samples:

Poem 1: One aimlessly pushes the grasses aside in search.
Poem 2: Did you see the ox?
Poem 4: I seize the ox.
Poem 7: Riding on the ox, he has come home.

Sakamoto is at least struggling overtly with the puzzle of how to nominate what might be called "the Oxherding Self," rather than silently pretending that no metaphysical or spiritual questions lie behind a translator's choices. Yip poses one such question this way:

> How can an epistemological world view developed from the Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, which emphasize the ego in search of knowledge of the non-ego…, turn around and endorse a medium that belies the function and process of epistemological elaboration? [16]

Put another way, how can "rigid" English syntax convey a world view that calls its very theory of knowledge into question? Yip's answer is that it can't. To get the Chinese into English, English itself would have to change, loosen up, become less demonstrative.

Yip has written a book about Ezra Pound and not surprisingly he finds that in modernism and in the poetic styles it spawned we see attempts to modify English so as to make it more hospitable to non-Western modes of perception. As is well known, Pound's encounter with Chinese through Ernest Fenollosa's work was the starting point. Absent Fenollosa we might never have had lines like the ones that Yip cites from Canto XLIX:

> Rain; empty river, a voyage….
> Autumn moon; hills rise above lakes….
> Broad water; geese line out with the autumn. [Yip 21; *Cantos* 244]

As Yip shows, the line of experimentation that Pound began left its mark on the work of poets as diverse as William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, e.e. cummings, and Gary Snyder. [21-25]

Of all the *Oxherding* translations I've found, the only one that seems to me to reflect this tradition is that of Stanley Lombardo, a Zen Master and Professor of Classics at the University of Kansas. In Lombardo's *Oxherding* an imperative mood sometimes implies an actor ("hold onto the rope"), but in fact no actor is ever named, most of the poems being rendered with image-phrases laid down parasyntactically, one after another: "Weary, exhausted, no place left to hunt: / Maples rustle, evening, the cicada's song." [85] This is a post-Pound *Oxherding*.

The *Oxherding Series* is not, of course, a teaching about linguistic problems or translation in the literal sense; it is a parable of Buddhist practice, the poems and

drawings suggesting a Way toward apprehension of the True Self. As such, it requires Westerners to reckon not just with matters of syntax but more broadly with the question of how a medieval Chán-Buddhist teaching can be carried over into twenty-first century American speech. Even more broadly still, how is any spiritual insight passed from one person to another? How is the *dharma* transmitted? How, in this case, can the language of poetry convey an understanding that claims to lie outside language ("'The vast blue sky' is not at all the vast blue sky. / Think of snow falling on a blazing fire." [Poem 8])?

My own response to such questions has been to try to keep them in play, not by making a translation of *Oxherding* but by making *three* translations. My "One Word Ox" replaces each Chinese character with a single English word, my "Spare Sense Ox" casts each poem in simple English sentences, and my "Fat American Ox" shamelessly expands on each of these. Not that these three versions should be read as a series that moves upward from rough to finished draft. Each one should be read with the other two calling it into question, readers being invited by this lack of finish, by my stuttering as it were, to seek for themselves the Ox of right speech. The true *dharma* can only be discovered by one whose practice completes the incomplete.

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