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Koan of Himself: Finding Ikkyū's *fūryū* in Whitman's "Song of Myself"

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Abstract— *Fūryū* has been defined as the “aesthetic of unconventionality” (Qiu, 2001). In a broader, psychosocial context, it is associated with an iconoclastic attitude – a freethinking, grounded idealism amidst a myriad of circumstances. Experientially, *fūryū* can be understood as the Zen of poetic sensibility. Ikkyū Sōjun, an iconoclastic Rinzai Zen master (1394-1481), was the embodiment of *fūryū*. In his Zen poetry, Nature was a frequent metaphor for his sexuality and often alluded to counter the hypocrisy of most 15th century Zen establishments. Similarly, in his poem “Song of Myself”, Walt Whitman openly addressed his bisexuality and themes of “Self as Nature” with a sensuous fortitude reminiscent of *fūryū*. Both points considered, the goal of this paper was to identify the *fūryū* in “Song of Myself” by comparing the poetry of Ikkyū and Whitman. The analysis of *fūryū* in the context of modern American literature can assist the contemplative practices of Zen Buddhist or transcendental meditators in the West. Furthermore, it can contribute to the understanding of *fūryū* as an accessible universal concept, present in modern and contemporary literature, and in the practice of Zen itself.

Keywords— *mindfulness meditation, Zen, Fūryū, Ikkyū Sōjun, Japanese poetry, transcendentalist poetry, Walt Whitman.*

Fūryū can be understood as the mindful awareness that blooms from poetic sensibility. Its development has been associated with the iconoclastic stance of figures such as Ikkyū Sōjun, a Rinzai (Linji) Zen master who burned his seal of transmission after achieving enlightenment (Qiu, 2001). Ikkyū was a controversial figure in 15th century Japanese Zen circles. He embraced his sensuous nature and his Zen discipline with equal intensity. His poetry elegantly merged themes of Nature and philosophy with erotica and brash candor. As an iconoclastic Zen poet, Ikkyū was openly critical of what he deemed “hypocritical”, dogmatic attitudes prevalent in the Zen establishment. Many of his contemporaries taught nonattachment, a core Zen value, while striving for wealth and political influence. Similarly, while taking a woman or a wife was common practice for

Zen monks and priests, the women were often unrecognized under the tenets of ascetic restraint and “priestly renunciation” (Noriko, 2003, pp. 294-295). Thus, whether deliberately or by the candor of his stance, the interplay between sexuality and Nature in his poems addressed *fūryū* as another source of Zen.

Yone Noguchi, a modern Japanese poet, once stated: “we human beings are not merely a part of Nature, but Nature itself” (cited in Hakutani, 1985, p. 73). Quite similarly, the concept of the Self as “Nature itself” was often brought forth by Ikkyū in his poems. In “To Lady Mori with Deepest Gratitude and Thanks” (translated by Stevens, 1995), love was reverently conceived by Ikkyū as a wellspring of *fūryū*.

The tree was barren of leaves but you brought a new spring.

Long green sprouts, verdant flowers, fresh promise.

Mori, if I ever forget my profound gratitude to you,

Let me burn in hell forever.

The concept of “Self as Nature” was also brought forth by Walt Whitman in “Song of Myself” (1892/1973), and to some degree by other transcendental poets such as Emerson. Unlike his contemporaries, however, the iconoclastic stance in Whitman’s poetry emerged primarily from his open bisexuality. “Song of Myself” in particular has been regarded as “the song of sex” (Miller, 1990, as cited in Gentry, n.d.) because of its recurrent view of Nature as an allegory for human sexuality. In Section 21, Whitman relates to Nature from a stance imbued with *fūryū*.

Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!

Far-swooping elbow’d earth—rich apple-blossom’d earth!

Smile, for your lover comes.

Prodigal, you have given me love—therefore I to you give love!

O unspeakable passionate love.

Like Ikkyū, Whitman alludes to Nature with reverence, as a primordial source of *fūryū*, love and inspiration. Ikkyū saw in Mori, his “blind paramour” (Dunn, 1987), the embodiment of his gratitude towards Nature itself. Whitman humanized Nature as a form of gratitude for the love given. Both men have awakened to the beauty of the present moment through the transformative nature of *fūryū*.

Considering the similarities between the poetry of Ikkyū and Whitman, the goal of this brief comparison article was to introduce the reader to the concept of *fūryū* and its application within a modern Western philosophical context. To this end, the definition of *fūryū* as “the aesthetic of unconventionality” (Qiu, 2001) was used to identify the concept of *fūryū* in “Song of Myself” by Walt Whitman. For analytical purposes, two terms have been capitalized: “Nature” to denote the “ever present ecological life forces that exist with or without human presence” (LeVine, 2018, p. xxv) and “Self” to distinguish the transcendent entity from the ego-mind.

Fūryū as Iconoclastic Stance

Fūryū has been defined as a “courtly penchant for romance” (Qiu, 2001) or the refined aesthetic sense of the

iconoclastic recluse. In a way, *fūryū* describes an ability to maintain a romanticized view of life. Both types of *fūryū* are elegantly captured by Ikkyū in the following poem:

Snow

Plum calyxes without scent, bamboo leaves rustling;

The heavenly flakes over a foot high, night deepens in stillness.

Being *fūryū*, I naturally love the mind of poor scholars

As Du Fu, by the window, composing a poem on the west mountain. (Qiu, 2001, p. 139)

Fūryū as the sublimation of the present moment is evident in the first two verses, which describe the moment as “heavenly”. It is then claimed by Ikkyū in the final two verses to validate his iconoclastic stance. By comparing himself to Du Fu, a laudable Chinese Realist poet during the Tang Dynasty, Ikkyū recognizes the rewarding nature of unconventionality – attainable after eschewing the dogmatic ways of the *status quo*.

In “Snow”, Ikkyū “proudly celebrates the *fūryū* of his personality” (Qiu, 2001), while also admiring the original mind of other iconoclastic figures such as Du Fu. Similar themes are introduced by Whitman in the first section of “Song of Myself” (1892/1973): “Creeds and schools in abeyance, / Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten, / I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard, / Nature without check with original energy”. Whitman was unsettled by the realization of his oneness, though understandably so as he was jolted into awareness at a later age, within a different sociocultural context. As he expressed in Section 1: “I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin, / Hoping to cease not till death”.

The absence of a *fūryū*-minded life was associated with mindlessness, automaticity, and strife. Frequent wars and rebellions were common in 15th century Japan, as were events that led to the burning down of Kyoto, the ancient capital. The impact of survival stress on the *fūryū* mindset was addressed by Ikkyū in the following verses (Qiu, 2001, p. 139):

In a dark world, today there is no mood for the ink and brush;

Nor the mind of *fūryū*, how futile!

Three lives reborn on this land, the poetry spirit suffers,

As the “frost flowers,” pounded ten thousand times, on the east slope of Hua

Ding.

The first two verses capture the essence of *fūryū* as an empowering response. In the preface to the poem, Ikkyū stated: “Aah, in today’s world, people are all crazy about treasures and wealth; to them, an ink stick would be no more than a broken straw sandal. But I almost lost my life over a missing ink stick. I wonder if those who have many desires would feel a little shame when they heard this poem” (Qiu, 2001, p. 139).

Whitman also lived in a time marked by war. Though he was initially supportive of it (Hardwig, 2000), he nevertheless recognized the psychological impact of war, loss, and quotidian anxieties in Section 4 (1892/1973): “(...) depressions or exaltations, (...) /These come to me days and nights and go from me again, /But they are not the Me myself”. Similarly, in Section 23, Whitman regarded materialism of the senses as an inextricable aspect of reality: “I accept Reality and dare not question it, /Materialism first and last imbuing”. It should be noted that, unlike the materialism of object-driven wanting, the materialism described by Whitman is more akin to the sensory grounding of Zen meditation. Like Ikkyū, Whitman fully embraced his sensuous nature. Although Whitman initially regards himself as “(n)o sentimentalist”, his attitude begins to converge with the *fūryū* conoclastic stance in Section 24:

Through me forbidden voices,

Voices of sexes and lust, voices veil’d and I remove the veil,

Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur’d.

I do not press my fingers across my mouth,

I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,

Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,

Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.

Fūryū as Transcendent Force

Every day, priests minutely examine the Law

And endlessly chant complicated sutras.

Before doing that, though, they should learn

How to read the love letters sent by the wind

and rain, the snow and moon. (Ikkyū, translated by Arntzen, 1986)

Though initially an admonition, the verse evolves into a koan: How *is* the language of love expressed in Nature? A tentative answer emerges from “Song of Myself” (Whitman, 1892/1973, Section 2):

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the

dead, (...)

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

In both accounts, the innate knowledge of the original Zen mind is nurtured through Nature. Like Ikkyū, Whitman identified in Nature “the origin of all poems” – a transcendent state charged with *fūryū* that allows ego-striving to dissolve and the Self to emerge.

Like Vanishing Dew

Like vanishing dew,

a passing apparition

or the sudden flash

of lightning—already gone—

thus should one regard one’s self. (Ikkyū, translated by Hamill, 2004)

As a sudden flash of lightning, as a passing apparition – like Nature, self-realization is transient. Moments of enlightenment are experienced by the Self, a container of simple, genuine awareness. In this sense, the concept of *fūryū* is akin to the “transcendent function” (Jung, 1916/1958), a psychological mechanism that mediates the integration of conscious and unconscious aspects of the Self. “That which is capable of uniting these two is a metaphorical statement (the symbol) which itself transcends time and conflict (...) the destructive tendency to pull (or be pulled) to one side or the other” (Samuels, Shorter, & Plaut, 1986, p. 151 as cited in Miller, 2004, p. 4). A mark of individuation, the iconoclastic *fūryū* stance has integrated the materialistic, sensuous desires of the ego with the gentle detachment of the true Self. The struggle between materialistic striving and transcendent stillness is captured succinctly by Whitman in

Section 3 of “Song of Myself” (1892/1973): “Shall I postpone my acceptance and realization and scream at my eyes,/That they turn from gazing after and down the road,/And forthwith cipher and show me to a cent,/Exactly the value of one and exactly the value of two, and which is ahead?”.

CONCLUSION

Though both authors lived in distinct sociocultural contexts, the concept of *fūryū* as a catalyst for enlightenment is present in the poetry of both Ikkyū and Whitman. Ikkyū, a Zen master, embraced life as a koan where Nature whispered answers. Whitman, a transcendentalist poet, found in himself an ecosystem which “contained multitudes” (Whitman, 1892/1973, Section 51). Both individuals were empowered by the iconoclastic charge of *fūryū* and embraced its insights with gratitude. Likewise, an appreciation for Nature’s love letters can guide the contemporary meditator towards open-hearted awareness.

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