

## The Role of Live Performance in the *Gongan* Commentary of the *Blue Cliff Record*: Reflections on John McRae's Remarks about a Seminal Chan Buddhist Text

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### MCRAE'S REMARKS ON THE TEXT

It is widely acknowledged that the *Blue Cliff Record* 碧巖錄 (Ch. *Biyānlù*, Jpn. *Hekiganroku*), a collection in which Yuanwu Keqin (1063–1135) provides various kinds of prose remarks regarding one hundred cases that were originally selected and given poetic comments by Xuedou Chongxian (980–1052), is the seminal Chan Buddhist *gongan/kōan* 公案 commentary.

The text's innovative discursive structure in relation to its fundamental religious message concerning the spontaneous yet fundamentally ambiguous or uncertain quality of Chan enlightenment was a highlight of Song dynasty Chinese cultural and intellectual historical trends. The *Blue Cliff Record* has long been celebrated for its use of intricate and articulate interpretative devices as the masterpiece or “premier work of the Chan school” 禪門第一書 (or 宗門第一書) that has greatly influenced the development of the tradition for nearly a thousand years since its original publication in 1128.

As instrumental and influential as it is regarded, however, the *Blue Cliff Record* has been shrouded in contention in regard to the value of its approach to the role of language evoked in pursuit of awakening, and it is also clouded by controversy because of legends often accepted uncritically that obscure the origins and significance of the text. This collection is probably best known today for having apparently been destroyed in 1140 by Dahui, Yuanwu's main disciple yet harshest critic; it is confirmed the collection was left out of circulation before being revived and partially reconstructed in the early 1300s. Perhaps because

of these and related factors, the *Blue Cliff Record* has remained relatively obscure in modern Western scholarship, with only one major translation and a limited number of analytic works.<sup>1</sup> In a recent monograph, *Chan Rhetoric of Uncertainty in the Blue Cliff Record: Sharpening a Sword at the Dragon Gate*,<sup>2</sup> I explore some of the main literary achievements of Xuedou and Yuanwu in light of a brief but very insightful comment proffered by the late eminent scholar John McRae about the discursive functions of the text. This examination shows that by building on the innovations of numerous Chan predecessors, what the *Blue Cliff Record* accomplishes that has fascinated and inspired readers for centuries is an uncanny knack for keeping alive a timeless sense of participating in the immediacy of the original encounter dialogues that supposedly transpired long before the text's comments were composed. The remarks of Xuedou and Yuanwu frequently intrude on the source dialogues, or make asides or let out haughty chuckles in order to express disdain for others or to confess humbly the commentator's own sense of insecurity or indecision. Through developing a variety of inventive linguistic devices culled in large part from both classic and vernacular Chinese literary sources and methods in what was initially delivered as a group of oral sermons, which as soon as they were recorded came to represent textual materials, the collection creates an atmosphere reflecting the urgency of the spiritual quest so that encounters play out their drama and intrigue in disparate yet integrated ways.

As McRae points out in *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism*, a highly influential study of the symbolism and significance of Chan transmission narratives based on dialogues utilized in various textual formations all with important lineal and other institutional implications, *gongan* "stories were clearly passed around and subjected to repeated reevaluations and modification ... [that] occurred in a complex environment of both oral

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1. All *Blue Cliff Record* passages cited here from Cbeta.org have been checked against Thomas Cleary and John C. Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record*, 3 vols. (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1977), paginated consecutively and reprinted in a single volume in 2005, in addition to numerous other references. Another version published by Thomas Cleary in the Numata series in 1998 was also consulted.

2. Steven Heine, *Chan Rhetoric of Uncertainty in the Blue Cliff Record: Sharpening a Sword at the Dragon Gate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); much of the content in this article is based on this volume.

and written transmission.” Yet, he also indicates the *Blue Cliff Record* is particularly important in that “Yuanwu’s commentary on ... Xuedou’s verse and the case itself impart the sense that he was attempting to use the medium of writing to ... enter into the dialogue, to live within the idealized Tang-dynasty realm of spontaneous interaction.”<sup>3</sup> McRae further suggests that in diverse Song dynasty Chan texts this “feeling of ‘being there,’ is a literary effect contrived through literally centuries of combined effort.”<sup>4</sup> While very much agreeing with the above comments, I do take exception somewhat with the reference to Yuanwu’s “medium of writing” in that the text, as we know it today even though it was no doubt somewhat corrupted due its early loss and recovery (not unusual for works of the period), was a record or transcription of originally orally delivered poems by Xuedou and subsequent live prose remarks by Yuanwu. An emphasis on orality rather than writing in the end reinforces rather than detracts from McRae’s intriguing suggestions about the functionality of the remarks as living commentary.

I further argue that recognizing this aspect of the rhetorical construction does not diminish the impact of the conceit but rather heightens an understanding and appreciation for how effective the performative element can be in communicating the text’s religious vision. The source dialogues feature many verbal interruptions and nonverbal interruptions, including slaps, shouts, and strikes, although we generally do not know for sure whether these reflect accurate reporting of the original event or an editor’s retrospective exaggeration. Those occurrences are at once enhanced and evaluated through the frequent recorded cries by Xuedou and Yuanwu of “Bah!” and “Hah!,” as well as their refrains of “I strike!,” “He deserves thirty blows of the stick!,” or “He falls back three thousand miles!” We can only guess or speculate on the influence this ritual feature may have generated on the part of the audience of monks in the assembly who heard the sermons’ delivery, but if read properly today it serves as a crucial discursive component underscoring the function of spontaneity in the commentaries. Other aspects of the overall discourse highlight the importance of this performative quality. An important example is the recognition by both authors of the apparent limitations of their efforts in that the impact

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3. John R. McRae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 130.

4. *Ibid.*, 112.

of their sayings and doings is ephemeral or lasts only so long as the latest live delivery. For instance, although there are about one-and-a-half fascicles containing verse comments (*songgu*) on *gongan* in his twenty-volume recorded sayings (*yulu*) in addition to a collection of miscellaneous poems for various occasions in the last volume, Yuanwu does not contribute his own odes to the *Blue Cliff Record*. The lone exception is a single poem included in the commentary on the final case. In playful fashion the text's concluding verse expresses Yuanwu's equivocation in regard to the role of language as well as his mixed feelings about the efficacy of the overall commentarial project as a response to the religious aspirations of his readers:

Filled with countless bushels a boat effortlessly pulls away,  
 Holding just one grain of rice a jar entraps a snake;  
 When offering comments on one hundred transformative old cases  
 (*gongan*),  
 Just how many people will end up with sand tossed in their eyes?  
 萬斛盈舟信手拏.却因一粒甕吞蛇.拈提百轉舊公案.撒却時人幾眼  
 沙.<sup>5</sup>

This poem recalls Xuedou's self-deprecating saying, "Raising the ancient [masters] and raising the present [masters] is like tossing sand and sprinkling mud. There is in fact nothing!" 舉古舉今拋沙撒土.直下無事.<sup>6</sup> Xuedou also says in his *Record*, "For all my life I deeply regret that I have relied too much on words [to explicate Ch'an teachings]. Next time I would simply use my staff, sandals, robe, and bowl." 吾平生患語之多矣.翌日出杖履衣盂.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, in a capping phrase on the verse on case 50, in which Xuedou deploys one of his favorite discursive techniques by citing the key phrase from the main case ("Rice in the bowl, water in the bucket" 鉢裏飯桶裏水) as the opening line, Yuanwu remarks, "Truth is apparent. Why scatter sand and dirt? You must wash your mouth out for three years before you'll get the point." 露也.撒沙撒土作什麼.漱口三

5. T. 48:224b3-6; the verse follows the regulated four-line poetic pattern of opening-development-turnabout-conclusion 起承轉合(結).

6. T. 47:670a20. Soon before he died, when his grief-stricken attendant monk requested a parting *gāthā*, Xuedou replied, "My only regret in this life is that I talked too much"; cited in Charles Egan, trans., *Clouds Thick, Whereabouts Unknown: Poems by Zen Monks of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

7. T. 47:712c15-16.

年始得。<sup>8</sup> Also in case 41 Yuanwu caps Xuedou's final line, "I don't know who explains by scattering sand and dust" 不知誰解撒塵沙 with the phrase, "There is quite a bit of this taking place right now. Whether they are open or closed, it still gets in the eyes." 即今也不開眼也著。合眼也著。<sup>9</sup> While not primarily a poet himself, although he was known to use poetry romantic imagery taken from Chinese love stories as symbolic of the pathway to attaining enlightenment, Yuanwu's remarks on verses by Xuedou, who also composed voluminous prose commentary, support and clarify instead of denigrate and diminish the religious significance of Chan poetics?<sup>10</sup>

#### RHETORIC OF UNCERTAINTY

Despite controversies and refutations, the *Blue Cliff Record* has received ample praise both then and now. According to an informative and inspiring afterword written in 1317 by Xi Ling, a monk from Mount Jingshan temple near Hangzhou, which was the leading Five Mountains Chan monastic institution in China long dominated by followers of Yuanwu's lineage, the *Blue Cliff Record* is an astonishing work because in its pages:

Wondrous knowledge is disclosed and transmitted through a spiritual process that seeks to bring illumination to a dusky cave, like a small toad lifting up and shining light on the recesses of a darkened room.... Based on just a single perusal of this book, people with great

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8. T. 48:185b15.

9. T. 48:179a23. The following dialogue also mentioned in this case is interesting: "Haven't you heard that a monk once asked Changqing, 'What is the eye of a man of knowledge?,' and he said, 'He has a vow not to scatter sand.' Baofu said, 'You must not scatter any more of it.' All over the world venerable old teachers sit on carved wood seats, teaching with blows and shouts, raising their whisks, knocking on the seat, exhibiting spiritual powers and acting as masters. All of this is scattering sand. But say ye, how can any of it be avoided?" 不見僧問長慶.如何是善知識眼.慶云有願不撒沙.保福云.不可更撒也.天下老和尚據曲条木床上.行棒行喝豎拂敲床.現神通作主宰.盡是撒沙.且道如何免得; T. 48:179b6-10.

10. Xuedou composed seven texts in all with prose comments on about three hundred cases, and in most instances is parsimonious in that the remarks are often limited to just one or two sentences. One of these texts composed later in his life became the basis of Yuanwu's additional prose commentary in *Record of Keeping the Beat (Jijielu)*.

wisdom suddenly awaken their original mind and quickly reach the stage of thoroughly removing all doubts.<sup>11</sup>

Similar acclaim has continued unabated in regard to the exhilaration that ensues through learning from this compilation, which is greatly appreciated and admired today by researchers and aficionados alike in that a global audience has been avidly reading and responding to the significance of this and related texts.

Modern commentators are in accord regarding the value of the complex interpretative quality of the *Blue Cliff Record*, which “as a rich compendium of Ch’an teachings, lore, poetry, and wit ... reflecting Yüan-wu’s exuberant and colloquial style (however inscrutable it may appear initially), represents a peak in the literature of Ch’an.”<sup>12</sup> Heinrich Dumoulin refers to the text as “one of the foremost examples of religious world literature,”<sup>13</sup> although he also notes that this work is intricately composed and “not easy” to decipher. A. V. Grimstone remarks in his introduction to a partial translation with commentary by Katsuki Sekida, “Full of paradoxical expressions and all manner of allusions, [the *Blue Cliff Record*] employs a condensed, often involved style, while treating of matters of great subtlety and difficulty.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover in the introduction to their 1977 translation of the text, Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary suggest that the “literary expressiveness is so rich that it can hardly fail to make an impression.”<sup>15</sup> They emphasize that Edo reformer Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1768)—otherwise known as a fierce Rinzai critic of the elaborate discursive style used in the *Blue Cliff Record* and strong supporter of a rival standpoint based on minimalist uses of language—lectured on the collection at least fourteen times over more than thirty years (from the late 1720s until near the end of his life), and said that he continually gained new insights from reading it.

What makes the text so special? The *Blue Cliff Record* initiated a complex seven-layered style of *gongan* commentary style fully emulated by

11. T. 48: 224c17–225a1 (includes entire Xi Ling postface essay).

12. Kenneth Kraft, *Eloquent Zen: Daitō and Early Japanese Zen* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 131.

13. Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism, Vol. I: India and China* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 249.

14. A. V. Grimstone, “Introduction,” in Katsuki Sekida, trans., *Two Zen Classics: Hekiganroku, Mumonkan* (New York: Weatherhill, 1977), 18–19.

15. Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, xxiii; see also *Zengaku Daijiten*, 1109–1111.

just a limited number of other works from the era, most notably the *Record of Serenity* (Ch. *Congronglu*, Jpn. *Shōyōroku*) published in 1224 by the Caodong school monk located in Beijing, Wansong Xingxiu, based on eleventh century verse remarks by Hongzhi Zhengjue, perhaps the leading figure of the Song dynasty Caodong school. Wansong's primary disciple, Linquan Conglun, whose work was supported by Kublai Khan in the late thirteenth century, also composed similar works, and all of these monks additionally created collections of prose commentaries on *gongan*. After that era, it seems the sheer complexity of the seven-layer style, also referred to as the *pingchang* or evaluative commentary method, as well as the requisite dexterity of authors caused the genre to decline. However, streamlined versions of *gongan* commentaries featuring poems or capping phrases continued for centuries. The seven layers used in the *Blue Cliff Record* are: (1) Introduction by Yuanwu [for seventy-nine cases since it seems the others were lost], (2) Case selected by Xuedou with (3) Capping Phrases and (4) Prose Remarks by Yuanwu, and (5) Verse by Xuedou with (6) Capping Phrases and (7) Prose Remarks by Yuanwu. In the so-called *One Night Blue Cliff* (*Ichiyā Hekigan*) edition, supposedly copied in a single night with the aid of a local deity and brought back from China by Dōgen and then secretly preserved at the Sōtō sect's Daijōji monastery in northwestern Japan, the order is somewhat different as it follows the original *One Hundred Odes* by Xuedou in that the verse immediately follows the case; also, the sequence of the last third of the cases is distinct.<sup>16</sup>

What McRae highlights, however, is that the key discursive element is not so much the complexity of the multiple levels of evaluative commentary but rather the different dimensions of interactivity, including Xuedou's exchanges included within some of the cases (his own capping phrases are part of fifteen instances) and Yuanwu's remarks about all of the source dialogues integrated with the case as well as Xuedou's comments giving us a sense of the way both Xuedou and Yuanwu intermingled with their respective assemblies who first heard their utterances. The *Blue Cliff Record* lectures by Yuanwu were recorded based on summer retreat sermons delivered in 1111 and 1112 at Mount Jiashan monastery in Hunan province before being edited

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16. If read independently, which was probably done at the time, Xuedou's text is known as *One Hundred Odes* (*Baize Songgu*); however, this is not included in the modern Taishō edition of the master's work.

by disciples and released over a decade later. A couple of other manuscripts discovered since that time and preserved today indicate that Yuanwu must have contributed to the publishing process but was not ultimately responsible for it.

Supported by the quality of live performative ritual discourse, the spiritual vision expressed in the *Blue Cliff Record*, apparently originally known as the *Blue Cliff Collection* 碧巖集 (*BiyANJI*, Jpn. *Hekiganshū*) with the title undergoing a change in Edo period Japan,<sup>17</sup> makes it a prime example of what Yuanwu's predecessor and close associate, Juefan Huihong, called Literary (*wenzi*) Chan based on what I refer to as the principle of "uncertainty." This indicates a resourceful approach to discourse that is characterized by fundamental ambiguity and purposeful inconclusiveness. This outlook places full responsibility for attaining self-realization on the individual trainee, who through engaging multiple rhetorical perspectives without fixation or limitation gains spontaneous liberation from intellectual fetters and emotional attachments. What the authors try to reveal are not definitive explications or solutions for enigmatic *gongan* cases, but a way of exploring and making an assessment of various viewpoints that serves as a model for self-reliance and self-realization. In numerous examples throughout the work, highly stylized remarks seek to upend dramatically or reverse radically staid and stereotypical opinions via a Chan adept's symbolic ability to "overturn a trainee's meditation seat and chase the great assembly" 掀倒禪床.喝散大眾,<sup>18</sup> or more expansively to "reverse the flow of the great seas, topple Mount Sumeru [the mythical cosmic Buddhist summit], and scatter the white clouds" 掀翻大海.踢倒須彌.喝散白雲.<sup>19</sup>

17. I am grateful to William M. Bodiford for pointing this out in several personal communications and showing me a series of cover designs for various editions of the text over the centuries that reflects this change.

18. T. 48:148c20.

19. T. 48:160a116–17. I agree with Thomas Cleary's comments in the introductory essay to his translation of the *Book of Serenity* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1990), 39: "In the Chan understanding, no expression or view can ever be complete, and Chan literature explicitly warns that dialogue and difference among Chan adepts are not to be understood in terms of either/or, win/lose choices.... [S]ayings are not necessarily direct comments on or illustrations of the statements they are added to; sometimes they are designed



Dahui, the supposed destroyer of the text, was no less a literary achiever than his teacher or Xuedou in having produced a significant corpus of nearly a dozen major works including voluminous *gongan* commentary. But soon after publication of the *Blue Cliff Record* he supposedly led a harsh critique of any reliance on rhetoric that was seen as a violation of the basic Chan principle of holding to a “special transmission outside the scriptures” (*jiaowai biezhuān*). The notion of Non (or anti)-literary (*wuzi*) Chan was thus revived in the Southern Song, when aesthetic pursuits though still important in the capital of Hangzhou were considered by many a mere indulgence to be discarded rather than a refinement to be cultivated given the threat of northern invaders. Dahui’s keyword (*huatou*) technique extracts a catchphrase from one of the *gongan*, such as “No! (*Wu/Mu*),” “Three pounds of flax,” or “Cypress tree standing in the courtyard,” which constitutes a shortcut path for the practitioner to gain a sudden breakthrough to enlightenment without the need for the embellishments and flourishes of extended literary conceits.

The historicity of the account of what Dahui may or may not have done remains undetermined, but it is clear that one way or another the text of the *Blue Cliff Record* was lost for a long time before being retrieved and partially reconstructed by the combined efforts of monastic and lay supporters. The collection was transmitted to Japan shortly after this effort—the date and circumstances for the transfer is yet another problematic area of inquiry—where it met with a complex round of fanfare and influence on figures such as Daitō Kokushi (1277–1366) and Musō Sōseki (1275–1351), in addition to some examples of critique and neglect throughout medieval and early modern Japanese history, particularly by Bankei (1622–1693), who advocates the notion of the Unborn (*mushō*). The Dahui legend may be looked at from the standpoint of demythologization in that, regardless of the question of historiography, it symbolizes an ideological conflict between two visions of Chan awakening.

In my reading based in part on McRae, the notion of uncertainty as an innovative interpretative tool for deconstructing each and every standpoint put forth is key to the distinctive method of thought and manner of discourse of the *Blue Cliff Record*, which endorses

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to shift the reader into a different viewpoint or shed light on the same point from a different angle.”

indeterminacy on literary and experiential levels as the basis for experiencing spiritual realization. Uncertainty indicates that the primary aim of Chan awakening is to acknowledge constructive ambiguity in coming to terms with perennial issues that are crucial elements in the quest for spiritual realization. There is no attempt on the part of either Xuedou or Yuanwu—in fact such an effort is deliberately avoided and disputed—to reach a firm or clear-cut conclusion that may become the source of a preoccupation or attachment involving such Buddhist topics as the role of language (whether it is considered a vehicle or obstacle to truth), the function of doubt (as either debilitating or exhilarating along the spiritual pathway), suspicions about perception (as either detrimental or conducive to self-awareness), and the meaning of time (whether a hindrance or entry point to enlightenment).

The emphasis on uncertainty is not intended to indicate a form of nihilism or pessimism that gives up and abandons the quest for awakening in pursuit of primarily literary rather than religious goals, which is the way the *Blue Cliff Record* has frequently been (mis)understood. The collection is especially buoyant and optimistic about the possibility that each and every person has the potential to develop the skill or knack for attaining and expressing insight, and is thereby able to become an adept in his or her own way. As Yunmen declares in case 6, “Every day is a good day,” and in case 89 he says that, “All people have a light,” regardless of extenuating circumstances or divisions and distinctions made in ordinary life. Therefore uncertainty can be referred to more positively as the expressive activity (*hyōgen sayō*), borrowing a Nishida Kitarō philosophical notion, of “sharpening a (critical discursive) sword” 機鋒 (*jifeng*; literally, a “crossbow arrow” hitting its mark or any “razor-like device” that cuts through obstacles).

This term implies a quick-witted talent for answering effectively no matter the situation and breaking any impasse that emerges in Chan’s combative spiritual encounters. As conveyed by the verse and capping phrases on case 75, which declares, “Observe carefully the interaction of action points [between interlocutors]! (One entry, one exit. Two adepts are both parrying with the same staff, but which one is really holding it?)” 互換機鋒子細看 (一出入.二俱作家.一條拄杖兩人扶.且道在阿誰邊,<sup>20</sup> *jifeng* suggests a vivid, alert, and timely elicitation of words and gestures. Expressions are deployed either sparingly

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20. T. 48:203a8–9.

but with precision and great effect or with parsimony yet a generosity of spirit by nimbly communicating clever retorts that at first disarm the adversary, but in the end disclose deeper wisdom that is available to all parties.

Chan encounters are said to take place at the proverbial “Dragon Gate” (*longmen*). This mythical barrier is where diligent and determined fish swimming upstream of a waterfall during a raging spring thunderstorm are said to be able leap past the peak once and for all and thereby transform into dragons that fly away on clouds toward heaven while peach blossoms of the third lunar month fall and float calmly in the choppy waters below.<sup>21</sup> This image symbolizing the attainment of transcendental awareness was a traditional analogy for those select few competitors who passed strict imperial examinations based on their dedicated effort. In a related use of the metaphor of exams, at the end of case 46, master Jingqing comments, “Overcoming the body [or, everyday success] is easy to achieve but the path of full detachment is difficult.” 出身猶可易, 脫體道應難.<sup>22</sup> The first phrase used in secular discourse is an idiom for performing well on an entrance test that would normally be considered quite difficult to attain, but here it is contrasted with realizing enlightenment that represents the real challenge.

#### PERFORMATIVE ELEMENTS

As John McRae shows, an important feature shared by Xuedou and Yuanwu along with a multitude of Song Chan abbots is the fundamentally oral or ritual performance aspect of sermonizing. The deliveries of Xuedou’s verses in the 1020s and of Yuanwu’s lectures nearly a century later were live events that were recorded, or were perhaps originally given based on written notes as a kind of script and were subsequently edited. The presentations tried to capture and recreate in their own way the initial spontaneity and impromptu quality of source dialogues. By virtue of what was a live process their remarks seek to disturb and disrupt as well as to persuade and transform the then-current

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21. For a full discussion of some of the main elements of the extensive traditional symbolism associated with the Dragon Gate see Norris Brock Johnson, *Tenryū-ji: Life and Spirit of a Kyoto Garden* (Albany, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2012), especially the tenth chapter.

22. *T. 48:182b24.*

audience in addition to subsequent readers by creating a collaborative, participatory environment.

In case 88, for instance, Xuedou ends his verse with the simple eloquence of, “Leaves fall and flowers bloom, each in its own time” 葉落花開自有時. Yuanwu comments in his capping phrase on the progression of temporality and then Xuedou exclaims, “Do you understand or not? An iron hammerhead with no hole,” and Yuanwu reacts with, “It’s a shame he let go, so I strike!” 可惜放過.便打.<sup>23</sup> In case 97, the text indicates that after his verse Xuedou adds the remark, “I’ve thoroughly seen through” 勘破了也, as an exhortative aside made to the assembly. This phrase is included in two of the capping phrases added by Yuanwu, who then says sardonically of Xuedou’s final remark, “Each blow of the staff leaves a welt.”<sup>24</sup>

In case 60, evoking the Chan stick as an implement of instruction based on a dialogue in which Yunmen has told his assembly that his “staff has changed into a dragon and swallowed the whole universe,” Xuedou remarks, “I have picked up [the staff]/ Hearing or not hearing/ One must simply be free/ Stop any further mixed-up confusion/ With seventy-two blows I am still letting you off easy/ Even after one hundred and fifty it will be hard to forgive you.” 拈了也.聞不聞.直須灑灑落落.休更紛紛紜紜.七十二棒且輕恕.一百五十難放君.<sup>25</sup> The text notes that, “Xuedou then suddenly grabbed his staff and descended from the dais,” apparently waving it wildly in a mock threatening way while all at once the great assembly scattered and fled” 師驀拈拄杖下座.大眾一時走散. Yuanwu adds with quasi-approval to the first line of the verse, “He is being compassionate like an old granny” 謝慈悲.老婆心切; with skepticism to the fifth line about dishing out seventy-two blows he says, “I strike and say, ‘Letting go [releasing the disciple from the teacher’s grasp] does no good” 打云放過則不可; and with faux contempt to the last note on Xuedou wielding his staff he adds, “Why does Xuedou have the head of dragon but the tail of a snake?” 雪竇龍頭蛇尾作什麼.

Other instances in which the living situation of the verse delivery becomes apparent from reading the transcribed text, according to the modern typography of the Taishō edition which includes line breaks

23. T. 48:213b12.

24. T. 48:213b10–12.

25. T. 48:192c12–21.

but minimal punctuation, include case 20, in which Xuedou appends a second verse since he says the first poem in which he demanded that the meditation bench and cushion possessed by Longya be handed over did not complete his thoughts. Also, in case 45, Xuedou says he has thrown down or discarded Zhaozhou's "seven-pound shirt" into the West Lake, which was near the location of his first temple in Suzhou before he occupied the eponymously-named monastery in Zhejiang province.

Another example of the use of this ritual approach is case 11, in which Yuanwu asks rhetorically, "But tell me, where does [Huangbo's] meaning lie?" 且道意在什麼處. After describing the teaching of the Chan school Yuanwu says to the assembly, "I dare to ask all of you, who could be a teacher of Chan? But as soon as I speak this way I've already lost my mind. People, where are your nostrils [to be put in tow with a ring]?" 作麼生是禪中師. 山僧怎麼道. 已是和頭沒卻了也. 諸人鼻孔在什麼處. Then, "after a pause" 良久 that is recorded in the text (unusual in this collection though not in related texts from the era that are more clearly records of oral sermons) to indicate that during the hiatus the assembly may have asked questions or made comments Yuanwu concludes, "Their nostrils have been pierced through!" 穿卻了也,<sup>26</sup> which means, somewhat sardonically, that he has got the members of his group under his control.

John McRae also says there is a "feeling of 'being there'" created by *Blue Cliff Record* rhetoric. In that vein it is helpful to recall the saying of John Knox, one of the early great Protestant sermonizers who remarked, "It is possible to preach a quite unbiblical sermon on a Biblical text. It is also possible to preach a biblical sermon on no text at all." If "Chan" were substituted for "biblical" in the three places where Knox uses the word as both adjective and noun the same would hold true for the lectures of Xuedou and Yuanwu, who explored every possible topic, theme, saying, or image as a vehicle for expounding the significance of Chan insight but resisted turning clichés and catchphrases into prized expressions.

Part of Yuanwu's goal is to unpack and clarify Xuedou's sources of inspiration in their appropriate context by annotating critically many of their mysterious citations and allusions. In addition to providing these kinds of reference materials Yuanwu consistently goes beyond

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26. T. 48:152a25–29.

exegesis to eisegesis by offering his own creative evaluations of Xuedou as well as the encounter dialogue partners. This is done sometimes by offering praise but at other times through harsh criticism, and also covers reversals and inversions of standpoints and perspectives in an ongoing process that is referred to in one of the collection's prefaces as, "reviewing and reversing *gongan* case judgments" 翻案法. The goal of this interpretative effort is to direct the audience to not take for granted facile conclusions or idealized interpretations and to think through for themselves their own understanding of the dialogues. Yuanwu exposes readers to diverse views but discourages accepting any particular interpretation at face value since it easily becomes the basis of a fixation or attachment.

Yuanwu adds various kinds of commentary that at once explicate through exposition and problematize by challenging many of the assumptions and conclusions indicated in the *One Hundred Odes*. He shows that understanding the verse on case 37, for example, requires a broad knowledge of various Chan and Chinese literary sources that inspired Xuedou. But he also boldly proclaims that the verse should not be interpreted as an instance of "singing out from within nothingness" 無中唱出, which apparently was a common reading that needed to be dispelled (although elsewhere Yuanwu indicates he admires that view). Yuanwu suggests it takes the ear of an aficionado to appreciate the harmony expressed by the tune of Xuedou's elegant poetry yet he also comments ironically that "listening makes you deaf" 聽則聾.<sup>27</sup>

Although not necessarily strictly followed in every instance in the *One Hundred Odes* an intriguing example from among Xuedou's comments is a four-line verse on case 54, in which Yunmen outsmarts a monk who utilizes words too literally in response to the master's query and ends up first slapping and then striking the trainee. Starting off by signaling approval of the teaching method of Yunmen, Xuedou says, "In one act he takes the tiger's head and the tiger's tail,/ His imposing majesty extends throughout the four hundred realms./ But I inquire [of Yunmen], 'Didn't you realize how impregnable the position was?'/ [Xuedou] says, 'I leave out the last part.'" 虎頭虎尾一時收/ 凜凜威風四百州/ 卻問不知何太嶮/ 師云放過一著.<sup>28</sup> While the third line reverses the theme of admiration by calling into question Yunmen's

27. T. 48:175b14.

28. T. 48:188c09-12.

approach, the final line is deliberately irregular in terms of the number of characters (six, with the first two meaning, “the teacher says”) as Xuedou confesses he has nothing more to add in this context. The syntax further indicates that the final phrase was probably originally uttered as an impromptu remark made to inconclusively conclude an oral delivery of the poem. Given that the capping phrase provided by Yuanwu says he hits the meditation seat one time—although this part is left out of an alternative version of the *Blue Cliff Record*—perhaps the meaning of Xuedou’s last line is, “I don’t strike a blow,” instead of referring to a lack of words.<sup>29</sup>

Does Xuedou’s silence at the end suggest esteem for or criticism of Yunmen? Meanwhile Yuanwu’s comments playfully challenge both Yunmen, who he says deserved to be hit for wrongfully punishing an advanced disciple, and Xuedou, who was left speechless because he was unable to defend his ancestor’s apparent mistake. Yuanwu concludes by suggesting that he will not be one to leave off hitting, so that “everyone in the world will have to take a beating.” Through prose and capping phrase comments Yuanwu thereby creates a non-poetic way of capturing and conveying the poetic progression that leads to the final line by Xuedou, and this is carried out in order to at once support and subvert the predecessor’s standpoint. While later commentators, as the tradition continued to unfold, have offered different readings of Xuedou’s verse, which is deliberately ambiguous and open-ended, as well as Yuanwu’s reproach, the latter’s view is usually referred to directly or indirectly as an interpretative anchor.

To cite one among seemingly countless examples of how hermeneutic vagueness rooted in the principle of uncertainty regarding gongan evaluation can appear to reflect a perplexing inconclusiveness, let us consider back-to-back cases contained in Yuanwu’s *Record of Keeping the Beat* commentary on Xuedou’s prose remarks that highlight responses to a monk’s query, “What can be expressed completely in just one word?” 一言道盡時如何.<sup>30</sup> Noting that the sequence in this collection seems out of chronological order in that Muzhou was

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29. The commentary by Yamada Kōun of the modern Sambōkyōdan school points out an interesting discrepancy between the mainstream version of the text and the version in the *One Night Blue Cliff* edition; see <http://www.sanbozen.org/Hek054.pdf> (accessed January 26, 2015).

30. X. 67:243c17–24a3.

Yunmen's teacher and thus likely spoke first, case 53 indicates that Yunmen says, "Ripped apart!" 裂破, to which Yuanwu caps, "What's that?" 道什麼. Then Xuedou comments not through speaking but by, "Snapping his fingers three times" 雪竇彈指三下, and Yuanwu caps, "This came only after words of explanation" 也是隨語生解. In case 54 of the same text Muzhou replies, "I am found in the pouch of a begging bowl" 老僧在你鉢囊裏, and Yuanwu caps, "It's a double case" 兩重公案. Xuedou comments again with a gesture by interjecting, "Laughing out loud, Ha! Ha!" 雪竇呵呵大笑, and Yuanwu caps with, "Compare that!" 猶較些子.<sup>31</sup>

What is the relation between the distinct replies proffered by the Yunmen and Muzhou along with Xuedou's nonverbal reactions? To make matters even more complicated Yuanwu's prose remarks defy the reader to neither conflate nor separate the answers of the core dialogue while trying to comprehend intuitively Xuedou's state of mind:

Muzhou always used an ability to answer like a lightning bolt...Tell me, Was this the same as or different from Yunmen's answer? If you say different then the Buddha Dharma will be of two kinds; but if you say the same then why are there two answers since there is only one question? You must penetrate to where there is no doubt and then you will be able to see thoroughly...When Xuedou "laughed out loud, 'Ha, Ha!'" what was the reason behind this? Try to discern it. 睦州尋常機如掣電且道與雲門答處.是同是.若道是別.佛法有兩般.若道是同.為什麼問處則一.答處兩般.須是透到無疑處方見徹.雪竇呵呵大笑.是什麼道理.試辨看.<sup>32</sup>

For a small glimpse of the extent to which the gongan tradition has encouraged divergent thinking to proliferate with additional layers of complexity we can consider briefly Dōgen's interpretation of these cases that are included in vol. 2.133 of his *Extensive Record* of sermons delivered in Chinese (*kanbun*) in the Dharma hall at Eihei-ji temple (then known as Daibutsuji). Here the order of responses begins with Muzhou's words while Yunmen's reply is changed to, "Ripped apart from long ago until now!" 裂破古今. According to the record, rather than trying to explain what any of this means since that might result in a sense that logic prevails, "Dōgen throws his fly-whisk down on the ground while saying, 'Great assembly, do you understand this fully? If

31. X. 67:243c17-a1.

32. X. 67:244a4-9.



you do not understand then it is regrettable that I even bothered with the fly-whisk.” 擲下扨子階前便云.大眾還會麼.若也未會.可惜許.一柄扨子.<sup>33</sup>

A similar example of inconclusiveness is found in the verse to case 31 in the *Blue Cliff Record*, in which Xuedou deliberately contradicts himself in back-to-back lines, “Each and every gate has a path that is empty and desolate/ No, it is not desolate” 門門有路空蕭索.非蕭索. Yuanwu’s capping phrase states, “Fortunately [Xuedou] has a place to turn around” 賴有轉身處, but nevertheless, “I strike” 便打.<sup>34</sup> The final line of the poem suggests, “An adept seeks a remedy even if he has no illness” 作者好求無病藥. However this part of the verse can also be read as, “The adept seeks but there is no medicine for his disease,” or more emphatically, “The enlightened man must take medicine for the illness of ‘having no illness.’”<sup>35</sup> Since everyone including the awakened suffers from some sort of ailment, if the adept considers himself immune then such a belief in itself constitutes a form of disease. He seeks to avoid the futility of “hanging a medicine bag on the back of a hearse” 喪車背後懸藥袋,<sup>36</sup> which is a state similar to “pulling the bow after the thief has fled” or “falling into secondary status” 落在第二.

Another example of seemingly unresolvable ambiguity is in the *Record of Linji*, in which the master reacts to the unconventional behavior of a trickster figure known as Puhua 普化 (lit. “Universal Transfiguration”), showing that a single ambiguous word or phrase can lead to nearly opposite conclusions about the whole passage. The text covers the exploits of the prototypical ninth century leader but can perhaps be considered a Song Chan composition because it was first included as a section of the *Tiansheng Transmission of the Lamp Record* (*Tiansheng Guangdenglu*) of 1036 but was not published as an

33. Kawamura Kōdō et. al., eds., *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 7 vols. (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1988–1993), 3:78; see also Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, trans., *Dōgen’s Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Koroku* (Boston: Wisdom, 2010), 159–160.

34. T. 48:171a28–b1.

35. The first version is in Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, 199, and the second is in Sekida, *Two Zen Classics*, 228. Yuanwu’s prose comment seems to support Cleary and Cleary, “If you are an adept, even when you have no illness, still you should go ahead and take some medicine as a preventative measure” 任是作者.無病時.也須是先討些藥喫始得; T. 48:171b1.

36. T. 48:189a16.

independent work until 1120, just a few years prior to the publication of the *Blue Cliff Record*.<sup>37</sup> Linji had a mixed assessment ranging from acceptance and admiration to exhaustion and exasperation with Puhua, who joined his assembly for a while yet frequently tried to one-up the master before passing away in mysterious fashion:

One time Puhua was going around the streets of the town ringing a little bell while calling out, “When there is brightness I strike the brightness; when there is darkness I strike the darkness; when there are four quarters and eight directions I strike like a whirlwind; and when there is vast sky I strike like a wheelhouse.” Linji told his attendant to go and as soon as he heard Puhua say these words to grab him and ask, “When nothing at all happens then what?” Puhua pushed the attendant aside while saying, “Tomorrow there will be a great feast at Dabei cloister [a small temple in the city]. The attendant returned and told this to the master who said, “I’ve always had to wonder about that fellow.”  
因普化.常於街市搖鈴云.明頭來.明頭打.暗頭來.暗頭打.四方八面來.旋風打.虛空來.連架打.師令侍者去.纔見如是道.便把住云.總不與麼來時如何.普化托開云.來日大悲院裏有齋.侍者回.舉似師.師云.我從來疑著這漢.<sup>38</sup>

The phrase 疑著 in the final sentence is taken to mean that Linji “had my doubts or suspicions,” thus indicating a modest extent of disapproval or at least wariness. But it could also suggest the opposite according to some translations in which Linji “held wonder for” or “was in awe of” the controversial Puhua.

#### CHAN’S CRISIS OF AUTHORITY

To further explicate the role of rhetoric in the *Blue Cliff Record*, let us note that as Juhn Ahn astutely observes Song Chan was characterized by a “crisis of authority in reading and learning”<sup>39</sup> because, despite the fact that voluminous textual sources and interpretative resources were available as never before due to mass printing, diversity and divergence did not lead to either a unifying ideological vision or an overarching pedagogical standard. A sense of coherence that could bridge

37. See Thomas Yuhō Kirchner, ed., *The Record of Linji*, translation and commentary by Ruth Fuller Sasaki (Honolulu: University of Press, 2009).

38. Kirchner, *The Record of Linji*, 295–296.

39. Juhn Y. Ahn, “Who Has the Last Word in Chan? Transmission, Secrecy and Reading during the Northern Song Dynasty,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 37, no. 1 (2009): 28.

apparently incommensurable or conflicting viewpoints, some of which may have gained an endorsement from reigning emperors or influential men at court, was simply not generated by the fragmented and dispersed Chan institution, thus “opening a door for sheer arbitrariness or irresponsibility.”<sup>40</sup>

*Gongan* functioned at the forefront of contestation in that they “were, indeed, used as emblems of factional identity and style”<sup>41</sup> so that, as Juefan once regretted, “a hair’s breadth of differentiation” could lead one view to be labeled authentic while a seemingly plausible alternative was dismissed as a “crazy” 狂 or “wild fox” 野狐 interpretation. As *Wumen’s Barrier* remarks in the verse on case 21, “In a blink of the eye the opportune moment is lost forever” 貶得眼已蹉過.<sup>42</sup> The stakes were incredibly high yet no altogether convincing explanation could or would be given for judgments made.

Meanwhile the bane of single-flavored, tunnel-vision-based thinking on the part of stubborn fools and incorrigible phonies, who failed to realize their limitations, went hopelessly uncorrected. There was no other recourse than delivering “thirty blows of the stick” 三十棒 for faux disciples who fell back out of ignorance on stale formulas, indecipherable diagrams, memorized lists, recited ditties, or other examples of rote learning carefully catalogued into neat typologies while they frantically tried to fake their way through contested spiritual barriers. The blows were unfortunately also richly deserved by deceptive teachers who, based on arrogance, feigned that they were unconcerned and above the fray in evoking ordinary, everyday reality just-as-it-is 平事禪 (*pingshi Chan*) as a rationale for taking a *laissez faire* stance. Therefore 21 flogging, whether literal or more likely figurative, was fitting punishment for hopeless pretenders gave away their deficient status by “having jowls big enough that they could be seen from behind” 腦後見腮.<sup>43</sup> This is like the comment in the verse to case 6 of *Wumen’s Barrier*, “He makes the bad look good, as if holding up the head of a sheep but selling the meat of a dog” 壓良為賤.懸羊頭賣狗肉.<sup>44</sup>

40. Caifang Zhu, “Hermeneutics of Chan Buddhism: Reading Koans from *The Blue Cliff Record*,” *Asian Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (Nov. 2011): 383.

41. Ahn, “Who Has the Last Word in Chan?,” 24–25.

42. *T. 48:295c11*.

43. *T. 48:165c14*.

44. *T. 48:293c18*.

In *The Language of the Chan School (Chanzong Yuyan)* modern scholar Zhou Yukai explains with many intriguing examples over a dozen types of verbal and nonverbal expressions that are frequently used in Chan writings.<sup>45</sup> These include various elicitations indicated through the use of body language as well as shouting and hitting, in addition to communications by means of nonsensical words or eloquent but enigmatic phrasing, and more. All of the highly perplexing forms of disclosure emerging out of some degree of closure to trigger creativity while avoiding deceptive or distracting practices pigeonholed as foxy or crazy. In that vein Yuanwu boldly claims of his method for examining and evaluating encounter dialogues, “I always show people how to observe clearly the dynamic moment of pivotal activity whereby a turnaround is able to smash through any barrier.” 山僧尋常教人觀這機關轉處。<sup>46</sup>

Innovative rhetorical elements embedded in the *Blue Cliff Record* are aimed at unsettling conventional understandings of words and phrases through the inventive or reformative use of neologisms and wordplay while also resorting, when language fails to overcome conceptual entanglements, to various unvoiced or ritual performative acts and gestures that upset the stereotypical comportment of arrogant fools and stubborn phonies who were infecting Chan training routines. Through resourceful verbal maneuvers and imaginative nonverbal movements any outlook that resembles an ordinary worldview is turned radically upside down and inside out, not to establish yet another fixed opinion reflecting ignorance but to free an interlocutor from attachment to particular perspectives.

As Yuanwu says in case 20, because the intellectual and/or emotional views of regular practitioners are so deeply rooted, a master’s exploits exert a distinctively disturbing effect in appearing “to reverse the great ocean, kick over Mount Sumeru, scatter the white clouds with shouts, and break up empty space; straightaway, with a single device and a single object the tongues of everyone on earth are cut off.” 掀翻大海.踢倒須彌.喝散白雲.打破虛空.直下向一機 一境.坐斷天下人舌頭。<sup>47</sup> He also suggests in case 8 that for those trainees who are better

45. Zhou Yukai, *Chanzong Yuyan*, also cited by Caifeng Zhu, “The Hermeneutics of Chan Buddhism,” 378.

46. T. 48:197a5.

47. T. 48:160a16–18.

prepared, “If someone suddenly comes forward right now to overturn meditation seats while scattering the great assembly with shouts, this should not be considered mystifying.” 如今忽有 箇出來.掀倒禪床.喝散大眾.怪他不得.<sup>48</sup>

The phrase in the passage above that literally means “a single device and a single object” 一機一境 (*yiji yijing*, or sometimes 機境, *jijing*) is used frequently and functions in Yuanwu’s rhetoric as a special compound to indicate the exceptional kind of activity of an adept that expresses much more than what is actually being said or done. Examples include such gestures a Chan master uses as teaching devices in replying to questions as “twinkling the eyes,” “raising the eyebrows,” and “raising the staff, the whisk, or the gavel.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover Yuanwu uses a variety of verbs that convey the capacity to disrupt inflexible standpoints, such as “to reverse” 掀翻, “to kick over” 踢倒, “to scold and scatter” 喝散, and “to break up (or through)” 打破. Yuanwu also makes it clear that anyone including he himself could be subjected to this comeuppance. In commenting on case 79 he criticizes Touzi (819–914), who strikes an impertinent monk for asking whether breaking wind reflects the voice of Buddha, because he stops the assault before “his staff is broken” 拄杖未到折.<sup>50</sup> Then, in capping Xuedou’s lines about ignorant people who die while playing in the tide yet have, “Suddenly come back to life/ As a hundred rivers surge backwards with a roar” 忽然活.百川倒流鬧活活, Yuanwu says, “My meditation seat shakes as, startled and stunned, I too fall back three thousand miles” 禪床震動.驚殺山僧.也倒退三千里.<sup>51</sup>

#### CONCLUSIONS

By reflecting on John McRae’s perceptive discussion of the validity and viability of the *Blue Cliff Record*’s performative rhetorical style, we have considered a number of examples within the source dialogues that evolved into gongan cases whereby a dramatic form of enactment, such as striking and scolding, or threatening to inflict harm with a stick, sword, arrow, or a dangerous animal like a snake or tiger, or reacting with feigned fear or as if a victim of these dangers, is crucial to

48. T. 48:148c20–21.

49. Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, 16–17.

50. T. 48:205c7.

51. T. 48:206a10–11.

the impact of the encounter. In that sense, the action of the exchange reflecting an adept's ability to pivot on the spot or a novice's lack of capacity for this—or the interplay in which one party heightens their facility or is exposed for faking it through the challenge presented by the other—speaks more loudly than words in terms of sending to the reader/audience a powerful message regarding what is needed to attain self realization. Therefore, the term *gongan* seems to function in such a context less as a noun referring to a prearranged discursive entity than as a verb capturing spontaneous behavior during lively dialogues and debates. Even if it is believed that many of the accounts were literary devices invented long after the supposed event took place, these techniques must have originally exuded a sense of vitality and immediacy that can only be surmised.<sup>52</sup> We can imagine, for example, the effect felt at the time that Heshan (891–960) said simply but forcefully, “Knowing how to beat the drum” 解打鼓, four consecutive times in replying to a monk's persistent queries about the nature of truth and transcendence.

By the time monastic ritualism was encoded in Northern Song works, especially the *Rules for Chan Gardens* (*Chanyuan Qinggui*) from 1103 as the most authoritative example, the collecting of the vast storehouse of dialogues was for the most part completed. There was also a clear sense of how pedagogical practices should be conducted by delivering formal sermons (*shangtang*) given before the full assembly in the Dharma hall as well as providing teachings (*xiaocan*) for individuals or smaller groups in a more informal setting in the Abbot's quarters or Monks hall, in addition to other types of delivery with each of the styles adhering to its own set of rules regulating content and demeanor. It is clear from textual and contextual evidence that nearly a century apart both Xuedou through poetry and Yuanwu through prose and capping phrase comments presented their remarks on one hundred *gongan* while giving formal sermons, but also sought ways of breaking out of the mold of behavioral codes and instructions by appearing at critical moments to act spontaneously in a live situation. When the text of the *Blue Cliff Record* is read today as words on paper (or, in digital form) this extemporaneous activity probably cannot help but come across as having at least a partially scripted or premeditated

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52. See McRae, *Seeing Through Zen*; and Steven Heine, *Zen Skin, Zen Marrow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

quality. But if properly appreciated it demonstrates a distinctive flavor of approximating the immediacy of the moment that is still emulated in the delivery of Chan/Zen/Seon sermons today, even if these are often rehearsed in advance of the event, thus giving the impression that what started as the antithesis of ritual has—unfortunately, for some observers or participants—come to epitomize it.

Another key example showing Xuedou's performative stance is case 91 about a rhinoceros fan, in which the remarks of four interpreters of the main dialogue are cited and Xuedou caps each one. This section of the case recalls case 18, and Xuedou's impromptu expression following the delivery of his ode resembles the approach taken in case 60. After the usual four-line *jueju*-style verse, and with Yuanwu's capping comments later appended to make it appear from a typographical standpoint that this is an extension rather than a supplement to the poem, Xuedou challenges "every member of the Chan group to give a turning word" 請禪客各下一轉語. Disappointed when a monk interrupts to "instruct the assembly to go practice in the hall" 大眾參堂去—it is not clear whether this refers to leaving for the meditation hall, which would be conducted in silence, or to another room for private interviews, which would break the momentum of the group session, but in either case it alters against the grain of hierarchy Xuedou's expectation—the master "steps down" 便下座.<sup>53</sup> Yuanwu adds that he should have instead dished out thirty blows of the staff.

One textual indicator of examples of Yuanwu's unplanned delivery as recorded in the text is the occasional use of the phrase, "after a pause," during which there were probably some questions or comments raised by the audience that have been left undocumented. Or perhaps Yuanwu allowed the assembly to wait through a brief interval so as to heighten the sense of drama before he spoke once again. In case 11 such a suspension of words is noted in the prose remarks on the dialogue just before the verse is presented, when Yuanwu says in commenting on the image of piercing nostrils as a sign of discipline, "As soon as I speak this way I have already lost my head. People, where are your nostrils? (A pause) They've been pierced!" 山僧恁麼道.已是和頭沒卻了也.諸人鼻孔在什麼處.良久云.穿卻了也.<sup>54</sup> At the end of case 22 the text says that "the master struck" after asking of the assembly

53. T. 48:216a18–21.

54. T. 48:152a27–28.

some perplexing rhetorical questions, and case 47 concludes in similar fashion but adds the exclamation, “Blind!” while cases 47 and 77 also feature a pause before the final biting comments proffered by Yuanwu.

Another example shows both Xuedou and Yuanwu demonstrating a performative element in as the latter’s approach intertwines with his predecessor’s. At the end of the ode to case 81, which involves the story of “a monk who collapses” 僧放身便倒 when he pretends to be hit once by master Yangshan (751–834), Xuedou says, “Look—an arrow!” 看箭, Yuanwu notes that “after telling the story [in verse] in the Dharma hall Xuedou wrapped it up in a single bundle by calling out loudly...and at that moment everyone sitting or standing in the assembly was unable to stir.” 雪竇是時因上堂.舉此語束為一團話.高聲道一句云...坐者立者.一時起不得.<sup>55</sup> This is but one of many examples the demonstrate the value of John McRae’s insightful remarks on Chan discourse.

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55. T. 48:208a20–22.