

Gods and Demons at the Intersection of Religion and Art History¹

Pamela D. Winfield

Elon University

Almost every chapter of *The Gods of Medieval Japan* opens with an epigram, that is, a relevant quote or clever and pithy passage, and I would like to do the same. Professor Faure selects from his own pantheon of poetic luminaries, literary giants, and artistic geniuses: there is Valéry, Baudelaire, Yeats, Blake, Carroll, the British poet laureate Ted Hughes, Shakespeare, Nabokov, Levinas, and even the gospel according to Matthew. But as I was reading through these two volumes at the beach last summer (though they are definitely *not* light beach reading) another great literary genius came to mind from my own personal pantheon of greats. So in pale imitation of the master, and with a self-deprecating wink at my own capping phrase commentary here, I would like to structure the first part of my remarks with an epigram selected from the great John Lennon song, “I am the Walrus.”

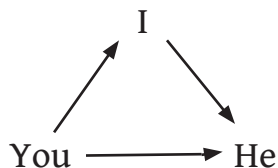
I am he and you are he as you are me and we are all together... [skip a few lines]

I am the egg man (who!), they are the eggmen (who!)

I am the Walrus. Goo goo goo joob!

Granted, the seriousness of these tomes does not warrant such a flip-pant and surreal LSD-induced Lewis-Carroll-moment from John. And I seriously doubt that the great esoteric mantra of *goo goo goo joob* has ever been uttered in American Academy of Religion history. But think about it:

1. This paper was given at the American Academy of Religion Annual Conference, Boston, MA Sunday, Nov 19, 2017.



(1) “I am he and (2) you are he and (3) you are me and we are all together.” This triangulated dance of ever-interlooping identities is not unlike Faure’s analysis of all the alter-egos and shape-shifting figures and stand-in doubles for both familiar and unfamiliar esoteric deities. (For example, the triad of Nyoirin Kannon, Aizen, and Fudō in vol. 1 may also relate to the triad of Benzaiten, Dakiniten, and Shōten in volume 2.) Everyone in the esoteric pantheon seems to mutually implicate everyone else within six degrees of separation or less, and in the end they all ultimately connect across synaptic networks of ritual functions and symbolic iconographies. Anyone can be considered to be the arbitrary center or node in an extended complex of associated deities, and as soon as you shift the focus to a different deity, other related figures come into focus that were previously obscured. This is the actor-network theory that is so helpful for Faure’s analysis. For example, Faure opens the first volume by looking at Myōken’s pole star and glosses on to Fudō and Ichiji Kinrin, who in turn also implicate Aizen and Nyoirin Kannon and myriad other deities, who are often linked to either Amaterasu at one point or another or to the symbolic wish-fulfilling jewel. And the *cintāmaṇi* jewel’s shape and function, in turn, is also uncannily similar to the comma-shaped “human yellow,” which is an invented life-essence premised on the actual *materia medica* of ox bezoar. So you see how far these networks can extend, and how far, in his words, these deities and relations and associations can take on lives of their own. And speaking of oxen, in the second volume, Faure takes up many theriomorphic deities, including and especially elephants, serpents, and foxes, who complicate our neat assumptions about the origins and meaning of such animal symbolisms.

This labyrinthine latticework of relations is Faure’s key contribution to the field. He has deconstructed—or rather exploded—the either/or thinking and the underlying dyads of the structuralists like Lévi-Strauss who organized and privileged phenomena that conveniently fit into binary categories of good or bad, male or female, sun/moon, wrathful/beneficent, heaven/earth, diamond/womb worlds.

Faure has instead regrooved our own neural pathways to perceive the gods in new and complicated ways. In so doing he has elevated those overlooked deities (the so-called implicit pantheon within the explicit pantheon of privileged figures) to reveal their elastic relations and adaptive roles relative to other deities, ritual necessities, and historical contexts. Who knew that the Immovable Wisdom King Fudō (whose two eyes, lips, and fangs point up and down) was invoked for healing as well as childbirth? That is iconic neuroplasticity at its best. This is an exciting new way to think about not only the figures themselves, but also to think about the way that scholarly categories and theoretical approaches to the study of religion can shape and shift our understanding of visual, textual, and ritual phenomena.

As for John Lennon's egg man thing: to me that's a clear reference to all the female (egg) and male imagery in Faure's extended embryological analysis. What I find most exciting about this work is the way in which Faure weaves what William LaFleur called the fecundist agenda throughout both volumes. The overwhelming social imperative to bear children, and to ritually and medically manage the dangers of this fraught liminal phase to both mother and child, runs right through many of the esoteric deities discussed. Faure's attention to this gendered and thus heretofore neglected role of the gods and goddesses is most welcome, as it opens up new lines of future inquiry. Here I am thinking in particular of Lucia Dolce and Anna Andreeva's work on esoteric embryology,² but I am also hoping that some eager grad student will pick up Faure's work and extend it even further. For example: Myōken's imaginary shadow planets Rahu and Ketu are minor figures discussed briefly in volume 1, but they actually are also key indicators of *nāgadoṣam*: a malevolent astrological omen for infertility and childlessness that goes back at least to the medieval period in southern India.³ The *nāgadoṣam* label literally means the blemish, fault,

2. Lucia Dolce, "The Embryonic Generation of the Perfect Body: Ritual Embryology from Japanese Tantric Sources," in *Transforming the Void: Embryological Discourse and Reproductive Imagery in East Asian Religions*, ed. Anna Andreeva and Dominick Steavu (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016), 253–310; and Anna Andreeva, "Explaining Childbirth to Women: Buddhist Medical Knowledge in the *Sanshō ruijūshō* (*Encyclopedia of Childbirth*)," *Journal of Asian Medicine—Tradition and Modernity* (forthcoming).

3. Amy Allocco, "The Blemish of 'Modern Times': Snakes, Planets, and the Kaliyugam," *Nidan: An International Journal for the Study of Hinduism* 26, no. 1 (2014): 1–21.

or disease (*doṣam*) of the *nāga* serpents, those featured creatures who appear in both volume 1 but especially volume 2 with Fuxi and Nuwa and the female Benzaiten's uncanny coupling with the old serpent man Ugajin. So the planets' power to block conception is as strong as its power to ensure it. This double-edged sword brings us to the last line of the refrain.

As for "I am the Walrus," we all know that the Walrus and the Carpenter story is recited by Tweedledum and Tweedledee in *Alice through the Looking Glass*; Alice cannot decide which character is more morally repugnant for wanting to eat all the cute little oysters on the beach, where incidentally both the sun and the moon appear *simultaneously*. The ethical ambivalence and moral ambiguity of the Walrus and the Carpenter is like many of the esoteric demons-turned-dharma protectors discussed throughout volume 2. And I use the terms "ambivalence" and "ambiguity" very deliberately: ambi-valence indicates the extreme polarization of distinctions (i.e., I feel strongly, both good and bad, at the same time), whereas ambiguity indicates the blurring, confusion, or conflation of distinctions (i.e., I don't know how I feel) so that those extreme feelings are neutralized, domesticated, and instrumentalized for the propagation of the dharma. Many of these figures are characterized by both ambivalence and ambiguity, which is so contrary to the either/or thinking of the structuralists. Volume 1, chapter 5 on "Fearful Symmetry" (a line from Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*) already played with the wrathfully compassionate deities Fudō and Aizen, and volume 2 chapters 4, 5, and 7 expertly excavates the beautiful Benzaiten's martial might among other attributes. Like the "delicate monster" (*le monstre délicat*) in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, our clearcut binaries are busted by the implicit symbolist shadows, and the inherent tensions in these jarring joinings are finally resolved by the great esoteric mantra of *goo goo goo joob*.

My admittedly idiosyncratic exegesis of John Lennon's bizarre and baffling Beatles lyric has taken longer than I initially anticipated, so I would like to turn now to reflect on what I see as Faure's main contribution to what I care about most deeply: the cognate fields of religious studies and art history. These are beautifully illustrated volumes that will shape both fields for generations to come.

Almost twenty years ago, in the opening lines of his provocative and influential 1998 article on "The Buddhist Icon and the Modern

Gaze,”⁴ Faure wrote, “Buddhist icons have been essentially the domain, or rather the preserve, of art historians. But Buddhist art, if there is such a thing, is perhaps too important to be left to art historians alone.”⁵ A few lines later, he asserts, “it is necessary to shift the traditional concerns about the history and aesthetics of art to the history, affect, and function of ritual images or icons.”⁶

His estimation of the scope and aim of art history at the time was perhaps a bit unfair, since already by the mid-1990s, historians of Japanese Buddhist art had already shifted their gaze from the secularized and decontextualized aesthetic concerns of “art” to a consideration of the ritual functions and fundamentally religious contexts of Buddhist images. For example, the March 1994 McMaster conference resulted in Robert Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf’s interdisciplinary volume *Living Images*, in which buddhologists and art historians alike focused on the ritual-institutional aspects of premodern Japanese Buddhist images.⁷ In addition, Samuel Morse’s 1995 *Object as Insight* symposium, exhibition, and catalogue adopted a novel and inspired approach to curating an exhibition around the ritual usage of Buddhist material objects.⁸

At the time I was a graduate student working on the interface between religious studies and art history as well, and so I quoted Faure’s then-recent article on the modern gaze at a graduate symposium at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2000. I can tell you that it did not go over well in a roomful of art historians and museum curators. To say that Buddhist icons were too important to leave to them alone—as if only a buddhologist like himself were really capable of thinking about the “history, affect and function of ritual images”⁹—was not only inaccurate, but insulting. The backlash was considerable.

But I think that Faure’s article was not meant to insult his art historian colleagues, but rather to call for a revolution within text-bound

4. Bernard Faure, “The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (1998): 768–813.

5. *Ibid.*, 768.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf, eds., *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

8. Anne Nishimura Morse and Samuel Crowell Morse, *Object As Insight: Japanese Buddhist Art & Ritual* (Katonah, NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 1995).

9. Faure, “The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze,” 768.

religious studies. Since the time of his influential article, our field has finally taken the material turn and caught up with the rest of our peers in academe. I therefore applaud the fact that Faure has finally made good on his longstanding promise to cross traditional disciplinary lines and take up the Buddhist icon with theoretical sophistication, a trans-sectarian or non-sectarian approach, and a formal structure that heralds, perhaps, the birth of a new kind of literary genre: the narrative illustrated encyclopedia.

This format bears a striking resemblance to the lengthy article-entries of the *Hōbōgirin* Buddhist encyclopedia, but its lush illustrations, over 350 magnificent images published in color for the first time in many cases, look more like a standard art history textbook. I have no idea what subventions were obtained to keep these beautiful books at such reasonable prices, but I commend University of Hawaii Press for producing such stunning works.

Conversely, this format integrates much of the information from the old Flammarion iconographic guides by Louis Frédéric, whom Faure acknowledges as one of his esoteric “kings of knowledge” (*vidyārāja*). Yet Faure’s entries are far longer and more detailed, with more doctrinal import, ritual functionality, historical importance, and the occasional political fallout than the old iconographic studies.

In many ways, therefore, this format finally restores the historical symbiosis between the artificially separated academic fields of religious studies and art history. This is momentous. Yet I can’t help but wonder, since everything ultimately links up with everything else, if perhaps a companion website with hotlinks, similar to Mark Schumacher’s excellent site for Japanese Buddhist iconography,¹⁰ could be an effective vehicle for getting at all of the interconnections. These works compel the reader to think in terms of webs, and meshes the internet and genealogical family trees and clusters of brain neurons where deities can jump synaptic leaps of logic to connect with other noumenal neurons, as tenuous and far-reaching as those dendrites may be.

Faure does provide an extremely abbreviated schematic map at the start of both volumes to orient the reader to some of the linkages among deities, but when the last chapter in volume 2, for example, connects the placenta god Matarajin with no less than eighteen deities, namely Sekizan Myōjin (plus related deities Taizan Fukun and Myōken), Shinra

10. Mark Schumacher, onmarkproductions.com.

Myōjin (plus related deities Myōken, the *kami* Susanoo, the Onmyōdō god Gozu Tennō, Dakiniten, and others), Daikokuten, the Seven Mothers, Konpira, and maybe even Shōten via the Seven Mothers,¹¹ then a snapshot of just that unfamiliar network would have been extremely helpful. I am a visual learner, and a visual diagram outlining each deity's set of relations, both in terms of genealogical development and/or vaguely associative relations, would have been helpful.

My only other request would be for Faure to get a new layout editor. I understand that impossible editorial decisions had to be made, but it is sometimes frustrating to wait up to fifty pages to read about an image that appeared previously. Images are visual quotes, and we would never dream of placing a block quote on a page without exegeting it right away. As a result, I found myself concentrating on the secondary text and following the narrative flow, instead of really studying the primary sources, i.e., the iconography itself, to see the connections for myself.

In sum, true to form, Bernard Faure's unqualified mastery of the material is encyclopedic in scope, penetrating in its depth, and challenging in its theoretical refinements. The combination can be a bit overwhelming at times; it is better read piecemeal and digested in small bites. But he has unquestionably authored the authoritative reference work for esoteric Buddhism in English. As I was reading these volumes last summer, every night I told my husband, "*Je vais me coucher moins bête ce soir.*" I'm going to go to bed a little less stupid tonight. And for that, we thank you.

11. Synopsis adapted from Joseph P. Elaqua, review of *Gods of Medieval Japan Vol. 1: The Fluid Pantheon* and *Vol. 2: Protectors and Predators*, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 24 (2017): 165.

