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Two Views of Buddhist Art Karl Jaspers and William Empson

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Abstract: This essay aims to show how Karl Jaspers uses the Buddhist temple of Borobudur in Indonesia as an exemplar of his view of art as cipher-script. The temple relies heavily on what is not shown or is only partially-disclosed, which is an essential part of the way one can experience it, and as such it relates to Jaspers' idea of cipher-scripts. In contrast, William Empson's view of Buddhist art takes on board his theory of ambiguity in literature and the consequential multiplicity of meaning. A viewer is faced with partial understanding as an inevitable consequence of ambiguity. Empson identifies asymmetry in the faces of the Buddha in the sculptures he studies and uses them as examples to highlight his theory of multiplicity of meaning. Both Jaspers and Empson rely on the concepts of ambiguity and partial-disclosure.

Keywords: Empson, William; Jaspers, Karl; Borobudur Temple; asymmetry; Buddhist sculpture; cipher-scripts; *Existenz*; transcendence.

The philosopher Karl Jaspers and the literary critic and poet William Empson both rely in their views on Buddhist art on the concepts of partial and ambiguous disclosure.¹ For Jaspers this was achieved through his idea of cipher-scripts, for Empson it was accessible through his study of asymmetrical faces that are displayed in some Buddhist art.

Jaspers' view of Buddhist art makes its central appearance in his treatment of ciphers and art, more particularly in the presentation of his concept of cipher-scripts, and he uses one particular Buddhist

artwork, the Borobudur temple in Java (Indonesia),² as an exemplar of his theory. Jaspers' argument, as it relates to art, very briefly summarized, is as follows: metaphysics attempts to give one a basis of a transcendent ground. It must do this through thought (this is all that is available to humans). However, thought is itself indeterminate and therefore cannot be used to ground anything determinate. Hence, one can have no determinacy through thought: there is no direct knowledge of the transcendent ground. Jaspers argues that one can side-step this problem when considering expressions of the transcendent ground as cipher-scripts of transcendence, the keys to which

¹ A version of this essay was first presented at the Eighth International Karl Jaspers World Conference: Karl Jaspers in a Global Context, in conjunction with the XXIVth World Congress of Philosophy, August 13–20, 2018, Beijing.

² Stunning and comprehensive illustrations of the temple are depicted in Louis Frédéric, *Borobudur*, photography Jean-Louis Nou, New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1996.

one will never know, never fully understand.

How can humans know that hopeful expressions and artworks can or should be considered as cipher-scripts of transcendence? Jaspers begins by invoking his concept of *Existenz*; he explains

Ciphers light the root of things. They are not cognition; what is conceived in them is vision and interpretation. They cannot be experienced and verified as generally valid. Their truth is linked with *Existenz*. The magnetism of Transcendence for *Existenz* is voiced in ciphers.³

I suggest this represents a leap of faith, a moment of intuition or an existential leap. Jaspers goes on and brings in his ideas of works of art as cipher-scripts:

The great step in which man transforms himself occurs when the supposed corporeality of Transcendence is given up as deceptive and the ambiguous cipher language is heard instead. [PFR 92]

Anything one can know from these scripts is part of a continuing task and is a challenge to human creativity. One must struggle with this task: the struggle is part of the process, yet it is only through this struggle that one finds tranquility, albeit briefly. It is an awareness of an association of oneself with transcendence; it is usually a difficult and fleeting experience. Jaspers explains:

This struggle is waged in leading the way to limits, in learning to see and to hear, in rational thought, in approaching Transcendence through ciphers, in interpreting ciphers. [PFR 131]

A critic might well say that this is wishful thinking; can anyone defend Jaspers' position? The first and perhaps most important point to note is that Jaspers' argument involves metaphor: one perceives one's expressions "as" or "is seeing them as" cipher-scripts of transcendence which become audible. He writes:

The inadequacy of all ciphers shows in the fact that I can only heed them as images or guidelines at the existential moment, not hold on to them as to an assuring reality. [PFR 93]

So, the entire argument relies on metaphor, but it is metaphor seen in its broadest sense: as, for example, the metaphor of Nietzsche propounded in his essay

"On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" (1873). It is metaphor that goes beyond a mere figure of speech: metaphor that is seen to underlie the entire human condition. For Nietzsche, all human relations with the world are metaphorical. They must be so: all the senses operate by secondary inputs: humans see "as is" by virtue of the mediation of their particular sensory apparatus. Jaspers puts it another way and makes an important distinction:

Ciphers are never the reality of Transcendence itself, only its possible language. [PFR 93]

One encounters this in many forms and in many utterances: in religion (ideas about God and the soul), myths, general concepts such as freedom, truth, good and evil, metaphysical ideas about existence, and, in that which is the focus of this essay, namely in the experience of art.

In Jaspers' metaphorical language, "cipher" is a key concept: a cipher is a visceral message sent in a code known and understood by a sender and a specified recipient. Others looking at the message might sense there is a meaning, in fact they may be certain that there is a meaning but are unable to understand it. However, the messages Jaspers is considering here have been created by human agency and here lies the problem: how can they point beyond their human creation? Hence, one is back to the issue of wishful thinking. Jaspers goes on to argue that such cipher-scripts can point beyond themselves despite the limitations of human thought: they develop out of the very failure of thought itself. He uses in this context the maritime term *Schiffbruch* that is translated as "stranding" or "foundering," and that can be seen as a metaphor for the point where one realizes the limitations of thought. It is a self-destruction of thought to achieve emptiness: an approach which is seen in much of Eastern thought. Jaspers invokes the Buddhist concept of nothingness. This failure of thought need not be considered wholly negatively: it can be used to overcome the restrictions of thought and to release Being into what he calls "its encompassing openness."

Jaspers discusses the great Buddhist temple in Java, the Borobudur (built c. 800 CE), as an exemplar of this approach. It is literally an ascent as one proceeds along and up its walkways toward a transcendent level by experiencing one's movement through the architecture and in awareness of the presence of the sculptures. Jaspers writes:

³ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, transl. E. B. Ashton, New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers 1967, p. 92. [Henceforth cited as PFR]

The sculptural-architectonic representation is a parable of the road to the unrepresentable. [PFR 266]

Note Jaspers' use of the word "parable" that is closely related to metaphor; a parable is a type of metaphorical analogy. The ascent is a gradual process as one moves up and through the Borobudur: there are five square-shaped lower terraces and three higher, circular platforms before one reaches a final level, the highest of all: there are nine in total. The building forms an ambulatory of about a mile and a half: starting at the lowest level of the Borobudur with the portrayal of human life in a series of bas reliefs on the high walls of the square terraces. These include tales of the Buddha's earlier lives, the Jatakas. The higher circular terraces are more exposed and have seventy-two bell-shaped filigree stupas within which one glimpses the Buddha figures. The final colossal stupa is totally enclosed: one sees nothing.

As one moves through and up the structure, what can be seen, what is made visible, is being gradually reduced. Initially one is presented with what is clearly visible, then what is partially shown or veiled, and finally what is not shown at all. Many of the sculptures at the higher circular levels can only be partially seen: they are hidden inside some of the many stupas which are encountered during the ascent. Thus, during the ambulation one experiences a transition from the phenomenal world to the world of nirvana: an experience of the imperceptible void. At the very highest level of the Borobudur, the destination is reached: a symbolic representation of the ultimate truth which can no longer be described or represented in any other way.

This idea is related to the madhyamaka doctrines of the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (c. 150-250 CE). Jaspers had written a brief introduction to Nagarjuna in Volume II of his *The Great Philosophers*. Interestingly, Jaspers invokes Nietzsche as a comparison with Nagarjuna; he writes:

Sometimes Nietzsche seems to approach this method. He, too, prevents us from coming to rest in any position. He flings us into a whirl of oppositions, and at some time negates every statement he makes by its opposite.⁴

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plotinus, Lao-tzu, Nagarjuna*. From *The Great Philosophers: The Original Thinkers*, transl. Ralph Mannheim, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1974, p. 130.

These symbolic representations and their increasing withdrawal from references to human life as one progresses up to the summit of the Borobudur, lead to the symbolism of the Void (*shunyata*): the ultimate truth which can no longer be described or represented but can only be symbolized. The recognition of this, must occur, by pure unconditioned consciousness. This is developed much further, of course, in Buddhism: through specific meditative exercises which enable a transformation of consciousness. This is the achievement of the Zen state of *satori* which has been so well documented. Jaspers writes:

Buddha and the Buddhists were the first to think this self-cancellation of metaphysics radically and explicitly. We note the ambivalence at once, for this kind of thinking cannot be at home in the real world, nor in any conceived one. It is "at home" in vanishing and letting vanish. In temporal existence this self-dissolution of the cipher metaphysics leads to nothingness. [PFR 279]

Jaspers explains that this achievement does come at a price:

By taking up and then discarding all ciphers—i.e., all meanings—the meditator does not reach a standpoint for his future activities in the world. He has left the world. He drops back into it, but henceforth he will experience it only as an indifferent course of existence. It no longer means anything, except for cryptic signs that may hint at ways to the disappearance of both world and meanings. [PFR 267]

Buddhist Art as Seen by William Empson

Sir William Empson (1906–1984) was a literary critic and poet and is perhaps most well-known for this book *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, a study of the powerful effects of ambiguity, either deliberately used by an author or appearing unconsciously, as applied to the canon of English literature.⁵ The book is one of the classics of twentieth-century literary theory and one of the key works in what came to be called the New Criticism. First published in 1930, the book was instrumental in Empson being awarded a fellowship at Magdalene College, Cambridge. The fellowship did not last long: it was rescinded and he was expelled from the college due to violation of its rules. His mentor at Cambridge

⁵ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, London, UK: Chatto and Windus, 1947. [Henceforth cited as *STA*]

University, the literary critic I. A. Richards, who was one of the founders of the New Criticism movement, helped Empson obtain teaching positions abroad including at Peking University and later at Tokyo University. Empson travelled widely during his time in East Asia and he became fascinated by Buddhist art, which led to the development of his theory of Buddhist art that he explains in his book *The Face of the Buddha*.⁶

The Face of the Buddha was published posthumously in 2016, thirty-two years after his death, due to a series of bizarre circumstances. Seemingly, Empson gave the manuscript to a critic friend who at the time was too drunk to remember what he had done with it. He thought he had left it in the back of a taxi and that it was irretrievably lost. This friend had in fact given it to the Tamil poet and publisher Tambimuttu who handed it to the editor Richard March, yet, sadly, March died soon after and his papers were given to the British Museum. Empson's manuscript was serendipitously rediscovered by a browsing curator and was subsequently published in 2016. Scholars believe that Empson's development of his theory of the Buddha images dates back to 1932 when he visited the ancient city of Nara. Struck by the beauty of the Buddhist sculptures he compiled a series of photographs many of which are included in the 2016 book *The Face of the Buddha*. In his earlier book *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Empson defines ambiguity as being

any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language. [STA 1]

In other words, his reading of ambiguity allows for various readings of the same text and any definitive meaning can never be identified. The consequence of this, Empson believes, is that ambiguity is an inevitable way of seeing the world through literature. This multiplicity, arising out of ambiguity, becomes the essence of human experience. Multiplicity is the key concept here as it is also in the context of Empson's view of Buddhist art. One can see the similarity here with Nietzsche's view of metaphor in "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense." One can also begin to notice the link with cipher-scripts: for instance, Jaspers' phrase

"ambiguous cipher language" that is quoted above (see PFR 92). Both Empson's view of ambiguity and Jasper's cipher-scripts rely on the concepts of partial and ambiguous disclosure.

In *The Face of the Buddha*, Empson applies a theory of ambiguity to visual art rather than literature: to Buddhist art and, in particular, to the face of the Buddha depicted in certain sculptures. His key insight is in finding asymmetry in the faces of these Buddhist sculptures. Drawing a line down the middle of the faces, Empson noticed a distinct difference between the left and the right sides which, he argues, takes them beyond the commonplace: they achieve a deeper insight into Buddhist philosophy and indeed into the human condition. He found this feature in many of the Buddhist statues that he visited and studied, writing:

that the chief novelty of the Far Eastern Buddhist sculpture, beyond what had already been done in India and central Asia, is the use of asymmetry to make the face more human. [FB 81]

Empson suggests this technique reflects a belief in human personality's multiple nature. These ideas of multiplicity are carefully depicted in *The Face of the Buddha*. In order to illustrate this asymmetry, Empson manipulates photographs of the Buddha faces and thereby creates new composite images. Half of the new composite image is the original left side of the photograph to which he adds a mirror image of the original left side replacing the original right side. The mirror images were produced by photographic manipulation. He does the same with the right side producing another composite photograph: the original right side and its mirror image. He compares the two new composite images and finds their differences are quite remarkable.

Empson takes the theory further: he sees it expressing a truth that is lost to the Western world by way of the imposition of Christianity. This lost truth is the Buddhist denial of the existence of the self (*atta*), as a permanent unit; it is the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman*, which is one of Nagarjuna's key concerns. This concentration on the self, as opposed to the Buddhist denial of self, Empson sees as the lost truth. He argues that the fixation on the self developed out of, and was modeled on, the concept of a singular God in monotheism. His opposition to this singular view drew him to the face of the Buddha in these statues: half-knowing, half-innocent; he believed they reflect

⁶ William Empson, *The Face of the Buddha*, ed. Rupert Arrowsmith, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016. [Henceforth cited as *FB*]

a deeper insight into the human condition than that provided by Christian iconography. Empson believed one should consider the underlying philosophy of Buddhism when thinking about his theory of facial expression. He writes:

What the Buddha or his earliest interpreters took as the crucial doctrine is that man is a muddle with no unifying principle. [FB 105-6]

This is essentially a re-statement of the Buddhist *anatman* doctrine. Empson ends his discussion with a telling contradiction which neatly brings together his views on asymmetry and the Buddhist denial of self:

It would be an odd, but not an unreasonable, thing if the profoundest studies of character in all sculptures have proceeded from a painstaking application of the doctrine that there is no such thing as a character at all. [FB 106]

The approach is not limited to Buddhist art as Empson finds the same ambiguity elsewhere, for example, in the well-known 1941 portrait of Winston Churchill by the photographer Yousuf Karsh. Depicted in Churchill's facial expression is the administrator on the left side, and the petulance, the

romanticism, the gloomy moral strength, and range of imaginative powers on the right. This last example however raises the issue that this asymmetry identified by Empson applies to the human face generally and not just in art, and hence it undermines the power of his argument.

In conclusion, both Jaspers and Empson rely on the concepts of partial and ambiguous disclosure: Jaspers through his idea of cipher-scripts, Empson through the concept of asymmetrical images of the Buddha's face. Jaspers uses the Buddhist temple of Borobudur as an example of his view of art as cipher-script, and that this view relies heavily on what is not shown or disclosed as part of the way one experiences the Borobudur. Empson's view of Buddhist art takes on board his theory of ambiguity and the consequential multiplicity of meaning. Again, one is faced with partial understanding as an inevitable consequence of ambiguity. Empson uses the asymmetry of the face of the Buddha in the sculptures he studies to highlight this multiplicity of meaning. As these examples show, both Jaspers and Empson rely on the concepts of partial and ambiguous disclosure.