On the Shoreline of Knowledge: Irish Wanderings. By Chris Arthur. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012. 230 pp. $21.95.

My experience of reading Chris Arthur's essays raised an intriguing question: Could there be an affinity between Buddhism and the essay?

At first sight this seems unlikely. Buddhism appears to be an essentially Eastern religion, while the essay looks like an essentially Western form of writing. Doesn't Buddhism aim to move beyond the illusion of the separate self, while the essay focuses on and celebrates the self? Further, doesn't the personal essay (and every essay is to some degree personal) distance itself from any kind of organized religion, as well as any kind of orthodoxy?

If we look more closely, however, some of these objections diminish. For one thing, there are Asian forms of personal prose equivalent to the Western essay, such as the Japanese monk Yoshida Kenko's *Essays in Idleness*. For another, the spread of Buddhism in the West in the last sixty years shows that Buddhism is no longer a purely Asian religion, and that it can thrive in an outwardly "individualistic" society. The relative looseness and decenteredness of Western Buddhist organizations as compared to major Christian churches have attracted many individuals who would reject a more tightly defined "creed." Buddhism is more a set of practices than a set of beliefs. Its ethical precepts are couched as guidelines more than commandments. Concepts like heresy, inquisition and excommunication are alien to it. Instead, many Buddhists, especially in the West, prefer to follow Buddha's recommendation to judge and act by their actual experiences, rather than by accepting doctrines established by religious authorities. (Of course, this trend has existed alongside traditions of devotion to teachers, veneration of relics, and so on.) Meditation, far from being a withdrawal from reality, as popularly supposed, is practiced as a way of investigating the nature of one's own experience of self and world. In other words, it is an empirical approach rather than a doctrinal one: trusting experience rather than authority.

This precept was also the hallmark of the Western scientific revolution: conducting experiments rather than deferring to Aristotle. The experiential and the experimental are, as the words suggest, akin. Although the scientific revolution was focused on the outer world of Nature, it was accompanied by the emergence of a new mode of

investigating the inner world of the self: the personal essay, as pioneered by Montaigne. Furthermore, Francis Bacon, often seen as the instigator of the scientific method, was also an essayist. Essays are in a sense experiments in subjectivity. Thomas Karshan, in a review of the recent anthology *Essayists on the Essay* (University of Iowa Press), writes that "essays express the right of each person to think for themselves without professional accreditation, relying for authority only on the strength and charm of their voice, and for evidence only on their own private reading." The personal essay occupies a space between or beyond disciplines and institutions. Chris Arthur cites Susan Sontag's comment that "'the culture administered by the universities has always regarded the essay with suspicion,'" and adds, "One of the reasons I resigned from a lectureship at the University of Wales was due to the suspicion, if not outright hostility, engendered by my essay writing." The current academic climate of research assessment, peer review, and collaborative projects is not one in which the personal essay is validated.

The influence of Buddhism on Chris Arthur's writing is clear, whatever the extent of his actual involvement with it. Many essays refer to the religion, and one is devoted to the Zen Ox-herding pictures. But what is more important is that his whole sensibility seems attuned to certain ways of looking at the world developed in Buddhism. Perhaps the chief theme here is "dependent origination," the idea that nothing is self-originating: every phenomenon depends on a preceding one, in an infinite regression of causes and effects, which is also an infinite progression into the future. This vision creates a beginningless and endless web of connectivity. In his essays, Arthur's skill is to start at one point of intersection and go on to show how the web spreads out from it. This point could be a memory, an object, a place, or a person, a picture, a book, or almost anything else. The web of connection is everywhere and can be touched anywhere. The starting point is always a personal experience, which can be an apparently trivial one. As Shunryu Suzuki puts it in his *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, "When you understand one thing through and through, you understand everything." He continues, perhaps thinking of totalizing ideologies and orthodoxies, "If you try to understand everything, you will understand nothing."

Many pieces in this volume (and previous ones) center on Arthur's childhood and youth in Northern Ireland, which he left early,

remaining "across the water," first in Wales and then in Scotland, countries which he mentions little. Significantly, both are nearby countries from which visits to Ireland are fairly easy. This situation of "close distance" seems in some ways to condition Arthur's quest for identity, as childhood memories collide with present realities. The focus is on personal identity, but also on Irishness, specifically Northern Irishness. Arthur repeatedly examines how the experience of a place over time creates personal identity. Emphatically "personal": Arthur stays clear of the religio-political identities associated with the sectarian conflicts of his native province, which for him are based on inadequate and (at worst) violent identifications. He calls them "the lethal abstractions of nation, faith, and politics." He aims to define not only his own unique sensibility, but also his own private Ulster, his own map of the province.

Any of the essays could serve to illustrate these ideas, so let us take just one as an example: "Pencil Marks." Arthur picked up an ordinary pencil in a strip of vacant land near his childhood home in Lisburn, County Antrim. This is one of the "neglected margins" (a good phrase for the territory of his essays, and often of essays in general) of no interest to tourists. He writes, "It was because I found it there that the pencil took on the value it came to have for me. It seemed almost like a relic of the place." This is not quite the same as a memento, souvenir, or keepsake; nor would a photograph work for this signifying process. In fact the pencil's *in*significance to others is part of its meaning to Arthur. He does not even know to whom the pencil once belonged. Probably a child dropped it on the way to school. This, then, is a relic with a difference. A clipping from Buddha's toenail or a fragment of the true cross would be recognized by many devotees, but Arthur's pencil "is a private talisman bound up with my personal history." It becomes a token of the home Arthur was about to leave for a "more permanent exile" when he found it. Absence from the place in which he found it gives it its aura of the sacred: "Relics are redundant if you're in the presence of the sacred." The pencil becomes a symbol of the "mundanity and mystery of home" at the point where home is abandoned.

Things are important in Arthur's essays. One of the delights of reading him is coming across references to his own eclectic readings: here I am thinking of Stephen Pattison's *Seeing Things: Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts* (2007), from which Arthur quotes the following: "'the things that people cherish connect them to wider

meanings and life's purposes. . . . Objects of all kinds play an important part in forming identity, self and culture.'" Through Arthur's essay the pencil is endowed with "the connectivity of a kind of lightning conductor. When I hold it, the accumulated voltage of that place runs through me, the electricity of a whole network of memories surges back." Fittingly, this essay was itself drafted with the thing that is its focus: "using the pencil to draft the first notes of what is written here seemed almost sacramental." Of course this simple mass-produced item cannot be a symbol in the Jungian sense; it cannot evoke the "collective unconscious" because its meaning is not collective. Nor can it be a conscious cultural or political symbol: this Ulster writer is precisely trying to avoid the collective identities manifested in flags, uniforms, and parades. Instead, he seeks to create private symbols, and employs the essay as a process of generating the symbolism. The talismans are self-created personal symbols.

This process is a kind of transfiguration. The word has religious connotations, though Christian this time. But the transfiguration is brought about through thought, not supernatural power. Arthur writes, "Once thought about, familiar places, familiar faces, familiar things soon recede into a network of connections and associations so dense, so complex, that their familiarity is transfigured into something close to alien." Connectivity can thus produce an effect similar to the Russian Formalists' idea of "defamiliarization." Following even a few of the connections that any object has can create a sense of wonder at the world's strangeness.

Chris Arthur's essays provide an example of how patient, thoughtful inquiry into one's own experience of self and world can attain highly wrought literary form. In a culture of grand theories and exaggerated claims, his is a quiet voice that deserves (and is gradually receiving) an attentive hearing. Further, the importance of his work reaches beyond the literary: he shows how the religious impulse in the individual need not involve fixed creed and sect, but can create fluid, provisional patterns of significance in a world of vociferous simplifications and conflicting belief-systems. Arthur's quest is not for a fixed identity. Paradoxically, the result of his essays is as much loss of identity as definition of it. In a way, it is the very attempt to define identity that leads to infinity. Investigating the self can lead to a sense of dissolving the self into wider and wider connectedness. There is a personal road to impersonality. As the Zen teacher Dogen put it, "To

study the Buddha's way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."

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Selected Poems. By Friedrich Hölderlin. Bilingual edition edited and translated with a preface, introduction, and notes by Emery George. Princeton, New Jersey: Kylix Press, 2012. 963 pages. $100.00.

Emery George's monumental translation of over two hundred fifty of Friedrich Hölderlin's poems, versions, drafts, and fragments can be viewed as the culmination of his half-century engagement with "the poet's poet." Comprising all phases of Hölderlin's production, from the earliest known poems out of the days in Denkendorf and Maulbronn (1784-88) to the latest so-called Tower Poems in Tübingen (1807-43), George's selection not only includes new translations of just about all the odes, elegies, hymns, and their relative drafts, but also sixty-five poems and fragments that are translated here into English for the first time. Many of these first translations come from the early years, 1784-93, but one of George's principles—which he demonstrates with his translations—is that "[t]he best of the juvenilia are indispensable for understanding the poet's trajectory." Most notable in this regard is the poem "Kanton Schweiz" (1792, published in 1793), which marks Hölderlin's first successful poem in dactylic hexameter. Equally remarkable are the number of canonical Hölderlin poems or versions thereof that are translated for the first time: the first version of "Stimme des Volks" ("Voice of the People"), the preliminary drafts for "Friedensfeier" ("Peace Festival"), the third version and drafts for a fourth of "Der Einzige" ("The Only One"), and the first two versions of "Das Nächste Beste" ("The Next the Best"). The fact alone that such central pieces are only now available to English readers makes this volume indispensable. Moreover, excepting the few epigrams and the numbered "Fragments and Prose Poems," each work receives its own page, with generous margins, in a strong clear font (unlike, for example, Penguin's rather crowded edition of Michael Hamburger's translation of *Selected Poems and Fragments*). In every aspect—its selection, protocols of translation,