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**Watching the Water Flow:
Buddhist Reflections & Blue Ecocritical Insights
from Welch's *Wobbly Rock***

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Abstract: Lew Welch's first published book, *Wobbly Rock* is a six-part poetic contemplation upon Muir Beach, a site of spiritual meditation for the vanished Beat poet. In addition to the three "principal characters" outlined by Welch in his collected poems, the Man, the Mountain and the City, there indeed appears to be a fourth preoccupation within Welch's poetry: the Sea. This essay adopts a bifocal approach: it combines the two fields of blue ecocriticism and Buddhist studies, with a particular focus on Dōgen's seminal work, *The Mountains and Waters Sutra*. Within the field of blue ecocriticism, a relatively new sub-field within ecocriticism, Dobrin writes of "the need to examine oceanic metaphors as a manner of examining the positioning of ocean in language and literature" (8). The research will explore certain tensions within the poem, such as how Welch reflects upon the sea's ability to transform the non-human objects that it touches ("I have been in many shapes before I attained congenial form") (*Wobbly Rock* 3), while at the same time representing something illusory to the Beat poet who had embraced Buddhism at this stage of his life ("If you / take away the sea / Tell me what it is"). More specifically, Welch's poem is an extended meditation upon Dōgen's Buddhist maxim, "when most human beings see water they only see that it flows unceasingly. This is a limited human view" (Dōgen 103). Welch is a poet trying to reach beyond such "limited human view[s]. This bifocal approach allows us to contextualize *Wobbly Rock*, in terms of what Dobrin calls our "submersive epistemologies" (12) for understanding a sense of the whole.

Keywords: blue ecocriticism, *karesansui*, manifestation & liberation, hypersea theory, impermanence.

Introduction

Although Beat poet Lew Welch lists the Man, the Mountain and the City as the main "principal characters" of his collected works, there are also several key poems that focus on a fourth "character": the Sea. As Welch biographer Ewan Clark writes, "Welch's Eden was found on the slopes of Mount Tamalpais, the gorges of the Rogue River Valley, or *the Pacific beaches along the fringes of Marin County*" (4, my emphasis). The sea is present in Welch's *Wobbly Rock*, first published as a single long-poem chapbook, in six parts, by The Auerhahn Press in 1960. Although it was not Welch's first time in print, nor the first poem he completed, it represents his first stand-alone publication, a watershed moment for the San Francisco Renaissance poet. The poem focuses on two main subjects: the sea at Muir Beach (including a wobbly rock to be found there) and the famous stone garden at Ryoanji Temple, in Kyoto, Japan.

Blue Ecocriticism and Beat Studies

Blue ecocriticism is a new and exciting sub-field within the greater field of ecocriticism that helps us not only examine how ocean has been represented throughout literature, but also, and perhaps more importantly, how ocean's liquidity can be used to analyze literary texts in exciting and novel ways. This paper will first briefly situate blue ecocriticism and its methodological potential within the field of Beat studies in general, followed by a justification for why it was adopted for analysis of *Wobbly Rock*.

Within the field of Beat studies, there are several texts that are ripe for blue ecocritical analysis. These include such well-known titles as Jack Kerouac's *Big Sur* and *The Sea is My Brother*, Allen Ginsberg's poems in "The Dakar Doldrums" and certain poems in Gary Snyder's canon. While Kerouac's flight to Ferlinghetti's cabin in *Big Sur* led to an alcoholic breakdown, the location by the sea and later the sea itself initially appealed to the famous writer as a source of solace and healing. In the poem "Sea" at the conclusion of *Big Sur*, which is inarguably one of the most moving moments of the novel, Kerouac attempts what one of his literary idols, James Joyce, also wanted to do: to capture the sounds of the ocean through writing. As Kerouac scholar Gerald Nicosia, author of *Memory Babe*, the exhaustive biography on the Beat writer says, Kerouac tries to "encapsulate in words the infinite majesty of nature" but ends up emphasizing "the difference, the chasm, between human beings and the natural world."¹ Kerouac's posthumously published novel *The Sea is My Brother* takes place on a merchant ship during World War II and although the sea serves mostly as a backdrop, the main protagonist displays definite signs of thalassophobia (fear of sea), similar to Kerouac's own fear of being torpedoed and drowning while he was on board the SS *Dorchester*. Ginsberg's poem "The Dakar Doldrums" shows how going to sea has long been considered a form of romantic escapism, in this case, Ginsberg taking a ship to Africa to distance himself from an unsuccessful love affair with Neal Cassady. Finally, parts of Gary Snyder's magnum opus, *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, relate to cultures by or near the sea, especially the "North Pacific Lands and Waters" section. Snyder has also written other ocean-related poems over his career, especially the poem "Oil," which features in *The Back Country* collection, in which the Beat poet and outspoken eco-activist (somewhat ironically) worked on an oil tanker in his early years travelling across several seas on his travels. While Kerouac, Ginsberg and Snyder have all received much critical attention to date by Beat scholars, including some of the works listed above, many of these texts and authors have yet to be explored from a blue ecocritical angle. Since his disappearance in 1971, Lew Welch's work remains to this day vastly under-researched and his first published book, *Wobbly Rock*, is the perfect example of a Beat text ripe for blue ecocritical examination. All of the texts mentioned above feature the sea in some capacity; in *Wobbly Rock*, the sea acts as one of the "principal characters" of the poem itself.

1 Personal correspondence with Gerald Nicosia, June 1st, 2025.

Along with a blue ecocritical framework, an analysis of Dogenian philosophy, in particular Dogen's *Mountains and Waters Sutra*, is also essential for understanding this poem. Therefore, some explanation of Dogen's famous but difficult text by Dogenian scholar Okumura will be provided to contextualize its deep meanings and how they apply to Welch's poem in particular. Finally, the stone garden (or 'dry garden') aesthetics such as those found in the garden at Ryoanji Temple (mentioned in Welch's poem) will be then analyzed. All of this analysis, drawing on both the disciplines of blue ecocriticism and Dogenian philosophy will then be applied to stitch together a summary of each of the six parts of the poem.

Blue Ecocriticism, Zen Buddhist Philosophy and, the Poetry of Lew Welch

Our idea that water flows from higher to lower places is only one way of viewing the movement of water. There are many other ways that water moves. (Okumura et al. 198)

Seen from space, we clearly live on a blue liquid planet, in which more than 70% of our world consists of ocean. As Sidney Dobrin points out in *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*, the seminal work on this new and exciting field, "one primary objective of blue ecocriticism is to irritate ecocriticism's engagement with representations of ocean from predominantly land-based methodologies and epistemologies" (4). As he goes on to say, there is a real "ocean deficit" (i) that lies within the larger discipline of ecocriticism. He writes, "ecocriticism has thus far primarily been a land-based criticism stranded on a liquid planet" and therefore "Blue Ecocriticism works to unmoor ecocriticism from its land-based anchors" (i).

For the methodology, this paper explores a new "partnership" between two very different fields: blue ecocriticism and Buddhist philosophy, which may at first seem incongruous but have the potential to be mutually complementary. Dobrin's astute observation regarding "our desire to import land-based logic of ownership on the fluid space of ocean" (2) and his call for us to explore texts more fluidly corresponds harmoniously with one of Dōgen's most famous Zen Buddhist writings: *The Mountains and Waters Sutra*. Understanding both Dobrin's and Dōgen's main ideas are crucial for the reader wishing to fully appreciate the underlying philosophy in Beat poet Lew Welch's first book, *Wobbly Rock*, as the poem's setting fluctuates back and forth between Muir Beach and the famous stone garden at Ryoanji Temple (Kyoto). Therefore, this paper will examine not only how blue ecocriticism and Dōgenian Buddhist philosophy can shed more light on Welch's *Wobbly Rock*, but also how these two academic fields might potentially complement and inform each

other. More specifically, what Dōgen's famous sutra and the field of blue ecocriticism have in common, although they function in different ways, is their attempt to help free the mind from its Occidental land-based moorings, a mind which "traps the fluidity of ocean in the linearity of terrestrial thinking" (Dobrin 8).

The Beach and Blue Ecocriticism

In his groundbreaking work, *Literature as Cultural Ecology*, Hubert Zapf devotes one chapter to the "Solid and Fluid." He writes, "[p]oetry is the translation of the language of nature into the language of culture, and the beach is a particularly rich ecosemiotic site of poetic emergence and creativity" (198). This quote by Zapf is particularly important as one of the main settings for *Wobbly Rock* is Muir Beach. Zapf says, "[t]he special significance of the seashore for a cultural ecology of literature is linked with its conspicuous in-between status: it is located at the interface between water and land as heterogenous manifestations of global ecosystem" (189). In another interesting article about the constant state of flux that is inherently part of the ecology of a beach, author John Fiske writes, "[t]he beach is an anomalous category between land and sea that is neither one nor the other but has characteristics of both" (120). In other words, it is a site where solid and fluid meet and co-exist.

Zapf's observation that, "[t]he beach is a place where historical time is both present and suspended" (191) is of extreme importance and relevance in this discussion of *Wobbly Rock*. When Welch sees the rocks on the shore at Muir Beach and when he sees the rocks in the garden at Ryoanji Temple, he meditates upon the nature of time and Welch calls into question the concept of solidity, especially when it is removed, or to borrow Dobrin's term *unmoored*, from its present moment. Dobrin writes, "[t]he primacy of the visual saturates human-ocean interaction in an ocularcentric epistemology that is at once revealing and limiting" (175). While Welch's poem records clearly its observations of the beach topographies, its inhabitants and fauna, it avoids an "ocularcentric" approach. Instead, the poem represents a Buddhist-infused meditation on the beach, a place where both chaos and order paradoxically co-exist. Welch 'processes' his understanding of the beach in his mind through a comparison with Ryōanji, perhaps the most famous Zen stone garden in Kyoto, which embodies the concept of *karesansui*.² In order to understand the Zen stone garden aesthetic of *karesansui* we will need to explore the underlying Buddhist philosophy of Dōgen's *Mountains and Waters Sutra* (which is the basis behind the design of many Japanese stone gardens).³ This will in turn help us better comprehend some of the ideas within Welch's poem, *Wobbly Rock*, which relate to the fluid nature of matter and time.

2 The Chinese characters for the Japanese term 'karesansui' (枯山水) literally mean "dry mountains and waters," a concept which is important for examining the part of Welch's poem which includes an apparent *absence* of water.

3 While Japanese stone gardens, such as the one at Ryoanji Temple, are based on Buddhist philosophy, the original Chinese stone gardens, which date much further back, are based more on symbolism and supernaturalism.

The Zen Stone Garden Aesthetic & Dōgen's *Mountains & Waters Sutra*

In his insightful commentary on the *Mountains and Waters Sutra*, Dōgen scholar Shohaku Okumura writes, “[w]ater doesn’t have any fixed self nature, so it changes in many ways: sometimes it is wet, of course, but sometimes it’s very dry” (181). Welch’s mind fluctuates back and forth from the Muir Beach setting (with the wobbly rock, which he assures us is “real”) containing an abundance of water, to the Zen stone garden at Ryōanji, a “dry” setting in the sense that water is not *visually* in abundance. Okumura, in his ruminations about Dōgen’s famous sutra, explores these ideas more deeply,

There’s actually no such thing as what we call ‘water’; it is merely a collection of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen. When electrolyzed it becomes a vapor of hydrogen and oxygen. Just as a bubble is an event within the interaction between air and water, water is an event in which hydrogen and oxygen are connected. *There is no fixed entity called water.* And yet, we cannot say a bubble is not there, or water is not there. As an event each of them is actually there. This is what ‘emptiness’ means. (82, my emphasis)

In other words, Buddhism teaches us that our habit of breaking concepts down into concrete ideas through words is in itself illusory. We tend to think of “water” as something residing in its liquid state, separated from the concept of “ice” (solidified water), and “snow” (a powdery form of water) or “water vapor” when it evaporates and forms into clouds.⁴ We think of it sometimes as “wet,” and sometimes as “dry.” However, the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence reminds us that these are all temporary states, which from a blue ecocritical perspective, we might also call “fluid states.” All of these should be considered as the same thing, in a process of ongoing flux,⁵ but the human mind has a tendency to break things up or as Okumura says, “[t]his is the origin of dichotomy. And then we create even more separations” (183). We even tend to break up time, which is circular to the Buddhist, into smaller concepts such as the past, present and future. However, as T. S. Eliot reminds us, “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future” (177).⁶

Okumura writes, “[a]s water is beyond these dichotomies [of wet and dry], it is beyond the dichotomy of self and other, subject and object, or self and the myriad dharmas” (183). How does this relate to the human poet? As Okumura points out, “When we let go of our views and perceptions, the self and all beings are one” and

4 Related to this point, Okumura writes “we don’t know the true reality of all beings; we know only the forms (nāmarūpa) seen by human eyes” (213).

5 This has much in common with what Greek writer Herakleitos once said, “πάντα ρεῖ” (panta rhei) which translates as “everything flows.” This quote is also in Ezra Pound’s epic poem, *The Cantos* as “All things are a-flowing,” a work Welch was familiar with.

6 This conception of time is yet another way one might ‘read’ meaning into the Buddhist *enso* symbol that graces the cover of *Ring of Bone*.

“when we let go of views and perceptions, we are connected with all beings” (184). This corresponds perfectly with what Welch says in Part 4 of *Wobbly Rock*: “there is no separation,” when he sees the fisherman on the shore, his rod and fishing line all connected as one, not separate entities.

But what is the connection between water and Welch as poet? As Okumura points out, “[w]ater means the self—the self that includes self and others: one mind is all things and all things are one mind” and more importantly, “[w]e are a drop of water that is studying the entire ocean in which we are a tiny part” (185). What is fascinating about Okumura’s exegesis is that it also lends support to the hypersea theory. As Dobrin explains,

what hypersea suggests is not just that land-based life emerged from the sea, but that life retains primary components of the sea such that we can theorize the sea as extending across land in a complex system that demonstrates that life has not left the sea, but extends sea across land in an intricate biogeophysiological system. As such, hypersea suggests that the thing itself known as sea is a distributed object that extends well beyond the boundaries of the confined understanding of the sea as identifiable object. (147)

What can the Zen stone garden, which *appears* to be absent of water tell us about water and ourselves? As we saw above, Okumura explains that Dōgen wants us to see all things as connected, and our own part in that grand connection. We are “a drop of water that is studying the entire ocean in which we are a tiny part” (185). What the Zen stone garden can tell us about this is that, “[w]ater is appearing simply as water and yet water is completely liberated.” The key words here are “appearing” and “liberated.” They correspond, respectively, to the Japanese Buddhist terms “*genjō*” and “*tōdatsu*.” Okumura writes, “[a]ppearing’ ... is a translation of *genjō* in *Genjōkōan*. Both sides of being—manifestation (*genjō*) and liberation (*tōdatsu*)—are constantly at rest and constantly walking. This is the true virtue of the mountain and water” (194).

Here we can see that although water is both “appearing” and “liberated,” ultimately, water is neither limited only to its “appearing” dimension, nor to its “liberated” dimension. They become one through cancelling each other out in some sense. This idea is echoed by Welch himself in Part 2 of *Wobbly Rock* when he writes, “all / the opposites cancelling out a / CIRCULAR process” (69).⁷ It is circular because Welch perceives everything flowing back and forth, in a constant state of flux or as Okumura says, “everything is coming and going—arising, staying for a while, changing, and disappearing” (196).

Karesansui:

The Aesthetics of Japanese Zen Landscape Gardens

Although Japanese Zen stone garden aesthetics are heavily based upon their predecessors in China, their design is heavily informed by the philosophies contained

⁷ As the original chapbook, *Wobbly Rock*, is unpaginated, the references in my text refer to the page numbers where *Wobbly Rock* has been reprinted in Welch’s collected poems, *Ring of Bone* (2012).

within Dōgen's *Mountains and Waters Sutra*. As outlined above, the term *karesansui* (literally “dry mountains and waters”) refers to this sutra and according to Okumura's interpretation of Dōgen, these mountains and waters not only refer to the name of the sutra, but are in fact sutras themselves. In a similar sense, Japanese Zen stone gardens, which capture the idea of mountains and rivers in miniature, also represent sutras for the Buddhist practitioner to meditate upon and Ryōanji in Kyoto is often considered the stone garden *par excellence*, for such a practice to take place.

In an article by Mirei Shigemori, a well-known researcher of Japanese gardens, called “The Abstract Nature of Stone Gardens,”⁸⁸ he writes that the Japanese stone garden is typically dry, but not always (some contained ponds). Shigemori says, “it first referred to a natural landscape, and because they used the word ‘*sansui*’ (mountains and waters), the garden was first thought of as a copy of the landscape” (64). However, contrary to this commonly-held belief that *karesansui* was an attempt to copy nature, Shigemori asserts that in fact the main idea has more to do with supernaturalism, abstraction and symbolism and that 仮山水 (*karisansui*), the idea of a ‘temporary hill’ (*karisan*), or by its extension, a ‘temporary stone garden’ is a more accurate representation of its original meaning. This idea is harmonious with the Zen concept of impermanence.

Shigemori explains how the act of making a garden, including the Ryōanji Temple stone garden, reflects their belief that “to the Buddhist, all things have a Buddha mind.”⁹ (67), including the very stones in the garden. Therefore, to a Zen student interested in studying Buddha nature, like Lew Welch, the Zen stone garden could be ‘read’ or meditated upon, just like any other sutra.

Wobbly Rock: A Short Summary of its Six Parts

The previous sections have explained the underlying philosophy contained within Dogen's *Mountains and Waters Sutra*, by drawing upon Dogenian expert Okumura's analysis, the underlying philosophy of Japanese stone garden aesthetics, and how examining the various forms of fluidity within the six-part poem, through a blue ecocritical lens, can help shed more light on this complex but important poem in Welch's oeuvre. The following section will now provide an explanation of each of the six parts in *Wobbly Rock*, first published in 1960 by The Auerhahn Press,¹⁰ by drawing on the analysis provided in the sections above.

The main physical location of the poem is Muir Beach, California. The poem begins on somewhat solid foundations. “It is a real rock. (Believe this first)” (68). Part 1 of the poem focuses on this rock which is wobbly because “It moves when hit

8 This is my translation of Shigemori's Japanese article entitled “枯山水における抽象性.” This and all subsequent translations of the Japanese are my own. Some translate 枯山水 alternatively as “dry landscape garden” but I have opted for “stone garden” both for its simplicity and because it corresponds with Welch's own term for the garden in *Wobbly Rock*.

9 This is my translation of Shigemori's comment, “仏者は万有に仏心がある”. Some may alternatively translate this as “all things have a Buddha nature.”

10 The first edition of *Wobbly Rock* by The Auerhahn Press is long out of print and now quite scarce in commerce. However, it was reprinted in the latest edition of *Ring of Bone: Collected Poems*, published by City Lights / Grey Fox in 2012, which is still in print (pp. 68–73). Alternatively, an online version of the original poem is available in PDF format on the Internet Archive.

by waves / Actually shudders” (68). But as we will soon see, it is not only the rock that wobbles. Part 1 of *Wobbly Rock* focuses on the rock in question at Muir Beach, that inspired the composition of the poem. Welch’s use of words like “real” and “actual” implore us to picture this as the default setting and location of the poem. The description in Part 1 corresponds to Dōgen’s “*genjo*” or “manifestation” principle, as the rock appears before us. This corresponds to the metaphorical equivalent of the “mountain” in Dōgen’s *Mountains and Waters Sutra*.

The firm foundation that Welch establishes in Part 1 of the poem, however, is soon subverted and eroded. In Part 2, the poet’s mind begins to “wobble” from the scene before him at Muir Beach to images of the stone garden at Ryoanji, which Welch had seen in a picture “by / Berkeley painter I never met” (69). Welch notes the rocks “[p]recisely placed as rocks of Ryōanji,” even in this natural setting. His use of “placed” is an interesting way to describe a *natural* setting, implying either that it is his mind that is doing the ‘placing’ in the illusory realm, or, that he is trying to tap into some non-human agency here. He reflects upon how the rocks came to be in the stone garden, realizing that they originated from the sea (“450 years ago”), like the wobbly rock at Muir Beach. Observations like “the instant AFTER it was made” recall Okumura’s comments on Dōgen’s “manifestation.” Welch does not linger long on how things “manifest” at a particular moment in time, noticing their “liberation” in a constant state of flux: “And now all rocks are different.” This is the metaphorical equivalent of the “waters” in Dogen’s *Mountains and Waters Sutra*, as their form is now seen as more fluid.

The foam on the beach reminds him of the “swept stones” (69) of the stone garden as his mind’s eye begin to oscillate back and forth between these two locations, “getting it all confused again” (69). While there are certain solid objects, “other rocks” that the reader can grasp and “hold onto” (even though they are “wobbly”) throughout the six-part poem, the focus of the poem shifts rapidly and fluidly as Welch’s contemplation of his setting transcends any solid-liquid binaries. He thinks upon the history of the rocks in Ryōanji, displaying an “attention to chrono-scale oceanic histories” (Dobrin 32) outside of the present moment, when he recalls “the monks who made it [i.e the stone garden] 450 years ago” (69). That is to say, Welch’s reflections upon the nature of time go beyond the present moment (i.e. reflections upon the past or future, whether imaginary or real) and as such meditations are by their very nature *fluid*, this is another reason why I believe that a blue ecocritical model is appropriate here, in order to examine the fluid nature of time within Welch’s poem more closely. The stones in the garden at Ryoanji were “original gravelstone from sea” (69). From the perspective of blue ecocriticism, we can see that stones (“gravelstone”) are also fluid by nature over time (moving from sea to garden) even if this fluidity is not witnessed by the human eye. Welch himself comments on their fluid properties at the close of Section 2 when he says, “And now all rocks are different and / All the spaces in between” (69).

The fluidity of the stones and time itself that Welch contemplates upon in Part 2, appears to trigger a reflection upon his *own* fluidity in Part 3 when he writes: “I have been in many shapes before I attained congenial form” (70). Here, as he was a practising Buddhist at the time, he is perhaps wondering about his past incarnations or “many shapes” in various “lifetimes” (70). The opening line of Part

3 is in italics, suggesting another voice. The line "*I have been in many shapes before I attained congenial form,*" may also refer to an animistic embodiment of a voice with a "Buddha mind," possibly the "Buddha nature" of the rock at this particular point in time. His mind "wobbles" back to childhood memories, with his Jeffers-like nostalgic remembrance of "[w]hen I was a boy I used to watch the Pelican" and scenes of the "[n]ight fire flicking the shale cliff" (70). The italics return in the second half of Part 3 of the poem, in what appears to be a condensed rendering of his "*samsara form,*" contemplating how his own "form" shifts in its "liberated" way. The first three lines: "*I have travelled / I have made a circuit / I have lived in 14 cities*" may represent a condensed version of the poet's life as he travels through the world of *samsara*. And finally, through a meta-reading of this section, his "Buddha nature" is also represented by his name in a book (such as the front cover of *Wobbly Rock*), and the 'Buddha' essence of the book itself, in the words we are reading, is arguably another form of the poet too ("I have been a book originally"). He closes Part 3 with a riddle or *koan*. Welch writes,

Waves and the sea. If you take away the sea
Tell me what it is (70)

In just two lines, Welch brilliantly explains the whole concept of *karesansui* (the Japanese term for stone garden aesthetics, meaning literally "dry mountains and waters"). If we take away the sea, literally, we have pebbles and stones but a visual absence of water, or in other words, 'dry mountains and waters' or *karesansui*. This could be one possible answer to Welch's "riddle." If we imagine a desiccated ocean, there would just be stones, pebbles and soil. However, as Welch reminds us, and recalling the hypersea theory which posits that the sea is not only the origin of life but something we carry with us over land, the boulders were "[l]ugged ... from the sea" (Part 2), where they (and we) originally came from. If mountains can and actually do "walk" as Dōgen suggests, within the vast context of chronoscalar perception, why not rocks (which are part of mountains) as well? If "there is no separation" (a line from Part 4) between the rocks and "the monks" who "lugged" them to the garden, can we not say that the rocks are indeed also "walking"? All things are "liberated," in a state of flux or movement ("walking") as we travel through *samsara*. Therefore, Welch realizes that the beautiful harmony captured in the *karesansui* stone garden aesthetic of Ryōanji Temple is also temporary. In this sense, perhaps it does indeed embody a *karisansui* ("temporary mountains and waters") aesthetic, which was the original intention of the stone garden according to Shigemori, thus implying impermanence.

In Part 4 of the poem, Welch describes the people on the beach including a fisherman who is one with his fishing line and rod: "there is no separation" (71). Welch's mind here perhaps "wobbles" once again as the scene of the beach seems to recall for him his own times collecting mussels in the pools by the beach ("Shells all lost or broken") and he also wryly observes how rain is enough to scare beachgoers away. Then, we see Welch the ecologist emerge in one stanza with one of the most powerful lines in the poem, "Did it mean nothing to you Animal that turns this / Planet to a smoky rock?" (71). Welch could see the future climate crisis

that was coming, and laments how we are slowly destroying our own “gentle and undemanding / planet” (25), turning it gradually and tragically into a “smoky rock.”

As Shaffer correctly points out in Part 5, Welch lists his observations vertically down the page. Halfway through Part 5, as Shaffer has pointed out, Welch adopts an “amusing inversion of the observation” (42), although he attributes this to “structural correspondence with paradoxes of identity and perception mentioned in earlier sections” (42). My interpretation of this section is that Welch, following in the footsteps of his Imagist mentor, William Carlos Williams, is simply recording what he sees in the mirror-reflection on the ocean’s surface, which explains why the “rocks at the cliff’s base” precede the observation of the “starfish” which precedes the “cliff” and so on. If he were to rearrange the order of objects observed purely from a land-based human perspective,¹¹ he would not be ‘one’ with the ocean he is floating upon. Here, he is “in a boat” with three other people. Once again, we should remember: “there is no separation.” In this case, it means writing the words down faithfully according to the *image*, as it is reflected on the surface of the water.

In the final section, Part 6, Shaffer correctly points out how the close of Welch’s poem resembles the beginning of Dante’s *La Divina Commedia* (43), when he enters the dark wood.¹² Perhaps what is more important to consider here is not that this is the end of the *Wobbly Rock* poem, but the *beginning* of Welch’s career as a published poet. He is setting out on a journey, like Dante does in Canto 1 of his epic. Here he manages to successfully lose “all separation,” becoming one with the ground and trail beneath him. In the middle of Part 6, he writes “I THINK I’LL CALL IT THE PACIFIC.” Here, perhaps Welch is subtly making fun of the futility of words in the face of the overwhelming power of nature (like Kerouac discovered in his “Sea” poem that closes *Big Sur*), highlighting their inability to capture something as enormous as the Pacific Ocean. There is yet another type of *kōan* in the second half of Part 6. Welch writes,

Wind water
Wave rock
Sea sand

These six words are also in a sense a condensed reflection upon the passage of time. Waves are made by the gravitational pull of the moon, but also by the wind. How is sand formed? It is formed through the slow erosion of rocks by the sea. Therefore, the lines could have been written, alternately, as follows:

wind water wave
rock sea sand

Welch’s comment, “there is no separation,” may indeed be pointing to how

11 And here we should recall that blue ecocriticism is encouraging us to move away from purely land-based observations.

12 In the Preface to *Ring of Bone*, Welch writes, “Though any of the poems will stand perfectly well by itself, each nourishes and is enriched by the poems before and after it.” There is a possible instance of this right here. The reference to Dante’s “*selva oscura*” in Part 6 of *Wobbly Rock* is perhaps prefigured five pages earlier in *Ring of Bone* in Part 4 of Welch’s “Hiking Poem / High Sierra” when he talks about “*lost groves*” (*Ring of Bone* 63).

poets separate their words, on the page, by line breaks. Within these words lies the hint to solving this disguised *kōan*. Finally, Welch's comment about the "[s]ea breaking within me" (73) reminds us of the hypersea theory. That is to say, "there is no separation" between the poet's physical being and the ocean. The final two lines of "I am / Rocked by the sea" (73) is an obvious pun, referring to how he was "rocked" in the sense of "inspired" or "moved" by the sea while also referring back to the title of the poem itself: *Wobbly Rock*. Perhaps the wobbly rock is writing Lew Welch as much as Lew Welch is writing the poem. If this is true, this would indicate Welch's occasional belief in an external origin of poetic inspiration,¹³ an animistic (and Buddhist) version of Jack Spicer's theory of "The Outside" or "Dictation," in which rocks have "Buddha minds" or "Buddha natures" which can speak through us.

In conclusion, as Clark writes, "this poem is a vehicle with which Welch can push both himself and his readers toward that goal of seeing the reality of existence" (144). Like the Pacific Ocean itself, Welch's poem *Wobbly Rock* contains endless possibilities if we look into its deep spaces and crevices. At first sight, Welch's poem appears to be deceptively simple or calm, but like the word "Pacific," there is much lurking under the surface.

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13 Welch did not always believe in this idea, as evidenced by the title of his third book, *On Out*, referring to the process of bringing poems out of the poet, thereby indicating that they originate from within the poet.