This bilingual edition of the poems of Amdo Gedun Chopel (1903-1951), In the Forest of Faded Wisdom, is a welcome addition to the ever-growing corpus of writings by and on the most outstanding, controversial figure of 20th century Tibet.

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Donald S. Lopez Jr., editor and translator, 2009.

PROF. LOPEZ’S PREVIOUS STUDY and translation of Gedun Chopel’s commentary on Nagarjuna, The Madman’s Middle Way (MMW), 2006, is the first analysis in English of the Amo scholar’s notorious philosophical commentary, The Middle Way. An Ornament on the Thought of Nagarjuna (Mdu ma Klu grub dpongs rgyan). In that book, Lopez gives an overview of the life of Gedun Chopel, followed by a literal translation of this brilliant philosophical treatise – the most controversial piece of writing to emerge from modern Tibet, and a superbly written text.

In the Forest of Faded Wisdom (FFW) is quite a different kettle of fish. This too is a pioneering work. Lopez has put before us the life of Gedun Chopel, followed by a literal translation of this brilliant philosophical treatise – the most controversial piece of writing to emerge from modern Tibet, and a superbly written text.

In contrast, what struck me when I was doing research on the life of the ‘Amdo Beggar’ in the 1970s and 1980s was the misleading delight that emanates from his writings, the roar of appreciative laughter of his audience when reading or reciting his work, and the endless humourous anecdotes I was told about him by all and sundry during my decade of research on his life. There is also a clever and haughty side to Gedun Chopel – as a brilliant dialectician from the great Gelukpa monastery of Labrang Tashikyil, he had a biting wit, a humorous jesting spirit, an ‘habitual tendency’ towards exaggerated scathing mockery of the adversary, but rarely was he sad. He could beat anyone in philosophical debate, or reciting his work, and the endless humorous anecdotes he related about himself could make any audience roar with laughter. But it is not this which we are looking for when we read his poems, which are quite a different kettle of fish.

The mood
In the FFW, as in MMW, Lopez uses words like bitter, caustic, melancholy and cynical to describe Gedun Chopel’s writings and his attitude to life. One wonders if these terms echo reactions from the orthodox Gelukpas who wrote counter-attacks to The Middle Way, objecting, with considerable panache (Dorje geshi Sherab Gyatso, Gedun Chopel’s own teacher, early 1950s) or with great virulence (Dorje tsering, 1970s), and indeed with deep disdain, to the ‘Amdo Beggar’s mocking words?

Let us examine an example of what Lopez considers as Gedun Chopel’s ‘bitterness’, in one of his oft-cited alphabetical poems (FFW 31, Ao bished: Kho ye kha bo ghan du sun ‘yus su…). Lopez had already used this word in MMW (p.93), with regard to the same context, i.e. Gedun Chopel’s departure in 1926 from Labrang Tashikyil (in the far northeast of the historic Tibetan province of Amdo, Chinese Qinghai, Xizang). But Lopez’s interpretation appears to the reviewer to be a misunderstanding of the meaning of the poem which is full of light humour and ribald mockery against the lama of Gelukpa orthodoxy, protector deities (here referring to Nechung, main protector of Labrang) and the illiterate, roaming trader monks, who were part and parcel of the rich and vital monastic scene in Tibet, especially in the context of the great monastic universities.

On the contrary, Dorje Gyal gives quite a different reason for his departure, affirming that since “he knew Tibetan, Chinese (sic) and English and was very clever, the famous warlord of Qinghai (Amdo), Ma Pufung, wanted to take him on as private secretary. This was not a career that the Amdo scholar would relish.” He also remarks before he left, “A big fish like me cannot fit into a soup ladle!” and “How can a cuckoo stay amongst crows?” Like many aspiring young men from the territories all around the high plateau –whatever their geographic, ethnic, sectarian or religious affiliations – the ‘Amdo Beggar’ wanted to move on to pursue higher studies by joining one of the three great monastic universities around Lhasa: Drepung, Ganden or Sera. Moreover, if he had been ejected from Labrang by the ‘doctors of divinity’ for his famous attack on the Manual of Study, he would have gone straight to Drepung Gomang College, where the Manual was mandatory and where its author, Jamyang Shen?e
It was and part of parcel of Tibetan literature at least from the 13th century—but one day some scholar made an especially appealing remark about Gedun Chopel's life, writing and philosophy, emphasis is laid on the theme of 'uncertainty' with regard to 'everything about him.' This theme first appears in the translation of the Manus of the Manual, that calls everything we know into question, because of, rather than in spite of, the enlightenment of the Buddhas (p. xii). And having given an account of the uncertainties of his life, now I turn to his text on uncertainty. For as stated above, which way may be interpreted as a means of avoiding the task of actually sitting down and constructing a proper timeline—continues in the organization of FWW. We get to the point at which the sentences are often moments of self-expression, of delight, admiration, humility etc., in Gedun Chopel's case they are used more to express self-justification or 'pith' with regard to the new ideas he is setting down, as in teasing mockery of tradition and orthodoxies.

In Gedun Chopel's case, this is a key element in many of his works. A certain theatrical mise en scène is involved and the poetic chessboard games (kun-bzang 'khor-lo, FFW 25, 33, 54, 61, 74, 79), and the satirical lampoons (FFW 35 v3, 58 v3, 59 v3, etc.) Thus the 'verse-and-genre' verse is much more important than the few fine independent 'poems' from his pen. It is the latter that fall more clearly into the realms of modernity in that they are imbued with a tone of expansively, precise and technical. The poem 'Wealth in This World - Mint on the Pass' (Srin pai) 'byer ba'i bstan po' nor, dedicated to a beloved friend who had just died, is no doubt the finest example (FFW 33 and Lopez's note).

Gedun Chopel's 'White Admirer' (Deb ther dkar po), on the political history of the Pugtal Empire of Tibet (7th-9th centuries), uses the verse-and-genre to present the verses of 20th century Tibet's finest writer to the Western public—to provide the background context from which each one emerged, and the date or period when this is known. It is true that a number of them are put into context in the introduction and some notes are useful, but the majority are simply bibliographical references.

Verse v. poetry
Another feature of the book is the aim to present Gedun Chopel's widely scattered 'poems' in the form of a previously uncollated corpus. Lopez queries the omission as if it were possible to translate the uncollected verses into a single volume, nor have they been gathered since his death in 1931. The largest group (30 poems) was published in Tibet in 2005, in vol. 5 of his Collected Writings, in a chapter entitled 'On Poetry' snyan rtsom gyi skor.' (FFW p. 16)

What is meant by 'poems' here, and indeed how many Tibetans are included, is not brought together into one book? Lopez referring to the opposition between traditional or classical 'genre' and new categories that have emerged over the last half century (and more), with the advent of contemporary Tibetan literature? 'Poetry' snyan rtsom as, if it appears in the above-mentioned title, is one of the new terms for 'poetry' in the Western world. It is certainly relevant with regard to an ongoing discussion amongst Tibetan intellectuals as to whether Gedun Chopel belongs to the classical or to the modern world (of course he belongs to both). Yet, in spite of the use of this term and the examples presented in context in the introduction, no mention is made of the modern period, nor of the nature of modern Tibetan literature in Lopez's analysis.

If Gedun Chopel is indeed the greatest poet of 20th century Tibet, then surely it would be appropriate to ask how did he express himself? Is it possible to make an appraisal of the language of his 'poems'? Of the different styles poets have gathered the modern and/or classical? Furthermore, it is essential to address the question of Gedun Chopel's widespread and intimate use of 'alternating verse' (phar lgis byung) and prose. Since this forms a genre in itself, it is crucial how the spelling comes out as, already in Dandin's Mirror of Poetry (Tib. M lnga mtog), translated into Tibetan by Shingyong (pp 1270). This genre needs to be discussed as Gedun Chopel's use of it. According to jangbu, another term for it is 'verse-and-prose' or 'verse-and-prose' or 'neither verse nor prose' (phar lgis byung). They are the particular strategy in which the verses that surge in the midst of a text, or at the end of a chapter, are called 'intermediary verses' (bor skabs bar byung). They are the ones that seem to be welcome 'phar lgis, a moment of rest (ngag gur) tsug la bo pa), suspended of responsibility 'gan bular med pa), allowing the author and the reader to get beyond the 'practical' nature of prose. It is a moment when the author can sublimate thought, express the essence of the text in a lofty, elegant fashion, and let this be a transitional unit within the genre.

Alternation is a vital aspect of this genre, and it was expressed in a variety of ways with particularity to Jangbu, another term for it is 'verse-and-prose' or 'both genre in itself, known as found already (tshig su bar skabs, verse-and-prose' or 'neither verse nor prose'. It's a style that has been developed as authors have sought to complement ever more remarkable verses to complement and alternate with their prose.

104 poems or 222
According to the contemporary Tibetan count there are twenty-two or twenty-three real 'poems' in Gedun Chopel's corpus that stand by themselves, including the poetic chessboard games (kun-bzang 'khor-lo, FFW 35, 33, 54, 61, 74, 79), and the satirical lampoons (FFW 35 v3, 58 v3, 59 v3, etc.) Thus the 'verse-and-genre' verse is much more important than the few fine independent 'poems' from his pen. It is the latter that fall more clearly into the realms of modernity in that they are imbued with a tone of expansively, precise and technical. The poem 'Wealth in This World - Mint on the Pass' (Srin pai) 'byer ba'i bstan po' nor, dedicated to a beloved friend who had just died, is no doubt the finest example (FFW 33 and Lopez's note).

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1948-1721 the founder of Labrang, had been a famous student? Would Gedun Chopel have chosen Geshe Sherab Gyatso, the author of the Manual of the Manus, as his main teacher in Dreung? And if he had no choice in the matter, does this not suggest a certain rigidity in the system?

The uncertainty
It is also the organisation of the book that is being questioned here. In Through these verse-and-prose and verse-and-prose to Jangbu, another term for it is 'verse-and-prose' or 'both...