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# Fictions of Reading

## Westerners and Buddhist Texts

> *The Sun—the Light—rises in the East. Imagination has often pictured to itself the emotions of a blind man suddenly become possessed of sight. . . . By the close of day the man has erected a building constructed from his own inner Sun, and in the evening . . . esteems it more highly than the original external Sun.*
>
> —G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia*

The Sun, after rising gloriously and providing sight to the blind, is setting in the twilight of the West. Buddhism, with its signs of light, equanimity, ultimacy, and peaceful fulfillment, has found a place in the Western imagination. Certain questions, however, persist. Can the Buddha's teachings be truly viable without native monastic traditions, in an era of ego therapy and showy individualism? Can they truly take root in alien ground? Have we reconstructed and packaged the teachings especially for ourselves—and how much has been lost in the process?

### The Fate of Non-Reading

There are no easy answers. Signals are clear, though, that Buddhist ways, recently Westernized, have been sucked into a whirlpool of global economics, New Age therapies, and neo-Buddhisms. This situation is manifested in glossy



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magazines and newsletters supported by advertisements for meditational supplies, along with services that include matchmaking, financial management, and even dentistry—all somehow "Buddhist." Such foibles may constitute a recent phase in the process, depicted by G. W. F. Hegel, in which the Sun is now setting into the twilight zone. The "Oriental Renaissance" of the first half of the nineteenth century (when India was seen to be the cradle of all civilizations and the source of all nourishment) was followed in the second half, with the entry of Buddhism, by worries that Asian religions could be toxic. Hegel's work was itself a setting sun. With access in 1827 to a multitude of reliable sources, he was neither a careful nor a respectful reader. What he "read" was guided mainly by the demands of his System.[1] Buddhist texts teach *nirodha*, or "cessation," leading Hegel to conclude too quickly that for the Buddha "*nothingness [das Nichts] is the beginning and the end.*"[2]

Negativism was viewed merely as a dialectical moment in the Absolute Spirit's journey. For other interpreters, however, so-called Buddhist "nihilism" was not to be taken lightly; it posed a threat to cherished beliefs and to Western civilization itself. Friedrich Nietzsche spoke of "*the desire of the Buddhist for nothingness, Nirvana—and no more*," warning ominously of a "*plunge into gloom and unmanly tenderness under whose spell Europe seems threatened.*"[3] Other writers—including Victor Cousin, Eugène Bournouf, and Jules Bathélemy Saint-Hilaire—also warned of (or in Schopenhauer's case, welcomed) "nihilism," and were somehow able to ignore or dismiss the Buddha's emphatic rejections, in the early texts, precisely of nihilism (*natthikavāda*) or annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*) (SN 42.13.3.1; 24.5.5).[4] Out of ignorance, fear, or missionary zeal, they were unable to read Buddhist texts. Yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, much had changed: Buddhism was no longer considered a threat. On the contrary, its teachings were seen as an uplifting way of life and a consolation for pain.

What lingers on, though, in the reception of Buddhism in the West, is a tradition—from at least 1820 until recent times—of ignoring or misconstruing Buddhist scriptures, and using them as a launching pad to project common fears, hopes, and fantasies. Desire, in reading, wanders, and is far from direct sight, or insight. For many popular Western teachers today, a detailed study of the texts is frequently deemed unnecessary: close readings may be dispensed with, in favor of vague anecdotes about "what the Buddha says somewhere" or what he or his disciples are said to have done. Today, Buddhist teachings, despite a plethora of fine translations and exegeses, are still often read casually or ritualistically, or discussed in ways soothing to recent mindsets.

The fiction of Westerners reading points to the unlikelihood—the fiction even, given our history—that we are capable readers of Buddhist texts, with energy, time, and motivation. But the fiction of reading may, in another sense, point to the results of imaginative engagement—that is, to useful figures engendered by filling in gaps and constructing passageways of communication.

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## Focal Points

With such a situation in the background, this study has three focal points. First, it is an effort to move against the long-standing tendencies, just mentioned, of the non-reading or poor reading of Buddhist texts. It does so by providing something like a guidebook to potential readers who may not fully know, or who would like to review, some major Buddhist scriptures. Second, it goes beyond a guidebook level by proposing to read Buddhist texts slightly askew, in a corrective to commonly accepted protocol. It proposes to read the texts not as primarily philosophy, doctrine, therapy, or even as advice for better living, but rather as literature. My assumption is that such an apparently marginal or parallax approach, informed by literary theory, will yield a harvest of fruitful ways of revising conventional formulae. Third, the readings here are part of a critical strategy meant not only to uncover sites of lyricism, drama, or compelling storylines but to illustrate, along the lines of contemporary theory, how Buddhist ideology and rhetoric are at work in shaping reponses in listeners and readers.

## Cultural Encounters

Those responses are important, but we seem to have heard mostly what wanted to hear. The mood of the present epoch is in most ways, and despite a huge upsurge of interest, not particularly Buddhist, and what works as medicine in one part of the world in one epoch, might not work for another part, in a different epoch. The retooling of Buddhist ways for the West, especially in counseling and mental health, has been a troubled process.[5]

The picture, even so, is not entirely bleak. Despite a large distance from Buddhist texts in time and place, a "fusion of horizons," to use Hans-Georg Gadamer's phrase, may be in progress, with our own biases mixed into the exchange.[6] The Buddha, not an author in the usual sense, left his spoken words for monks to recite in formulae, and centuries later those formulae were turned into texts and, much later still, translated into other languages. My inquiry will deal with whether or how a contemporary Westerner reads, or would be likely to read, Buddhist texts. Such an inquiry is fraught with difficulties, and we need to be aware of varying ways in which the West attempts to attain hegemony over its other.[7] In particular, as Philip Almond points out, "through the West's progressive possession of the texts of Buddhism, it becomes, so to say, materially owned by the West, . . . [and] ideologically controlled by it."[8]

Pointing this out is not a neutral act, and here part of the ideology is to concur with such claims but also to suggest that an outsider's perspective is of positive value. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, "the person who understands [needs to be] *located outside* . . . in time, in space, in culture." New meanings emerge when a culture comes into contact "with another, foreign meaning," and a sort of dialogue ensues in which both cultures are enriched, overcoming one-sidedness:

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"we raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself."[9] For the encounter to be creative, we need to assert, all the more confidently amidst the transformation described by Hegel, that going "back to the texts" is a usefully contrarian movement. It may be a way to offset ideological fabrications in New Age and other recent discourses.

I propose to take account of nuances in key terms. This is especially crucial, given that Westerners come to Buddhist texts mostly in translation. Regional literatures are often studied by philologists or native speakers, who call for analyses of the finer points of diction, syntax, wordplay, and rhyme. Some of these matters are bypassed here, and most Westerners are unlikely to encounter these texts in the original languages. But literary value, some have contended, is precisely what is *not* lost in good translations, while literary response is crucial on the levels of rhetoric, plot, character, image, archetype and genre. At times I have made reference to Sanskrit terms in preference to Pāli, have often preferred more recent translations to older, more stilted ones, and in the interests of clarity, have have italicized major terms. This book, then, making use of widely available translations, and referring for clarification to earlier languages, shows how Buddhist sacred texts might be interpreted today. What kinds of texts, though, are they?

## Truth, Myths, and Folktales

All cultures have stories, legends, folktales, and songs, the most important of which, the *myths* (and so some extent the epics), help illustrate what is of deepest concern to that society. They explain the laws, customs, history, and religion, and are not held to be imaginative, nor even of human origin.[10] Other stories, deemed less important, the *folktales*, are recounted for entertainment or amusement, and are said to be imaginative structures, independent of belief, in which any real or implied beliefs are a matter of indifference.

In our own times, with the decline of local communities and the growth of science, myths have declined or gone underground, while literature, overwhelmingly secular, has broken free from belief systems. Where "truth" was once something of great import, conveyed in myth or legend, it has now become the verifiable, usually mundane, statement. Truth, however, Northrop Frye argues, is not a literary category: "the anxiety of society, when it urges the authority of myth and the necessity of believing it, seems to be less to proclaim its truth than to prevent anyone from questioning it."[11] This declaration is resonant not only for Platonic texts, where a "noble lie" is meant to assure social harmony, but also for Buddhist texts, where the four Truths are designated as "aryan," or "noble." Might there be some anxiety lurking behind the confident equanimity of the Buddha's, if not Plato's, claims about nobility? Is there perhaps a repressed violence, a pressure to "come and see"—not just anything, but this particularly precious saving way?

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Despite renunciation and a tight guarding of desire, does not the wandering Prince Gautama move desiringly in his quest? In the wisdom of *Ecclesiastes*: "*Better is the sight of the eye than the wandering of desire*." This overlaps in part with Buddhist wisdom, where attentive seeing brings direct insight. Yet the sight of the eye may also, at times, be precisely what instigates new desire and continued wandering. Monks are taught to guard their senses—that is, to see in what is seen, only the seen, so that desire does not lead one into errancy. But can the wandering monk always see only the seen, or rather does he wonder, and thus, wander? Here a folkloric thrust makes its deepest cut into the Buddhist ideology and its aryan, noble ways. "I have a notion," Frye muses, "that if the wandering of desire did not exist, great literature would not exist either."[12] And Buddhist texts, whatever else they may be, are also great literature.

There might be some uncertainty then, especially today, as to whether Buddhist texts are primarily imaginative (with the freedom of folktales), or primarily mythic (with the constraints of important truths). In either case, though, the issue of nobility is still alive. Wallace Stevens argues that the apparent decline, even the disappearance, of nobility may be little more "than a maladjustment between the imagination and reality. We have been a little insane about the truth . . . . In its ultimate extension, the truth about which we have been so insane will lead us to look beyond the truth to something in which the imagination will be the dominant complement."[13] Such a movement, through and beyond truth, is suggestive: perhaps we enter into the Buddhist world most fully and accurately by apprehending it as literature, and not simply as doctrine or as practice.

Any such position may be viewed by some as a compromise, as a way of becoming reconciled to our disenchanted world, so manifestly lacking in buddhas. Yet we need not claim, as Matthew Arnold did, that poetry will now be needed as a substititute for religion, to console and sustain us.[14] Religion, despite changing assessments of it, may all along have been an unacknowledged form of poetry—myth to be taken as truth. Arnold brings to the fore, however, sad symptoms of desperation and unbelief. Many of us today cannot help but be warily skeptical, and discussions of religion are no longer welcome in polite secular society. As Slavoj Žižek remarks, "When it comes to religion, . . . we no longer 'really believe' today, we just follow (some) religious rituals and mores as part of respect for the 'lifestyle' of the community to which we belong."[15] At the other extreme, not far from "polite society," there are those "who live their culture immediately," as Žižek puts it, or who believe to the extent of terror and war. There is thus much at stake in our involvement, even as mere readers, in Buddhist matters

## The Reader's Role

First we must learn about reading. How do we read and, if we read poorly, how can we read otherwise? Questions of textuality, reading, and interpretation, so crucial to religion, have loomed large in recent literary thinking. The advocates

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of *reader-response criticism* maintain that a text is not simply written words on the page but an activation of those words. "Reading can be characterized," Wolfgang Iser writes, "as a sort of kaleidoscope of perspectives, pre-intentions, recollections. Every sentence contains a preview of the next, and forms a kind of viewfinder for what is to come; and this in turn changes the preview."[16] As we read, our progress is impeded at times by puzzling gaps in the story. We need to "fill in the gaps" to allow for the continuing flow of sentences, plot elements, or ideas. Whenever gaps occur, readers are called upon to use imagination or speculation to close up, or jump over, the gaps. The process of reading is thus a search for some sort of consistency, pattern, or explanation.

In reading, Iser comments, familiar illusions are promoted, and then punctured: "What at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads to our own rejection of them, thus tending to prepare us for a re-orientation."[17] This could well be a sketch of the Buddhist path: illusions are punctuated, one after another, about comfort, self, pleasure, beauty, goodness, and eternity. Only then can there be a more open-eyed beginning. Here we will welcome gaps, rather than being eager to close them. Gaps or blanks in the texts will be taken as occasions for reading between the lines, for venturing speculations about what might be going on. The speculations may, of course, vary immensely. Norman N. Holland, a reader-response critic, shows how readers' reactions to literary phrases and themes correlate with their varying personality structures, adducing the formula, "unity is to text as identity is to self."[18] By this theory, there will be widely differing responses to any text.

Those responses are crucial to the text's identity and survival. Tristram Shandy, the writer-as-hero of Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy, Gentleman*, tries to mitigate his outrageous authorial antics (blank or black pages, squiggles, unfinished episodes, interruptions, digressions) by "noticing" any readers foolish enough to have persisted for so long in their shared adventure with him. Nor is the reader today, though rarely addressed directly, any less important. An issue of *The New Yorker* magazine shows a cartoon in which someone, presumably in a bookstore, sits at a desk with a large sign: "*Meet the Reader*." A number of substantial-looking persons, no doubt authors, are lined up, books in hand, for the reader to sign.[19] As the cartoon's humor implies, readers are not usually given much attention, except perhaps indirectly, when best-seller lists are being compiled.

More than for sales receipts, readers are crucial, especially when cross-cultural or religious matters are at stake. In an age of disenchantment, in the wake of stories of war and terror, readers are likely to harbor ambivalence; they are intrigued yet suspicious of shining promises—of future lives, of relief from suffering, and of nirvana. To read the Buddhist texts "as literature" would ideally lighten the burden of suspicion, allowing the promises to gain a hearing.

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## Suspension of Disbelief

Literature, especially about magical or supernatural events, requires what not all readers are prepared for. Samuel T. Coleridge called it, in 1817, the ability "*to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which consititutes poetic faith*."[20] With that term, *suspension of disbelief,* Coleridge has in mind the supernatural spirits and ghostly figures in a poem much like his own *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

The statement could apply more broadly, though, to all literary texts, and to texts containing what some readers may consider to be the "shadows of imagination"—stories of past lives and supernormal powers. Perhaps we need not gravitate inevitably, at least not yet, toward a Buddhism without beliefs.[21] We might instead allow some leeway for temporary suspensions of disbelief or, more positively, for the aesthetic belief we sometimes give, enthusiastically, to literary stories and figures. Perhaps habitual beliefs can come under temporary or experimental scrutiny when we read literary or Buddhist texts. Nor is this situation unfamiliar, since art and literature are all around us. We are tacitly presumed, as readers, to play the game, to walk the walk, to use our imagination, to suspend disbelief. A particular type of reading, then, may be helpful to an inquiry into the Western reception of Buddhist scriptures. That type of reading is of Buddhist texts as literature.

We need not go far to find examples of Buddhist literature. One of the first meetings of East and West is dramatized in the *Questions of King Milinda*, in which a figure said to be the Greek king Menander, given an Indian name, is depicted asking questions about Buddhist doctrine to the monk Nâgasena. The King's requests are perpetually for an illustration or an analogy, and Nâgasena, versed in canonical texts, is admirably fecund in his imagery. The analogies are highly regarded by the King, who, when not entirely satisfied, can always ask for another. Since analogies are images or similes, the ability to persuade the King (who eventually converts) is based on a skill with words or, more specifically, with poetry or rhetoric.

## The Buddha as Storyteller

More so than Nâgasena, the Buddha is a master of images, and he frequently speaks as a poet or parable-teller, preferring to cast his message as a lyric or story to illustate what could also be stated discursively. He thereby taps into wider, archetypal dimensions. To many, images may matter more than extended arguments; often, when he is making an abstruse or repeated point, we wait impatiently for an example or story.

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One typical story is of the young Kisā Gotamī, who comes to the Buddha carrying her recently deceased baby in her arms. Not willing to accept death, or assuming perhaps that the Buddha may be a miracle worker, she hopefully demands medicine. Instead of preaching about impermanence, non-self and suffering, he tells her to make rounds of the entire city, asking for a mustard seed from any house in which no one has died; if she finds a seed, he will do what she wishes. She makes the rounds but, since in every house, someone has died, she garners no seeds.[22] As in many folktales, the protagonist must undergo a trial, and here she learns by direct experience that death is universal. The dramatized action makes the Buddha's point far more memorably than if he had stated the teaching in a sermon, as he usually does to his monks. The literary dimension thus enlivens and clarifies the teachings.

The story is notably allegorical, and has a mythical or "truth" dimension in Frye's sense. It arises out of the discourse and is strictly subordinated to it: we are told that the Buddha knows by supernormal vision, in advance, the outcome. There is no possibility that Kisā could have stumbled upon (or slyly chosen to knock at) the doors of newly constructed houses with young residents, no deaths, and a plentiful supply of mustard seeds. For if she did indeed get the seeds—and folktales usually have variations—would the Buddha then display shamanic powers, bringing the baby back to life? And if so, what would happen to his teachings of impermanence and karma: would they still have the same import?

At first glance, readers or listeners may gain the impression that the Buddha, a worthy raconteur, may have kept a supply of personally experienced anecdotes on hand, and pulled this one out, as the occasion required. Perhaps a more likely possibility is that the story about medicine was itself composed as "good medicine," so as to reinforce the point about death's inevitability. The story is mythic or highly ideologized, and not open to much modification, if any.

Something similar could be said about the arrow parable, in which a man is struck by an arrow and is in mortal danger. If that man were to insist, before allowing himself to be treated, on knowing details about the arrow and who shot it (and here the Buddha elaborates at length), then the man, while making these inquiries, would die (MN 63.5),[23] the point being that suffering needs to be treated urgently, and that peripheral questions can only get in the way. Just as the wounded man is not able to ask questions, as an examining sheriff might do, so we readers, if we know the genre conventions, are expected to get the point, and then stay quiet. We are not to speculate about whether, for example, suddenly removing the arrow might lead to the man's death, or if perhaps he had been wisely shot at, if his further living might bring vengeance or war upon others. Any elaboration of the tale has already been given within the tale, in lists of possible poisons, arrow types, shooters, etc. The story speaks with one voice—it is monoglossic—and only much later in the Buddhist tradition, we will find, are contending voices permitted.

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## Contemporary Approaches

To heighten an awareness of the issues at stake in what follows, some recent literary theories will be put to work: reader response theory, Russian formalism, deconstruction, rhetorical analysis, archetypal theory, semiotics, psychoanalysis, poetic influence, mimetic rivalry, ideology critique, and dialogism. The theories are meant to shed light on the Buddhist texts, and not vice versa—that is, my intention is not to comment on the theories, but rather to use them in acts of reading. Particular theories are invoked at various points, but always to assist in reading, and thus perhaps with only reader-response and rhetorical analysis in the foreground. In addition to theory, another aspect of literary study will involve allusions to typical Western texts—often canonical ones, just as many of Buddhist texts here are canonical. The comparisons might seem distracting at times, but the larger task here is discern in Buddhist texts the cross-culturally understandable work of literary figures, storytellers, dramatists, rhetoricians, and poets.

How, more generally, does one read Buddhist texts as literature? The Bible, to take a familiar example, is usually received as sermon, liturgy, prayer, or inspiration, and is believed, by many, to be literally true. But a growing discipline has lately emerged about the Bible "as literature," where literary, rather than religious, meaning is the center of attention.[24] More than those who are committed to the doctrine, those who read Buddhist scriptures as literature may read freely and creatively, since they temporarily suspend disbelief, or indeed belief, in the text's solicitations. They read with due respect, but less piously, less pedantically, and more playfully, more critically. Reading the texts as literature allows and encourages readers to imagine and speculate—in ways which dogmatists or scholars may disdain—about the existential pathos behind the texts' formulaic repetitions.

Those who dare to imagine may be held in suspicion by traditionalists. In a discussion of this issue, Jeff Humphries asks, "Is there any place in a genuine Buddhist practice for literature . . . ?" and "is there any valid place for Buddhism in literature?"[25] He gives a negative answer to both questions, invoking the figures of Nāgārjuna and others who warn against treating the Middle Way as literature or philosophy. True enough, the delights of poetry were considered dangerous distractions by the Buddha, and later by Nāgārjuna. We might be wary, though, of mystifying or essentializing terms such as "genuine . . . practice," "valid place," or indeed, "Buddhism." The Buddha, who taught emptiness with an open hand, deploys parables, songs, similes, and anecdotes in his practice, while later traditions had recourse to koans, verses, tales, visualizations, and chanting. Who can possibly say, then, that there is no literary dimension in the teachings and practices, or that literary texts have no Buddhist points to make? Indeed, to cite Humphries, "the closest thing in Western culture to the Middle Way of Buddhism . . . is the practice of literature—of reading and writing."[26]

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## Heroic Archetypes

Suspension of disbelief is not always a requirement for the creation of literature. For earlier cultures, gigantic, legendary figures were perceived as real, and one esteemed theory of literature is that all great figures and plots are descended from earlier mythic *archetypes*—that is, recurrent images stored in all psychic constitutions.[27] The power of literature derives from such archetypes, taking us beyond our limited cultural or linguistic spheres. The fact that archetypes are communicable, Northrop Frye points out, "largely accounts for the ease with which ballads and folk tales and mimes travel through the world, like many of their heroes, over all barriers of language and culture."[28]

According to Joseph Campbell, the career of a hero—be it Oedipus, Electra, Aeneas, Arjuna, Jesus, Orlando Furioso, or the Buddha—follows a similarly patterned sequence in all myths, which he calls "monomyth": a communal crisis (plague, sin, war, suffering); a call requiring some courageous response; a difficult journey with occasional help into unknown, supernatural territories (leaving home, wandering, initiation); confrontation with an enormous enemy (Māra, Satan, a dragon); a horrendous life-disturbing battle out of which the hero emerges victorious (enlightenment, resurrection, a defeated dragon); returning home (nirvana, heaven, a palace) "to bestow boons" amidst great acclaim, including marriage into a royal family.[29] The pattern, not always completed, may have peculiar variations, but is generally applicable. The sequence may be refined specifically for World Saviors: royal ancestry and a miraculous birth; prophecy; childhood deeds; possible marriage and propagation of an heir; a calling; departure; forest or desert discipline; battle with a supernatural adversary followed by the performance of miracles, teaching and making converts, founding an order; a sacred death; heavenly ascent or nirvana.[30]

As a literary form, Northrop Frye classifies this kind of life story as a *quest-romance*: "The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest . . . in three stages": first, a perilous journey with minor adventures; second, a crucial struggle; third, an exultation of the hero. A "ritual death" is followed or accompanied by a "recognition scene." The three stages of quest may be called, "using Greek terms, the *agon*, or conflict; the *pathos*, or death struggle; and *anagnorisis*, or discovery, the recognition of the hero."[31] In the Buddha's case, recognition (*nirvana*) precedes and is completed by death (*parinirvana*): he knows, with overwhelming conviction, that he achieved his goal, and will not be reborn. Such a story may be read in a number of ways, and Frye finds that "the nearer romance is to myth, the more attributes of divinity will cling to the hero."[32]

Indeed, as centuries passed the Buddha did become a legend, and was "less an example to be followed . . . and more and more a symbol to be venerated."[33] Siddartha Gautama is archetypal, and he himself claimed to be following the "ancient path" of earlier Buddhas. As the Buddha becomes mythical and legendary, his titles are emphasized and, like other epic heroes, such as Homer's,

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he is known by familiar and oft-repeated epithets: "*Well-Farer, Knower of the worlds, incomparable Trainer of men to be tamed, Teacher of gods and humans, enlightened and blessed*" (DN 2.40).[34] One appealing aspect of the literary text, then, is the very familiarity of its traditional, formulaic, heroic figures and plots.

## Defamiliarization, or Making Strange

Interestingly, another specifically literary aspect is almost the opposite. A literary text is evocative to the extent that it speaks of a strangeness different from our customary, familiar world. The Russian formalist, Victor Shklovsky, claims that the purpose of art is "to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, not as they are known; the technique [used for this purpose] is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult."[35] *Defamiliarization*, or *making strange*, by which literature is thus defined, avoids names. It represents familiar objects in peculiar ways, so that we see them as if for the first time.

These two different features are not incompatible. A royal prince, that familiar figure of epics and fairy-tales, is in this case a future Buddha, who "goes against the stream," and abandons his lavish palace. His teachings, when eventually offered, acknowledge common facts of conditioned existence (birth, sickness, death) but propose a radical deconditioning as the way to overcome those facts. In both cases, a defamiliarization takes place: the prince behaves in an unprincely manner and inverts his position: he becomes a homeless vagrant, and in his teachings, suffering (*dukkha*) is seen from the perspective of an extraordinary being. Precisely because the perspectives were (and are) unfamiliar for ordinary folk, recourse was taken to various kinds of pedagogy, persuasion, and "skillful means" (*upāya*).

In the West, the ways of persuasion come under the rubrique of "rhetoric," which has been linked at various times with sophistry, legalism, and propaganda, as well as with eulogies, ceremony and political counsel.[36] Recent theorists have shown that literary texts are replete with rhetorical strategies, often deployed in overdetermined or inconsistent ways.[37] One may have doubts, as these theorists often do, about strict distinctions between literature and rhetoric. Sacred rhetoric, for example, is part of a highly performative religious and literary discourse that preaches, consecrates, ritualizes, praises, proselytizes, narrates, sings, confesses, prays, advises, consoles, prophesies, heals, accuses, curses, forgives, memorializes, exhorts, warns and, above all, inspires.

Most earlier listeners or readers are likely to have differed from us in their responses to such discourse. "We" do not constitute a unity, however, and in what follows, I consider possible reactions to Buddhist scriptures by various types of contemporary readers. Those types are schematic, not exhaustive: there are countless strategies of reading, and countless readers. Readers generate readings that range from strict exegeses to mild or radical transformations. In all cases, readings have both literary and rhetorical dimensions. Paul de Man

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has argued that a critique of metaphysics—a critique that could be extended to dogma, or indeed dharma—is founded on "the rhetorical model of the trope, or if one prefers to call it that, literature."[38] Such a critique, whether mild or rough, whether implicit or explicit, provides fruitful strategies for reading, and for a probing of Buddhist ideology.

## Rhetoric and Ideology

Society at the Buddha's time was in turmoil, and competing ideologies frequently came into conflict. A great migration was taking place from small-scale communities to the more impersonal life of urban centers. Wealth was being earned by enterprising merchants, who made business trips from one urban center to another. A new sense of freedom and individualism had a price, however, in a growing sense of aloneness and malaise.[39] The newly emerging Buddhist ideology appealed mainly not to the lower classes but to an increasingly well-off merchant class impressed with the possibility of gaining merit by performing right actions oneself rather than having Brahmins make sacrifices. The Buddha's teaching seemed reasonable, empowering, and calculable. As Richard F. Gombrich argues, spiritual matters could be monetized, and what Max Weber called the *Entzauberung* (disenchantment, demystification) of the world substitutes quantity, be it in money or acts of merit, for quality.[40] The goal of merit-making—better future lives and, ultimately, nirvana—provided a vision of escape from the crowded, unhealthy confines of samsāric life.

Does Buddhist rhetoric disguise its mercantile roots, however, with a conjoined (and seemingly inconsistent) ideology of renunciation? As Terry Eagleton shows, in many literary texts "the ideology seems to determine the historically real, rather than vice versa," so that while ideology pre-exists the literary text, the text transforms that ideology, condensing and displacing it, and thereby indirectly commenting upon it.[41] These processes of troping, visible in Buddhist texts, and much like Freudian dreamwork, can be deciphered by rhetorical analysis. In its basic shape, an ideology emerges in the Buddha's story and in his subsequent teachings. A well-to-do young man leaves home, as commonly many of his counterparts did at the time, to become a *śrvāka*, or wanderer, in search of fulfillment. The text's rhetorical thrust will be to extol and amplify his departure and quest, in implicit comparison with those of other wanderers; it will demonstrate and commend his achievement, in particular, of ultimate freedom. Although the Buddha's biographical narrative is fragmented, the focus on a single divinized figure through a series of disparate episodes is typical of the epic genre in India.[42] The text honors not only the hero, moreover, but also his teachings. Those teachings are repeatedly described as being "*lovely at the beginning, lovely in the middle and the lovely at the end*" (DN 14.3.22).

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## Hyperboles of the Sacred

The term *lovely* (or "good") has an aesthetic dimension, but it is more than aesthetic. It signals a new world of possibilities. The loveliness, sometimes in the form of "inspired utterances," breaks away from the ordinary world of conditioned experience. It is a "making strange": Buddhist discourse, though often restrained, as befits the Middle Way, at times verges on the incredible, excessive, and hyperbolic. The Buddha performs magical feats—walking across rivers, flying through space, reading minds, instantly disappearing and reappearing elsewhere (DN 14.3.29). Such behavior might seem far-fetched, and the language describing it is hyperbolic.

It should come as no surprise that the language of religion is in general hyperbolic, or marked by a blessed excess. It may be a tool for persuasion and ideology, but it also is more than that. Stephen Webb observes that today we live in a world in which discourse has become flat, rational, technical, and uninspired. The figure of hyperbole, intimately connected with religion, inspires us, by contrast, "to imagine more than we know, say more than we dare to believe, act more boldly than is wise and rational, see more than realism displays."[43] Hyperbole is any apparently excessive or overstated language. It complicates the process of filling in gaps as we read; they may, at times, need to be left open. The language of hyperbole is incomparable, beyond our usual conceptions, straining and elevating our imaginations—in what Longinus calls the sublime style.

Hyperbole, so prominent in rhetorical handbooks, is a manner of speech that exaggerates the truth. The "exaggerated truth" may be all the more true, as in the following passage attributed to the Buddha:

> *"Which do you think is more: the flood of tears which, weeping and wailing, you have shed upon this long way—hurrying and hastening through the round of rebirths, united with the undesired, separated from the desired—this, or the waters of the four oceans?*
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> *". . . For a long time have you suffered the death of father and mother, of sons, daughters, brothers and sisters. And whilst you were thus suffering you have, indeed, shed more tears upon this long way than there is water in the four oceans."* (SN 15.3.3)[44]

The addressees are specified as "*the brethren*" ("*forest-dwellers, almsmen, rag-robed*"); they are monks, but perhaps like most of us, not yet liberated. The "*you*" is gradually built up into a cosmic person who is both selfless and samsāric. Suffering and grief, recurring in so many times and places is—and is not—the "you" of the listener or reader. "*You*" are here and everywhere, and a sense of urgency is all the stronger on that account.

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Passages like this, and interpretations that notice hyperboles, are especially provocative in a study of Buddhist texts, which are customarily seen as moderate, realistic, sober, and rational. Yet those texts, especially in the Mahāyāna traditions, are often unfathomably hyperbolic. Even in the earliest, arguably more "rational" schools, we are asked—hyperbolically—to abandon household life, and to employ contrarian, defamiliarizing methods of emotional detachment and sensory renunciation. In all cases, we may decide, as readers or as practitioners, to deflate the hyperboles and reduce the demands. But if so, how well are we reading or practicing?

## Skillful Means

Our situation as readers of Buddhist texts as literature is paradoxical. On the one hand, literature is fictional, and its plots, characters, and verbal constructions, however realistic, are meant to be viewed as not literally true. This being so, we may misread Buddhist or other sacred texts if we believe that they are only literature. They are not to be read, some may tell us, as mere fiction or poetry like other fiction or poetry. On the other hand, many Buddhist texts are adapted to the audiences addressed—that is, they are contrived as *skillful means*, thus complicating any uniform message they may be assumed to have. John Schroeder convincingly takes exception to commentators who examine the content of the Buddha's discourses without paying attention to pedagogical contexts, who all too readily assume that the message can be understood as a series of statements apart from any rhetorical context.[45] Buddhist sayings are therapeutic and pragmatic: they meant for the urgent task of relieving suffering.

The therapy's true purpose might not always be clear. For many people, the Buddhist goal is perforce an imagined, if not a fantastic, idea. Many of them, even if practitioners, have not reached the higher jhānic states in meditation, and they can only imagine nirvana on the basis of scanty, often negative, adjectives: "*not-born, not-brought-into-being, not-made, not-formed*" (It 43).[46] Such an idea has been viewed as the locus for projected hopes, wishes, and aspirations, while the path-to-goal structure has been called a quasi-fictional invention, an imagined analogy for the career of ideal persons.[47] Both the path and the goal may have a strong kinship, it seems, with literature.

In a famous, archetypally Buddhist parable, the teaching itself is imagined, again by analogy, to be like a raft:

> *"Bhikkus* [monks], *suppose a man in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water, whose near shore was dangerous and fearful, and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Then he thought: 'There is this great expanse of water, whose near shore is dangerous and fearful, and whose further shore is safe*

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> *and free from fear, but there is no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Suppose I collect grass twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore.'"* (MN 22.13)

The man then does what he intends, described in precisely the same words, and thereupon he reaches the far shore. Repetitions perform a reinforcement and, as with other parables, preclude deviation. The words to describe a hypothetical state ("suppose a man . . .") are exactly repeated by what the man thinks, thereby validating his thinking, just as his activities will exactly repeat, word for word, his thoughts. No symbolic dimension is as yet specified. We are simply offered concise, practical thinking, and an activity that directly stems from that thinking.

Once having crossed the river, what is to be done with the raft? The man can lug it around with him, which would cumbersome. Or else, preferably, he can leave it on the shore or set it adrift, and thereby, according to a significant motif, "lay down the burden" (of suffering). The raft has served its purpose, and he no longer needs it, since he'll have no wish to go back across the river. The moral of the parable is clear: "*the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping*" (MN 22.13). If so, however, the story—the raft, the Dhamma—is to be taken as something tentative, hypothetical, even experimental, very much like a literary text, which we are to see as fiction or illustration, and not as history or news reporting.

## The Epic Quest

The reader is aware of the man "in the course of a journey," and here we come to the literary genre of many Buddhist texts, including the founder's biography. The journey or quest-romance, as a type of desire fulfillment, has a peculiar position in Buddhist expositions, since a certain type of desire (*tanhā* in the second Noble Truth) is a great enemy to followers of the path. When the young Prince, and Buddha-to-be, embarks on a quest-romance, what are his motives?

One may pause before tackling this question, and ponder what sort of hero he might be. Frye, who follows Aristotle in classifying heroes according to their elevations, claims that if the central figure is superior "in kind" both to other humans and to the natural environment, the hero is divine and his story is a myth. If superior "in degree" to others and to the environment, the hero is typical to romance; if superior in degree to others but not to the environment, he is an epic hero or a leader.[48]

The Buddha varies in his superiority to us. In making use of supernormal powers, he is closest to the heroes of romance and epic, moving "in a world in which the laws of nature are suspended."[49] At other times, he is not above his natural environment: his teaching—the *dhamma*—is sometimes called the natural

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or normal "law," and he dies, as other humans do, at the end of his life span. Though starting as a human, albeit a royal prince, he becomes elevated upon achieving enlightenment, and thereafter, especially in later traditions, is turned into a divinized, mythical figure. Even in the apparently earliest stories, he is legendary from the outset. Prophecies that accompany his birth and his career are marked by the paraphernalia of the quest-romance: "unlikely conversions, miraculous transformations and providential assistance."[50]

Much of the Buddha's story has an epic dimension. Prominent in the Pāli texts are stock epithets, oral formulae, speeches and counterspeeches, gods, prophecies, and praises of great deeds or sayings. Passages in those texts often seem to be, as T. W. Rhys Davids has observed, fragments of a "Buddha Epic," or potential forerunners of such an epic.[51] The episodes are not connected, however, and they are far calmer and more concise than those in the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*. Even so, we discover a narrative that might be termed "epic" (or *mahākāvya*) in the *Nidanakathā* or, more surely, in the Sanskrit verses of Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita*.

The high mimetic epic, as in Homer or Milton, has "an encyclopedic range of theme, from heaven to the underworld, and an enormous mass of traditional knowledge."[52] Classical epics, and Dante's *Commedia*, all begin at a low point, and the central figure is gradually, cosmically educated to make efforts in an archetypal quest. Frye's scheme applies, too, to Indian legends: the prince and future Buddha begins at a low point—a depressing recognition of ubiquitous suffering. The subsequent quest, as in all epics, is not simply self-centered: "an objective and disinterested element enters into the poet's vision of human life," which gives his legend its authority.[53]

The epic often includes a quest-romance dimension, which is heightened in later genres. Intriguingly—and here we return to our question about the Prince's motives—the quest-romance is defined by a strong libidinal element, and is akin to rituals and dreams: "translated into dream terms, the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality."[54] What the Buddha promises is deliverance, precisely from anxieties: the raft parable describes how the "unsafe shore" is "dangerous and fearful." The realization or place of refuge and safety is, or so we would imagine, libidinally satisfying—where I can "*go wherever I want*" (MN 22.13). The typical quest-romance fills in the "want" dimension, however, with rather non-Buddhist items: luxurious banquets and sexual romance, all constituting "the victory of fertility."[55]

The Buddha's quest-romance, then, is atypical. In literary-critical terms, we need to offset a reading of archetypal patterns with a sense of making strange, or defamiliarization. The Buddha's quest-romance is precisely a relinquishment, not a victory, of fertility. And so we might need to ponder the degree of relevance, in this case, of the heroic paradigm.

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