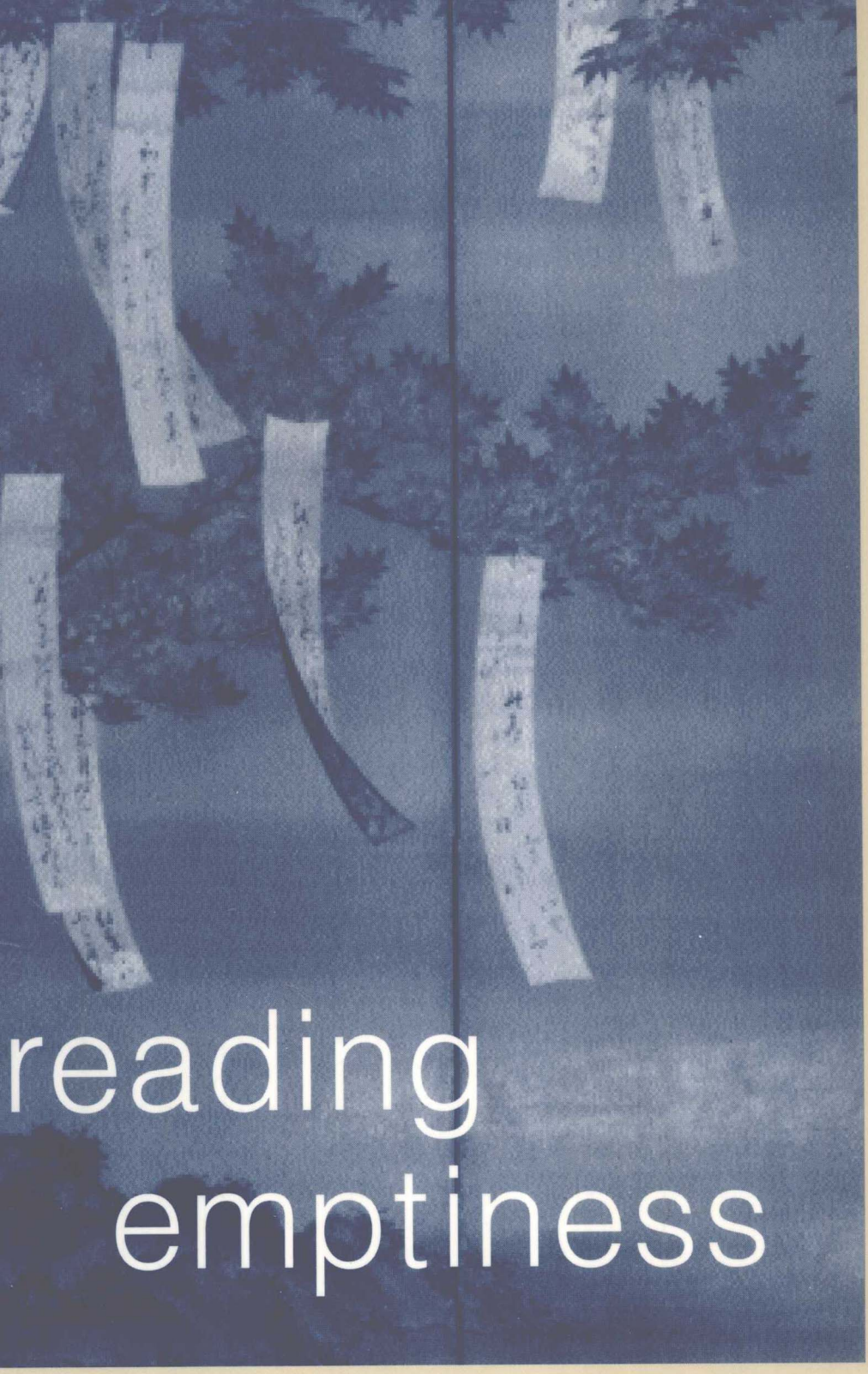

reading emptiness

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Jeff Humphries

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COVER ART: Tosa Mitsuoki, Japanese, 1617–1691. Autumn Maple with Poem Slips, six-fold screen; ink, colors, gold leaf and powdered gold on silk, Edo period, c. 1675, 142.5 × 293.2 cm. Kate S. Buckingham Collection, 1977.157 (detail), photograph by Christopher Gallagher © 1998 The Art Institute of Chicago.

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For Ann Kathryn Benjamin Humphries

Preface

This is not so much a work of scholarship or of criticism as a narrative in the form of an essay comprising several parts that are also essays, each of which calls on the resources of scholarship, criticism, literary theory and philosophy, and sometimes science. Its voice and its point of view are frankly personal and idiosyncratic. Part 1, comprising three chapters, is devoted to speculations about a possible common ground between literary and Buddhist practices, so I have called it "anti-theoretical," for lack of a better term. In fact its conclusions undermine and even dispense with theory as that term has been understood in the literary precincts of recent academe. Part 2, which examines the life and writing of Lafcadio Hearn, and the place of Buddhism in it, is a "defense and illustration" of the (anti-)theory elaborated previously. Any of the chapters could be read independently of the others, but read in sequence, each has a greater cumulative effect than if read alone.

I am not a specialist in Eastern religion or Eastern languages but a teacher and practitioner of literature. American universities now include among their faculties such remarkable scholars of Buddhism as Robert Thurman and Jeffrey Hopkins (and increasingly now their students), who have studied the traditions from within as well as without. I have neither their knowledge nor their scholarly apparatus at my disposal. But my purpose is quite different from theirs: not to elucidate the ancient traditions of Buddhism to Westerners but, using their work as a guide, to seek ways in which literature might be integrated into a truly Western practice of Buddhism that would remain true to its Eastern roots.

The bibliography reflects a mix of scholarly, "popular," and "devotional" literature, from "New Age" icons such as Alan Watts and Alexandra David-Neel to the most careful and recondite scholarship, to works by Tibetan lamas living in exile in the West. None has been used indiscriminately or without regard for its limits; each has its place here. Every effort has been made to guide the interested reader toward other sources of information. I have quoted only from translated sources that are readily available in most large libraries, and I have

tried to be careful about which translations I have used. Every effort has been made to keep arcane vocabulary to a minimum.

My hope is that the book may offer one answer to the questions I am most often asked by students: why and how should they take literature seriously.

Two chapters of this book have appeared before, in very different versions: chapter 1 in *Southwest Review* (autumn 1994, vol. 79, no. 4), and chapter 3 in *University of Toronto Quarterly* (summer 1997, vol. 66, no. 3).

J. H.
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
March 1999

Introduction

This is not a Buddhist "theory" of literature. There cannot be such a thing, if as Nagarjuna wrote, "The emptiness of the conquerors was taught in order to do away with all philosophical views. Therefore it is said that whoever makes a philosophical view out of 'emptiness' is indeed lost" (Huntington, 3). However, neither the Buddha nor Nagarjuna ever said that texts, language, and literature could not contribute to enlightenment, to the direct apprehension of the nature of reality—though most Buddhists today seem to think that they did. Zen in particular is deeply corrupted by this misapprehension, in Japan as well as the West, though its Japanese founder, Dogen, was not (as I will show in the pages that follow). In an introduction to a key text by Nagarjuna, David Kalupahana writes that "in the Buddha's view language is not, in itself, an inadequate means of expressing what is empirically given. Yet modern interpreters of Buddhism seem to assume that the Buddha considered language inadequate to express the truth about existence that he discovered" (17). In fact, Kalupahana points out, the Buddha regarded language as a convention, and

> the difficulty lies in adopting a middle path without accepting conventions as being ultimate or rejecting them as being useless. The uniqueness of the Buddha's philosophy lies in the manner in which a middle path can be adopted with regard to any convention, whether it be linguistic, social, political, moral, or religious. (p. 18)

A classic Chinese text points out the ease, rather than the difficulty, of the Middle Path:

> All forms and appearances are stamped by impressions of a single reality; whatever you encounter [including language, and books] is real. . . . "Sentient beings" [conventional reality] and the "reality-body" [the reality of emptiness] are one in substance but different in name. There has never been movement or stillness, and no concealment or revelation. Because the names are different, there is

> mutual interidentification, there is mutual concealment and cancellation; because they are one substance, they can interidentify and can conceal and reveal each other. Because of this interidentification the two truths, real and conventional, have never been contradictory. (Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable*, pp. 105–6)

In other words, the literary, along with every other sort of conventional reality, is not different from the ultimate reality of emptiness. Thus to the extent that it refuses to admit literature into the circle of right practice, contemporary Buddhism is missing an invaluable aspect of Buddhist teaching, the same aspect that also makes Buddhist thought invaluable to students and practitioners of literature.

Part of the purpose of this book is to correct the misunderstanding and prejudice against literature among Buddhists themselves, but in a larger sense it is intended to provide some relief from a particularly troublesome aspect of every Western theory of literature: the tendency to consider a human reading a book as an animate, sentient thing (a "thinking reed") confronting an inanimate, nonthinking thing—two objects, one endowed with the power of thought (a subject), both having real, inherent existence. This view reflects both the tendency to reification, to consider things as objectively real, and the corollary tradition of dualistic thought in the West since ancient times. That dualism is characteristic of both Platonic idealism and of empiricist materialism—two sides of one coin. Monism—the view of Spinoza and Parminides that everything is "one"—is dualistic in its own way, arising in opposition to dualism, with which it makes a pair. Even the most radical Western thinkers, from Nietzsche to Derrida, have had to operate within the context of a fundamental dualism. Reader-response theory is grounded in the idea of the reader as agent, as subject, and of the text as object, though defined in different terms than the traditional ones, without any absolute or permanent characteristics. Deconstruction, in the person of Jacques Derrida, thinks and writes from the vantage point of the ultimate *sujet supposé savoir*, the highly (over-)refined Cartesian subject-who-is-supposed-to-know who knows that what he is supposed to know is not what it is supposed to be (a static, reified "truth" or "thing"), having only perceived and even deeply understood the phenomenon of emptiness *in the object*. This position halfway in and halfway out of Cartesian dualism imbues deconstructionist discourse with both a gleeful, deliberate obscurantism and a mournful heaviness, an existential angst, which may both be unnecessary (see chapter 3). Despite his real insights

into the nature of conventional reality, Derrida finally goes no further than a recondite academic discourse, a playground for the effete post-romantic intellect. Of all Western streams of thought, the Buddhist Madhyamika is probably closest to Richard Rorty's pragmatism, with its emphasis on *phronesis* (practical wisdom), as opposed to *theoria*, which strives after only absolute, abstract truths.[1] In the Hua-yen tradition it is written that

> "Even if all sentient beings attain enlightenment in an instant, that is no different from not attaining enlightenment. Why? Because enlightenment has no forms or formlessness." Everything being formless, the noumenon thus is manifest—"sentient beings" and "Buddha" both vanish. (Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable*, p. 103)

This is the radical pragmatism or "everydayness" of Buddhism. Still, there are differences, starting with the fact that Rorty's pragmatism is at least provisionally subject-centered; it assumes the inherent reality of the subject, the agent of pragmatism.

From a point of view opposite to that of all Western literary theories, I wish to propose here that a human reading a book is a case of two entities, neither of which has any reified, static or inherent existence, involved in a process of mutual "projection." We are used to considering the book as a kind of lens, or mirror, that throws us back our searching look after effecting inflections or distortions, so that we don't recognize it as our own. Consider book and reader now as two mutually reflecting sets of lenses or mirrors, as mutually involved phenomena, one comprising perhaps only one lens, the other several, with this distinction of single on one side and multiple on the other being subject to constant and unpredictable reversal:

> One phenomenon is relative to all; there is inclusion, there is entry, with four steps in all; one includes all, one enters all; all include one, all enter one; one includes one phenomenon, one enters one phenomenonon; all include all, all enter all. They commune simultaneously without interference. . . .
>
> If we use the example of ten mirrors (arrayed in a circle or sphere so that all face all the others) as a simile, one mirror is the one, nine mirrors are the many. As the first expression states, "one includes all, one enters all," we should say that one mirror

> includes in it (reflections of) nine mirrors, meaning that one mirror is that which includes and nine mirrors are that which is included—yet because the nine mirrors also are that which includes (because they contain the reflection of the one mirror), the aforementioned one mirror which includes also enters the nine mirrors, so one mirror enters nine mirrors. The next three expressions follow this pattern. The second expression says, "all include one, all enter one"—we should say that nine mirrors include in them one mirror, nine mirrors enter one mirror. That is to say, the first-mentioned nine mirrors are that which includes, so the one mirror is that which is included; because the included one also includes, the aforementioned including nine mirrors enter the one mirror, so nine mirrors enter one mirror. As for the third expression "one includes one thing, one enters one thing," we would say that one mirror includes one mirror, one mirror enters one mirror. This means that the first one mirror includes in it (the reflection of) a second one mirror, and the (reflection of the) first one mirror also enters the second one mirror. As for the fourth expression which says "all include all, all enter all," we would say that the ten mirrors each include in them (reflections of) nine mirrors, and (reflections of) ten mirrors all enter nine mirrors. That the entered and the included are only said to be nine mirrors is to leave one to include and enter. (Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable*, pp. 119–20)

Less abstractly, consider the book as though it were a raw oyster, tasting you as you taste it, but without being consumed in the process, or rather both consumed and not consumed at the same time. Not only is the "other" unknowable, as William James asserted, but it is not even really there at all, and not only that, but neither is the self, the would-be knower. This need not, however, and does not prevent human being from going on, or knowing things, including other beings, or reading. Nor is it in any sense tragic or pathetic, though to James and to Proust, and to every Western thinker, including Nietzsche—who merely transmuted his anguish into a lunatic grin—it has seemed wrenchingly so. Within the very limited domain in which they occur, these ways of knowing are perfectly valid, and even "true." The Buddhist Madhyamika or Middle Path does however discredit any effort to render these into any sort of permanent coherence, to understand them as having permanent or ultimate reality—despite whatever impressive material products may result.

Our empiricist science in the West has produced a remarkable capacity for manipulating material reality, but not much understanding of its nature, or of our connection to it. The same can be said for our theories of reading: they have produced remarkably sophisticated strategies and models for textual production, each with its own unique and exclusive claims to Truth, each with its own inadequacies, all the result of being grounded in an absolutist dualism: the reader is an object endowed with thought, and is the agent of knowing (the subject); the book is the inanimate object of inquiry.

That neither should be an object, and neither have any reified existence, as I propose following the philosophy of the Madhyamika, is not completely alien to Western modes of thinking; we need not sacrifice all of the latter to embrace it. On the contrary, it has affinities with the thought of many Western writers, including Montaigne, Proust, Derrida, Rorty, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. One interpreter of Heidegger has paraphrased him by saying that human existence is "weird" because "humans are not things but the clearing in which things appear" (Zimmerman, p. 244). But this does not go far enough. *Books are the clearing in which human being appears, at least when human beings read.* Because our responses to them are out of all proportion to books as objects—what we "read" in them bears no relation to the paper and ink that are the book—the act of reading seems to be an exceptional instance of human being. In fact it is not exceptional, but exemplary. We are always seeing things that are not there, and we are in fact ourselves something that is not there, being seen by ourselves, and others, and even by books (which do not, it is true, see with eyes but with ink and paper, with words). This is not a mystical or even a paradoxical statement. My point here is not to mystify or proselytize but to articulate a different way of looking at texts that has profoundly affected my own readings, and allowed me to appreciate literature more.

I propose that no two texts can be fundamentally alien to each other; still, it is possible to argue, as some have done, that Western literature and Eastern thought are mutually exclusive. Despite affinities that may exist with Western thought, Buddhist philosophy does call deeply into question the most fundamental assumptions of the West about language and representation. It is a commonplace of Western linguistic theory since Saussure that the relation of sign to referent is completely arbitrary, that there is nothing beyond convention and artifice that links the two. This assumption grounds all of Derrida's thought,

the entire intellectual edifice of deconstruction. And yet it is quite moot from the perspective of the Madhyamika. The sign can only be arbitrary if we imagine the thing existing on its own quite apart from our naming it, thinking it. Without inherence, without reified being, no thing can exist in this way. And every thing must become indistinguishable from our representations of it, from our words for it, our thoughts about it. Words (or mathematical formulas, if we are talking about the sciences) and the things they represent are like books and readers, mutually reflecting mirrors in the famous simile of Hua-yen Buddhism cited above—each appears within the other.

Even more basic, the distinction between nature and artifice has no place in Buddhist thought. Or rather, it only exists in reality to the extent that it exists in our minds. The distinction itself is only a convention, a delusion if we cannot see beyond it. The work of Francois Jullien has demonstrated that in much of Eastern intellectual and religious tradition, not only Buddhism, human culture is seen as an extension of nature, and language and art as "unfurling" from nature rather than arising in opposition to it. Both we, and literature, are part of the natural world. Books, words, thoughts can—and do, constantly—profoundly affect not just the way things are conceived, but their very nature. This implies a much greater responsibility toward the natural world, from which we can no longer separate ourselves. It also means that we must begin to take language, literature, textuality, much more seriously than we have been accustomed to do.

If this seems a frightening prospect to historians and journalists, so be it. Western journalism and history, like all the "empirical" disciplines, have grounded themselves in a deference to objective "fact," and to the subject/reader's need/desire to know those facts ("Inquiring minds want to know!"). Buddhist thought implies that there are no such things as facts entirely distinct from our representation of them, or from those to whom we represent them. So the value of disseminating information must be combined with, not compromised by, concern for the way in which the dissemination affects the information. This is different from censorship and propaganda, which are only concerned with the effect of information on an audience, and do not question the status of the information or the facts that it purports to represent. I am talking here about involvement and responsibility, not manipulation. We are wont to talk in the West about communication, whether in self-help books or scientific journals, as though we could talk about a fact or a situation without affecting it. We remain wedded to such misappre-

hensions even though empirical science (in the person of Werner Heisenberg, author of the Uncertainty Principle, and others besides him since) has discovered that they do not work. Even those in the West who have been most forcefully exposing the contradictory underpinnings of Western thought (Derrida, Foucault) remain firmly within these objectivist fallacies. If objects and facts cannot be studied as though existing independently of the study, neither can "discourses."

Obviously, I do not believe that Western literature and Buddhist thought cannot be mixed. The *Flower Ornament Scripture*, the principal scripture of the Hua-yen school of Buddhism, contains the following passage that I consider the cornerstone of this small book.

> "The nature of all sentient beings is naturelessness; the nature of all phenomena is uncreated; the form of all lands of formlessness—in all worlds there only exists verbal expression, and verbal expression has no basis in facts. Furthermore, facts have no basis in words." Thus do enlightening beings understand that all things are void, and all worlds are silent: all the Buddha teachings add nothing—the Buddha teachings are no different from the phenomena of the world, and the phenomena of the world are no different from the Buddha teachings. The Buddha teachings and worldly phenomena are neither mixed up nor differentiated. (p. 462)

The "Middle Way" or Madhyamika system of thought that is emphasized here rejects all theories, and all rationalism. At the same time, it embraces each as true on its own. And true without relativism, without regard to any other or higher "truth," of which there is none. The accusation of relativism reflects an absolutist assumption that if one truth is not absolutely true, another must be better, and some one must be the best one. Why should this be so? In Madhyamika Buddhist thought,

> The way of thinking and speaking that finds expression in propositions embodying epistemological and ontological claims is diagnosed as symptomatic of an extremely serious "mental affliction" (*klesa*), the generative force behind an inordinate and ultimately painful clinging to the "I" and to the objects used to insure the continued well-being of this "I." The Madhyamika maintains, moreover, that philosophers are not the only ones bound up so tightly in the web of reified thinking. In articulating these ideas of "necessary connection" and the like they merely reveal to public

> scrutiny what is for the average person a clandestine, unconscious, and deeply engrained tendency of conceptual thought, that both generates and sustains an attitude and a pattern of behavior tainted by clinging, antipathy, and delusion. (Huntington, p. 55)

For the absolutist—and virtually all Western thinkers are absolutists, including those whose absolute embraces relativity—this raises the question: What room does this leave for words, or for theories, of any kind? The Indian Buddhist philosopher and interpreter of Nagarjuna, Candrakirti, answered as follows:

> The problem of a connection between argument and counterargument is only a problem for those who presuppose some form of absolute, as you do, and are therefore compelled to meet your claims with appropriate counterclaims. For us it is a pseudoproblem, because we hold no such presuppositions. Our words are like the reflection of a face in a mirror—there is no real connection between the reflected image and the face, but the image nevertheless serves a specific purpose for the person using the mirror. Similarly, our words bear no intrinsic connection with your epistemological and ontological problems and the language used to express these problems, but nevertheless these words of ours can serve to realize a specific purpose: They can be understood to express something that is not at all susceptible to expression in the language of "objective facts." (Huntington, p. 54)

In other words, the Buddha was a radical pragmatist: "What is true *(bhuta, taccha)* is that which bears results *(attha-samhita)*" (Kalupahana, p. 19).

I have tried to assume no knowledge whatever of Buddhism on the part of the reader, and no particular knowledge of literary theory, beyond that there is such a thing. Readers are cautioned, however, to jettison as much as possible of what they think they know about Buddhism, for instance that it is fundamentally pessimistic. "Life is suffering" is one of the Four Noble Truths, but life is also Nirvana. Life is suffering only because we misunderstand it. The same life can be paradise. Zen temples would not have such beautiful gardens, and Buddhism would not have produced such stunning artwork over thousands of years, if asceticism and pessimism were the whole story, or even very much of it. In fact, Buddhism is one of the most "optimistic" religions

around. It asserts that in every being there is the possibility of enlightenment, and in everything that seems ugly there is beauty. In everything that seems temporal, there is timelessness. But of course we can only begin to go beyond suffering when we stop denying it. Buddhist Enlightenment is not like being "saved" or "born again" in the Christian sense. It is a matter of opening the mind, clearing away blind faith, and thinking clearly. There is no god in Buddhism, but it nevertheless *is* a religion. This is a sticking point for many Westerners, from Catholics and Jews who understand it to mean that they can keep their old religion and be Buddhists too, to nihilist/atheists and even pundits like Andy Rooney for whom a godless religion is a *non sequitur*. Many practicing Western Buddhists get this wrong, or only partly right. One may insist, for instance, that all the many Buddhist deities are simply representations of various aspects of mind, and not "real" at all, but without realizing that the same is true of ourselves, of the one who makes this observation.

I am very far from wishing to suggest, like most proponents of a "religious" approach to literature, that all literature is, or ought to be, a kind of scripture. Literature is just literature. It does not refer, after the example of medieval allegory, to the life of Christ, or the lives of Mohammed or Buddha, nor have any "salvational" aspect, nor should it. To suggest otherwise is to embark on something quite different from reading or literary study. We must not forget that "'Because enlightenment has no forms or formlessness' . . . 'sentient beings' and 'Buddha' both vanish" (Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable*, p. 103).

There have recently been several books and many articles addressing affinities that may exist between Western deconstruction and Buddhist thought. All of them are very different in scope and purpose from this book. Harold Coward's *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* is an excellent, careful, and thorough examination of Derrida's philosophy of language as compared to those of various classical Indian thinkers, including the Buddhist Nagarjuna. Coward takes great care to note differences as well as similarities, and he avoids unwarranted generalizations. His book is a good antidote to some other work that seems to overlook important differences in the service of dubious ends.

Robert Magliola *(Derrida on the Mend)*, for instance, has made an interesting case for the similarity between Jacques Derrida's work and that of the Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna. In particular, Magliola argues, I think correctly, that Nagarjuna's concept of *shunyata* or emptiness is

very close to Derrida's *différance*. I am troubled, however, by his key assertion that Nagarjuna's thought "completes" Derrida's: "Nagarjuna's Middle Path," he writes, "the Way of the Between, tracks the Derridean trace, and goes 'beyond Derrida' in that it frequents the 'unheard-of-thought,' and also, 'with one and the same stroke,' allows the reinstatement of the logocentric too" (p. 87). To my mind, this belittles both Derrida and Nagarjuna, whose systems of thought are quite mutually exclusive in their means, origins, and ends, though similar in many specific and general aspects. Neither "needs" the other as Magliola would have it; and in fact his desire, as he admits, is to use Buddhism, a completely nontheistic system, to stake out a possibility of logocentric *theism* (Christian Catholicism) within Derridean *différance*—in other words, to place not only Buddhism, but deconstruction, in the service of Catholic Christianity.[2] (Magliola belongs to the Carmelite order.) This is a project worthy of an enlightened missionary, perhaps, but it is still decidedly colonialist, Western, and logocentric in its motivation and purpose. Relying often on categories of understanding derived from Derrida (logocentric or entitive, and differential), Magliola's readings of Buddhist thinkers are directed toward "improving" deconstruction for Christian and Catholic purposes. "I have been trying to show," he writes for instance, "that the Buddhist 'doctrine of the two truths' . . . permits the reinstatement of entitative theories while continuing deconstruction" (1990, p. 87). Derridean deconstruction itself already very explicitly allows for this possibility, though not in the definitive sense that Magliola intends; it has no need of the two truths to do so. What it does not allow, however, is theocentric logocentrism (Christian monotheism) as the terminus of differential thought, and in my opinion neither does Nagarjuna nor Buddhism in general. Putting the two together does not alter this fact. In the same essay, Magliola says that "My message to Westerners is that [Derridean] 'trace' . . . can be blissful . . ." (p. 96). But did anyone ever suggest that it could not be? Certainly not Derrida himself, or any of his followers in America that I am aware of.[3] Deconstruction is not a procedure that may be used or eschewed; it is a phenomenon in which all forms of knowing are subsumed, and logocentrism is one of its aspects. So are all forms of pleasure, including bliss.

Magliola and many others, moreover, ignore Nagarjuna's warning, cited previously, that "whoever makes a philosophical view out of 'emptiness' is indeed lost." As Coward puts it, "Language for Derrida is able to participate in that spiritual goal to which it points, but does not seem to do so for Nagarjuna" (p. 145). This fails to address the extremely

important question of whether there is any place in a genuine Buddhist practice for literature, for reading, or for scholarship (much less philosophy), and the corollary question, of whether it makes any sense to address Buddhism from within these disciplines—is there any valid place for Buddhism in literature? Over and over again, many of the greatest figures in the history of Buddhism have sternly repeated Nagarjuna's advice against treating the Middle Way as "philosophy" or "literature," and it would be irresponsible in my view not to take those warnings seriously. I have found the same solution to this problem as David Loy,[4] though not by the same path, or to the same purpose:

> The end of views such as "ultimate" and "conventional" leaves the world as it really is—a *sunyata* or nondual world in which there is no linguistic or philosophical meddling. . . . Loy comments, "If there is no subject-object separation between language and object, between signifier and signified, then all phenomena, including words, are *tathata*, 'thusness.' This is why, as we see clearly in the Zen tradition, language too participates in the reality it manifests . . . [otherwise] how could so many Zen dialogues have led to a realization on the part of the student?" (Personal correspondence, quoted in Coward, p. 145)

There are important differences between deconstruction (and all forms of Western thought), on the one hand, and Buddhism, on the other, which the initial, perhaps overenthusiastic comparative approaches have tended to gloss over. I hope to respect those differences here, and to suggest, in a more practical and modest sense, what, if any, might be a way of reading and writing, of thinking literature, consistent with the principles of Buddhist thought. For if Buddhism does not let us know texts in ways that they cannot be known otherwise, students and scholars of literature, and philosophy too, might spend their time more profitably elsewhere. However, my purpose here is much more ambitious than Magliola's, as well as diametrically opposed to it: rather than yoking Buddhist thought to deconstruction and organized Christianity, I would like to find in the former ways of reading that allow us to dispense with both of the latter.

I have, not surprisingly, concluded that the closest thing in Western culture to the Middle Way of Buddhism is not any sort of theory or philosophy, but the practice of literature—reading and writing. The