



Rafal K. Stepien, ed., *Buddhist Literature as Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy as Literature*.

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THIS BOOK IS a collection of twelve substantial essays which examine how literary texts in the Buddhist tradition serve as vehicles of Buddhist thought. The texts studied include Jātaka narratives (Amber D. Carpenter and Sarah Shaw), the *Lotus Sūtra* (Natalie Gummer) “as a highly sophisticated theory and practice of performative utterance” (4), hymns of praise “that may alternately strike us as dreadfully silent and crowded with interpretive possibilities” and that “raise issues of voice, audience, sentience, ontology, testimony, the bounds between discursive genres, and the horizons of human hope—all of which are, or should be, matters of interest to philosophers” (Richard F. Nance, 102), Aśvagoṣa’s *Beautiful Nanda* (Sonam Kachru), the *Tale of Genji*, the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and the modern Korean poet Manhae (Francisca Cho), *waka* (Ethan Bushelle), Zen dialogues and poems (Steven Heine), and Milarepa with his fifteenth-century biographer Heruka and his sixteenth-century commentator Pema Karpo (Yaroslav Komarovski and Massimo Rondolino). The late C. W. Huntington, dedicatee of the volume, treats an eighteenth-century autobiographer Jigme Lingpa in connection with today’s practitioners of “autofiction.” The editor’s essay is on the *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, a treatise on aesthetics by Liu Xie (ca. 465–522), which is little known in the West but has quite a cult in China as the topic of 140 books and 2400 essays (234). Liu Xie claimed that “literature conveys the mind” (246) as the conventional conveys the ultimate. Among the texts studied, the Japanese poems, in their porousness to a religious significance and function, are perhaps the ones that most challenge standard conceptions

of the relation between poetry and thought (SANFORD 1992; ROBERT 2008). A pre-Buddhist, pre-literate foundation for this might be suggested by the ritual character of the *Manyōshū* (EBERSOLE 1983) and the possible traces of an indigenous sense of transience and pathos on which Buddhism, with its firmer sense of history and of metaphysical impermanence supervenes as alien.

So far, so good. But the volume also has high theoretical ambitions, declared at the outset: “This book will upset many people. It is meant to, for it challenges many ideas cherished by philosophers and literati alike,” certain “overarching structures and strictures that have hitherto framed, and thereby limited, philosophical and literary study in the West” (1). It “takes its cue from contemporary debates among Western literary theorists and philosophers regarding formally literary but/and substantially philosophical texts” that have overcome a “rigid repartitioning of relevant texts as either literary or philosophical” and generated insights neglected in Buddhist studies due to “an easy and unquestioned assumption as to the independence of literature from philosophy in the primary texts themselves,” which in reality “typically present Buddhist philosophical thought in highly wrought literary form” (2). The people “upset” will be those scholars who ignore “the polyvalent nature of primary sources by reading them in strictly literary or philosophical terms” (5).

Since these remarks address a number of mobile and evolving scholarly fields, it is difficult to assess their pertinence. They concern only the Anglophone world, not the French or German contexts in which literature and philosophy have long been porous to each other (consider Adorno, Blanchot, Deleuze, Derrida, Serge Doubrovsky, Foucault, Lacan, Guardini, Käte Hamburger, Heidegger, Georges Poulet, Sartre), and where, since the Oriental Renaissance of the early nineteenth century, philosophers have often plunged into Eastern thought, though aware of being hobbled by linguistic incompetence (think of Simone Weil’s dabbling with Sanskrit, Heidegger’s effort to read Chinese and to dialogue with Japan, Barthes’s book on Japan). But we should be happy they did not barge in where angels fear to tread, as did a string of French philosophers in books on Saint Paul. Generally speaking, the fruits of comparatism in literature, philosophy, and religion are disappointing, particularly when based only on translations.

A point not acknowledged in the volume is that very many Western philosophical texts deliberately eschew all literary pretensions (the Scholastics, Leibniz, Wolff, Husserl, Frege, much analytical philosophy) and that literary philosophers such as Plato are rather atypical; generally speaking, the more literary a philosopher is, the lower his or her place in the philosophical canon. The same holds for Buddhist thought: Abhidharma, Madhyamaka, Yogācāra treatises, and the logical works of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti hardly offer rich fare for literary scholars, and it is hard to see how literary considerations would have altered the picture of them presented in CONZE (1967) and WESTERHOFF (2018). All of

these can comfortably be called philosophical and lend themselves to a “fusion philosophy” in dialogue with Western ideas on epistemology and philosophy of mind. But more literary works would more naturally fall under the category of “religion” rather than “philosophy.” Of course there is a constant unease about applying these Western categories to Eastern texts, and this unease is increased rather than dispelled by the enthusiasm with which the term “philosophy” is used throughout this volume, even as it claims to “powerfully question from various angles the applicability of the very categories of ‘philosophy’ and ‘literature’ to the multifarious Buddhist texts” it investigates (15). The title and the striking cover, a calligraphic display centered on *sems* (the Tibetan word for “mind”), ensure that the book will be placed under the rubric of “Buddhist Philosophy.” *Literary Dimensions of Buddhist Thought* might have been an apter title.

Also “upset” will be “those inclined to conceive the current disciplinary compartmentalization of Western academic institutions as rightly reflecting real divisions in the texts they study” (6). This does little justice to the foundational role of strictly defined borders in the creation of such disciplines as philosophy, theology, logic, religious studies, and literary criticism. “Es ist nicht Vermehrung, sondern Verunstaltung der Wissenschaften, wenn man ihre Grenzen ineinanderlaufen lässt” (It is not increase but deformation of the sciences when one lets their borders flow into one another), says Kant (quoted in HUSSERL 1928, 6). Stepien claims support from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*, with “its dialectical sublation of all dichotomies in Absolute Spirit” (7). Though the purist Husserl accused the encyclopedic Hegel of an “impure world-wisdom,” Hegel defended the irreducible identities of the different disciplines and would abhor the mishmash of “world philosophy.” Stepien himself calls for a policing of borders when he rightly deplores that “it is often practically impossible to tell the divide between philosophy of religion and theology” (7).

Another complaint is that “the scholarly fields of literature and philosophy, literature and religion, and philosophy and religion have been and continue to be overwhelmingly dominated by Christian/Western perspectives” (6) and that “the vast majority of relevant academic positions are devoted to Western forms of ‘philosophy’” (7). There are obvious historical and linguistic reasons for this, but it is not true of non-Western milieus as Stepien admits (15), and scarcely applies, despite “woke” claims of rampant orientalism and neocolonialism, to Western studies of Islam or of Buddhism in the last two centuries, long before the recent English-language studies of Islamic, Chinese, and Indian philosophy listed on pages 18–20 (to which might be added the budding *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy*). The example of Nietzsche’s friend Paul Deussen in devoting the first half of his history of philosophy to non-Western sources (DEUSSEN 1894–1917) was not taken up by departments of philosophy and the same may be said of Karl Jaspers’s series on the great philosophers, including Buddha,

Confucius, Jesus, Nāgārjuna, and Laozi (JASPERS 1981). But Deussen remained seminal in Indology, and Jaspers reached a wide circle of readers. The “intellectual racism inherent in privileging Western models of the relationships among philosophy, literature, and religion” (7) is an accusation that could be extended to departments of philosophy in Japan or China. To say that “the continued refusal on the part of professional philosophers to treat non-Western philosophers and philosophies is nothing less than ‘deeply racist’” (20, quoting Jay L. Garfield) seems unnecessarily belligerent, and risks trivializing the notion of racism.

My overall impression is that the programmatic aspect of this book would be more convincing if the question it addresses to the Buddhist literary heritage were more narrowly focused. Saddled with the aim of “filling not one but several lacunae” (11), its central purpose becomes unclear, as if self-deconstructed. Again, I suggest that the abundantly stimulating essays would benefit from a simpler non-revolutionary purpose, for instance, to show the roles of literary creativity in the transmission of the Dharma, by serene attention to the art of those Buddhist texts that have genuine literary distinction.

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