This edited volume collects twelve papers around the idea that—to borrow phrasing from Madhyamaka—Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist literature are neither the same nor different. The papers give voice to both individual and collective concerns about disciplinary boundaries in the contemporary academy, as well as about the inertia that keeps so many specialists in philosophy and literature from incorporating Buddhist and other non-Western materials into their work. The volume amounts to a sustained argument that boundaries among traditions are just as empty (śūnya) as they are among disciplines; in showing this as much as saying it, Rafal K. Stepien and his collaborators have produced something very much like the narratives and poetry they analyze. While traditional Buddhist contexts do not feature any perfect analogue to our professional distinction between philosophical and literary activities, they do feature pervasive worries about the place of beautiful, expressive, and evocative uses of language in the pursuit of religious objectives. The various texts and thinkers examined in this book both reflect and reflect about prevailing assumptions concerning what counts as the Buddha’s word, what ways of talking and listening keep us focused on its message instead of distracting us, and to what extent explicit reasoning helps us understand and propagate it. Boundary-policing and gatekeeping are not just modern academic problems: spending time with this book has helped me think through not only the relevance of professional competition to age-old debates within Buddhism but also the ways in which today’s academic gatekeeping presumes an analogue to sacred truths.

The title of Amber D. Carpenter’s paper—“Transformative Vision: Coming to See the Buddha’s Reality”—encodes its core claim, which is that classical Buddhist narratives aim primarily at showing us what people are like when they are cognitively advanced, the better to help us become more cognitively advanced ourselves. Where some approaches to the ethical value of literature take it as a kind of “laboratory” for enhancing one’s appreciation of different viewpoints and psychological states, Carpenter argues that Buddhist narratives focus on conveying correct viewpoints and good states through their favored characters. Hence

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those characters embody and enact what well-formed doctrine aims to teach us more discursively; their responses to dangerous or confusing situations do far more than doctrine by itself could do in showing readers why such teachings matter. In complementary fashion, Sarah Shaw’s “Jātakas and the Abhidhamma: Practical Compassion and Kusala Citta” demonstrates the intricate weaving of systematic doctrine into highly entertaining and imaginative tales. Reading these tales in tandem with abhidhamma makes the latter come alive; with the aid of its precisely formulated definitions and statements, readers can better appreciate the significance of even apparently trivial thoughts and behaviors in such tales, and hence in their own lives as well. That the behaviors of exemplary figures convey doctrinally formu-
izable perspectives on reality means that doctrinal grounds can be adduced against the value of a given tale as well as in its favor. Massimo Rondolino’s “The Repa and the Chan Devotee: Hagiography, Polemic, and the Taxonomies of Philosophical Literature” vividly illustrates the didactic function of Buddhist storytelling by examining a twentieth century Chan monk’s vehement critique of Tsangnyön Heruka’s fifteenth century works on Milarepa. In any tradition that zeroes in on certain charismatic individuals as inspirational guides, it is as we should expect that claims about what they said and did will be sites of sometimes bitter contestation. The anonymous critic’s dedicated breakdown of all the flaws he sees in tales of Milarepa can help us think of narratives not just as tools but as weapons, dreadful in the hands of enemies no less than useful in our own.

Some of the texts examined in this volume tell stories less of someone else than of their own writers and readers. The late C. W. Huntington Jr., to whom the collection is dedicated, holds up the Tibetan genre of “secret autobiography” alongside postmodern “autofiction” as narrative demonstrations of selflessness—or, in the words of his title, of “The Autobiographical No-Self.” From a Buddhist perspective, telling highly unreliable stories about ourselves is something we do daily; in doing so self-consciously, literary auto-fashioners enact the realization of this fact. Huntington argues that this kind of narrative does substantive philosophical work, by forcing its readers to grapple with the ambiguity between fact and fiction at an unusually intimate level. Sonam Kachru’s “Of Doctors, Poets, and the Minds of Men: Aesthetics and Wisdom in Aśvaghōsa’s Beautiful Nanda” likewise shows a Buddhist writer leading readers into question, in this case by writing a Buddha who leads a hapless would-be Buddhist into question. The Buddha leads Nanda into question most effectively by leading Nanda’s body, with its associated frames of reference and comparison, into a heavenly realm that discombobulates his competence to make good sense of what he senses. This heavenly journey provides Nanda with experiential premises in an overall argument for adjusting his sense of himself and his prospects; Kachru’s fine-grained analysis of Aśvaghōsa’s language indicates the depth to which it aims at leading us through something similar. As Richard F. Nance explores in his “Panegyric as Philosophy: Philosophical Dimensions of Indian Buddhist Hymns,” Buddhist thinkers regularly indicate their own discom-
bobulated journeys by way of praising the people and things they trust to help them through. In countless cases, to better understand the whys and hows of praise is to
better understand the claims and arguments these thinkers make: who and what they think they are, who it is they see themselves as talking to, and the striking range of beings they find worthy of their gratitude all go to make them who they are as thinkers. To disregard the thinkers of Buddhist thoughts, whether known to us through autofiction, through their lavishings of praise, or through our own responses to marvelous uses of language, would be on a level with forgetting that Buddhist deeds are done by doers as portrayed in tales.

Yaroslav Komarovski’s paper—“Where ‘Philosophy’ and ‘Literature’ Converge: Exploring Tibetan Buddhist Writings about Reality”—demonstrates how little inkling there is in traditional settings that we should forget the speakers and enacters of philosophy. Focusing on Tibetan Madhyamaka texts, Komarovski details not only the diversity of genre and style they incorporate but also their consistent instrumentalization of rational argument in pursuit of personal attainments that go far beyond rational structures. Natalie Gummer’s “The Scandal of the Speaking Buddha: Performative Utterance and the Erotics of the Dharma” presents Buddhist philosophizing at its most concretely and manipulatively personal. She examines the *Lotus Sūtra* as the avowedly hyper-fertile body of a being who conveys its sublime fertility through speech rather than bodily fluids. *Buddhavacana* makes and remakes reality, especially through making more Buddhists and Buddhas with their own multifarious capacities of invention. The Buddha of the *Lotus* announces his commitment to speech as creative expedient, and since this very announcement falls within its own purview, its listeners would do well not to assume that it trades on any ultimate difference between merely effective and properly truth-telling speech. The lack of an ultimate difference between truth-telling and other kinds of performance effectively implies that anything can tell the truth; Steven Heine’s “On Resolving Disputes between Literary (*Wenzi*) and Non-Literary (*Wuzi*) Approaches to Expressing Zen Buddhist Philosophy” surveys a range of Chinese and Japanese sources embroiled in disputes about the role that poetry might play in performing the distinctive truths of Zen. The paradox of a tradition that uses beautiful and evocative language to reject all language draws forth a thousand variations on the theme of what to do when the aptly-named “poetry demon” strikes. To abandon style with consummate style, to be profound by way of contempt for the profound, is a distinctive kind of auto-fashioning not unrelated to the *Lotus* Buddha’s boundless creativity of bodies.

Ethan Bushelle’s “The Green Bamboo Is the *Dharmakāya*: *Waka* Poetry and the Buddhist Imagination in Heian Japan” likewise surveys an East Asian controversy about poetry, in this case about the suitedness of a secular genre for Buddhist adaptation. While one option for adapting *waka* was simply to enlist its forms in service of existing ritual and didactic objectives, another went in something like the opposite direction: enlisting Buddhist thought in service of more deeply feeling out the worlds disclosed by *waka*. To approach a poem, however “profane,” as an object of pointed contemplation sanctifies it for a world of thought in which attitudes take precedence over purportedly free-standing things. Francisca Cho extends the inquiry to fictional narrative, perennially suspect as “unserious” in the indige-
nous Chinese tradition but elevated to the level of scripture by certain Buddhist-influenced defenders. Her “Buddhist Literary Criticism in East Asian Literature” considers not just the links between fictional reality and the empty presence analyzed in doctrine but also the lack of an ultimate question as to whether anything narrated in scripture actually took place. Self-consciously investing in illusion and in the intensity of the commitments that it weaves can serve, if anything, as a useful corrective to the conventional assumption that ordinary objects of obsession are realities and not illusions. While it occurs in the middle of the volume instead of at the end, Stepien’s contribution is a fitting capstone to this review’s reordered telling of its contents: “The Original Mind Is the Literary Mind, the Original Body Carves Dragons” conveys in its very title the complete assimilation of writerly creation to cosmic truth. Stepien delves into the metaphysical dimensions of Liu Xie’s influential treatise The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons, which enlists both Buddhist and indigenously Chinese concepts toward a vision of universal patterned process. For Liu, the shifting structures of the world are nowhere more apparent than in language, whether entertained in thought or emitted in the form of speech and writing; the complexities thereby emitted express the all-pervasive unity of things rather than negating it.

As I stated at the outset, this collection operates in much the same way as its target texts do: a mix of genres, styles, claims, and paths of argument, it yields an irreversible change of perspective. The keynote throughout is the unity of what our habits cordon off as disciplines and cultures; to me, at least, this was an easy sell, and it left me with the sense that conventional practice (ṣrāvaka) is what would stop someone from buying it. If Zen writers regularly grappled with the “poetry demon,” I think it would be fair to say that we as academics suffer constant visits from the “career” or “professionalism demon,” who insists we play our game by certain well-established protocols. The mutual exclusion of disciplines and objects of study seems like an inevitable feature of any intellectual market; readers thoroughly appreciative of just what happens in this book might wind up seeing that as opportune, whatever its frustrations. After all, what significance could there be in the Lotus’s announcement that śrāvakas are bodhisattvas if we could not understand the difference?