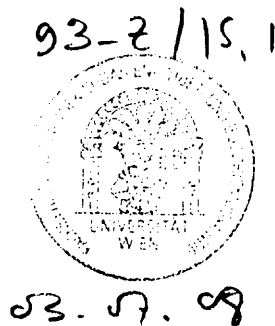


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III. AN EXCHANGE

The Theatre of Objectivity: Comments on José Cabezón's Interpretations of mKhas grub rje's and C. W. Huntington, Jr.'s Interpretations of the Tibetan Translation of a Seventh Century Indian Buddhist Text

by C. W. Huntington, Jr.

I

During the past year several journals have published reviews of my book, *The Emptiness of Emptiness*.¹ The authors of these reviews raise a number of engaging questions regarding my work on early Mādhyamika. No meaningful discussion on these issues can take place, however, until we have gone much deeper into the problem of methodology. Although I shall focus my remarks here on an essay by José Cabezón I would, in fact, like to draw attention to another piece as well, a long article by Paul Williams that is full of interesting and controversial opinions. It will be seen that both of these reviews are marked by a common leitmotif that bears directly on some important matters of general concern having to do with the translation and interpretation of Indian Buddhist texts.

At the very outset I would like to thank my reviewers for their generous assessment of my work. I doubt that anyone could be more severe with the book than I am myself. The truth is that I can barely open the cover without contemplating some stylistic or thematic problem. That they have recorded so many favorable reactions to what I have written is certainly gratifying. I was particularly encouraged by Mr. Cabezón's judgement of the translation. Of course he is absolutely correct about the difficulty of translating ancient technical treatises like the *Madhyamakāvatāra* and in retrospect there are several changes I would be tempted to make if I had the chance. For example, I like his suggestion of "provisional meaning" for *neyārtha*. In any case, before I leap into a detailed account of my specific concerns I want to express my sincere appreciation for the general tenor of these reviews which, in my estimation, manage to be both

intelligent and nonadversarial. What I have to say here can not help but appear critical; I only hope that, with care, I might succeed in maintaining the high standard set by Mr. Cabezón, Mr. Williams and the others who have taken the trouble to publish their valuable observations on my research.

To be perfectly honest, in spite of all I have just said I must confess that I read a great deal of Mr. Cabezón's review with a sort of horrified fascination. I can not imagine ever encountering more dramatic evidence of just what little control an author has over how his work is understood. By the time I reached the final paragraph I was dumbfounded. How could a man who is virtually my ideal reader possibly have come up with an interpretation of my book that directly conflicts with my own understanding of what I had written on so many vital issues? It really is startling, the extent to which the meaning of one's words eludes even one's own grasp. Near the beginning of his review Mr. Cabezón writes "... it is ironic that the main thrust of Huntington's introduction should be so at odds with the dGe lugs pa reading of the Madhyamaka" (p. 131). And yet as I made my way through his presentation of what he refers to as "the dGe lugs pa reading" I discovered that the difference between my own understanding of Mādhyamika and that of mKhas grub rje did not appear to be nearly so striking as I had been led to expect. To be precise, I found myself in disagreement not only with Mr. Cabezón's interpretation of aspects of my own book but also with his understanding of several passages drawn from mKhas grub rje's *sTong thun chen mo* — all of which raises, I believe, several interesting hermeneutical problems. It is these problems that I would like to address in what follows, for, as Gadamer and others have argued, there is an intimate relationship between the tools a scholar brings to his research and the conclusions he reaches. To devalue this relationship is to compromise one's capacity for just the sort of self-critical reflection that is the lifeblood of any intellectual work.

If our effort to make sense out of Buddhist literature is to be convincing then this effort must be suffused with an equally intense and overt interest in exhuming not only the presuppositions of Indian and Tibetan authors, but our own presuppositions and preconceptions as well. As a corollary to this general principle I would suggest that if we are radically to challenge the accepted interpretations of Indian Mādhyamika texts — that is, if we are interested in developing a persuasive philosophical interpretation of Nāgārjuna and the other early Indian Mādhyamikas, one that we might have the courage, finally, to call *our own* — then we must radically challenge the accepted models of scholarship. The first, laborious step in this process is to unearth the assumptions that empower these models and bring them up into the light where we can get a close look at exactly what it is that we are dealing with.

II

To begin with I want to discuss very briefly a few prominent instances where

Mr. Cabezón and I seem to be in less than perfect accord over the meaning and implications of what I wrote in my book. The list of examples I have chosen to discuss is representative, but by no means comprehensive, for it is not my purpose here to contest his claim to have presented “one interpretation of Candrakīrti that varies radically from the one presented in the introduction to [*The Emptiness of Emptiness*]”(p. 153). Rather I wish only to suggest that this claim becomes extremely problematic given that the two of us — Mr. Cabezón and myself — do in fact hold distinctly different interpretations, if not of Candrakīrti, then most certainly of Huntington. Let me be more explicit.

“Intuitively one might say,” Mr. Cabezón writes on page 159, “that the Mādhyamikas argue for their beliefs against ... different opponents, but for Huntington this is not possible, since what they are doing is not philosophy.” Mr. Cabezón’s conviction that I do not take Candrakīrti’s text to be properly philosophical permeates his review. So far as I can see, this conviction is apparently rooted in my references to the philosopher Richard Rorty and his remarks on the “nonphilosophical language” of William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein. While I realize that my readers may not be versed in Rorty’s work, I had hoped that the significance of this expression could be determined within the wider context of my discussion in the introduction. “Nonphilosophical” in Rorty’s admittedly idiosyncratic usage means “nonspeculative;” that is, “pragmatic” or even “deconstructive” in a somewhat less than technical sense of the term. My point was that modern Pragmatism and ancient Mādhyamika both represent attempts to subvert the sort of metaphysical speculation that has throughout history generally co-opted the grand title of Philosophy in India and the West. Again, in Rorty’s jargon the people who engage in this highly critical enterprise are called “edifying philosophers.” Edifying philosophers do not construct systematic philosophical explanations of their own; rather they employ every means at their disposal to develop persuasive critiques directed at the conceptual systems presented by others. Granting the possibility that Mr. Cabezón may not be conversant with Rorty’s terminology, it is nevertheless difficult to understand how this single expression could have been responsible for such a sweeping conclusion when my entire project was — from my own perspective, at least — an entirely self-conscious attempt to develop a reading of Mādhyamika that is nothing if not philosophical. See, for example, p. 129: “It is misleading to characterize Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti as the proponents of a mystical, allogical, or irrational system unconcerned with the proper business of philosophy Such an interpretation does a tremendous disservice to Nāgārjuna’s thought The single most controversial and revolutionary feature of Nāgārjuna’s legacy lies in his restructuring of the philosophical enterprise” The problem may be that in Mr. Cabezón’s view philosophy devoid of either epistemology or syllogistic reasoning is not philosophy at all. “Instead,” as he makes clear, “it is something more akin to therapy of the Wittgensteinian kind” (p. 159). We ought to note in passing that in his review Mr. Williams not only disagrees with

Mr. Cabezón on this particular issue, but he has gone so far as to criticize me for over-emphasizing the philosophical dimension of early Mādhyamika: "Huntington's rethinking of Madhyamaka in the light of contemporary philosophical concerns is viable and perhaps laudable, but it should not be represented as the only option for those who would take the relevance of these texts to modern Western concerns seriously" (p. 195).

Closely related to his assertion that I do not treat the Mādhyamika as proper, methodologically grounded philosophy is Mr. Cabezón's claim that my interpretation of Candrakīrti dispenses with the need for "rational and systematic justification of the philosophical truth of ... emptiness" (pp. 155 ff). In many contexts I discuss the undeniable significance of rational discourse in early Mādhyamika. As a representative example we might look to p. 139, where I review the overall thrust of my attempt to make sense of the Mādhyamika as philosophy: "Carefully taking into account 'the limits of reason' as well as its necessary and legitimate claims, the meaning that this or any other philosophy has for us can perhaps be measured by no higher standard than as a function of its practical consequences for the individual, for society, and for all forms of life. The most important question would then be: Through incorporating a vocabulary that seeks neither to deny nor otherwise to contradict or denigrate all the evidence that can and must be accepted by the canons of reason ... [and so forth]." One of my major goals in this enterprise was to examine how these texts may have considerably redefined the accepted, methodologically grounded models of both philosophy and reason, but it would be a serious mistake to equate even substantial *redefinition* with outright *rejection*. Nāgārjuna appears to me to be interested only in mitigating what was taken by him to be a compulsive and spiritually crippling preoccupation with a style of rationalism that had become entrenched in the Buddhist world during the centuries immediately before and after the advent of the Christian era. His work was produced in a context shaped by the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* and it must have been welcomed by at least some of his contemporaries — those who referred to themselves, somewhat hyperbolically, one suspects, as the "Mahāsaṅghikas" — but we also know that the early Mādhyamika writings were denounced from the first as irrational and nihilistic by a large segment of the intellectual community, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. And still several hundred years seem to have passed before any effort was made to accommodate these critics. It was not until the middle of the sixth century that one of Candrakīrti's immediate predecessors, Bhāvaviveka, composed a number of highly influential treatises built solely around the promise of furnishing the *Madhyamakakārikās* with an unshakable logical foundation.

On p. 155 Mr. Cabezón cites mKhas grub rje as saying "the belief in no-beliefs is itself a belief," as though this difficulty had not been addressed anywhere in my account of Candrakīrti. The "no view" that I find in early Mādhyamika is certainly not so naive as to be oblivious to the difficulties posed by this kind of self-referential conundrum, and in fact I specifically addressed

the issue in several places. See, for instance, p. 135, where I refer to Rorty's alternative understanding of what it might mean not to hold a view: "Whereas less pretentious revolutionaries can afford to have views on lots of things which their predecessors had views on, edifying philosophers have to decry the very notion of having a view, while avoiding having a view about having views. This is awkward, but not impossible" The problem of self-reference is linked to concerns about relativism and the even more basic matter of how I have defined a "view." In brief, my argument in the book is not that early Mādhyamika holds no views whatsoever, but rather that it lays no claim to any "value-free, objective view of truth or reality." This is a critical point that both Mr. Cabezon and Mr. Williams seem to have missed,² though I hammered on it almost *ad nauseam* from the preface on through the introduction and notes. With all due respect to mKhas grub rje, I would think it obvious — so obvious it hardly requires mention — that no one can compose an expository text without expressing some view or another (be it "right" or "wrong," confused or perfectly lucid). The early Indian Mādhyamika authors were certainly no different in this regard from any author who has ever set pen to paper. On the other hand, they seem to differ considerably from most other philosophers to the extent that their views do not demand any ahistorical, *a priori* justification. The views expressed in those texts are anchored only in 'jig rten pa'i tha snyad: "... according to the Mādhyamika, concepts of logic, and theoretical as well as practical concepts dealing with empirical phenomena like causation, are all grounded in a particular way of life ..." (Huntington, p. 10). It is this "way of life" (whatever it may be) that is groundless, and not our concepts, our logic, etc. To put this another way: While early Mādhyamika texts expound many and varied opinions on issues of crucial relevance to the project of developing an effective soteriological strategy, such opinions are obviously not what is being referred to in, for example, *Madhyamakaśāstra* 13.8, where Nāgājuna cautions us not to misconstrue emptiness by making it into a *dṛṣṭi*. His use of the Sanskrit word must be, in that context, synonymous with what Candrakīrti occasionally identifies as *mithyā-* or *ku-dṛṣṭi*: an incorrect or perverse view. Which is to say (in my reading), a view of truth or reality that would undermine the Buddhist soteriological project through purporting to be value-free or objective.³

Toward the close of his discussion Mr. Cabezon suggests that I appear at times to subscribe to the fourth member of the *catuṣkoṭi*. Actually on this issue I referred to none other than mKhas grub rje himself regarding the connection between the fourth member of the *catuṣkoṭi* and concepts of a "transcendent ground," an "ineffable reality," or, for that matter, the assertion that early Mādhyamika is not philosophy, but some kind of mystical practice (Huntington, S. 3, n. 12). Given the context of Mr. Cabezon's remarks, I suspect he may have formed his opinion solely on the basis of what I wrote about "most contemporary scholars [believing] that the term emptiness refers neither to existence nor non-existence" (p. 18). After citing this line from my book, he flatly asserts that

contemporary dGe lugs pa scholars *do not* hold to such a position. Maybe not, but they must still explain, e.g., *Madhyamakaśāstra* 15.6: “Those who see in it [any reference to] intrinsic and extrinsic being, or existence and nonexistence, do not see the actual teaching of the Buddha.”²⁴ In support of his assertion Mr. Cabezón translates a passage from the *sTong thun chen mo* where mKhas grub rje clarifies the critical distinction between outright non-existence and the lack of “inherent existence.” I was truly puzzled here, for mKhas grub rje’s discussion seems to me to be relevant not to the fourth member of the *catuṣkoṭi* but rather to the second, usually interpreted as a statement of unqualified negation: “Things do not exist.” This is one instance of a place where the tables are turned and I find myself in apparent disagreement with Mr. Cabezón’s interpretation of his own translation of mKhas grub rje.

Finally, a less abstruse, but equally disturbing example of how even a most obvious effort to control the meaning of my words can fail. Mr. Cabezón is startled by my observation that early Mādhyamika set itself “in opposition to a philosophical tradition which was preoccupied with the search for more and more precise technical terminology and had neglected the practical application of philosophical theory...” (Huntington, p. xii). “What a terribly poor picture this paints ...” he exclaims, “of the great Abhidharma and Yogācāra masters! Was the Abhidharma truly the dry scholasticism that Huntington implies it was?,” (Cabezón, p. 160). On p. 17, in defining my use of the term “Hīnayāna,” I wrote: “It is clear ... that the Mādhyamika critique was specifically directed against an abstract, academic philosophy that had become divorced from the tradition of practical application. Still, we have no reason to suppose that this sort of scholasticism was characteristic of every non-Mādhyamika school even in Nāgārjuna’s time, and therefore the terms [Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna] have been retained here as convenient labels for two different genres of literature.” And from Section Two, note 1 (p. 201): “In this discussion I have used the term Hīnayāna as it is used by Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti and other Mahāyānists; in fact, the Mādhyamika critique was almost certainly directed against only one of at least eighteen early Indian Hīnayāna sects, the Sarvāstivāda”

III

The examples discussed above provide strong support for the unsettling observation that a text — any text — will not necessarily be interpreted in accord with the author’s own understanding of what he has written. In this case the text happens to be my own, and, as a consequence, this particular demonstration of the lack of authorial control is unusually vivid. The feeling is very much as though my book, the book *I* wrote, has been forced to serve some purpose other than the one *I* myself envisioned for it. What *I* require, of course — and what *I* can not seem to find — is some stable criterion for determining who is qualified to adjudicate in the matter of our disparate interpretations of my words. Is there

really no final arbiter to whom I, Mr. Cabezón and my other reviewers might appeal? Is there no one we could all place our trust in, no referee willing and able to say, once and for all, “*This* — and nothing else — is the meaning of what Huntington has written”? For my own part, I could not honestly claim to command that kind of certainty. For any number of reasons I may not have managed to say what I thought I was saying in my book. Perhaps I failed to appreciate the full implications of my own ideas. Or it may be that I was unable to articulate those ideas clearly enough. I might have been confused about what it was that I intended to communicate. Then again, I can’t completely rule out even the unlikely possibility that my ideas may have changed over the past few years in ways I myself can not quite see. If so, then I could easily be incapable of remembering exactly what I was thinking when the book was taking shape. It is not enough for me simply to insist that my work has been misunderstood, when in fact my reviewers are in many ways every bit as qualified as I am to assess the significance of *The Emptiness of Emptiness*. Mr. Cabezón’s credentials are clearly in order. He is a highly trained, competent critic, an authority in his own right. This being the case, there is, moreover, good reason to believe that his understanding of my book will be shared by others of equal competence. For better or worse, then, we’re apparently left on our own to hash things out between ourselves. I can publish a response to his review. We might eventually find the opportunity to get together and talk, and, with luck, we might even work out some common understanding of my book. One way or the other the exchange of ideas and opinions will go on between us as long as we care to stick with it, and, in the end, what more could we want? For the moment it would be enough if only I could persuade Mr. Cabezón, Mr. Williams and their readers that what has happened to my book is exactly what could happen to *any* text. Which brings me to the considerably more complicated and problematic issue of Mr. Cabezón’s reading of mKhas grub rje.

If nothing else, the disparity between my understanding of the *sTong thun chen mo* and Mr. Cabezón’s certainly seems to throw into question the whole idea of a single, authorized (“traditional”) dGe lugs pa reading of the Mādhyamika like the one referred to by both him and Mr. Williams. At the very least it must suggest that, even assuming such a reading exists, we do not have any dependable access to it since one or the other (or both) of us has obviously been led astray. This is exactly the sort of meta-confusion I was trying to avoid by not relying, in my own work, on later Tibetan exegesis. I subtitled the book “An introduction to early Indian Mādhyamika” and on every significant point of interpretation where classical documentation was required I strove to support my case primarily with references to “early” Indian sources (that is, to no author later than Candrakīrti himself). I sought, to put it another way, to present my understanding of Candrakīrti, and *not* my understanding of a later Tibetan understanding of Candrakīrti. I will take this issue up in somewhat greater detail in just a moment,

but before I do I want to step back-stage, so to speak, and take a look at the rhetorical structure of Mr. Cabezón's review. This is where we can expect to find the costumes, props, colored lights and other paraphernalia that operate behind the scenes to create the dramatic effect of objectivity.

As I mentioned above, we are told early on that the reviewer's goals are modest, for he aspires merely to demonstrate "that there is at least one interpretation of Candrakīrti that varies radically from the one presented in the introduction to [*The Emptiness of Emptiness*] ... Which comes closer to the mark will be left up to the reader" (Cabezón, p. 153). One "mark" at the center of the target. The bull's eye. This is the spot where, in my understanding of the trope, the reader will locate the actual meaning of Candrakīrti's work. In other words, two interpretations are to be offered for inspection and the reader is invited to judge for himself which comes closer to this meaning, but the very existence of a single, centralized meaning around which all interpretations are grouped like so many misfired arrows seems itself to be taken for granted in Mr. Cabezón's choice of metaphor. It is not clear who establishes the position of the bull's eye; this does not appear to be so important as the simple fact of its presence. All that we know for sure at this juncture is that a contest of some kind is about to get underway, that the winning interpretation will be the one that comes — in the opinion of the reader — "closer to the mark," and that the reviewer will not himself participate either as judge or contestant. Fair enough. Or is it?

Ostensibly this is an amiable way to proceed, but the truth is that the stage is already set for a by no means insignificant rhetorical illusion. If this illusion is successful then everything the reviewer goes on to say will be cloaked in an aura of undeniable, and, as I hope to show, undeserved prestige. In short: Mr. Cabezón has set out in such a way as to gain the upper hand immediately by absenting himself as author from the discussion that follows. Once this feat is accomplished the reader will be convinced that he is being presented with (1) the traditional dGe lugs pa reading of Mādhyamika and (2) the reading of a modern Western scholar "clearly ... influenced by Wittgenstein" and a host of other very un-traditional, non-Buddhist authors. Or, perhaps even more dramatically, if we accept the terms as established by the reviewer then the debate (such as it is) will take place between "the great dGe lugs pa exegete" mKhas grub rje — no less a personage than the close disciple of Tsong kha pa himself — and this guy Huntington, whoever he is. Where, I want to know, is Mr. Cabezón in all of this? How did he manage to slip into the wings so gracefully, and without so much as a word of farewell? And finally, what, exactly, is he doing back there? Confronted with the formidable spectre of mKhas grub rje and "the dGe lugs pa reading of the Madhyamaka," I find myself feeling a bit like Dorothy must have felt in that scene from the Wizard of Oz — the one where she's cowering before a gigantic projected image of the Wizard when Toto, playing somewhere off in

a corner, pulls back a little drapery and reveals the elderly gentleman who's actually in charge of the whole frightening show. Immediately the old fellow leans forward, speaks into a microphone and the terrifying voice of the Wizard booms out: "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!"

Let me try to be somewhat more precise. Given the rhetorical structure of this review⁶ the reader is evidently supposed to accept (without ever actually being presented with any such claim) that Mr. Cabezón has direct and unflinching access to an authorized — *the* authorized — dGe lugs pa reading of the *Mādhyamika*, that he is thoroughly qualified to present such a reading, and that, in effect, Mr. Cabezón is completely transparent, nothing but an impresario, a mouthpiece for Tsong kha pa's eminent disciple, who is in his turn (for all we know) capable of performing a similar service for Candrakīrti. Moreover, all of this is in rather stark contrast to the circumstances surrounding this other fellow — "Huntington" — who is at best presenting his own more or less accurate interpretation of Candrakīrti. And the reader is being asked to decide which of these two accounts of *Mādhyamika* "comes closer to the mark."

At the risk of seeming blunt: Is this stacking the deck, or *what*? Are the claims in my book not documented every bit as closely as those in Mr. Cabezón's review? Is my scholarship really all that much less reliable than his? Or is it a matter of my not being privy to some kind of esoteric knowledge passed along through "living contemporary interpretations of Candrakīrti"? Why, in other words, is Mr. Cabezón to be granted the right to speak directly through an influential proxy, to speak with such enviable certainty, almost as if he were himself mKhas grub rje, while I, despite all my best efforts, am nothing but Candrakīrti's more or less fallible interpreter? Assuming that our scholarly credentials are relatively comparable, so far as this discussion is concerned, then why not set up the debate on the meaning of Candrakīrti's work between Candrakīrti himself (whom I claim to represent) and mKhas grub rje (whom Mr. Cabezón seems to favor)? Or else, much more to my liking, why not simply lay our cards on the table and acknowledge that in fact both of us are doing exactly the same thing — each presenting his own interpretation of someone else's writing. Someone long since dead and gone.

Like it or not we're both in the same boat. I don't think Mr. Cabezón would seriously want to suggest that he possesses some infallible key to the meaning of mKhas grub rje's words, but that is precisely what is implied in his rhetoric. Of course the truth is that mKhas grub rje is no more present in his review than Candrakīrti is in my book. The truth is that the reader is being asked to evaluate the claims made by two modern Western scholars, each of whom has chosen to rely, to some extent, on a different corpus of texts. On the one hand we have José Cabezón's interpretation of mKhas grub rje's interpretation of Candrakīrti; on the other — assuming the reader is interested in going directly to my own writing — C. W. Huntington's interpretation of Candrakīrti. Actually the situation in the review itself is even more convoluted, since what we have there is José

Cabezón's interpretation of C. W. Huntington's interpretation of Candrakīrti. Clearly all these accounts of the Mādhyamika are highly interpretive, though I'll have to admit that it seems to me my book has the advantage of being least removed from the acknowledged object of our investigation. Be that as it may, neither Mr. Cabezón's interpretation of mKhas grub rje nor mine of Candrakīrti is, in any strict sense of the word, "traditional." More to the point, neither of us can legitimately claim to be capable of directly re-presenting, either through translation or exegesis, an authorized reading of the Mādhyamika.

IV

It is very troubling to me that Mr. Cabezón has structured his discourse in this way, not because I believe, even for a moment, that it was done with the slightest motive of gaining some unfair advantage. Rather my concern is just the reverse: This sort of scholarship is at present endemic to serious studies of Buddhist philosophical literature. It is my constant harping on the interpretive dimension of our work that appears idiosyncratic and perhaps even a little suspect. By repeatedly drawing attention to my own role as interpreter I have chosen to place myself on center stage, and it is not surprising that Mr. Cabezón is more than willing to leave me out there with mKhas grub rje, sweating under the bright lights, while he retires to the wings. He is only doing what too many others in the field would do under similar circumstances. Unlike most Buddhologists who produce interpretive studies of classical Buddhist texts, in *The Emptiness of Emptiness* I went out of my way to acknowledge that my interpretation of Candrakīrti is just that — my interpretation. I also insisted that even my translation of the *Madhyamakāvatāra* is incapable of conjuring up the original Indian author and absolving me from responsibility for my role as interpreter. I could never hope to succeed in understanding the Mādhyamika exclusively "on its own terms," as Mr. Williams suggests I might have attempted to do (p. 194), any more than we can hope to understand this distant, incomparably foreign material on our own terms. And still as text-critical scholars we have no plausible alternative but to proceed as if it were possible to accomplish both these objectives.

To return again and again to the problem of interpretation is to acknowledge that we do not know, after all, exactly what the classical authors were saying to each other. Why should this strike us as odd or controversial? What is threatening, I believe, is that in focusing on the interpretive dimension of our work we attest that our understanding never will achieve the ideal of absolute certainty, that in practice the idea of this kind of certainty operates as a sort of archetypal *vikalpa*, a conceptual palimpsest on which layer after layer of impossible dreams have been inscribed.

We can never read any text — even in the original language — except through the lens of our conscious and unconscious presuppositions. More, were

it not for these very presuppositions and prejudices no text or teacher could have any meaning at all for us, since the very possibility of meaning is rooted in just this conceptual soil. Here is the disturbing conundrum of Heidegger's famous "hermeneutical circle," what Gadamer calls "the finitude which dominates not only our humanity, but also our historical consciousness."⁷ But one need not share my estimation of the implications of recent hermeneutical theory in order to agree that solid text-critical scholarship can not be built on any veiled assertion of a *priori* privilege. It ought to be nothing more than a matter of academic professionalism that all attempts to find meaning in ancient Buddhist texts must stand or fall on the strength of their own scholarly merit, and not because of any direct or implied claim to represent the actual meaning of a classical author. I have no doubt that Mr. Cabezón would agree with me about this. If, however, he still believes that there are "evaluative criteria that can be employed to decide questions of authorial intent" (p. 153), then it is imperative that he openly demonstrate how I have failed to employ those criteria and thereby relegated my work on Candrakīrti to the status of "interpretation," while his on mKhas grub rje deserves to be treated as "the dGe lugs pa reading of the Madhyamaka." I don't know how to put this any more forcefully: Methodological problems are no longer peripheral to our common search for philosophical meaning in Buddhist literature.

Both Mr. Cabezón and Mr. Williams comment on the irony of my having developed my unorthodox interpretation of the Mādhyamika under the guidance of a venerable Tibetan *dge bshes* of the dGe lugs pa school. Mr. Williams informs his readers that "It is fashionable nowadays to work on Buddhist texts, even those from India, with a Tibetan lama. This gives the translation a certain *imprimatur* ..." (p. 203). Surely this comment is more than a bit ingenuous. First of all, collaborative translations involving one native speaker of each language are much more than simply fashionable. As Mr. Williams knows, every canonical Tibetan translation of an original Sanskrit text — including the Tibetan translation of Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra* — bears just this kind of *imprimatur*. And for good reason. It makes obvious sense that the Tibetans chose to consult with Indian scholars, just as it now makes sense for European and American scholars to work as closely as possible with their Tibetan counterparts. But, as Mr. Williams himself goes on to tell us, "Tibetan lamas can sometimes make mistakes, and even when they are right it is the Western scholar who uses their advice and help ..." (ibid.). Which brings me to my second point: There is not so much as the *possibility* of irony in the situation as I see it. I learned two things from Geshé Wangchen: First, he taught me a great deal about how to read the texts; and second, he fostered in me, by his own example, the courage to think for myself. If "the" dGe lugs pa reading of Mādhyamika exists, he certainly never let me in on it. Our discussions were always marked by an ongoing struggle to make sense out of whatever we happened to be reading, whether it was Candrakīrti, Vasubandhu, or Tsong kha pa. Geshé Wangchen may or may not

“hold any wayward views of his own.” For all I know, in his own unassuming way he may actually be something of a renegade. He is most definitely a philosopher, and no apologist. I learned from him, in a very practical way, an invaluable lesson that was only reinforced by my reading of Gadamer and others: We have no choice but to grapple with the unsettling fact that there can be no legitimate grounds whatsoever for the claim that any one textual interpretation is *necessarily* more authoritative or traditional than any other. It is altogether inappropriate to intimate, as Mr. Williams seems to be doing, that Geshé Wangchen ought to take a stand for or against my interpretation of early Indian Mādhyamika, when I made it perfectly clear in the preface to the book that I assumed full responsibility for assessing the significance of Candrakīrti’s work in the context of modern Buddhist scholarship (p. xii).

At the close of his review Mr. Cabezón refers to “living contemporary interpretations of Candrakīrti” and “traditional Tibetan readings of the Madhyamaka” (p. 160), as though such interpretations and readings were directly available to us, simply out there, waiting to be appropriated should we decide to do so. As though the question were every bit as simple as he makes it appear: mKhas grub rje, or Huntington? “Which seems closer to the mark will be left up to the reader.” Frankly I can’t imagine what it would be like to believe that the task is nearly so straightforward as this. What I learned from Geshé Wangchen and my own further study is so far removed from this way of thinking that I can not be absolutely sure that I know what it would be like to *desire* the kind of innocent simplicity that prevails in most current research on Buddhist philosophical literature. In my view, if our research is truly concerned with the search for meaning in these texts then it needs voluntarily to inhabit a world that is much more complicated and uncomfortable, much darker and more perilous, and a great deal more interesting.

V

I promised, a few pages back, to pursue my initial remarks on the problem of interposing Tibetan authors between ourselves and the ancient Indian Mādhyamikas like Candrakīrti and Nāgārjuna. As I mentioned, in my research on early Indian Mādhyamika I consciously elected to focus on texts composed in India during or before the seventh century. My reason for this was not only to avoid the kind of meta-confusion I discussed briefly in section III. There is another consideration as well, one that has to do directly with the principles of Tibetan hermeneutics.

Tibet and India are what Mircea Eliade called “traditional civilizations.” In *Cosmos and History* we are told that the person immersed in these cultures “acknowledges no act which has not been previously posited and lived by someone else What he does has been done before. His life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others.”⁸ “The man of the traditional civiliza-

tions accorded the historical event no value in itself; in other words, he did not regard it as a specific category of his own mode of existence.”⁹ Of course Eliade was simply making a formal, theoretical statement out of something that had been known and grudgingly accepted since at least the early nineteenth century, when European Orientalists were already deeply involved in the frustrating struggle to compose a history of South Asia. Regardless of whether or not one is inclined to accept the broader implications of Eliade’s thesis as they are developed in his book (*I, for one, am not*), most contemporary Asian specialists would nevertheless acknowledge that the so-called “traditional civilizations” of India and Tibet have no concept of history that accords with our own. It should come as no surprise that this difference in historical consciousness is reflected in the methods and goals of Tibetan hermeneutics.

I think it would be fair to say a central feature of most Tibetan exegesis is its concern with harmonizing — or, if you prefer, systematizing — any apparent discord among the Indian sources. Witness the entire genre of literature, so popular in Tibet, known as *grub mtha’*. Another way of putting this might be to point out that Tibetan textual interpretation proceeds according to an unstated presupposition that there is such a thing as “the Indian tradition” and that this Indian tradition is in some meaningful sense both monolithic and unbroken. This presupposition was transported into Tibet along with the canonical literature and it would never have occurred to anyone to question it. The notion of an unbroken, monolithic Indian tradition was, for all practical purposes, an unexamined postulate, an invisible, guiding force that suffused the work of editors and translators at bSam yas and the other early monastic centers and provided the results of their work with indisputable, ready-made significance.¹⁰

Text-critical scholarship in Europe and America does not take for granted the existence of an Indian tradition. Rather, it is one of the explicit tasks of modern textual scholarship to organize this literature within the context of archeological and other historical data, so as to define a chronological sequence within which we may eventually be able to speak convincingly of a history of Buddhist thought in India. From our point of view “the Indian tradition” does not yet quite exist, for it has still to be fully conceived. All we have, so far, are fragments of a story that need to be laboriously pieced together and correlated with a variety of evidence culled from the study of ancient Indian epigraphy, indigenous Chinese codicils and other sources only indirectly related to the Indian texts themselves. The history of Buddhist thought in India is a tale gradually being written through the application of scholarly tools and techniques common to all historiography. Whether or not we will be able to construct for ourselves a monolithic, unbroken Indian Buddhist tradition is still very much open to question. Personally I remain skeptical. My own research on the *Akutoḥbhayā* and other early Indian Mādhyamika texts suggests otherwise. Based on this research I am convinced that it is not only possible, but most rewarding, to view Candrakīrti’s writing as a sort of rococo expression of Nāgārjuna’s

classical Mādhyamika. Candrakīrti would then be the final, and in certain significant respects, decadent, transformation of the Master's original impulse. Briefly, I propose that the late sixth and early seventh centuries saw the crystallization of a fundamentally new orientation to Nāgārjuna's work. After that time Mādhyamika authors became much less concerned with pragmatics and much more preoccupied with logical and epistemological problems.¹¹ This would have been no small event, either, no mere ripple on an unbroken continuum. What I am at present engaged in surveying could turn out to be nothing less than a deep rift in the intellectual history of Indian Buddhism, in Kuhn's jargon, a "paradigm shift," an upheaval at once so dramatic and so subtle that — given their presuppositions about the existence of an Indian tradition — Bhāvaviveka and the others who followed Candrakīrti (including the Tibetans) would not even have been aware that they were engaged in a substantially different project. But *here is not the place to develop these ideas, nor is it important whether or not one agrees with me.* What I want to point out in the present context is only this: Were it not for our own peculiarly modern concept of historiography and the tools and instruments associated with it, I could neither define nor recognize this particular sort of "incommensurable" discontinuity in any history of Buddhist thought. This is, I believe, compelling justification for my insistence that *Mādhyamika literature of the period from Nāgārjuna to Candrakīrti* — what I refer to as "early Indian Mādhyamika" — needs to be studied primarily in the context of its own era, and only secondarily through the lens of later exegesis. Tibetan sources will have to be handled with an especially high degree of critical attention if we are interested in pursuing an understanding of Nāgārjuna and his immediate disciples that does justice to the modern Western historical consciousness.

I want to be clear that nothing I have just said need be read as an unqualified endorsement of the premises and goals of historiography. My purpose is simply to acknowledge the considerable power that this model of scholarship commands in the contemporary intellectual world, a power that one shrugs off, I believe, *only at one's own risk.* *Here is the basis for my insistence that questions of methodology need to be treated side by side with any effort at finding meaning in Indian Buddhist texts.* If it is to be cogent and convincing within the territory governed by historiography then any concept of meaning must necessarily incorporate a strong historical component — something which Tibetan exegesis lacks almost by definition. This is the reason why we can not simply fling ourselves directly into the mainstream of Tibetan exegetical writings and let the current carry us along. For those who work in the shadow of Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger, the problem of philosophical meaning can not be separated from the problem of history. R. G. Collingwood speaks for all of us — whether we like it or not — when he asserts that history has become the primary vehicle "for human self-knowledge."¹² Dilthey was probably even

closer to representing the state of the Western intellectual in this, the last decade of the twentieth century, when he wrote, "Man knows himself only in history, never through introspection."¹³ One may elect to argue that this assertion is culturally chauvinistic, or, perhaps, that the situation ought not to be so even in the West, but it would be difficult to deny the significance of Dilthey's words for anyone working within the academic community today.

The failure to recognize and address the role of effective history in modern Western concepts of meaning is one of the principal shortcomings of what I called, in *The Emptiness of Emptiness*, "proselytic scholarship." And yet, as I also indicated in several places, the way things stand now scholars with a primary research interest in Buddhist philosophical literature are all but forced to believe that they must decide between philology and historiography, on the one hand, and the search for philosophical meaning, on the other. Here, I submit, is an irony that invites considerable scrutiny. There is a profound reason for the continued split between text-critical and proselytic scholarship in the field of Buddhist studies — one that bears directly on any possible philosophical significance we may eventually find in the Mādhyamika texts. The willingness to marginalize questions of methodology is coupled with an almost principled lack of appreciation for the depth of our responsibility as interpreters of the Indian and Tibetan sources. Both of these can be explained as manifestations of a covert and decidedly utopian desire to step beyond history into an ahistorical, *a priori* realm of objectively verifiable truth.

I do not wish to argue here whether or not the early Indian Mādhyamika texts offer any support for the hope of such an escape. I do insist, however, that this is not the only way Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti can be understood. A genuinely alternative reading is possible. A reading that would see this desire to step out of history as yet another form of grasping. A reading that would work to defuse the desire for transhistorical objectivity without propelling us headlong into an equally untenable relativism.

NOTES

1. See José Cabezón, the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 152-161 (hereafter referred to as Cabezón); and Paul Williams, the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 19, pp. 191-218 (hereafter referred to as Williams). Although I will not refer to it in this essay, the reader might also want to consult Paul Griffiths' review in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 111.2, pp. 413-414. References to *The Emptiness of Emptiness* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1989) will be made under the rubric of "Huntington."

2. See, for instance, Williams, p. 200: "There are paradoxes involved in maintaining that Madhyamaka has no approach or viewpoint *in any sense*." (Italics are in the original text.)

3. I am indebted to Williams for pointing out, on pp. 202-203 of his review, four

instances where I failed to translate the Tibetan *ngan* or *log* (“perverse” or “wrong”) in the expression “perverse/wrong view.” Whether this results in nearly so fatal a distortion of Candrakīrti’s text as he implies is another matter. In several other contexts I did not overlook such explicit references to “incorrect” views or misconceptions: See my translations on p. 226, n. 5; p. 231, n. 36; and p. 162, n. 63. More significant, however, is the fact that there are yet other passages where Candrakīrti unconditionally dispenses with all views and positions, whether “bad” or “good.” See 6.119; 6.173; and the commentary to 6.88 (translated on p. 248, n. 118). Outside of *MA* and the accompanying *bhāṣya*, evidence of Candrakīrti’s apparent willingness to issue a blanket rejection of all views is even more abundant. See, for example, his commentary to *MS* 13.8 (pp. 108.14-15 in Vaidya’s edition): “Emptiness is the abandoning or the not setting in motion of all strong attachment and grasping, of all that is fabricated by views” (*iha sarveṣāṃ eva dṛṣṭikṛtānāṃ sarvagrahābhīnivesānāṃ yanniḥsaraṇam apravṛtīḥ sā śūnyatā*). The only thing that can be said for certain is that Candrakīrti’s writings as a whole are not consistent on this issue. I look forward to exploring the problem in considerably more detail in a separate article.

4. I cited this *kārikā* on p. 130 of my book. The Sanskrit is in the accompanying note along with my understanding of its significance.

5. My observations here apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to what Williams has to say about “dGe lugs pa orthodoxy,” “the dGe lugs pa tradition,” etc.

6. H. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. by Garret Barden & John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 244.

7. M. Eliade, *Cosmos and History, The Myth of the Eternal Return*, (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1959 [rep.]), p. 5.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

9. Tibetan fascination with the *siddhānta* (= *grub mtha*’) schema is, according to Cabezón, the presupposition underlying mKhas grub rje’s “second objection” to the view that the Prāsaṅgikas have no position of their own. He continues: “mKhas grub rje states that for someone who maintains that the Prāsaṅgikas hold no philosophical position all notions of distinct philosophical schools or traditions vanish” Obviously the real threat is not simply to one or another isolated “school” or “tradition,” nor even to the *siddhānta* schema itself, but rather, to the deeply held pan-Tibetan faith in the existence of an unbroken, monolithic Indian tradition like the one I have described here. To challenge this faith “was (and still is) considered devastating by traditional [Tibetan] scholars.” In fact such a challenge was (and still is) literally unthinkable. As Cabezón makes perfectly clear: “It leaves one a relativist.” Or, in religious rather than philosophical terms: It leaves one an *apostate*. (All citations in this note are lifted from Cabezón, p. 156.)

10. Ruegg has reached a similar conclusion: See *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Indian Buddhism* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1981), p. 239.

11. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 10.

12. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesamelte Schriften* (Stuttgart: Trübner, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1914-1972), Vol. VII, p. 279.