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On Method



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A Way of Reading

When the realm of thought is extinguished
there is nothing to be named.
Like nirvāṇa, the essential nature of things
neither arises nor passes away.

Nor is there the slightest difference
between nirvāṇa and the everyday world.
Nor is there the slightest difference
between the everyday world and nirvāṇa.

—*Madhyamakāśāstra*, XVIII.7 and XXV.19

I

I remember—as if it were only yesterday—stretching out on the upper bunk of a second-class bogie on the Kashi-Vishvanath Express that runs back and forth between New Delhi and Benares, between the capital city of this world, of politics and commerce, and the capital city of another, quite separate realm, the world of spirituality and unchanging truth. It's late August, and in the stifling monsoon heat our compartment has become an oven, the air saturated with human sweat and a haze of smoke. Below me the wooden benches are packed with uniformed soldiers, each one of them puffing on a beedie. The card game has been in progress non-stop for some ten hours. Only a meter above the fray I lie safely ensconced on the narrow platform, my head resting against an olive green canvas bag, my eyes focused on a small, pale yellow book. The cover is worn, the Devanāgarī title barely legible under a coat of accumulated grime: *Rūpacandrikā*. The book has been my constant companion for years. Six hundred pages of Sanskrit grammar, six hundred closely lined pages of declensions and conjugations that must be committed to memory. This is the map by which I plot my journey into the mysteries of Indian Buddhism.

The setting varies, as do the characters on the page, but nevertheless for most of us the activity is a familiar one. Whether Sanskrit or Tibetan, Chinese or Mongolian, or any of half a dozen other classical Asian lan-

guages, these are the terms of our apprenticeship as text-critical scholars. Hundreds of hours of memorization, thousands of hours of consulting grammars and dictionaries, an endless succession of mornings and afternoons and nights spent nodding over pages of print, deciphering the code, submitting to the ritual of training that will guarantee passage into the inner-sanctum of the text. And yet, as each of us would acknowledge, grammar and vocabulary are in themselves not enough. One may read the words without understanding. Far worse, however, is the possibility that even our most considered interpretation might turn out to be entirely spurious. A peculiar loss of faith is common to anyone who has ever substantially revised his initial understanding of a passage. Here's the rub: We may well know what a single line or, for that matter, what an entire text means, but how could we ever *know* that we know? How indeed. The truth is that we can not even be sure what might constitute knowledge in this case, as opposed to belief. Precisely this is the fundamental uncertainty in which we, as text-critical scholars, become abruptly self-conscious; here is the sort of radical doubt that drives us away from the texts and back into an eccentric, introspective space where we begin, for the first time, to frame questions of method.

To become critically self-conscious can be a rewarding experience. It is also, more often than not, a painful one. A sort of profound discomfort arises along with our growing awareness of the extent to which the conclusions of our research are inevitably molded by presuppositions embodied in the conceptual tools that permit that same research to get underway in the first place. The desire for certainty is not easily uprooted. We would like very much to know something and to know that we know it. Or, at the very least, to know that such a possibility exists, and that not every act of knowing is contaminated by belief. Moreover, the search for correct (valid / accurate) interpretation is (like all theoretical impulses) part and parcel of a much broader philosophical project, and so we quite naturally find our own craving for certainty mirrored in the Indian sources. All of this is clearly registered in the way we have traditionally gone about the business of interpreting Buddhist philosophical texts. An example might help to illustrate the point.

Not so long ago Paul Griffiths published a review of *The Emptiness of Emptiness*. Commenting on my characterization of Madhyamaka as philosophical propaganda, he pointed out that

the very notion of propaganda carries with it an interest in persuasion: the propagandist, by definition, wants to persuade his audience of something,

or, more usually, to do something . . . but [Huntington] does not pay sufficient attention to the close connections between the act of persuasion and the need for argument. . . . If, as he suggests, we are to regard Mādhyamika as a 'justified prejudice' there need to be (and are) arguments to ground the use of the adjective. . . . I am inclined to think . . . that the Mādhyamika theorists are on firmer ground than Rorty (or Huntington)." (Griffiths 1991, 413-414)

Look closely, for a moment, at the network of associations triggered by the use of the words "persuasion," "argument," "grounds," "theory": To engage in persuasion is to construct deductive arguments; to argue in this way is to furnish grounds; to stand on firm ground is to be a successful theorist. The philosophical notion of "firm ground" has a long and venerable history and is itself embedded in a wide range of associations bound up with the search for first principles bracketed from all extraneous interests, goals, agendas, or lines of authority. Notice how such a vocabulary expresses certain assumptions about the way language must do its work in Madhyamaka texts. According to these assumptions, Nāgārjuna's words are to be read as a proposed universal lexicon for non-mythical, objective truth, knowledge of which would reflect the presence of an equally non-mythical, objective reality—another world, so to speak, a transcendent realm beyond suffering and decay and all forms of historical contingency; the "other shore" from which Nagarjuna speaks. Our job as interpreters of these texts is, then, to evaluate the validity of the Madhyamaka's arguments in terms of whether or not they succeed in providing convincing theoretical proof ("grounds") for the existence of this other world. It ought to be possible, in principle at least, to peel back from Nagarjuna's writing the layers of cultural baggage (everything that has to do with the period and place in which these texts were composed) and uncover a core of timeless philosophical truth. Either the "Mādhyamika theorist" successfully furnishes conceptual access to (proof of / grounds for) ultimate reality, or the realm of the transcendent conjured up by his words is merely a product of the Indian religious imagination. Either these texts contain arguments that prove something, or they don't. It is our job—our interpretive task—to construct an accurate representation of those arguments and to evaluate their success or failure by this standard. If the texts fail to establish conclusive theoretical grounds for the existence of this other world of transcendent truth and reality, then they may still, of course, hold a great deal of interest for the cultural or intellectual historian, but it is difficult to see

how they could have any compelling philosophical or religious value except as rather exotic artifacts of a distant place and time, the record of what was, ultimately, an unsubstantiated claim.

All of this is, I think, a fairly accurate sketch of the interpretive strategy that has been routinely applied to the study of early Indian Madhyamaka by European and American scholars working in shadow of T. R. V. Murti, Richard Robinson and Edward Conze. To read in this way is to understand that one is reading what Griffiths refers to, elsewhere, as “denaturalized discourse”:

. . . denaturalized discourse is almost always (perhaps always) linked with an attempt to clean up the messy ambiguity of ordinary language used in ordinary contexts. Polysemy, multivalence, the stuff of poetry and the language of love: these are not values for a user of denaturalized discourse. This is usually because the contexts within which such discourses are developed and applied are judged to be unreal, consisting in apparent or constructed objects rather than real ones. The *lebenswelt*, the constructed world of lived experience in which we have our being is, of course, exceedingly messy. We always say more than we mean and less than we hope; we use language to evoke sentiment, to inspire action, to manipulate, and to meditate. All of this is discourse in context, naturalized discourse that glories in specificity, growing from and shaping particular human needs in particular cultural contexts. (Griffiths 1990, 64-65)

Nor is it difficult to appreciate why early Madhyamaka texts have been read the way Griffiths wants to read them, as instantiations of an essentially ahistorical, “denaturalized” discourse. There are more than enough places where it certainly seems as if Nāgārjuna is arguing for something of universal significance, where it certainly seems as if he wants to prove something objectively. And if this is not the case, then what exactly is going on?

The hermeneutical problem raised by Griffiths’ criticism is a real one. It is not so much that there are no options to reading Early Indian Madhyamaka in this way; it is simply that in this context the model of denaturalized discourse seems so, well, *natural*, that we almost forget we’re looking out at the text through a set of rather thick theoretical spectacles—a prescription inherited not only from later Indian and Tibetan commentaries but from our own deeply embedded preconceptions about what constitutes legitimately “philosophical” language. There is, however, a very real alternative, with a pedigree that goes back, in the West, to Plotinus, who shaped certain scattered elements of an ancient language

of mysticism into a powerful new form of discourse. Some three-hundred years later a companion of Saint Paul, known to us only under the pseudonym Dionysus, wrote of a "mystical theology" in which the Greek word *kataphasis* (affirmation, saying, speaking-with) is juxtaposed with *apophasis* (negation, unsaying, speaking-away). During the 150-year period from about the mid-twelfth through to the start of the mid-fourteenth century apophatic mysticism reappeared in a series of virtuoso performances by Christian, Jewish and Islamic writers including Ibn 'Arabi, Rumi, Abraham Abulafia, Moses de Léon, Hadewijch, Marguerite Porete, and the comparatively well known Meister Eckhart. In the East apophasis has been identified as characteristic of certain early Taoist writings and, of course, of the Madhyamaka tradition in general and Nagarjuna in particular. The two verses from the *Madhyamakaśāstra* cited in the epigraph to this paper are a perfect illustration of apophatic discourse, which displays, in the words of Michael Sells, "a distinctive dialectic of transcendence and immanence in which the utterly transcendent is revealed as the utterly immanent" (Sells 1994, 6). Elsewhere he calls this "the refusal to resolve the apophatic dilemma by posing a distinction between two kinds of names"; or simply "the letting go of the generic name" (*ibid.*, 189-190).

At the center of apophatic discourse is the effort to speak about a subject that can not be named. The suspension of the logic of non-contradiction necessary to accomplish this aim means, as Sells has shown, that apophasis has much more in common with poetry, narrative fiction, drama, and other forms of non-discursive writing than it does with traditional philosophical and theological texts. This is not to say that apophasis is devoid of deductive argument; however the appearance of argument and grounds in apophatic writing has generated a great deal of confusion among philosophers, theologians and critics who fail to appreciate that even the most rigorous logical form can be exploited for a variety of literary and rhetorical effects. For instance, the same argument might appear in Aquinas' *Questiones Disputatae* and in a novel by Dostoyevsky, but no critic would be naive enough to apply to both passages the same hermeneutical tools. And yet all too often this is just what happens in the interpretation of apophatic writing. "Apophatic texts," Sells tells us, "have suffered in a particularly acute manner from the urge to paraphrase the meaning in non-apophatic language or to fill in the open referent—to say what the text really meant to say, but didn't" (Sells 1994, 4). Or, in other words, . . . to read this literature as an example of denaturalized discourse.

If the Madhyamaka's arguments are not to be evaluated as "genuine" arguments, but rather as a species of apophasis, then we require some other coherent interpretive model, some other way of understanding that would allow us to make sense of these texts as either philosophical or religious discourse. The model I shall propose here takes seriously the similarities traced by Sells and others between apophatic writing, poetry and narrative.

Like poetry, apophasis is not a discourse that everyone will appreciate immediately. Like poetry, apophasis resists paraphrase into other linguistic modes; paraphrases can only be partial. When we write about a poem, we do not attempt to express the meaning of the poem—if the meaning could be expressed discursively, it would not have required a poem. In trying to understand how the poetry works, we are led more deeply into the event of reading the poem. What that event means to different readers may well differ strongly from one to another. Yet what has been commonly accepted for poetic discourse—a resistance to semantic reduction—is frequently viewed as a form of mystification in apophasis. (Sells 1994, 216)

My project in what follows may be viewed as a contribution to a conversation already in progress, for Griffiths' original paper on denaturalized discourse provoked an insightful response from Francisca Cho Bantly. In an essay titled "Buddhist Philosophy in Fiction," Bantly pointed out that "the insistence that universal truth claims about reality are best made through philosophy, or denaturalized discourse, itself makes tacit assumptions about that reality. . . . Behind this drama, however, it is not too difficult to glimpse a cultural bias, itself rather temporal and limited in scope, which responds in terror to the suspicion that our truth-concepts are only masks for our embedded interests" (Bantly 1992, 85 and 87). Interests—whatever they might be—are always embedded in an ontology, and "the means by which one can best express ontological truths depends significantly on the structure of that ontology itself" (*ibid.*, 101). Like fiction, the subject of Bantly's article, apophatic writing has the capacity to express, or embody, an ontology that radically destabilizes traditional philosophical and religious assumptions about wisdom and ignorance, sacred and profane, mundane and transcendent, reality and illusion, error and truth. But to make the shift between alternative ontologies demands an alternative way of reading. This is, as well, a point forcefully made by Bantly, when she asks: "How far are we willing to go in undermining some of our own ontological

grounding for the sake of casting new molds for our understanding of cultural discourse?" (*ibid.*, 85).

Whatever this alternative way of reading and understanding might be, we need to recognize, first, that it will necessarily entail a certain set of methodological presuppositions, and second, that the effects of those presuppositions will reverberate throughout the conclusions of our research. Any discussion of Indian Buddhist philosophy is also, by implication, a discussion of critical theory. Which is to say, for us there can be no other form of early Indian Madhyamaka than the one we retrieve from the texts, and what we find there ("the Madhyamaka's philosophical and religious project") will necessarily bear the indelible stamp of the critical theory that powers our interpretive work. This will no doubt come as a great disappointment to those among us who hoped to uncover some form of pure Madhyamaka untainted by a context which includes the reader's interest and all the vicissitudes of history. Nevertheless, as text-critical scholars with an interest in Buddhist thought we can scarcely avoid being drawn into a conversation between our colleagues in literary criticism and philosophy that has been in progress for some twenty years now. This has nothing to do with any anxious cry for relevance—though, for the record, I see no great merit in the willful cultivation of irrelevance. What is required of us, as a discipline, is only that we make the effort to articulate the principles of our critical theory and so infuse the practice of textual interpretation with a greater level of self-awareness.

II

For many of those involved in the discussion of critical theory, the decade of the eighties was a time of "revisionary madness" (O'Hara, 1985). Structuralism, semiotics, hermeneutics, deconstruction, speech-act theory, reception theory, psychoanalytic theory, feminism and Marxism were only some of the various interpretive schemes that vied for attention in literature departments. As W. J. T. Mitchell wrote in 1985, "The general assumption is that everyone has a theory that governs his or her practice, and the only issue is whether one is self-conscious about that theory. Not to be aware of one's theory is to be a mere practitioner, slogging along in the routines of scholarship and interpretation." (Mitchell 1985, 2) Mitchell made these comments in the context of his introduction to a collection of papers he edited for The University of Chicago Press, a series of articles that had appeared in the journal *Criti-*

cal Inquiry between 1982 and 1985. The book takes its name from an essay by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels titled “Against Theory,” and it is, in fact, the record of a heated debate provoked by their work. The controversy stimulated by Knapp and Michaels elicited responses from several of the most prominent critics of the time, including Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish—both of whom were commissioned to write special pieces for this volume, which has attained, in some circles, the status of a kind of intellectual cult classic, in that the views exchanged there became emblematic of an influential approach to textual interpretation called pragmatic theory. Over the course of the next several pages I shall draw on the rhetoric of this debate and on the central concerns of pragmatic theory as the initial step in offering what seems to me to be a powerful alternative hermeneutic for the interpretation of early Indian Madhyamaka.

“Pragmatic theory” could be construed as an unfortunate misnomer for a form of critical discourse that defined itself largely in terms of its antitheoretical stance. Knapp and Michaels are certainly the most extreme of the New Pragmatists in their notorious appeal for an end to the “career option of writing and teaching theory” (Knapp and Michaels 1985, 105), but all of the central players are in one way or another opposed to the theoretical enterprise as it is traditionally conceived. To appreciate what is involved in being against theory it is necessary, first of all, to have some clear idea of just what theory is in its orthodox form.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, theory is “a looking at, viewing, contemplation, speculation; also a sight, spectacle.” “There is,” as Mitchell observes,

a tacit contrast here between the visual as the ‘noblest’ sense and the lower, more practical senses, particularly hearing, the conduit of the oral tradition, of stories rather than systems, sententiae rather schematisms. . . . Theory is monotheistic, in love with simplicity, scope, and coherence. It aspires to explain the many in terms of the one, and the greater the gap between the unitary simplicity of theory and the infinite multiplicity of things in its domain, the more powerful the theory. . . . Theory always places itself at the beginning or the end of thought, providing first principles from which hypotheses, laws, and methods may be deduced. (Mitchell 1985, 6-7)

For Indologists the etymology of the word immediately suggests associations to the Sanskrit *dr̥ṣṭi*, especially as it is used by Nāgārjuna, who himself took great pains to reject “the ocular metaphor.” All of this suggests in turn certain interesting parallels between Knapp and Michaels’

similar rejection of theory; the fact that they are unanimously perceived by their colleagues to have failed in this effort (to have “out-theorized the theorists”) makes the parallels appear even more intriguing. For as it turns out, every one of the “antitheoretical” New Pragmatists is self-consciously committed to defending some alternative form of theoretical discourse. To see why this is so, and in the process perhaps to discover some previously unexplored routes for deepening our appreciation of Nagarjuna’s own antitheoretical rhetoric, I want to take just a moment to review the familiar distinction between positive, or “foundationalist” theory, and negative, or “antifoundationalist” theory.

Foundationalist theory is concerned with formalizable rules, that is, rules that can be applied across the board to generate predictable, methodologically invariable results. It is in this sense that Stanley Fish contrasts a “rule” with a “rule of thumb.” Of course mathematics is the paradigmatic model for theory as a collection of rules, and Chomsky’s generative grammar is a prime example of how this model can be applied to virtually any theoretical enterprise: “The Chomsky project is theoretical because what it seeks is a method, a recipe with premeasured ingredients which when ordered and combined according to absolutely explicit instructions . . . will produce the desired result. In linguistics that result would be the assigning of correct descriptions to sentences; in literary studies the result would be the assigning of valid interpretations to works of literature” (Fish 1985, 110). This understanding of theory sees it as a determined effort to govern practice, “to *guide* practice from a position above or outside it” and “to *reform* practice by neutralizing interest” (*ibid.*, 110). The argument against theory is, briefly, that the project so described by theory can never succeed: “It can not help but borrow its terms and its content from that which it claims to transcend, the mutable world of practice, belief, assumptions, point of view, and so forth” (*ibid.*, 111). It is in this sense that “theory hope”—defined by Fish as “the hope that our claims to knowledge can be ‘justified on the basis of some objective method of assessing such claims’ rather than on the basis of the individual beliefs that have been derived from the accidents of education and experience” (*ibid.*, 112)—is in vain. Antifoundationalist theory (whether Kuhnian, Derridean, Marxist, pragmatic or any other) insists that the search for justification of our claims to knowledge through some kind of objective method is bound to fail primarily because we will never be able to trace belief back to its source in something that is other than belief. Of course the great fear inspired by antifoundationalist theory in all its various guises is that in disposing of any objec-

tive criteria for rational inquiry, it is turning back the theoretical clock to some forbidding pre-Enlightenment era when practice was governed by nothing more than the individual's own perverse, unprincipled imagination. Evidence of this fear is not difficult to come by. One need look no further than a recent edition of the *Ann Arbor News*, where an article titled "Scientists deplore flight from reason" describes a recent conference in New York attended by some two-hundred professionals who had gathered together from around the country to express their communal anguish over the escalating intellectual assault on rationality:

. . . participants at the meeting aimed their barbs at "post-modernist" critics of science who contend that truth in science depends on one's point of view, not on any absolute content. Participants deplored what they see as a growing trend toward the exploitation of scientific ideas to attack science. They cited the physics of relativity and quantum mechanics as pillars of 20th-century thought that are sometimes distorted by critics of science into arguments that nothing in science is certain and that mystery and magic have an equal claim to belief. . . . Dr. Paul Kurtz, a professor of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo, contended that post-modernists of both the political left and right denied that scientific knowledge was possible. The result, he said, was an "erosion of the cognitive process which may undermine democracy." (*Ann Arbor News*, 8 June 1995, D5; from a syndicated article by Malcolm W. Browne in the *New York Times*)

Fish's response to this fear is to point out that antifoundationalism is not an argument for unbridled subjectivity, but rather for "the situated subject" (Fish 1985, 113), by which he means the individual who is always already situated in an interpretive community which provides contextual constraints on his or her judgment. Antifoundationalism is, in this respect as well as in others, invariably historicist, for as a form of theoretical discourse it can only reject assertions of "absolute content" based on an authority located outside of any particular place and time. What we have here is in effect a theoretical affirmation of contingency, and in particular, the radical contingency of knowledge, for any claim to knowledge must inevitably rest on belief. Insofar as antifoundationalism is theoretical, however, it is a peculiarly self-defeating kind of theory, for like all theory, it too finds its origin in belief:

A theory is a special achievement of consciousness; a belief is a prerequisite for being conscious at all. Beliefs are not what you think *about* but what you think *with*, and it is within the space provided by their articulations that mental activity—including the activity of theorizing—goes on. Theories are

something you can have—you can wield them and hold them at a distance; beliefs have *you*, in the sense that there can be no distance between them and the acts they enable. In order to make even the simplest of assertions or perform the most elementary action, I must already be proceeding in the context of innumerable beliefs which can not be the object of my attention, because they are the content of my attention . . . (Fish 1985, 116)

A final curious upshot of Fish's brand of antifoundationalism is that, according to him, it generates absolutely no practical consequences: "The fact that we now have a new explanation of how we got our beliefs—the fact, in short, that we now have a new belief—does not free us from our other beliefs or cause us to doubt them" (*ibid.*, 114). To say that theory in itself has no practical consequences is equivalent to saying that theory is incapable of dictating practice, that no theory can carry within itself the rules for its application. Here, as elsewhere, Fish betrays his debt to Wittgenstein (cf. Wittgenstein 1968, Part I, §292). The rules for application of theory are always supplied by the particular contingencies of a given situation. Some course of action is already in progress and it is this action-in-progress that supplies the context in which theory acquires whatever significance it has. The consequences of theory are, then, a function not of theory itself, but rather of the total environment in which theory abides. Allegiance to a particular theoretical position can still be highly significant—though not because the theory informs a characteristic practice, but rather because certain people declare allegiance to certain theories, and to do so is to align oneself with a particular ideology. Fish's position in this regard does not find unqualified support among all pragmatic theorists. The work of Edward Said, for example, suggests to some that even antifoundationalist theory is capable of generating real and direct consequences:

I do not mean to suggest that a "real" Islam exists somewhere out there that the media, acting out of base motives, have perverted. Not at all. For Muslims as for non-Muslims, Islam is an objective and also a subjective fact, because people create that fact in their faith, in their societies, histories, and traditions, or, in the case of non-Muslim outsiders, because they must in a sense fix, personify, stamp the identity of that which they feel confronts them collectively or individually. This is to say that the media's Islam, the Western scholar's Islam, the Western reporter's Islam, and the Muslim's Islam are all acts of will and interpretation that take place in history, and can only be dealt with in history as acts of will and interpretation. (Said 1981, 41)

One could not hope for a more radical statement of antifoundationalism, and yet Steven Mailloux points out that Said's theoretical assumptions have generated, via his analyses of Orientalism, very real consequences for the practice of U. S. foreign policy. Even more significant, in Mailloux's eyes, is the fact that Said's work has been taken up by Orientalism's victims as an objective justification for what is, in effect, their own self-interpretation. "These appropriations of Said's discourse can occur because a demonstration that others' asserted truth is actually interested belief always *counts as* a critique of their assertions in the present arena of critical and political discussion. In such an arena, to expose asserted truth as 'mere' belief is to have the effect of undermining that truth even though the debunker elsewhere insists that *all* truth is perspectival belief" (Mailloux 1985, 70). Once again I am reminded of the difficulty so many commentators have had, down through the centuries, in understanding how the Madhyamaka's antitheoretical theory is able to accomplish its aim when it is an argument without grounds, and therefore, apparently, no argument at all. Recall, for example, the objection raised against Candrakīrti in *Madhyamakāvātāra* 171: "When you speak like this you only defeat your own position, and this being the case, you are incapable of refuting [the position of an opponent]" (Huntington 1995, 178). As Mailloux explains, "In fact, theory is a kind of practice, a peculiar kind because it claims to escape practice. But the impossibility of achieving this goal does not prevent theory from continuing, nor does it negate the effects it has as persuasion" (Mailloux 1985, 70-71). And here we have, I think, a cogent response not only to Candrakīrti's interlocutor, but to Griffiths, perhaps, and to so many others who see persuasion only as a matter of deductive argument and "firm grounds."

Throughout this paper I have been interested in stressing the connections between philosophy and critical theory. Every idea of theory—what it is, what it can be—comes with its philosophical (ontological, epistemological) analog, just as every philosophical agenda has its theoretical implications for the way we read and interpret texts. If we expect to find arguments and grounds in Nāgārjuna, for example, then it is important to realize that this expectation is bound up with a certain interpretive strategy based on notions of accuracy and correctness. Adena Rosmarin unveils the philosophical origins of foundationalist theory:

As their definition of "epistemology" and "ontology" reveal, Knapp and Michaels take their notion of theory from philosophy as it was institutionalized by Kant's followers in the nineteenth century: a project whose business

is the grounding and adjudicating of claims to knowledge, where "knowledge" is defined as the accurate representation of what is known. In this they are right. Our discipline *has* envisioned itself as the progressive acquisition of knowledge about literary texts, and literary theory *has* assumed the grounding and adjudicating role of philosophy. It asks: Where is the essence (ground) of literary meaning located? How do we most accurately represent it? Which interpretations are the most accurate representations? (Rosmarin 1985, 81)

There is no objective reason why either philosophy or literary criticism needs to rest forever in this model. Which raises the question of alternative theories. Based on Rorty's suggestion that we substitute conversation for confrontation (a groundless give and take for deductive argument) in our definition of the context in which knowledge is both generated and understood, Rosmarin develops the rudiments of a theoretical approach that would avoid the limitations of the representational model, which depends on its capacity to reduce textual meaning to a formula that can grasped in generalized rules and methods ("to say what the text really meant to say, but didn't" [cf. Sells 1994, 4, cited above]). This alternative theory would rejoice in the very features of textuality that are most difficult to represent: polysemy, multivalence, change, ineffability, complexity, uniqueness. . . . It would no longer be bound by a compulsive need to postulate objective, extra-textual standards against which we might judge the accuracy or correctness of our interpretations. Equally important, a nonrepresentational theory would make it possible to treat the relationship between belief and knowledge from a whole different perspective, it would reveal a world where the need for certainty no longer dominates us the way it has in the past, a world where the primacy of belief is no longer cause for alarm. This is the world that poetry and literature has always occupied and evoked, it is world that can be discussed, felt, entered into and lived, but not re-presented from the outside in the kind of schematic formulas characteristic of denaturalized discourse. Here a semblance of argument and rule may be called upon to achieve certain metaphorical or literary effects, but these effects take place in a world entirely beyond the grasp of reason and logic, a world where one can know without believing and believe without knowing. Shakespeare's sonnet 138 speaks to us, like Nagārjuna's writing, from "the other shore," where there really is nothing outside the text (cf. Rosmarin 1985, 88):

When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies.

But Nāgārjuna was not writing poetry, nor is a Shakespearean sonnet philosophy. Shakespeare's writing may have philosophical implications, but it would not normally occur to us to read a sonnet in the same way we read a philosophical text. One might come up with all sorts of good reasons why this is so, but at the moment I am not interested in reasons. For behind or underneath the reasons hides a powerful intuition—almost a conviction—that there are, or ought to be, *rules* to prevent such a perversion of genres. Philosophy is one thing, literature and poetry quite another; and even if we concede that they all may simply be styles of writing, still to conflate them is to lose sight of the fact that philosophy is anchored not in the free play of language, but in argument and grounds.

To lose sight of the fact . . .

And yet it can be done. What is required is not another argument—though arguments might come in handy—but an act of imagination, an exercise of that most subversive, anti-authoritarian and eminently human faculty. Rorty, among others, has recommended just this kind of imaginative leap into a realm where one need have no fear of hitting ground:

If one thinks of philosophy as entirely a matter of deductive argument, then this game of mirrors will, indeed, be one's only recourse. But one can also think of philosophy in other ways—in particular, as a matter of telling stories: stories about why we talk as we do and how we might avoid continuing to talk that way. . . . The notion of "rational grounds" is not in place once one adopts a narrative strategy. . . . For if we ever did get rid of all the jargon of the tradition, we should not even be able to state the realist's position, much less argue against it. The enemy would have been forgotten rather than refuted. If Derrida ever got his "new logic," he would not be able to use it to out-argue his opponents. Whatever a "graphematics of iterability" might be good for, it would be of no use in polemic. The metaphysics of presence was designed precisely to facilitate argument, to make questions like "How do you know?" seem natural, and to make a search for first principles and natural resting-places seem obligatory. It assumes that all of us can tell such a resting-place when we see it and that at least some of our thoughts are already there. You can't argue against that assumption by using the vocabulary of the tradition, but neither can you argue that the tradition is wrong in its choice of vocabulary. You can *argue* only against a proposition, not against a vocabulary. Vocabularies get discarded after looking bad in comparison with other vocabularies, not as a

result of an appeal to overarching metavocabularies in which criteria for vocabulary choice can be formulated.

This means that narrative philosophy should not be expected to fill gaps left vacant by argumentative philosophy. Rather, the importance of narrative philosophy is that persuasion is as frequently a matter of getting people to drop a vocabulary (and the questions they phrase within it) as of deductive argument . . .

One can still have philosophy even after one stops arguing deductively and ceases to ask where the first principles are coming from, ceases to think of there being a special corner of the world—or the library—where they are found. In particular, I take “literary theory,” as the term is currently used in America, to be a species of philosophy, an attempt to weave together some texts traditionally labeled “philosophical” with other texts not so labeled. It names the practice of splicing together your favorite critics, novelists, poets, and such, and your favorite philosophers. . . . Thinking of it this way helps one get rid of the idea that philosophy is somehow on another level. It lets one think of “philosophical” and “literary” texts as grist for the same mill. (Rorty 1985, 134-136)

III

Having now dispensed with the need for reason, argument and grounds in my effort to develop a new way of reading Nagarjuna, I want to own up to some very serious qualms. In a commencement address delivered at Denison University, where I was teaching at the time, the journalist Anna Quindlen referred to a comment made by one of her critics: “I don’t believe her,” the fellow had written. “She may be the only happy person in New York, but somehow I doubt it” (Quindlen 1995, 50). I can’t help feeling that something similar could be said about Rorty, Fish and most of the other New Pragmatists. Their willingness simply to shake off the dust of traditional philosophical claims to truth strikes me as a tad cavalier—especially insofar as they seem prepared almost casually to embrace the lack of objectivity as if it were itself a more profound form of truth. Perhaps it is, but here I find myself more inclined to trust Nietzsche’s cryptic, almost mystical reserve, when he warns us that “something might be true while being harmful and dangerous in the highest degree. Indeed, it may be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish” (Nietzsche 1966, 39). In any case, one suspects that a problem which has occupied the attention of philosophers and religious thinkers in the East and the West for thousands of years is not going to evaporate at the wave of the pragmatic wand. In fact Rorty has been criticized for over-simplifying

deconstruction's complex relationship to the whole problem of metaphysics (e. g. Norris 1987, 150 ff.), and indeed, a close reading of Derrida reveals that he does not envision any final escape from traditional forms of logocentric discourse. For example, consider what he has to say in *Writing and Difference*:

But all these destructive discourses and all their analogs are trapped in a kind of circle. This circle is unique. It describes the form of the relation between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics. There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (Derrida 1978, 280-281)

In what is perhaps the most comprehensive and nuanced exposition yet to be published of deconstruction's philosophical implications, Rodolfe Gasché explains how Derrida's concept of "metaphoricity" (the metaphor of metaphor) "names the 'origin' of an unavoidable illusion, the illusion of an origin" (Gasché 1986, 314):

In short, whether discussing Hegel, Husserl, or Heidegger, Derrida is primarily engaged in a debate with the main philosophical question regarding the ultimate foundation of what is. Contrary to those philosophers who naively negate and thus remain closely and uncontrollably bound up with this issue, Derrida confronts the philosophical quest for the ultimate foundation as a necessity. Yet his faithfulness to intrinsic philosophical demands is paired with an inquiry into the inner limits of these demands themselves, as well as of their unquestionable necessity. (Gasché 1986, 7)

But of all modern philosophers, it is Nietzsche who appears to have pushed this particular issue to its ultimate, dramatic conclusion. "The falseness of a judgment is not for us necessarily an objection to a judgment. . . . The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving. . . ." (Nietzsche 1966, 4). Nietzsche alone has the temerity baldly to declare "untruth as a condition of life" (Nietzsche 1966, 4):

From the beginning we have contrived to retain our ignorance in order to enjoy an almost inconceivable freedom, lack of scruple and caution, heartiness and gaiety of life—in order to enjoy life. And only on this solid, granite foundation of ignorance could knowledge rise so far—the will to

knowledge on the foundation of a far more powerful will: the will to ignorance, to the uncertain, to the untrue. Not as its opposite, but—as its refinement. (Nietzsche 1966, 24)

If Rorty, Fish and the other New Pragmatists seem a bit shallow alongside Nietzsche it may be because they lack his finely tuned sensitivity to problems of morality and religion. What is required is a sophisticated concept of religious discourse to which we could apply the analytical framework of pragmatic theory. Nor must the project begin at ground zero, for as it turns out we already have a compelling example of what might be accomplished along these lines in a recent book by Carol Zaleski.

Zaleski's book, *Otherworld Journeys*, is built around a comparative study of near-death narratives drawn from two quite disparate sources: medieval Christendom and contemporary American society. She has attempted, in her own words, "to meet the problem of interpretation head-on" (Zaleski 1987, 7), and it is this dimension of her work that I want to review here. Perhaps the best place to begin is with Santayana's famous definition of religion, which was presumably the catalyst for Zaleski's title:

Any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular. . . . Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy; its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or not—is what we mean by having religion. (Cited in Zaleski 1987, 201-202)

In the case of accounts of near-death experience this message is delivered in the form of narrative descriptions brought back from actual visits to a realm beyond the world of the living. Reports of these experiences—whether medieval or modern—are cast in the rhetoric of objective truth. Although these accounts are structured as narratives and not as a series of deductive arguments, they nonetheless function, for those who take them at face value, as conclusive evidence of the existence of a reality every bit as real as any described in the language of empirical science. There are, however, two major obstacles to accepting such reports on their own terms: First, as Zaleski's comparative study shows, despite their remarkable similarities, medieval and modern accounts of this other world differ

in significant ways—ways that frustrate any hope of finding in them a universal lexicon for the near death experience. In all their various renditions, the stories brought back from the other world are infused with the by-products of cultural and social conditioning. Second, even the striking similarities in descriptions of these experiences have been subject to a plethora of naturalistic explanations based on neural wiring, physiological mechanisms of dying, repressed memories of birth, and common psychological responses to the threat of death. Although no single theory is presently capable of accounting for all the medical, psychological, philosophical, historical, social, literary, and logical dimensions of the experience, skeptics are convinced that it is only a matter of time before the scientific community will be able to put together an entirely mechanistic explanation that will strip near-death reports of any shred of revelatory power. Zaleski's theological task is, then, to find "a middle path" between the extremes of scientific reductionism and naive affirmation. Her solution lies in a return to William James, and to his suggestion that religious testimony be evaluated not on the basis of its origin, but rather on the basis of its "fruits for life."

In order to harness pragmatic theory to her theological project, Zaleski proposes a concept of religious discourse based on an understanding of symbolism taken over from Coleridge, Tillich, Cassierer, Langer and Ricoeur: The object or image that functions symbolically does so not only by representing some reality beyond itself, but also by simultaneously participating in what it represents. A symbol neither fully contains nor copies the transcendent, but it has the potential to communicate some share of the power inherent in that realm. This understanding of symbolism is linked to a definition of religious imagination as "the capacity to create or to appreciate religious symbols" (Zaleski 1987, 191). In this sense, although religious discourse may deal in theory, it does not aim to satisfy one's curiosity about theoretical questions. "When we think theoretically," Zaleski explains, "we must guard against spatializing and hypostatizing our ideas; perhaps we could not think creatively at all, however, if we lacked the capacity to imagine, though only subliminally, a realm in which our ideas can act" (Zaleski 1987, 193). This realm of religious symbols—the realm governed by the religious imagination—is what we encounter in reading any religious writing; consequently the task of the theological critic is to interpret the significance of such language not as a function of whether it is true or false, but rather to seek to uncover the vitality of the text as a vehicle for religious transformation. Any and all of the powers of language may be recruited for this aim, and

so the rhetorical devices one encounters in religious discourse run a gamut from poetry, narrative and didactic prose on through the overtly argumentative style of abstract philosophical theology. Which brings us to Zaleski's central claim, in which she identifies the real strength of her pragmatic method:

One need not abandon the idea that there is an ultimate truth in order to recognize that for now, at least, pragmatic criteria must be used. If we have no direct sensory or conceptual access to the reality for which we aim, then we must judge those images and ideas valid that serve a remedial function, healing the intellect and the will. In this sense, all theology is pastoral theology, for its proper task is not to describe the truth but to promote and assist the quest for truth. (Zaleski 1987, 192-193)

Every genre of religious literature has its audience and a language appropriate to that audience; but regardless of the shape of the language, it serves, in every instance, a therapeutic end. It can not accomplish this end, however, unless we are willing to surrender the conviction that there is, or ought to be, some form of original, authentic religious truth that can be pried away from language, myth, history and culture. We need consciously to recognize and affirm not only that religious discourse is always the discourse of a particular place and time, but that to remain vital it must be constantly reshaped in the imagination of the reader. According to Zaleski, "The advantage of this position is that it calls on religious thinkers to acknowledge and take responsibility for their own reflective and creative work in framing ideas of the universe and of God" (Zaleski 1987, 195). This ongoing, creative (re-)framing of the text has a particular significance in the interpretation of apophatic discourse, where "the habits of language pull the writer and reader toward reifying the last proposition as a meaningful utterance. To prevent such reification, ever-new correcting propositions must be advanced" (Sells 1994, 207).

As we have already seen above, our willingness to accept the creative role that we as interpreters play in the understanding of any text is a direct fallout of pragmatic (anti-) theory. But as adapted by Zaleski to the interpretation of religious discourse, pragmatic theory becomes much less hostile to the claims of traditional logocentric philosophy and metaphysics. The power of the text no longer hinges on the success of its arguments in accurately representing truth or reality, for what appears as argument is equally capable of being interpreted as religious symbol—as

a tool of the religious imagination designed not so much to *prove* as to *heal*. In this respect logic and deductive argument can be made to work for religious purposes in just the same way as does the language of a near-death narrative—by shifting the grounds for ultimate truth from the realm of knowledge to the realm of the imagination, or, to say what amounts to the same thing, by making it possible to *believe*.

Against the pull of scientific reductionism, which seeks, in the arena of near death testimony, to undermine the credibility of these stories by explaining away the central experience as a composite of individual physical, psychological, and social data, Zaleski reminds us, significantly, that the same case could be brought against the experience of love—a state that can be accounted for as the composite effect of neurochemical and social mechanisms including everything from advertising to pheromones. The truth—the objective, scientific truth—is, of course, that every normal state of consciousness is a composite effect of electrical and chemical events in brain, hormones, inherited drives and various forms of social and cultural conditioning. If we were to apply reductionist principles across the board nothing would survive, for all of our experience is in one way or another a composite whole assembled by the imagination out of threads of sensation, perception, language, memory, and on and on. Similarly the meaning of a text, whether that meaning is conceived to lie in its capacity to prove or to heal, is the cumulative effect of an enormous variety of context-bound elements including rhetorical style, appeals to authority, ideological associations, an interpretive community and so forth. The integrity of experience, like the meaning of a text, is only problematized when for some reason our imagination can no longer do its work and we cease to be captivated by the effect of the whole.

But let me return to the question of the aim of religious discourse, and to Santayana's definition of religion cited just above. His work indicates that all the various components of advanced religious life could be referred back to a primitive view of the other world as an actual place—a view that continues to exert its influence on the religious imagination even where it has been sublimated into a variety of epistemological and ontological claims about "truth" and "reality." But it is Zaleski who gives Santayana's ruminations their real force in her suggestion that the primary value of the human inclination to conceive of another world lies in its potential to furnish us with "a sense of orientation in this world, through which we would otherwise wander without direction . . ."

This has not always been formulated in terms of life after death. Even the contemplation of death, unadorned by images of the beyond, can have this orienting effect insofar as it makes us place ourselves, with greater urgency and purpose, in the midst of life; and a sense of the mystery of existence, of infinite presence or surrounding emptiness, can have the same value as a graphic depiction of the steps to paradise and hell. Buddhist evocations of the inexhaustibly productive void are as well suited as Dante's *Divine Comedy* to meet the need for orientation . . . they call on us to inhabit this cosmos, by overcoming the fear or forgetfulness that makes us insensible to life as to death. (Zaleski 1987, 202-203)

Descriptions of the after-effects of near-death experience seem to bear this out: "greater zest for life, less concern for material things, greater self-confidence, independence and sense of purpose, attraction to solitary and contemplative pursuits, delight in the natural world, tolerance, and compassion toward others" (Zaleski 1987, 142). Zaleski stresses throughout her study that the presence of the other world has these same effects not only on those who actually make the journey, but also on the audience who hears and accepts their message. In the words of an Australian woman who wrote to *Anabiosis*, a regular digest of news for the membership of the Association for the Scientific Study of Near-Death Phenomena: "I don't fear death now, *nor do I fear life*" (Zaleski 1987, 143).

IV

It's time to return to the problem with which this paper began: How does Nāgarjuna's apophatic language accomplish its philosophical / religious work? How are we to "make sense" of the Madhyamaka's uncompromising effort to overturn even the slightest suggestion that there is another, transcendent world of absolute truth and reality with equally frequent assertions to the effect that the realm beyond thought, "the essential nature of things"—*dharmata, tattva*—"neither arises nor passes away"? I have done my best to ensnare this question in a number of other issues, to demonstrate how it is both a problem of textual interpretation and of philosophy, both a theoretical problem of the source of textual meaning and a philosophical or religious question of the distinction between knowledge and belief and the nature of their objects.

We have seen how, in its antitheoretical polemic, pragmatic theory incorporates a notion of the primacy of belief over knowledge. As Fish puts it, "Theories are something you can have . . . beliefs have *you*." In

this as well the New Pragmatists have borrowed from Wittgenstein, who wrote:

All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments; no, it belongs to the nature of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life." (Wittgenstein 1972, 105)

In Wittgenstein's vocabulary "system" is synonymous with "language game;" both expressions refer to the framework of formal and informal education, social, cultural, and interpersonal conditioning within which we express doubts, engage in reflection and inquiry, and arrive at conclusions. "A language game is only possible if one trusts something . . . [it] is not based on grounds. It is there—like our life" (Wittgenstein 1972, §509 and §559). Justification, argument, evidence, explanation, grounds, proof, reason, judgments of accuracy and inaccuracy—all of this takes place within systems, and not between them.

In a wonderful essay called "The Groundlessness of Belief," Norman Malcolm observes that a language game may be said to be groundless, "not in the sense of a groundless opinion, but in the sense that we accept it, we live it. We can say, 'This is what we do. This is how we are.'" (Malcolm 1977, 208). I am reminded once again of Stanley Fish: "Someone who declares himself committed to the promotion of individual freedom does not have a theory; he has a belief. He believes that something is more important than something else—and if you were to inquire into the grounds of his belief, you would discover not a theory but other beliefs that at once support and are supported by the belief to which he is currently testifying. Now, to be sure, these clustered beliefs affect behavior—not because they are consulted when a problem presents itself, however, but because it is within the world they deliver that the problem and its possible solutions take shape" (Fish 1985, 117). According to Wittgenstein, what is true for the promotion of individual freedom is equally true for the practice of chemistry, where the Law of Induction, for instance, is regularly employed without any concern for theoretical evidence of its validity. It simply would not occur to a chemist to insist that he *knows* that the Law of Induction is true. ("Imagine such a statement made in a law court.") On the other hand, if he were to reflect on the matter at all it would be most appropriate for him to say, "I *believe* in

the Law of Induction.” (Wittgenstein 1972, 500). And here we reach the bedrock of what is, ultimately, “religious” belief, defined as “an acceptance which is not conjecture or surmise and for which there is no reason” (Malcolm 1977, 209).

“Reason,” “argument,” “justification” and all the rest of it is a function of what a person lodged in a particular system of belief finds satisfying. Curiously enough the impulse to locate rational, objective justification for belief is nowhere stronger than in the philosophy of religion. “The obsessive concern with [proofs of the existence of God] reveals the assumption that in order for religious belief to be intellectually respectable it *ought* to have a rational justification. *That* is the misunderstanding. It is like the idea that we are not justified in relying on memory until memory has been proved reliable” (Malcolm 1977, 211). It is Malcolm’s opinion, based on his reading of Wittgenstein, both that people do not seek grounds for religious belief, and moreover, that there could be no such grounds. “When you are describing a language-game, a system of thought and action, you are describing concepts, and yet also describing what certain people do—how they think, react, live” (*ibid.*, 214-15). His point is that religion, like every other system of belief, is a value-seeking enterprise, a groundless viewpoint (*Weltbild*) from which the significance of events and ideas and experiences is judged and assigned. Religious belief is a particular way of viewing or construing “the world,” embedded—as are all perspectives—in a form of life (the action-in-progress that Fish mentions in his appropriation of Wittgenstein). I think of yet another of Nāgarjuna’s *karika*-s:

That which is in the process of being born and passing on,
when taken as causal or dependent,
is, taken as non-causal and independent,
declared to be nirvāṇa. (*Madhyamakaśāstra* XV.9)

All of this finds a good deal of support in no less authoritative a source than the present Dalai Lama, who explains the significance of Madhyamaka in terms of a fundamental transformation of one’s attitude or view:

We all want happiness and do not want suffering. Moreover, achieving happiness and eliminating suffering depend upon the deeds of body, speech and mind. As the deeds of body and speech depend upon the mind, we must therefore constructively transform the mind. . . . Many such different methods of transforming the mind have been taught by the many great teachers of this world, in accordance with individual times and places and in

accordance with the minds of individual trainees. Among these, many methods of taming the mind have been taught in the books of the Buddhists. From among these, a little will be said here about the view of emptiness. (Gyatso 1975, 51-52)

And so the question of how to read Madhyamaka texts becomes at once extremely pragmatic, after all, for the meaning of Nagarjuna's writing must be located not in "the view from nowhere," but rather in its capacity for transforming one's perspective, for shifting one's existential hermeneutic from one groundless system of belief to another.

But this does not account for the way such a transformation is effected. We may dispense with the notion of grounds, but still to believe is to believe *in something*, and that something is, for Nagarjuna, ultimate meaning (*paramartha*), reality beyond the realm of thought and names (*anabhidhatavyatattva, dharmata*), and nirvaṇa. Can we find a way to make text-critical, historical sense of this language that will not reduce Buddhism's religious message to an intellectual artifact, to yet another failed claim of an exotic form of denaturalized discourse? For at least some of us in the field this remains an engaging question. And so it should, for the question of whether religious belief is necessarily naive or uncritical deserves to be taken seriously. Which brings me back, one last time, to Zaleski, and to some remarks that appear near the close of her study of near-death narratives:

It is one thing to acknowledge in general terms the orienting value of otherworld visions; it is quite another to decide whether their specific content might be relevant to our own view of life and death. In order to understand the conditions, both cultural and natural, that shape near-death experience, we have assumed the role of spectators and can not easily divest ourselves of that role. In comparing medieval and modern visions, we seem to have stepped outside our own cultural context and may feel at a loss as to how to step back into it and make judgments. Such incapacity for wholehearted participation is the intellectual's occupational disease; among scholars engaged in the comparative study of religion it can produce a sense of nostalgia for days of innocence or for some idealized form of archaic or traditional religiosity. (Zaleski 1987, 203-204)

Malcolm makes the same point more bluntly:

Present-day academic philosophers are far more prone to challenge the credentials of religion than of science. This is probably due to a number of things. One may be the illusion that science can justify its own framework.

Another is the fact that science is a vastly greater force in our culture. Still another reason may be the fact that by and large religion is to university people an alien form of life. They do not participate in it and do not understand what it is all about. This non-understanding is of an interesting nature. It derives, at least in part, from the inclination of academics to suppose that their employment as scholars demands of them the most severe objectivity and dispassionateness. For an academic philosopher to become a religious believer would be a stain on his professional competence! (Malcolm 1977, 212)

I would like to respond to Zaleski and Malcolm by taking another look at the lines from Shakespeare that were cited in Section II, above, and by reading them from what I take to be a "Madhyamaka perspective." This time I will supply the text of the entire sonnet:

When my love swears that she is made of truth
 I do believe her, though I know she lies,
 That she might think me some untutored youth,
 Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.
 Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
 Although she knows my days are past the best,
 Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue;
 On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
 But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
 And wherefore say not I that I am old?
 O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
 And age in love loves not to have years told.
 Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
 And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

That there is some kind of truth or reality that transcends what we take for granted in everyday experience is more than a message brought back by those who claim to have journeyed beyond death, more than a series of "denaturalized" epistemological and ontological arguments—it is an intuition, one might almost say a conviction, that seems to be built into human language and thought. But when we turn the light of historical method on that intuition it quickly fades into a collection of indefensible propositions, for I can not seem to understand myself completely outside the identity that has been constructed around and within me by the place and time where I live. I am unwilling—*unable*—to step outside of history . . . Unless, perhaps, in order to love and be loved. For in some sense all love is illicit love, and the demands it places on us are always

exceptional. The middle-aged gentleman who speaks to us from Shakespeare's sonnet knows that the love he gives and receives is dependent on a lie, and not only on a lie, but on his ability joyfully to take the part of the naive, ignorant youth, "unlearned in the world's false subtleties." And so he does not feign belief, for the game simply doesn't work by those rules. He does not pretend to believe; he *believes*. (Wittgenstein writes: "A language-game is only possible if one trusts something." Malcolm comments: "Not *can*, but *does* trust something" [Malcolm 1977, 204]). His lover reciprocates, and the act is complete—an unqualified affirmation of this life and this world that simultaneously incorporates and transcends "simple truth." Argument works at the level of discursive, expository prose and rule-governed theory; apophatic discourse works best in the vertiginous, slippery world of poetry and narrative fiction, where, even in the midst of argument, knowledge and belief are conflated ("I do believe, though I know . . ."), where a promise may be a curse ("she swears"), and love is indistinguishable from artful untruth ("I lie with her and she with me"). Wisdom and skillful means are inseparable.

"Wisdom" is, in this classically apophatic sense, the facility to believe in untruth. To know that one's belief has no grounds, and yet to believe. Like the journey of the prodigal son, the path leads through another, exotic terrain and back home again. But unlike the Biblical pilgrimage this quest has no end. It is the reality of the other world, and the continuous, circular journey between here and there—a journey of perpetual transformation—that makes all the difference. Wisdom is the facility to believe, then, not in any sort of nonsense, but in a particular kind of soteriologically efficacious nonsense. Wisdom is to know that stories about a transhistorical, absolute truth, and the realm in which that truth comes alive, can not be objectively valid. To know *this*, and yet to believe. It is wise to believe because familiarity with the other world of absolute truth and reality orients us here in this world (a mysteriously textualized world of unlimited interpretive possibilities) by making it possible to affirm our present existence even in the midst of change and uncertainty: "I don't fear death now, *nor do I fear life*." One must first see this world as false, by leaving it behind; this is the life of reason, the beginning of the philosophical, religious journey that we find registered in denaturalized discourse. One must then see the other world as no more or less real than this one. Two worlds standing across from each other, face to face like two polished mirrors, the reality of each a quasi-illusion supported by the other in an endless series of reflected images

falling away into infinity, a groundless vortex of belief. "The affirmation of transcendence—when taken up with full apophatic seriousness—then turns back upon itself" (Sells 1994, 212).

The pilgrim begins where he finds himself, in this world, with argument and grounds. He moves from here to the other world, and back again (and again and again . . .), to the *appearance* of argument and grounds. Antifoundationalism can be used to undermine any claim to knowledge or objective truth; it can clear away the grounds for certainty, but in doing away with grounds it also does away with any possibility of asserting value-free, *a priori* necessity—that is, any form of ultimately binding ontological or epistemological relativism—for its own conclusions. The point is that we can not know anything for sure: including *this*. Antifoundationalism can not be expected to make good on the broken promise of denaturalized discourse and foundationalist theory. For the pilgrim whose travels are never over, belief is no longer justified on the basis of its proposed origin in rational grounds, but rather in terms of its "fruits for life."

How, then, do we learn to find meaning in a semblance of reasoned argument? How do we learn to feel at home in a homeless world of radical uncertainty and change, of suffering and death? Perhaps the most immediately relevant question is the one that Francisca Cho Bantly asked in her response to Griffiths: "How far are we willing to go in undermining some of our own ontological grounding for the sake of casting new molds for our understanding of cultural discourse?" To give up searching for what the text *really* means to say, to know that the object of belief is a lie and yet to believe, to let go of fear and love life unconditionally . . . all of this requires something quite outside the realm of logic and rule-governed theory. There must be some other bridge to understanding, some kind of hermeneutical perspective from which we might finally begin to pull all of this together into a meaningful, composite whole. I shall, indeed, make one last suggestion. Or rather, I shall quote from Nietzsche (again!), for though I am in less than perfect agreement with Rorty in other ways, I have taken to heart his proposal that literary criticism, philosophy, and—I would add—Buddhist Studies as well can "name the practice of splicing together your favorite critics, novelists, poets, and such, and your favorite philosophers."

With the strength of their spiritual eye and insight grows distance and, as it were, the space around human beings: their world becomes more profound; ever new stars, ever new riddles and images become visible to them. Per-

haps everything on which the spirit's eye has exercised its acuteness and truthfulness was nothing but an occasion for this exercise, something for children and those who are childish. Perhaps the day will come when the most solemn concepts which have caused the most fights and suffering, the concepts "God" and "sin," will seem no more important to us than a child's toy and a child's pain seem to the old—and perhaps "the old" will then be in need of another toy and another pain—still children enough, eternal children! (Nietzsche 1966, 57)

It seems to me that Nietzsche's words may offer guidance for those of us interested in developing some genuinely alternative way of reading Nāgārjuna, those who, having grown weary of "simple truths," are searching for a middle path out of the extremes of, on the one hand, compulsive ideological commitment to a reductionistic concept of methodological objectivity, and, on the other, naive affirmation of some kind of dogmatic Buddhist absolutism. Perhaps the new toy (and the new pain) Nietzsche alludes to in this passage has something to do with symbol and metaphor, with "the 'origin' of an unavoidable illusion, the illusion of an origin." Perhaps it has to do with the realm of poetry and narrative fiction (which Plato ironically condemned), and with what Carol Zaleski calls "religious imagination"—the capacity to imagine "a realm in which our ideas can act" (cf. Nehamas 1985). If so, then surely this is no call to unconstrained subjectivity—which has at any rate never existed. Like any hermeneutical tool the religious imagination has always been subject to the constraints of time and place, to the constraints of the community in which it functions, and to those of the grammar and vocabulary of the text from which one must begin the journey of interpretation.

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