

Reading the Mila Life Story: Doubles, Double-Takes, and the Literary Affordances of Text

Janet Gyatso

Abstract This essay explores some of the outstanding literary flourishes of Tsangnyon Heruka's *Mila Life Story* and attempts to analyse how they work in the narrative. It advances a theory about the "literary affordances" of texts, which make possible varying levels of detail, irony, suspended resolution, and multiple points of view, and which serve to enhance the interest and impact of the story. It also argues that there is a discernible self-reflexivity when texts take advantage of these kinds of license, seemingly delighting in their own artfulness. The essay examines several episodes in the *Life Story* which illustrate these features of the work's literary brilliance.

I would like to take the opportunity in this essay to enjoy, once again, some of my favorite episodes from the brilliant *Mila Life Story* by Tsangnyön Heruka (Gtsang smyon Heruka, 1452-1507).¹ I will reflect on why they are my favorites, and what makes them so worthy of the designation "literary."

This essay will become theoretical at times. Whatever theory I manage, however, will largely be culled from the particular work at hand, and will hardly serve as a universally applicable description of literature, even if I make a few gestures in that direction. I won't even be able to consider the *Mila Life Story* itself with any comprehensiveness. But my hope, in addition to partaking in the pleasures of this outstanding work, is for the desultory insights in this essay to help open the space for literary analysis in the field of Tibetan studies.

In what follows I consider a Tibetan text that few if any would deny counts as a wonderful piece of literature. This of course would not be true of all Tibetan writing. So, by "literature," or "the literary," I mean not the larger category of everything written, but rather that sense of the English word when it refers to writings that are particularly imaginative and expertly conveyed

1. Gtsang smyon 2007. In this essay I refer mostly to Quintman 2010. The first complete English translation of the work to my knowledge was Evans-Wentz 1928.

I would like to express thanks to Charles Hallisey, who drew my attention, long ago, to the literary critical strategy of paying attention to point of view.

in terms of their style, structure, and impact on the reader. Something like what is referred to as *belle lettres*.

More specifically, I myself have long considered the category of “literature” to apply to any verbal presentation that takes advantage of its own mechanisms—the very possibilities that the medium of literature itself offers, or affords—to convey feelings and experiences and kinds of knowledge beyond the purely documentary, or descriptive.²

A literary verbal presentation, or text, can be written or oral; in this essay, the text under consideration is written (although it may well have some oral roots). But either way, there is a kind of second-order self-reflexivity at the very heart of the literary; part of what is brought to the fore in any literary presentation, quite apart from the actual story that is being told, is the very fact itself that special affordances of the verbal are now in play. This does not impute “consciousness” to literature, although it may sound like it. Rather, I am merely suggesting a kind of self-referentiality, in line with what literary critic Julia Kristeva hypothesized is at the very heart of the “semiotic” dimension of literature.³

Note that this definition sets aside authorial intent, although surely the literary is often created consciously and intentionally. But it does not have to be. It can also come into being intuitively, or spontaneously, even accidentally, through a writer’s hand. But whether deliberate or not, in literature the verbal medium, the very nature of a textual *topos*, serves to convey something beyond the direct denotations of each word and/or utterance. The verbal medium thereby does more than convey what we can loosely call, after Dominick LeCapra, the documentary, or information of practical import.⁴ Rather, the literary indulges in its own resources to “work” on its readers, creating kinds of aesthetic and affective resonances—sadness, joy, irony, humor, wonder—with what is being conveyed. There is also a sense of play, and freedom *to* play, in what the literary entails. There is a sense of reveling in the very license that literature affords to enjoy, or commiserate, or laugh. This in turn makes for a second-order self-reflexivity.

Literature often gives the impression of taking pleasure in being literature.

Among the affordances that the medium of a verbal presentation, or textual *topos*, offers for the birth of literature is the ability to make use of timing. It offers options to draw some things out in detail, and others to say summarily, in order both to give emphasis and even suspense, and to accord with the familiar experience in daily life wherein not all things operate with the same swiftness, nor are they governed by a strict clock. Repetition is another device that texts allow that serves to arrest the attention or also subvert any regimented process of unfolding according to a clock. The inordinate amount of fine-grained detail that written texts allow, detail that may be extraneous to the central message of a work, can instead serve to set off the imagination. Lit-

2. LeCapra 1983.

3. She develops this theory in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language*. See Moi, 89–136.

4. LeCapra 1983.

erature revels in polyvalence; metaphor makes possible multiple simultaneous meaning and inuendo. Alliteration or rhyme in the actual sounds of words adds to the punch of their meanings, an affordance which is grounded on the very (usually quite irrelevant) fact that words have sounds. A reference to something that already came up previously in this work, or to indeed to some other work, will put the reader in mind of something beyond the direct denotation of the words in view. Leaving some parts of the story unresolved for some time while the text turns to other matters—which texts that are being artful can dare to do—means that readers can be left suspended before they “get it.” And the more time they are suspended, the more the imagination—and memory, and wisdom, and humor, and etcetera—have to sneak in and color the final resolution.

What is more, all of such strategies can operate at a second order as well and end up drawing the reader’s attention to the very manner in which the text is put together, and the liberties that it is taking. In such ways (and many more), the reader can be made to notice that artfulness is at work.

I have just tried to introduce a definition of literature that is focused on the work performed by the text itself, but of course the humans who create the text and those who read or otherwise receive it have a role in its operation as literature too. Authors often intentionally aim to play with the affordances of the medium precisely so as to create a richly literary piece of writing. In this, they draw on their education, their imbibing and appropriation of technique from literary works of the past, as well as their own observational skills in the art of living itself, the very pleasure and sorrow and irony and richness of human experience. The more you are a keen observer and appreciator of this the better the writer you will be.

This is also true of the reader. The good reader brings to the table expectations, knowledge, and especially a willingness to receive and appreciate literary effects. A keen eye on life helps readers greatly too. The more you are already a reader of the ironies and tricks of life the more you will pick up on the depth of the writing you are reading, be that intentional or not. Some readers can almost make a work of writing into a work of literature on their own, seeing, for example irony or the poetic or the lyrical or the tragic where it was opaque to its creators.

In any event, in the case of the book considered in this essay, little such originary effort is required on the reader’s part, except perhaps to try to bring to conscious awareness the many impacts that are already raining down on her (or erupting up) from this brilliant *tour de force*. In the particular case at hand, the literary text does its own work first and foremost. And then the efforts of its string of authors—as well as the work of its reading as I will try to enact here—come in second.

Low-Hanging Fruit

My subject for this essay is a text that no reader can deny is a masterwork of world literature, let alone Tibetan literature. The life story of the eleventh-century yogi Milarepa (Mi la ras pa) was written in the fifteenth century by Tsangnyön Heruka. There have been many translations in many languages, and it is widely known. We also have a detailed study of the story's gradual development over time.⁵ Its main episodes likely originate in oral rendition(s) of the life by the protagonist himself.⁶ But even the earliest written rendition that we have now, a third-person biographical sketch by Mila's own disciple Gampopa (Sgam po pa), already mentions, for example, that there are many stories about Mila's time with Marpa (Mar pa) which Gampopa is not including in his own work.⁷ In any event, like the hagiographies of other outstanding Tibetan Buddhist saints such as Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyal (Ye shes mtsho rgyal), the story went through various transformations, and its elements were both repeated and developed in numerous versions over time, as laid out by Andrew Quintman (2014). Although several of the earlier versions are already replete with dialogue and interesting story twists, it is only in the hands of Tsangnyön Heruka that we get the brilliant novelistic rendering of Milarepa's life that it became. Quintman has also speculated on how Tsangnyön's presentation of the story as a first-person account allowed him the largess to imagine himself into the subjectivity of the protagonist, thereby enhancing his own—and his readers'—immersion in the drama. And so despite the fact that Tsangnyön far from invented the entire story out of thin air and in many ways drew on what was already in place, I will usually refer to the author of the *Mila Life Story* as Tsangnyön, both for convenience and in light of the significant literary embellishments that he introduced. On a few occasions I will refer to the authors in the plural, when the context warrants. I will also make reference where possible to earlier versions of the episodes I am discussing in this essay. But I will reserve for a future article a full study of the earlier versions and their exact wording in the original, in hopes of pinpointing the license Tsangnyön took in transposing, elaborating, and creating details.

In addition to its authors, we also know a lot about the reader reception of Tsangnyön's *Mila Life Story*, something relatively rare for Tibetan Studies. The book has been a superstar among Tibetans. Milarepa himself is extremely well known as a hero across the Tibetan speaking regions, regarded widely in Tibetan society as an amazing example of someone who gained enlightenment through extraordinary effort in one lifetime. His story is cited repeatedly in other Tibetan autobiographies as the inspiration for the author's own life, as well as in other genres of Tibetan writing over the centuries.

5. Quintman 2014.

6. The colophons to the *Tshe ring ma* song sections of the biography already mention Mila's participation in their commitment to writing: Quintman 2014, 200; 202.

7. Quintman 2014, 192.

The book's importance and popularity in Tibetan society was aptly confirmed for me, when, on my first visit to Lhasa in 1987, I came upon a crowd of people one evening, sitting right on the ground on Barkhor street. They were listening with rapt attention to the recitation of Tsangnyön's text by a reader perched on a pile of boxes. This was a moment of newly found social and religious freedom in Central Tibet, although it soon disappeared again after the uprising in Lhasa in 1989. But for a moment, Tibetan culture, after weathering the Chinese takeover and destructive Cultural Revolution, could be pursued freely even outside the traditional halls of the monastery. This particular group of people had chosen to spend their evening in the ancient center of the city, listening to an old but still so enjoyable favorite. On another evening soon after, I saw a very similar scene but this time someone was going through the crucial instructions in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* for his audience.⁸

Another somewhat random but also telling sign of the place of Tsangnyön's *Life of Mila* in the eyes of the Tibetan reading public came up more recently. Tashi Dekyid Monet of University of Virginia and I were engaging the contemporary poet and literary critic Chimay ("Chi med) in a conversation about the precedents for modern Tibetan literature, a conversation for which Tashi skillfully interpreted.⁹ What kinds of writing does Chimay regard as fonts of inspiration, both for herself and, in her view, the movement of modern Tibetan literature in general right now? The first work out of her mouth was Tsangnyön's *Life of Mila*, prefaced by the Tibetan equivalent of "first of all and of course...although it hardly need be even mentioned..."¹⁰

In all honesty, the *Life of Mila* by Tsangnyön is low hanging fruit if you are looking for an example of the literary in Tibetan writing. But on the other hand, it is just so good, so well done, that it still bears detailed critical attention, even if most readers of this essay already know the book well. In what follows I've chosen a bunch of passages that still both puzzle and delight me after so many years of teaching the book. Each case provides us with an opportunity to explore a bit further just what we might mean by the literary. As we will see, the definition that I tried to sketch out at the outset above only begins to scratch the surface; at best we will see the principles I identified emerging in very different ways and on very different grounds.

8. Lama Kazi Dawa Samdup and W. Y. Evans-Wentz certainly chose apt works to translate into English back in the early twentieth century when they first published their set of four classic Tibetan works. The set included both the *Mila Life Story* (Evans-Wentz 1928) and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz 1927).

9. See <https://uva.theopenscholar.com/writingtibetan/people/chimaypema-tso-འཆི་མེད་དམ་སྒྲ་འཚོ།> accessed August 2022.

10. She then added the *mgur* of Dodrubchen Jigme Denpa'i Nyima and Dza Patrul Rinpoche. I am in the process of writing an essay on the literary qualities of one of the *mgur* of Dodrubchen, along with Chimay herself and Tashi Dekyid Monet, which we three hope to publish in a future issue of JTTL.

It's Real

I alluded above to the fact that literature draws power from the artfulness of life itself. The more authors and readers are attuned to the many artful ironies and sadnesses and multivalences that life presents to us, the more you get good literature. There is thus an important mirroring between literature and reality—even if all writing that faithfully depicts reality is not necessarily literature.

To be real is a necessary if not sufficient feature to make something literature. Theorists recognize it most saliently in novelistic writing since the mid-nineteenth century, but varying artful ways to represent reality can be found in poetry, epic, and religious scripture since ancient times.¹¹ For our purposes, we can say that there is something about good literature that is real and true in a deep or important sense. This can be so even with what is called magical realism, when things are being talked about that can only be fantasy.

Many of the episodes in the life of Mila ring very true, even despite their sometimes magical or extrasensory nature. When we think about such passages in light of the normative and standardized conventions of the Tibetan auto/biographical genre, *namthar* (*rnam thar*), to which the *Mila Life Story* surely belongs—i.e., that this genre of writing is meant to inspire faith in the protagonist's enlightenment and portray their journey to enlightenment as a model for readers—we are astonished at how original and unconventional the *Mila Life Story* is. In many ways, it takes its place in the broad global movement we are calling “early modern,” which over a period of centuries fostered a growing sense of individuality and resistance to idealized traditional norms.¹²

I say this because many of the realistic and everyday dimensions of the passages we will consider below are in some sense at odds with the normative and idealistic aspirations of Tibetan *namthar*. Realism often betrays imperfection—so often found in real people and circumstances—which is not generally part of the agenda of *namthar*. While it is not uncommon for *namthar* to portray childhood folly and error, these are resolved once the protagonist reaches enlightenment. Imperfections are also not often brought to the fore for the adult characters in the book, except as a moral lesson. It is rare to see the ironic and playful portrayal of human foible that we find in the *Mila Life Story*. In fact the realistic flourishes in the latter that I have in mind often have nothing to do with any moral lesson at all. They have nothing to do with the protagonist's journey to enlightenment. Importantly, they are not meant as models. In other episodes, as we will see below, realistic portrayals do indeed serve the hagiographical game plan but in ways that enrich the story

11. E.g. Auerbach 1953.

12. The development of autobiography is often associated with the birth of modernity; I have discussed the connection of Tibetan autobiography to such movements in Gyatso 1998. I have also discussed the category of the early modern in Gyatso 2011 and 2015. For a current slice of the academic interest in the category, see <https://earlymodernworld.fas.harvard.edu/>, accessed August 2022.

rather than drive it. In either case, such flourishes often provide delight for the reader, but they do inspire the question of why they are there.

Here is my favorite example of unmotivated realism from the *Mila Life Story*.



Mila has just successfully wreaked havoc on his family's enemies. His black magic has successfully caused a house to collapse while a wedding party involving these enemies was in progress, killing 35 of them. The survivors are furious. Meanwhile, at the request of his mother, Mila plans to do further damage by magically inflicting a hailstorm on the village, and travels there with a fellow magic student. He successfully makes the hailstorm rain down, badly damaging the crops, and "covering the entire valley three bricks deep. The whole mountainside was washed into ravines." The villagers are furious, and strongly suspecting that it was Mila who caused the hail, look for him and come dangerously close to his hiding place.

Mila's companion offers to pretend to be Mila, while Mila himself can flee to another place. The two agree to meet at the inn in Dingri in four days. Mila departs. The text has him recounting that "As I skirted the village of Nyanam, a dog bit my leg and I did not arrive at our meeting place on time."

Meanwhile, Mila's companion successfully serves as a decoy and then proceeds to their agreed meeting place at the inn. Mila is not there, but the companion later finds him sitting at a feast.

As the story relates, still in Mila's voice, "He came up beside me and asked, 'Why didn't you meet me yesterday?'"

And Mila replies to him, "Yesterday I went to beg and a dog bit my leg so I couldn't travel quickly. But it's nothing to worry about."

The two then proceed on their journey back to their magic teacher's home. Nothing more is ever said about the dog.¹³



I've left out a lot of the small details in this story. But I kept in the one I want to focus on: the dog.

Why add this detail about Mila's dog bite to the story? It adds nothing to the larger story whatsoever. The fact that the dog made Mila late in meeting up with his friend has no impact on anything. They managed to meet anyway. Nor is any explanation given of why Mila was bitten in the first place, such as a moralistic suggestion that it was a sign of Mila's bad karma or something

13. Summarized from Quintman 2010, 39–41. Quotes from Quintman 2010, 40; 41.

like that. Not only is nothing of that sort said, it is not even implied. The episode with the dog seems to be an entirely extraneous detail. It happened, but it had no meaning for anyone, except an inconsequential inconvenience. Except maybe that it added a little flair and color to the story.

A dog bite is an incident that one might expect on the Tibetan plateau, where the ferocity of its canines is famous. People not infrequently get bitten by dogs. It seems like an event that someone might simply add in seamlessly when recounting an exciting series of events, which surely the larger story around the dog incident were. Maybe it is a trace of an oral story, something indeed that Mila himself first said, although the episode only shows up in writing at a midpoint in the series of versions that eventually landed in Tsangnyön's masterpiece.¹⁴ Whenever it showed up, however, it is the kind of flourish that the textual topos of a narrative affords: the addition of extraneous, but perhaps interesting or fun details.

We can agree with Roland Barthes that one thing realism does, and especially the kind of realism that may be deemed useless detail, is impart an aura of reliability.¹⁵ In this case, however, I would not necessarily need to claim that the dog bite episode was added in intentionally in order to impart such an aura. What might have been in mind on the part of the author, I think, was simply his pure interest in the event. The details of life are personally interesting, often just for their own sake. As the writer Chimay told Monet and me, there is intrinsic interest for readers in the mundane details of people's lives. This might apply especially to happenstances, the things that happen that are both unexpected and out of our control. And what is wonderful is that the genre of autobiography and other sorts of first-person narrative become an occasion to slip some of those things in, writers started to realize, as they wrote what might otherwise have been rote or idealistically normative *namthar*.¹⁶

I said above that the literary draws attention to itself at a second-order level. I'm not sure I see that happening so much in this incident, although it is possible to say that the reader's attention might indeed have been drawn to the work *qua* literary writing in light of the incident's incongruence with the genre expectations of *namthar*. The more pertinent point to make here though is simply that the episode adds nothing of moral significance to the story of how Mila got enlightened. Rather, what would most have come into focus for the reader when receiving this incident was probably just a pure delight in the story. If we want to add a second-order dimension to that literary pleasure, we can speculate that reader feels glad she is reading this book when she gets to

14. Andrew Quintman, email to me dated 8/4/22: "...The story does not appear in the earliest stratum of large compilations and narratives ... that proliferated in the centuries after his death. These include the so-called Bu chen bcu gnyis, and the early Mdzod nag ma versions. It does appear, however, in a later stratum of Mdzod nag ma versions. The short/simple version is that it is found in a version published in the modern collection 'Bri gung chos mdzod. My estimate was that this version appeared... a generation prior to Tsangnyon."

15. Barthes 1989. Cf. discussion in Wood 2005.

16. Gyatso 1998, chapter one.

a delightful passage such as this. I certainly did—even though I would not have wanted to get bitten by that dog myself!

One of the virtues of the truly realistic is that it is also often quite funny, more readily so, I would venture, than something that is meant primarily to make a moral point. There are quite a few really humorous episodes in the *Mila Life Story*: for example, the hilarious episode where Mila mocks his sister's prudery by sewing a blanket she gave him into small sheathes that will cover only his ten fingers and his penis.¹⁷ One of the reasons they are so funny is that they manage simultaneously to appear implausible and farcical, and yet remain quite realistic at the same time. The stories remind the reader of the inevitable follies of real people, in Tibet and lots of other places.

It's Real and Funny

Although there are many sad and painful scenes in the *Mila Life Story*, there are also many very funny ones. Even Mila the narrator himself characterizes his story as the possible cause for either laughter or tears as he begins to relate his life for its ostensible original recorder.¹⁸ I dare say that a large percentage of the book's Tibetan readers and hearers—along with many other readers and hearers—have laughed and will laugh at these episodes. I only have space to talk about two of them here.

The first is a scene I have long fantasized making a film about! Although it is quite unusual, it is also a scene that you could imagine in real life. I'm thinking of the uproarious incident in which Mila's enraged mom, hot cooking utensils thrown down in fury, trips out of her kitchen, down her house stairs, and collapses in front of her singing, inebriated son. It comes up early in the story, when Mila and his family are still taking in the disaster that has befallen them. Although she is justified in being incredulous that her son is singing, the incident makes Mila's mom look comically out of control.



One day Mila is singing as he saunters home from a wedding party. His mother, cooking in her kitchen, overhears him, and is infuriated at her son for being so carefree in the midst of their most miserable days. She can't believe her ears. She comes rushing out of the house to confront him, but this does not proceed as seamlessly as she might have wished. The narrative rhythmically intones the action in an unusual litany of short phrases:

17. I presented a paper on this episode at a conference at Berkeley on humor in Buddhism some years ago.

18. Quintman 2010, 15.

Tongs tossed to the right
roasting barley to the left,
the rest of the barley was left to burn.

Grabbed a stick in her right hand
a bunch of ashes in her left,

Down she fell the long stairs,
Down she jumped the short ones,

And out she came.

She threw the ashes in my face,
and she banged me over the head
with the stick several times.¹⁹

Mila's mother proceeds to berate him and then promptly faints on the ground. Mila, who had been drunk from the party, is brought to his senses by her collapse. Although he was just singing for pleasure, he realizes how inappropriate it is to sing in his family's current state of suffering, and he bursts into tears.



The scene shows us a side of Mila's mom that is quite incongruous with the way she is usually presented. Normally she is painted as a very competent woman, a powerful force, and much beloved by her son, despite her sometimes rather vengeful plans. But here she is flummoxed and at wit's end.

And yet despite the incongruity the episode feels very honest and real. Indeed, incongruity is what you get when you try to portray reality. Not everything makes sense or is consistent. This is especially true of real people. In fact the very fine-grained complexity of the character portrayal of

19. My translation. Gtsang smyon Heruka 2007, 30–31: “*skam pa gyas su bor/ yos dkrugs gyon du bor/ yos brdod 'phro tshig tu bcug/ lag pa gyas su yog pa zbig khyer/ gyon du thal ba spar gang khyer/ skas ring ba la babs/ thung ba la mchongs nas phyir thon byung ste/ thal ba de gdong la btab/ yog pa de mgo la lan 'ga' rgyab...*” I have not attempted to reproduce in English the irregular metre—if it even is even that—in this passage. It seems to somewhere between verse and prose. Perhaps there is some resonance with a kind of chant, but I'm not sure.

Mila's mom throughout the book—and many other of the story's characters too, including Mila himself—makes for one of the very fine literary features of Tsangnyön's masterpiece.

Incongruity, in addition to being real, has also long been recognized as a principal basis for humor.²⁰ Not only do we see this in the realistically complex figuration of Mila's mom as a person, another kind of incongruity here that also makes the episode funny is between the material world and the world of intentions. The mom's accident shows how physical reality ineluctably gets in the way of the best of plans. Mila's mother is morally outraged and intends to communicate that to her son, but she fails to pay attention to the height of the stairs, and the heat of her cooking fire, and the rest of the physical world around her as she jumps up to reproach him. This makes for a profound disconnect between her intentions and her dignity and the order of her world. What ensues is good slapstick. And it also strikes us as a plausible scenario. People do fall and otherwise create havoc when they are overcome with anger and not paying attention.

Let us also note, finally, that like the dog bite, Mila's mother's disregard of her burning food and clumsy negotiation of the stairs does not contribute to the moral lesson of the story. One could say of course that Mila's shock at her dramatic reaction, not to mention the rightness of her rebuke, surely does function at a critical juncture in the story to get him seriously on the path to the Black Arts, and from there eventually on the path of Dharma. But it is the particular rendering of the mom's trip down the stairs and the detail devoted to it that we are talking about here. It would have been sufficient to mention her rebuke if we were just interested in the moral lesson. What I am struck by is how this detailed farcical rendering of her slip contributes to the artfulness of the story, and to our pleasure and engrossment in reading it, despite its sadness and pain at the same time.

There is often incongruity between our intentions and what the world deals us in real life. While realism is already in play in ancient literature, its increasing salience is part of a broader tendency in world literature and thought since the early modern period to disavow the ideal in favor of the everyday.²¹ We already pointed out above the modern quality of dwelling on happenstance such as we found in the dog bite incident. In these and other ways, Tsangnyön's *Mila Life Story* trades on the tendency of reality to undermine our script. Try as we might, we can't evade it. But the effort to do so can look comical. The author of the *Mila Life Story* knows this very well.

Actually, though, some people are indeed able to overcome the physical laws of our planet. At one point later in the story, after Mila has become adept in yogic winds and heat, he gains the ability to fly.²² Unfortunately, however, most other people remain enmeshed in the physical laws of the universe.

20. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/#Inc> Accessed August 2022.

21. For the importance of the everyday in modern thought and writing, one classic source is Taylor 1989, part 3.

22. Quintman 2010, 149. Cf. Gtsang smyon 2007, 175–6.



One day, in order to practice, Milarepa flew over a small village where a man and his son were plowing a field. The son notices the man in the air and shouts, “Father, look at that amazing sight. A man is flying!” and drops his plow to stare.

It turns out the two are related to a woman who was killed when Mila murdered the 35 wedding guests with his Black Magic. They are not very pleased with him, to say the least. The father snorts, “What’s so amazing or such a great spectacle?” and orders his son to keep working. He is determined not to give Mila any more credit than he has already gotten for his powers. He is not going to acknowledge that a man is flying in the air.

But the father then goes on to warn his son not to let the moving shadow of the devious Mila touch him. And lo and behold, the father himself, afraid that the shadow might touch him, starts twisting this way and that to get out from under it too.



The father is afraid of Mila’s power despite his impervious facade. His body belies his words. He is truly afraid of the specter of the spooky silhouette landing on him, and he is afraid of what Mila’s power might wreak on him. In falling all over himself to avoid a mere shadow, he ends up acknowledging the astounding spectacle of Mila’s feat after all.

The fact that Mila is flying is part of the moral lessons of the hagiography. It demonstrates Mila’s power over the elements and his success at yogic agility. The fact that the father ends up demonstrating his fear and acknowledgement of Mila’s power is also part of the hagiography. But the man twisting his body in a minor panic about a shadow while claiming not to be impressed is not. Rather, it is a slice of life. The detail makes the episode more real than if the father had immediately and simply expressed awe at the flying man. It admits the complexity and dubiousness of the very proposition that a man could fly in the first place. And again, it shows complexity, if not incongruity, in human character: denial, faith, anger, superstition, bravado. All at the same time. It makes the father’s acknowledgement of Mila’s power all the more sweet.

Multiple Points of View

Noticing incongruities leads me to notice that the Mila story often sets up pairs of things that are incongruous. We just saw a few cases where pairs of things facilitate complex character figurations of the same person (competent mom/out of control mom; imperious dad/superstitious dad). Paying more attention to such “doubles” draws our attention to other literary devices in the

work. There are actually a lot of them, and interestingly, they emerge both synchronically and diachronically.

The spatial and temporal topoi of a text allow a variety of figurations of the same person or object in adjacent or subsequent sections. That the author of the *Mila Life Story* is using such affordances of the text to increase impact is nowhere more pronounced in what we can name as the central problematic that the story dares to raise altogether, namely whether Mila's guru Marpa is actually enlightened or not, a qualified trustworthy guru or not. In fact we are given several points of view on that question, and at least two, if not more, figurations of Marpa. Here the realism, for what it is worth, is in fact intricately connected to the larger hagiographical agenda of the work, and cannot be strictly separated from it, in contrast to what I suggested for other episodes above. But that is in itself a quite interesting feature of the literary: the realistic complexities that the literary side of the story allows actually enhance traditional expectations about disciples and teachers.

As we will see later, the undecideability of Marpa's character is already set up when they first meet. But the issue emerges in earnest later when, famously, Marpa gives Mila the task to build a tower.²³



Marpa keeps changing the tower's design, making Mila pull down what he had already built and start all over again. As this starts happening repeatedly, Mila becomes more and more skeptical as to whether Marpa knows what he is doing. Marpa even allows that he was drunk on previous occasions, but keeps reassuring Mila that his new version of the tower is the final plan. At one point Mila is driven to ask for Marpa's wife to witness Marpa's instructions. Meanwhile Mila is also losing faith that he will ever receive the tantric teachings he is seeking from Marpa. He suffers from exhaustion and sores on his body from the work, plus he has no funds for the initiation offerings he must give. Marpa even begins to be violent with him, slapping him and pulling him by the hair to eject him from the line of his disciples.



The episode is mostly recounted from Mila's first person perspective, but we are also told things that complicate that point of view. We learn that the tower has a strategic purpose beyond the purification of Mila: it is simultaneously going to allow Marpa to claim the land on which it will stand, in opposition to his relatives who are also claiming the land.

23. Quintman 2010, chapter 5.

This is the first in a series of information bits that could conceivably come from Mila's account of what he knew by the time he became an old man, when, according to the larger frame of the narrative, he was telling his life story to Rechungpa (Ras chung pa).²⁴ But as more details of the tower-building episode emerge, for example regarding certain discussions between Marpa and his wife, we can say that Mila would not have known about them at the time they occurred—and certainly not ever the blow by blow dialogue. As the episode proceeds, and we learn that Marpa's wife is starting to intervene on Mila's behalf, we realize that we are receiving information that Mila at the time could not possibly have known, since the very flummoxing to which Mila is being subjected would not work if he had known it.

In particular, Marpa is shown to have compassion and not to be the uncaring brute he is starting to look like from Mila's perspective. When his wife tells Marpa about the huge open wound oozing blood and pus on Mila's back, Marpa asks, in a pause in his show of bravado, "Does he really have a sore?" It appears he did not know! Marpa proceeds to summon Mila and examines him, and then encourages Mila to persist, giving him a pad to protect his back. When Mila appears to be accepting the device, our narrator tells us that Marpa secretly sheds tears and becomes convinced that Mila is an extraordinary disciple. Mila for his part is struggling between wanting another lama, just so that he could actually get some formal teachings, and being convinced that no one but Marpa has the true teachings to transmit. Two views of the same moment, from two different perspectives.

The fact that Marpa's tears are secret means that there is a difference in the story being told to the reader, and the story as it was unfolding for Mila the young student. So, double stories, both happening at the same time. Why? We can say it's a common feature of reality: things look differently from different perspectives, and different perspectives abound. And in this case the realistic figuration even has a function in the hagiographical agenda, complex as that is becoming.

Marpa keeps up his appearance to Mila of gruff determination so that his disciple will continue at his labors, but is shown to the readers to be concerned that his prize pupil will leave him. Once, when Marpa finds out that Mila has decided to run away and is already on the road,

His expression turned dour and a tear ran down his cheek. "Kagyü lamas, dakinis, and dharma protectors," he called out, "turn around my fortunate son." Then, covering his head, he sat there quietly.²⁵

For his part, the story never shows Mila fully losing faith in the lama's powers, but only the ques-

24. Quintman 2010, 11–15. The frame is reiterated at the start and end of the rest of the chapters in the book.

25. Quintman 2010, 67.

tion of whether he will ever grant teachings to him.²⁶ Even when Mila is finally informed of Marpa's concern for him, he is not convinced that the lama really thinks of him as his "fortunate" disciple.²⁷ But Marpa's actions do make us, the readers, wonder about his supposedly enlightened powers. On at least one occasion Marpa even falls asleep after drinking too much, much to his own detriment.²⁸ We also know that he was ignorant of the fact that Mila had left him, and that he was uncertain of what would happen.²⁹ It starts to seem that Marpa was not entirely sure of what he was doing at all. We also see him outraged when he learns that his own wife practiced deception to get Mila teachings. He is even on the verge of beating her, trying to gain entrance to the room where she is hiding, and failing that, finally covering his head with his shawl again.³⁰

It is only when Mila is on the verge of suicide and all the other disciples are trying to protect him that Marpa fully relents. And that is when Mila is finally informed of his intentionality.³¹ Marpa later recounts that:

In order to purify your karmic obscurations, I repeatedly drove you to despair with many cruelties such as burdening you with constructing towers... and kicking you out of the initiation line. Yet you never gave way to wrong views.³²

Apparently, part and parcel of this skillful means that there must be moments when Mila doubts his teacher, and struggles with his faith. But even there, interestingly, Marpa didn't anticipate his wife's intervention in his skillful means agenda, which eventuates in the outcome that Mila only went through eight of the intended nine incidents wherein he was brought to despair and confusion by Marpa's strange demands.³³ And that, in Marpa's words, means the following:

Had I the opportunity to punish this son of mine nine times, he would have become a Buddha devoid of physical remainder and without need to take another human birth. Since this did not happen, some slight residue of negativities and obscurations remains, brought about by Dakmema's (Bdag med ma) foolishness.

26. Quintman 2010, 63; 65.

27. Quintman 2010, 67.

28. Quintman 2010, 68. This was actually engineered by Marpa's wife Dakmema, as she knew she could use his drunken stupor to sneak one of Marpa's greatest treasures, the ruby rosary beads of his Indian master Naropa, out of their house, things that Marpa would never agree to give away if he was alert.

29. Quintman 2010, 69.

30. Quintman 2010, 78.

31. Quintman 2010, 82.

32. Quintman 2010, 85.

33. This detail is already in the *Bu chen bcu gnyis* biography: Andrew Quintman, email to me dated 8-4-2022.

Still, your major negativities have been eradicated by means of eight great agonies and many minor adversities. Now I shall accept you as a disciple and give you the oral instructions that are like this old man's heart.³⁴

The ingrency of Dakmema's own teaching devices and intentions is another dimension of the narrative that deserves a separate essay, as do a slew of other episodes that betray fascinating and suggestive assumptions about gender. For now we can just say that it is an astonishing piece of the story that Dakmema harbors an unpredictable agency of her own that cannot be fully controlled or known by Marpa's supposedly enlightened wisdom and skillful means. Marpa attributes this to the fact she is a woman, and therefore has special compassion.³⁵ I myself am interested in the way that Dakmema's disruption of Marpa's plans illustrates once again the story's allegiance to a kind of reality—its uncontrollability, to be exact, and the separate points of views and intentions of other people.

The plurality of perspective achieved by the author of the Mila story is an example of what can be achieved when the textual topos is used to produce impactful literature. To tell a story, any story, one has to take up a perspective from which the story is seen and told. But if a second-order self-consciousness emerges of the affordance that this requirement entails, then perspectives can be played with—not necessarily to immediately go to the place of an omniscient narrator, but rather simply to multiplicity ... and perhaps irreconcilability.

Multiple perspectivalism mirrors the actual state of things. It forces the reader to wrestle with their own point of view. In this case we can almost say that the reader is put through a test of faith of their own. This is one of the ways that we can see kinds of realism that actually feed the hagiographical agenda. The reader does not have the same faith in Marpa that Mila did due to his karmic connection with the master and the anticipatory dreams that shored him up in times of doubt. Rather, the reader must wrestle with their own doubt in light of what they know, differently than does Mila the character. On the one hand, the reader will be alarmed at the harsh treatment that Marpa deals to Mila (as are Dakmema and others inside the story). And the reader will also be alarmed that Marpa seems to be able to make mistakes. On the other hand, the reader knows, simultaneously with the events unfolding, that Marpa loves his disciple and is performing an elaborate ruse out of compassion and an endeavor to use skillful means to heal and mature a very sinful disciple (Mila the murderer). Perhaps the reader proceeds to reach a lesson that tells them that in the real world enlightenment and skillful means are hard. That does not have to make

34. Quintman 2010, 83.

35. Quintman 2010, 82: "As for Dakmema, to begin with she is a woman. She also has tremendous compassion and could not bear the situation, so she too was correct. But forging the letter and sending the gift of religious objects were serious offenses."

the reader lose faith in Marpa despite his fumbles; perhaps they even admire him all the more for achieving such a great pupil even despite his own anger issues.

So perhaps we are made privy to Marpa's true compassion, despite his cruelty and anger, because we, the prosaic samsaric readers, are much more likely to doubt Marpa than is Mila. Mila has his own intimations and visions that work against the evidence of Marpa's unreliability.³⁶ In contrast, we the readers have to judge only on the basis of what the text tells us. And so perhaps we need extra help. In this way, the literary excellence of the text serves to teach and draw in the reader, as well as the characters in the story. And as Marpa continues in the passage just quoted above, he clearly suggests that Mila's faith will serve as a beacon for future would-be disciples of his own:

Therefore, the disciples in your lineage will... have all the essential qualities of a student, including faith, diligence, wisdom and compassion. ... Finally they will become fully qualified lamas.³⁷

This makes clear that Mila's "pure vision," the technical term for the Tibetan tantric Buddhist student's ability to see the pure side of the teacher as what is truly real, is a model for his future disciples, to which we can add the readers of the text. Mila's faith makes for the occasion for Mila's future lineage to have faith in their own teachers. In other words, perhaps the reader is put into training by the *Mila Life Story* for her future discipleship with a difficult teacher too—or maybe just an all-too-human one. And while we may need a little more help than the exemplar does, the overall logic explains why Marpa *had* to be portrayed as fallible. We will all have to deal with human teachers, and so we had better get ready for that now.

Clicks Into Place Over Time

We just followed a set of synchronic discrepant doubles—several simultaneous versions of the same story, and how they make the occasion for deep moral reflection on the part of the reader.

There are also ways that doubles emerge over time in the *Mila Life Story*, and are not simultaneous. Such asynchronous pairs serve in different ways to give the story depth, texture, and a heightened ability to impact, and even to surprise, the reader.

Even a small detail in the *Mila Life Story* can exemplify the temporality of this device. The following instance would be delightful if it wasn't so terribly sad.

36. Quintman 2010, 63.

37. Quintman 2010, 85.



As Mila the narrator recounts the fortunes of his early life, he remembers how “we two, brother and sister, had dangling locks plaited with turquoise and gold.” He is reveling in how local folks admired their ornaments and prosperity.³⁸ But the death of his father turned Mila’s life around 180 degrees: his relatives illicitly took over his father’s patrimony, leaving his mother, his sister and himself in desperate poverty. As he describes their resulting misery—the same misery that so enraged his mother at his singing—he adds comments on the irony around those ornaments. “Our hair, once dangling in locks plaited with gold and turquoise, turned ashen and thin and became infested with lice. Sensitive folks who saw or heard us all broke down in tears.”³⁹



In some ways, the small irony of lice replacing the turquoise beads that formerly decorated their hair locks highlights the tragedy even more sharply than the far more significant losses of sufficient food and forced toil. It is a powerful literary device: the lice and the turquoise are so similar in size—almost doubles. Both are small bits of stuff, and both easily capable of getting entangled in one’s hair. But over time one has changed dreadfully into the other! The preciseness of the incongruous juxtaposition that emerges over time—when jewels come to turn into worms—helps bring to the fore the disaster that has happened to Mila’s family. Someone looking at them who was familiar with their former affluence would do a double take—and then break down in tears, as Mila said.

The fact that the juxtaposition only emerges over time serves to give the true significance of things an opportunity to unfold. As in the case of the synchronic doubles, it makes for depth in what is being portrayed, showing that there is more to things than immediately meets the eye. But it does these things in a somewhat different way. It is more final. Unlike two alternate synchronic points of view about which there is an important undecidability, once the outcome finally becomes clear over time, it takes definite precedence over the earlier portrayal.

Again, recall that these moves are made possible by the affordance of text, whereby the reader can turn and reflect back on the initial portrayal of something, juxtaposing now what one didn’t know before about where it was going.

Perhaps the most iconic example of this temporal device would be the prophetic dream, whose significance takes time to fully unfold. There are several important such dreams in the Mila story. One is the auspicious and prophetic dream that Marpa has on the eve of Mila’s arrival at his home

38. Quintman 2010, 19.

39. Quintman 2010, 22.

to beg his guidance. As if to confirm the truth of this omen, Marpa's wife also has an auspicious prophetic dream on the same night with some of the same elements. This doubling in itself would be synchronistic, but both only finally become clear over time.

Marpa knows that the two dreams are "in accord" but won't admit it to his wife, leaving both her and the reader hanging as to what to make of them.⁴⁰ In this instance, the dreams signal from the beginning that their significance will only unfold over time. And as we already saw, that unfolding confounds our expectations, since it seems Dakmema did not act entirely in accord with Marpa's plan after all.

Another case of things morphing and shifting in significance over time are the initial offerings that Mila makes to Marpa when they first meet. Marpa imperiously rejects his offerings and kicks them out the door, but does accept an empty copper kettle with four handles, banging it to make it ring aloud and filling it with melted butter.⁴¹ And yet it is only much later, when Marpa finally accepts Mila into his circle, that Marpa discloses the auspiciousness of each of the details on the kettle's design and quality, what it means that it was initially empty, and why he filled it with ghee.⁴²

The significance of both dreams and offerings are common tropes in Tibetan culture for the fact that auspiciousness and value can be anticipated but only fully actualized over time. But the final juxtaposition I want to discuss where something shifts over time is quite unusual in its structure, and a brilliant literary touch of the *Mila Life Story*.

Here the time it takes for the signs to resolve is much shorter than for the ones just discussed, which took months to unfold. This time the transition is complete in the course of a day. The episode comes up prior to the long process of Marpa's teaching method when Mila begins to build the tower. It concerns instead the very first few hours of Mila's first meeting with the master.⁴³



Aware after his special dream that Mila will be arriving that very day, Marpa the Great Translator decides to meet Mila incognito. He goes out to plow his field, something he had never done before. Mila encounters him, but ignoring his deep instincts, assumes this cannot be the great Marpa. This gives Marpa a chance to test Mila's character. He gets Mila to finish plowing the field,

40. Quintman 2010, 48–9. He owns up to some of the significance of his own dream at Quintman 2010, 83.

41. Quintman 2010, 53.

42. Quintman 2010, 84.

43. Marpa's disguise for Mila as a farmer and subsequent revelation of himself as the great master is already to be found in *Bu chen bcu gnyis*, ff. 5a-b, but it is different and is sustained over a month. Among other details, the traces of mud on the master's face are missing in this early version of the story: Andrew Quintman, personal notes on *Bu chen bcu gnyis*, provided to me in an email dated 8/30/2022.

while he takes off. Mila is eventually led into the master's house and finds him seated on a set of cushions on a carpet. Mila recognizes the same man he had met plowing his field. He is different only in that he had cleaned himself up, although Mila notes that there are still traces of dirt from his day of plowing on his brow, nostrils, moustache and goatee. In any case, Mila still doesn't realize who he is looking at. He is still asking to meet the famous master, when the Lama himself, in some exasperation, has to finally identify himself verbally, and then orders the young man to prostrate.⁴⁴



So here we have another set of doubles who, on the one hand, are totally different—one is a common laborer, the other a great master seated on a raised seat—and yet on the other hand are the same person. A single person has morphed significantly in a matter of hours. It all appears to be a special teaching device for Milarepa, who needs to learn how to see Marpa as a master. The device doesn't make it easy for Mila, however, and it marks the beginning of a series of challenges for Mila to discern who Marpa really is. (The reader, in contrast, is simply informed what is going on.)

I want to focus in particular on one curious detail in the story. Why are we told that traces of the plowing episode still linger on the cleaned up face of the Great Translator? These bits of dirt would seem to undermine the plan to confuse Mila with two different Marpas, the farmer and the cleaned up master. Instead, the dirt peeking out from the edges of Marpa's face bridges the two. They hint that the new man Mila is meeting is not entirely new after all. But the leftovers of the plowing escapade were apparently not even known to Marpa himself. At least the story gives no inkling that Marpa left the dust on his face on purpose. It is Mila the narrator who remembers noticing the tell-tale signs. And yet he himself doesn't quite grasp what they are telling him.

What really is being shown, then, is a puzzle. The dirt traces are in some senses symbolic. But are they telling Mila that Marpa is not fully liberated from "the dust of the world," a common Mahayana Buddhist trope, even though he is elsewhere in the story claimed to be a full buddha?⁴⁵ Or is the very fact that Marpa bridges samsara and nirvana in this way actually right in line with Mahayana theology, indeed par excellence? I don't mean to answer such questions here, but only to show how the literary details force Mila to confront them.

It is also the case that Marpa's imperfect disguise trades heavily on hard truths of material reality. The reality is that, after all, it is hard to get every last mote of dust off your face. What does that tell Mila—and/or us—about teachers and our paths?

The fact that Marpa did not make sufficient effort to wipe himself might just be showing a great master to be human, imperfect and flawed. Or it could be highlighting with approval

44. Quintman 2010, 49–51.

45. Especially Quintman 2010, 108.

the very fact that he had sweat and dirt on him in the first place—of course he did! In the end, whatever we make of it, the incident clearly opens up a set of thorny issues around what otherwise would surely be an inconsequential narrative detail. It reveals something about Marpa. And perhaps it also reveals something about masters in general. It is a point that could be stated outright, but works far better when its significance emerges gradually—both for Mila and for the reader as well, despite the extra help the latter has been getting from the narrator.

The incongruity between the various sides of Marpa needs to be reckoned minutely, and that takes time. Understanding of the guru needs to dawn deeply, and it requires consideration of everything from the nature of dirt to the most elevated Buddhist theory—and a lot of personal idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies in between. That deep reckoning is what has to happen for this story to make its impact; clunking either Mila or the reader over the head with some propositional claim would not have been enough.

Leaping Across the Chasm

Thus have we seen the realistic and to some degree modernistic details in Tsangnyön's *Mila Life Story* sometimes supporting the hagiographical underpinnings of the story, and sometimes subverting them. Either way, we have seen how literary flourishes and affordances deeply enhance the interest, the impact, and the pleasures of a narrative text.

I want to draw attention to one more device found in the *Mila Life Story* that lifts up the work of literature. It has to do with a kind of action in the narrative that mirrors the acts of writing and reading themselves. Like several of the foregoing examples, the device also has to do with the effort to understand things, and the fact that such understanding takes time to unfold. But in the following instances, the doubled things are especially explicit about their primary nature as (would-be) communicative signs.

The outstanding example in my opinion would be the highly amusing and satisfying episode that follows Mila's block-buster black magic killing 35 people at the wedding of his cousin.⁴⁶



Mila's mother learns that her surviving relatives are plotting to kill both her and her son. She resolves to send money and warnings to Mila, who is still living at the residence of his black magic teacher. She finds a pilgrim in transit, and decides to use him as a messenger. She provides the

46. Quintman 2010, 36–39; The episode is already mentioned in very brief outline in the *Bu chen bcu gnyis* f. 3a: Andrew Quintman, personal notes on *Bu chen bcu gnyis*, provided to me in an email dated 8/30/2022. But it is much elaborated in Tsangnyön's version.

pilgrim with hospitality while she mends his cloak, securing at the same time seven pieces of gold under a black patch, and embroidering over it, on the inside of the cloak, a design of white stars resembling the constellation Pleiades. Then she gives a letter to the pilgrim, who proceeds to find Mila and deliver the letter.

Problem is, the letter is “written in code.” Nor does it directly mention the gold pieces, of whose presence in his cloak, for safety’s sake, the pilgrim messenger was of course unaware.

The letter advises Mila to look for provisions in the region of a black cloud and the constellation Pleiades, adding that the pilgrim/messenger himself lives in that region. Mila is desperate for provisions but flummoxed by this opaque set of instructions. So is his teacher. But his teacher’s wife “possessed the marks of a wisdom dakini.” She immediately knows what to do. Dulling the pilgrim with beer (something that Marpa’s wife also does to Marpa) she becomes playful. Taking the pilgrim’s cloak off his body, she dances around with it, saying “What fun it would be to wear such a cloak and travel around the countryside.”⁴⁷ What a playful lady! Continuing to dance out of the room—and out of sight—she removes the gold pieces, mends the patch as before, and delivers back his cloak to the messenger. Later she hands the gold prize to Mila, and painstakingly unpacks for him and his lama each of the elements of the message’s code. Mila and the lama are impressed, with the lama adding “They say you women are canny, and it is true.”⁴⁸



Once again, the details of this episode are hardly needed to convey the main events of the life story, which would be concerned merely with Mila getting his money so he could get on with his training. Why is it included? Certainly part of the answer has to be simply for the pure delight of watching two very clever and resourceful people in action. And that is not to mention the special pleasure that both are women, with at least one of them identified explicitly as a *dakini*. We might be put in mind of the famous “dakini sign language” over which women hold special mastery. But why would the author bring that in here?

I don’t think that the trope of dakini sign language has an explicit or intentional role in Mila’s progress towards enlightenment. We do see several other impressive instances of special female-sent messages adorning the *Mila Life Story* however. One more brief episode that exhibits some of the same dynamics, and equally brilliant in its resourcefulness, is another message sent by a woman to Mila, this time by Dakmema.⁴⁹

47. Quintman 2010, 38.

48. Quintman 2010, 39. Cf. Gtsang smyon 2007, 47.

49. Quintman 2010, 73-4.



Mila is with Lama Ngok and trying to practice, but it has recently been revealed that Marpa has not given his blessing for Mila to study with him after all, and that an earlier letter from Marpa was faked by Dakmema. Marpa has invited Ngok to attend a celebration for Marpa's son, and has ordered him to bring the evil Mila along as well. The prospects don't look good for Mila to have to face Marpa, but Dakmema sends him a message at this point to encourage him to come and tell him that Marpa will now give him teachings.



One wonders how she can be so sure. That is what ends up happening, but not before a series of missteps that, given the way they are portrayed, seem unlikely to have been anticipated. But let's leave that question aside. For now, I am merely interested in the way that Dakmema sends the message. She writes it on paper and inserts it inside of a dice made of clay. She asks someone who was being sent to make arrangements with Lama Ngok to give this dice to Mila, who had previously left it behind. It is clear she wants to conceal the fact she is sending Mila a message—maybe because she does not want it to be known how much she is intervening in Marpa's treatment of him? But again, I am getting distracted. The really interesting part is *the way* Dakmema conceals the message, how opaque it is to Mila, and how Mila ultimately figures it out.



Realizing the die has come from Dakmema's hand, Mila receives it as a blessing. But after the messenger leaves, Mila finds himself desiring to play with the die, and starts to do so. And then he starts to reflect that he had never done that before in Dakmema's presence. And that probably her sending him a die means that she no longer cares for him, since dice are a bad sign for Mila. It was a result of dice that his ancestors had to leave their homeland in disgrace, bringing about much hardship. Swinging it above his head Mila slams the die to the ground. It breaks and out tumbles the rolled paper message. "Son, the Lama is set to give you initiations and teachings, so come with Lama Ngok."⁵⁰



50. Quintman 2010, 4. Cf. Gtsang smyon 2007, 91.

You have to be impressed with Dakmema's resourcefulness in getting Mila to find a piece of paper stuffed inside of a small clay die, and you have to be impressed with how the narrative portrays the way this unfolds. Mila is shown going through a series of reactions from gratitude, to desire to play, to puzzlement and finally to anger.⁵¹ In the course of trying to figure out why Dakmema sent him something in which he had never shown interest in her presence, he remembers the connection of dice to his own difficult family history, when gambling caused the impoverishment and homelessness of his ancestors. That makes him angry, suspecting that she is taunting him. And that makes him hurl the die to the ground. And that causes it to break open.

And that is what Dakmema wanted to happen. Indeed she is taunting him, cannily realizing that Mila will go through exactly the uncomfortable emotions that he does, but that doing so will get her secret message delivered. And of course once he reads it he realizes she does indeed remain deeply on his side. The text does not lay this out explicitly but it is easy for us readers to realize it.

If we can transpose the trope of messages and their decodement to the more general act of reading, one of the things that both these two last passages mirror—two messages sent across distances and time and in coded fashion—is the difficulty of reading signs altogether, and the need for ingenuity and imagination to get from sign to signified. Ingenuity is required of the original sender, or author, and ingenuity is needed by the recipient. And the medium itself—be it sewn cloth, clay, or bits of bark or paper—affords an extenuated process of unfoldment that ultimately delivers something important. A train of thought goes circuitously from author to sign medium to recipient, bringing along associations and second reckonings and self-reflection. Incubation; stewing; embroidering over; and maybe in the process a glimpse in the mirror. In other words, the work of literature. Perhaps the story is showing us people undergoing what the story itself aims to do. And so we recognize another one of the ways to detect literary self-reflexivity in the *Mila Life Story*. It leads us to appreciate and enjoy the text.

I don't think that any of the authors of these wonderful passages had such an aim explicitly in mind. Rather, I would just say they were delighting in the arc of the story, and the details that powerfully engage its telling and hearing or reading. But in order to do so, they would also, at some level, have to be reveling in the very affordances that story-telling provides to develop such details. And they would also have to have a fine appreciation of the sense of reality of it all. This is a reality that only comes from attending to details, details that may not always be conscious or explicit, but eventually ring true, and lead to a better understanding of the world and how it works.

In my book, that qualifies as part of the Buddha's dispensation, whether it was ever named as such or not.

51. Translator Kazi Dawa Samdup made clear that Mila's hurl of the die was an act of anger. Evans-Wentz 1928, 122.

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