

History for the Future: Politics and Aesthetics in the Fifth Dalai Lama's *Cuckoo's Song*

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Abstract: This article translates and interprets several stanzas of poetry from the *Cuckoo's Song* (*Dpyid kyi rgyal mo'i glu dbyangs*), the 1643 political history of Tibet authored by the fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Losang Gyatso (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617–1682). It focuses on the words this work uses to reflect poetically on its own documentary and literary qualities, and hence on the relationship between its political subject matter and aesthetic manner of expression. The article argues that any broader assessment of the *Cuckoo's Song* with respect to the nascent Ganden Phodrang regime should heed the ways in which this work addresses the purpose and necessity of speaking history eloquently. Its self-referential opening verses portray literary historiography as an intrinsically political act and politics as a necessarily aestheticized pursuit. What is ultimately at stake in this idea of history is the relationship between authorship and kingship as world-ordering powers.

*By this Poetical Description, you may perceive, that my ambition is not onely to be
Empress, but Authoress of a whole World...*

Margaret Cavendish, *Blazing World*

Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring!

Even yet thou art to me

No bird, but an invisible thing,

A voice, a mystery;

William Wordsworth, *To the Cuckoo*

Introduction¹

The *Cuckoo's Song* (*Dpyid kyi rgyal mo'i glu dbyangs*), the political history authored in 1643 by the fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Losang Gyatso (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617–1682), has a deserved reputation as one of the more distinctive and impactful works of Tibetan historical literature.² In addition to its influence on later historians, it is also known for its stylistic complexity. Alternating between poetic verse and prose narration, its depictions of past kings, noble genealogies, and shifting political fortunes are embellished with figurative turns of phrase and mythical allusions. In the words of Giuseppe Tucci, “the fifth Dalai Lama had wished to lift up to a greater literary dignity the writing of history.”³ The scholar of Tibetan literature Gedun Rabsal writes that “the Great Fifth’s political history is perhaps an unprecedented work of Tibetan literature... it could be deemed the first political history to be written in a poetic style.”⁴ In this respect it anticipated broader shifts in Tibetan literary culture, which in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was increasingly characterized by dense, poetically sophisticated biographies and histories. What distinguishes the *Cuckoo's Song* as a work of Tibetan history, these scholars suggest, is that it was also self-consciously a work of art.

Below, I translate and interpret several passages from the *Cuckoo's Song*. I do so not to plumb its historical contents or judge their facticity, nor to explore its sources, nor speculate about the fifth Dalai Lama’s motivations. These have been the aims of others who have commented on this work, to say nothing of historians who utilize it as an informative primary source.⁵ Instead I want to explore the connection between what Tucci calls “literary dignity” and “the writing of history.” Why is the *Cuckoo's Song* a *literary* history? Why does it speak with this voice, and what is the past such that it should be spoken in this way?

I take my cue from Stanley Cavell, who opens *The Senses of Walden* with the following admonition:

I assume that however else one understands Thoreau’s topics and projects it is as a

1. My thanks to Roy Tzohar and the participants in the Asian Studies Colloquium at Tel Aviv University for inviting me to share an early draft of this paper, and for their feedback.
2. My translations from this work are based on the version included in the Lhasa block-print of the fifth Dalai Lama’s *Collected Works* (Dalai Lama V 1991, vol. 19). For a modern typeset edition, see Dalai Lama V 2009, vol. 22.
3. Tucci 1999, vol. 1, 145.
4. Rabsal 2001, 216.
5. Scholarship that discusses the *Cuckoo's Song* includes Vostrikov 1994, 78–80; Tucci 1999, vol. 1, 145–48; Lange 1987; Yamaguchi 1995; Ahmad 2008, ix–xiv; Schwieger 2013, 74–75; Bischoff 2017. Tucci provides a partial translation (1999, vol. 2, 625–51). Zahiruddin Ahmad’s 1995 translation (cf. Petech 1996) was revised and republished in 2008. In Tibetan, in addition to Rabsal 2001, 214–18, see Nor brang 1993; ’Brug thar 2010.

writer that he is finally to be known. But the easier that has become to accept, the more difficult it becomes to understand why his words about writing in *Walden* are not (so far as I know) systematically used in making out what kind of book he had undertaken to write, and achieved. It may be that the presence of his mysterious journals has too often attracted his serious critics to canvass there for the interpretation of *Walden's* mysteries. My opening hypothesis is that this book is perfectly complete, that it means in every word it says, and that it is fully sensible of its mysteries and fully open about them.⁶

Cavell's desire to understand Thoreau's work directed him not outside the text, so to speak, towards details of the author's life, or his New England setting, but first to the language with which it spoke about itself. Likewise, the words about speaking the past in the *Cuckoo's Song* have not been used much in trying to understand its practices and purposes. My aim is to explore the work's explicitly literary acknowledgment of itself as such. I will suggest that the *Cuckoo's Song* calls attention to the creative quality of language as a means for not only documenting but also making history. As I read it, the work is making an argument—or presenting itself as an argument—for literary historiography as an intrinsically political act; and vice versa, for politics as a necessarily aestheticized pursuit. By speaking the past in this way, it identifies itself as a work that bears on the meaning and purpose of history itself, specifically for this Tibetan polity, at this inaugural moment of its own future.

History's Bow, Speech's Arrow

Let us begin from the simple idea, common to both the Tibetan intellectual tradition and scholars today, that the *Cuckoo's Song* is, as it were, two texts in one. It is a documentary account of the past, indeed one with lasting value for historians, owing both to its positive data and its critical engagements with Tibetan historiography. And it is a performance piece, showing off the author's mastery of *belles lettres* and especially literary culture under the influence of Daṅḍin (fl. 700).⁷

6. Cavell 1992, 3–4.

7. The exception is Lange's claim that "Die Sprache des Textes...ist eigentlich noch keine Schrift- und Literatursprache im üblichen Sinne. Ihr fehlt die wortwörtliche Ausführlichkeit, mit der in einer Schrift- und Literatursprache Gedankengänge nachvollziehbar in grammatikalisch vollständigen Sätzen und Passagen ausgedrückt, fixiert und so für eine Lektüre ausreichend vermittelt werden" (1987, 278). [The text's language...really isn't a written, literary language in the ordinary sense. It lacks the verbatim detail with which, in a written and literary language, trains of thought are compre-

Tucci says of the author that “in him the rhetorician is yoked to the historian and sometimes the former prevails.”⁸ Kurtis Schaeffer likewise gestures to this constitutive duality while helpfully summarizing the work’s basic subject matter:

This influential history begins with a short life of the Buddha and a brief discussion of the *Kālacakra Tantra*, then moves quickly to the history of imperial Tibetan rulers. The central chapters detail the political institutions of Ü and Tsang in Central Tibet from the twelfth to the beginning of the seventeenth century, including sections on the Sakya, Phakmodru, and Rinpung hegemonies. The concluding chapter lauds the Fifth Dalai Lama’s Mongolian patron, Gushri Khan, who had requested the work’s compilation.... Throughout the book are interspersed examples of ornate poetry, giving the work a tone of both formal eloquence and rhetorical authority. In both style and content, *Song of the Spring Queen* is one of the most important historical works on central Tibet that we possess.⁹

It is fair to say that scholarship has taken an asymmetrical approach to this signature blend of ornate style and factual content. So far the value of the *Cuckoo’s Song* for thinking about Tibetan history stems mostly from its role as a repository of data. The complexities of its language, obvious to anyone utilizing it as a source, have not factored in any substantial way into thinking about its contents or contexts. (Tucci, again, is a fitting example. Although it is clear from his general remarks that he recognized the significance of style for the work’s idea of history—the *how* of speaking the past being indispensable to the *what*—when it came to translating and utilizing the *Cuckoo’s Song*, he was interested in the facts behind the words.)¹⁰ Though commonly acknowledged, in practice the work’s studied eloquence often dissolves away into straightforward accounts of its subject matter or functionalist conclusions about its authorizing effects. At the very least, we

hensively expressed in grammatically complete sentences and passages and are thereby sufficiently conveyed for a reader.]

8. Tucci 1999, 147.

9. Schaeffer 2013, 355.

10. See for instance his perceptive comment that “Blo bzañ rgya mts’o brought history to its complete form as a literary type according to the Tibetan conception: a pious narrative of the Law’s alternate flower and decay, and of its developments, a compromise between spiritual forces and human ambition, between legend and reality, between political events and hagiographic glorification, which give these works a particular character, almost a continual wavering between what is certain and what is impossible” (1999, vol. 1, 146). Yet Tucci’s learned historical *précis* (*ibid.*, 3–66) does not factor this self-understanding into its narrative or analyses; his translation (see note 3) leaves out the poetry. In my estimation Tucci’s remarks remain the best statement on the *Cuckoo’s Song* in Western scholarship.

should account for the fact that the *Cuckoo's Song* is, in Cavell's words, fully sensible of itself and fully open about why it speaks as it does. Literariness is not just a technique but an explicit theme.

An example can demonstrate this self-consciousness while giving us a point of entry into the broader concerns of this essay. I refer to a well-known stanza from the end of the text (the twenty-second stanza of the concluding verses):

Drawn on history's straight-strung bow,
this fine-speech-feathered darting shaft
the fool's unlearned heart may pierce,
but for the wise, apart, a joy. //22//

*/lo rgyus gzhu la drang po'i rgyud drangs nas/
/legs bshad 'dab ldan g.yo ba'i nyag phran can/
/mi shes rmongs pa'i snying po phog srid kyang/
/gzur gnas mkhas pas mthong tshe spro ba 'phel/¹¹*

There is a dynamism to this scene of the historian as bowman, their words as a focused strike. The work portrays itself as a dramatic act: the string on history's bow is pulled taut; the arrow of discourse is loosed in flight; and it lands a direct hit on its unsuspecting target. For the *denouement*, our perspective shifts to another standpoint, that of the cultivated spectator who with pleasure has watched this act unfold.

The importance of this stanza has not been lost on readers past or present. It was cited approvingly by the Desi Sangyé Gyatso (Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, 1653–1705), the Dalai Lama's protégé and successor in power, who, like his mentor, was an ardent promoter and practitioner of the arts of composition and rhetoric. He quotes these lines in praise of one of his own momentous speeches, delivered in 1697 to an audience of noblemen, religious hierarchs, and foreign leaders at the unveiling of the sixth Dalai Lama, to indicate his skill at eloquently relating key facts about Tibet's past and about the history and theology of the Dalai Lamas.¹² In other words, the Desi took this stanza as a quintessential statement of what matters in speaking the past and speaking it well.

In a felicitous coincidence, a recent, in-depth study of the *Cuckoo's Song* takes this same stanza for its titular theme. This essay by Jeanine Bischoff, “[D]rawing a Straight Cord on the Bow of History: Zum Geschichtsbewusstsein des Fünften Dalai Lama in „seiner“ Geschichte Tibets” [“On

11. Dalai Lama V 1991, vol. 19, 112a.

12. Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho 2010, 293.

the historical consciousness of the fifth Dalai Lama in ‘his’ history of Tibet”] is a thoroughgoing assessment of the work’s strategies and their legitimizing effects, set against the backdrop of Tibetan historiography and the Dalai Lama’s rise to power.

Bischoff (alas, using Ahmad’s imperfect translation) takes the metaphor of the first line—likening history to an archer’s bow—as key to the Dalai Lama’s objectives in composing this work:

In den Worten des Fünften Dalai Lama soll es den gewundenen und unübersichtlichen „Bogen der Geschichte“ Tibets mithilfe einer „Schnur begradigen.“ Hinter dieser Metapher, verbirgt sich nichts Geringeres als Ngawang Lobsang Gyatsos Anspruch Ordnung und Objectivität in die existierende, fehlerhafte Geschichtsschreibung zu bringen, um ähnlich wie von Ranke zu zeigen „wie es eigentlich gewesen“ sei.¹³

[In the words of the fifth Dalai Lama, it aims to “straighten” with a “cord” the convoluted and confused Tibetan “bow of history.” Behind this metaphor hides nothing less than Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso’s claim to bring order and objectivity to the extant, defective historiography, so as to show, like (founding German historian Leopold) von Ranke, “how it really was.”]

On this reading, the point is to claim superior fidelity to the facts of the past. In line with this Rankean conception, Bischoff approaches the *Cuckoo’s Song* from three complementary angles: “the specific history on which the work is based; its objective claim ‘to report the truth;’ and the work’s legitimation strategies, based on two examples: the integration of the Avalokiteśvara cult and the presentation of other teaching traditions.”¹⁴ Indeed, the *Cuckoo’s Song* is at times unsparing in its criticisms of the perceived shortcomings of earlier historians, notably the Paṅchen Sönam Drakpa (Paṅ chen Bsod nams grags pa, d. 1554) and Pawo II Tsuklak Trengwa (Dpa’ bo Gtsug lag phreng ba, d. 1566). Tucci notes that the Dalai Lama “is quite capable of showing, with hardly dissembled irony, his predecessors’ failings and weak points.”¹⁵ On the other hand, the notorious identification of the Dalai Lama with Avalokiteśvara is a red herring in this text. So much is clear from Bischoff’s admission that “since the author assumes no part in his account of the history of Tibet, there are no self-depictions of him as the emanation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. Nevertheless, the text *The Song of the Queen of Spring* is one of many instruments for institu-

13. Bischoff 2017, 196–97. See also 230–31: “The implementation of his view of history on the history of Tibet ‘straightens’ it towards his own rule.”

14. Bischoff 2017, 197.

15. Tucci 1999, 146.

tionalizing the Dalai Lamas as emanations of Avalokiteśvara.”¹⁶ Such is not to deny the political importance of the longstanding association of the Dalai Lamas with this deity. But it is past time to shed the bad habit of seeing evidence of self-divinizing strategies in nearly everything the fifth Dalai Lama said or did.¹⁷

It is also appropriate to situate this work in terms of its charged political context. Ahmad correctly identifies it as a “celebratory history,” an idea that will be even more relevant in light of the discussion below.¹⁸ Written just one year after the founding of the new regime in 1642, the work’s proclaimed intention is to recognize the sweeping military victories of the Khoshud leader Gushri Khan, whereupon central Tibet became unified under a new government. Owing to this political transition, many scholars have stressed the teleological form of the *Cuckoo’s Song*, whose narrative of Tibetan history culminates in just this recent triumph. According to Peter Schwieger, “The ‘chronicle’ (*rgyal rabs*) of the Dalai Lama from the year 1643 was aimed primarily at demonstrating one thing—that Tibet’s entire history to date has been directed at a single goal: Gosi Qan (Gushri Khan)’s conquest of Tibet.”¹⁹

What is conspicuously absent in the *Cuckoo’s Song* is the famous episode of the Khan’s formal offering of Tibet’s territories and subjects as “donative property” (*mchod gzhis*) under the authority of the Dalai Lama institution, in a ritual gesture conducted at the Samdruptsé fort in April 1642. That pious gift stands in Tibetan historical memory as the founding act establishing the fifth Dalai Lama’s paramountcy over the new regime, whose government accordingly took the name of his house, the Ganden Phodrang (*Dga’ldan pho brang*).²⁰ The precise relationship between the

16. Bischoff 2017, 222.

17. Ahmad, a groundbreaking historian of Sino-Tibetan relations, was susceptible to this vice. A relevant example is his misreading of the prose introduction, which describes the Śākyamuni Buddha, not Avalokiteśvara as he presumed (2008, 3; I retranslate this passage below). Bischoff cites these lines as grounds for contrasting the *Cuckoo’s Song* against the fourteenth-century *Clear Mirror* of Sönam Gyaltzen (Bsod nams rgyal mtshan, 1312–1375), arguing that the Dalai Lama prioritizes and emphasizes Avalokiteśvara to a far greater degree, proving his political ambitions (2017, 222–23). To the extent that this deity features in the *Cuckoo’s Song*, it is in ways consonant with prior historiography. Avalokiteśvara is notably absent from the pantheon of its opening verses.

18. Ahmad 2008, xi.

19. Schwieger 2013, 74.

20. Our main account of that event is the fifth Dalai Lama’s autobiography (see Karmay 2014, 164–67), which was not published until decades later, though ostensibly based on contemporary records. One early Tibetan source is the 1646 biography of the fifth Dalai Lama by Mëndrowa Jamyang Wangyal Dorjé (Smon ’gro ba ’Jam dbyangs dbang rgyal rdo rje, 16th–17th c.) whom the Dalai Lama met at this event (see Smon ’gro ba n.d., 224–27). It is unclear whether this Tibeto-centric narrative had any currency at the time of writing the *Cuckoo’s Song*, finished in November 1643. Note that the impetus from the Lingmé *Shapdrung* (Gling smad zhabs drung, 1573–1646) to construct the Potala Palace as a royal seat for the fifth Dalai Lama began several months before the completion of this history (Karmay 2014, 182). After palace construction got underway in 1645, the Dalai Lama took an active role in conceiving its artistic program; significantly, the historical portraits of Tibetan kings and their works in the main assembly hall follow the *Cuckoo’s Song* (see also the plan provided by the Dalai Lama: 1991, vol. 16, 36a–43a), suggesting that this history became relevant for fashioning the

fifth Dalai Lama and Gushri has long been a matter of academic and political debate. Schwieger among others has rightly urged caution with respect to the earliest years of the new regime, which so far are imperfectly understood due to a dearth of archival materials. The *Cuckoo's Song* is directly implicated in these debates, being one of the Dalai Lama's first major compositions post-1642 and dealing overtly with political events and themes. We will discuss these matters more at the end of this essay; but for now let us acknowledge the dissonance between its explicit praise of Gushri Khan, on the one hand, and its subtle self-promotion of the author's own intellectual and literary mastery, on the other. As such, the *Cuckoo's Song* has a chimerical status as both the strongest testament to Gushri's importance and a key component of the Dalai Lama's own authority.²¹ Below I will comment further on this ambiguity. What is clear, at any rate, is that by the time of Gushri's death in January 1655, if not earlier, and increasingly in the decades to follow, the Dalai Lama was the undisputed head of Tibet. The larger point is that this outcome has justified a scholarly proclivity to frame the fifth Dalai Lama's early activities, including writing texts, as part of a larger strategic effort to shore up his status at the apex of the Tibetan political system.²² By focusing on this image of history's bow, Bischoff brings the *Cuckoo's Song* directly into that discussion, positing that this legitimation effort extended into the realm of history, too. What Schaeffer calls the "rhetorical authority" of the *Cuckoo's Song* thus appears as part of the larger project of securing the Dalai Lama's political authority.

Against this line of thinking, I counter that the *Cuckoo's Song*—surely as dense and complex a work of Tibetan literature as there ever was—bears witness to the fundamental limitations of a reading strategy that would explain literary choices primarily according to non-literary, sociopolitical interests. It is a case of putting the cart before the horse.

This brings us back to the stanza itself, and the meaning of this so-called "bow of history." There is an immediate retort to the reading outlined above: if the point of the *Cuckoo's Song* was to claim superior historiographical rigor, then why all the poetry? It seems unlikely that a work so invested in its own complications—crooked diction, obscure metaphors, long, complex sentences, and stylized verses—would have been aiming above all at reporting things just as they are, let alone that this yen for accuracy was part of some larger political scheme. Tucci, for his part, had a rather low opinion of the work's communicative potential: "The general effect is of stilted and intricate sentences, made even more difficult by words or meanings not registered in lexicons...

Dalai Lama's political leadership.

21. Those who argue for Gushri's supremacy over the Dalai Lama, notably Petech and Yamaguchi, rely primarily on Sumpa Khenpo's (Sum pa Mkhan po, 1704–88) *Wishing-Tree* (*Dpag bsam ljon bzang*), which is deeply indebted to the *Cuckoo's Song*.
22. See for instance Ishihama 1993, emphasizing the Dalai Lama's biographies of his predecessors, which he began writing—at Sönam Rabten's (Bsod nams rab brtan, 1595–1658) behest—several years after the *Cuckoo's Song*.

It almost seems as if he avoided setting forth his ideas in the simplest manner.”²³ Then and now, the *Cuckoo’s Song* is a famously opaque text. The fifth Dalai Lama wrote in his autobiography that he later regretted making the work so difficult, noting also that its Mongolian translation was consequently flawed (and recall that it was allegedly written at the behest of, and for the sake of, Gushri Khan).²⁴ Were one to invoke an early European metahistorical paradigm, for my money the apt comparison is not to von Ranke but rather Nietzsche, who praised “dramatistic” history as attaining a higher objectivity than straight fidelity to the facts.²⁵

Ahmad’s translation misses that what is being portrayed in this stanza is not just history’s bow but also speech’s arrow.²⁶ The association of language with archery was a trope in Tibet, understandably so given its prevalence as a cultural phenomenon. For instance, David Jackson cites the example of the fifteenth-century *Wishing Gem: A Compendium of Knowledge* (*Bshad mdzod yid bzhin nor bu*) in which Döndam Marwai Sengé (Don dam smra ba’i seng ge, 15th c.?) elaborates eight ways that speech resembles an arrow.²⁷ The verb in the second line, *gyo* (to move, shake, quiver), describing the tremulous movement of the loosed arrow in flight, can also refer to the wagging tongue of a skilled orator (as in the expression *smra ba’i ljags gyo ba*). Our words are darts that we launch with more or less skill.

Here is another way of reading this stanza. Formally, the first couplet refers to the work itself, and the second to the reader response. In the former case, the metaphor describes the coordination of what we might call the force and accuracy of historical discourse. The straight-drawn bow furnishes the motive power to span the ground of the past and strike its target; but the rhetorical projectile only hits home because its trajectory has been trued by the fletching of fine speech. In the latter half of the stanza, we see how this coordination of powerful release and straight flight allows for two outcomes. Recalling that archery on the plateau was a sporting activity and a form of entertainment,²⁸ accordingly the work of history is at once a purposive act (a shot meant to strike its mark) and a public demonstration of craftsmanship and skill. The discourse must be drawn, aimed, and fired with sufficient skill to go straight to the heart of the unsuspecting, unlearned reader. Any such “ignorant simpleton” (*mi shes rmongs pa*), as the Tibetan text literally has it, who comes to this text unaware of these facts of the political past, will be struck dead-on, receiving the full brunt of its power to inform. By contrast, the learned bystander is experienced enough to avoid this fate for themselves, and even take pleasure in doing so, as their vantage affords the critical distance to notice the artfulness and entertainment value of this perfect strike.

23. Tucci 1999, vol. 1, 147.

24. Karmay 2014, 184.

25. Nietzsche 1980, 32–38

26. Ahmad 2008, 158. He reads *dab ldan* as “with leaves,” referring enigmatically to a “tree of elegant speech,” rather than the feathers on the “notched” arrow (*nyag phran can*); cf. Nor brang 1993, 476.

27. Jackson 1984, 63; see Don dam 1976, 496–97.

In short, the stanza is drawing attention to, and prompting reflection on, the inherent duality of writing and reading history when it has been told in a stylized way. The *Cuckoo's Song* identifies itself as a work that marries correct content and expert style, and as such, that voices itself at once to the student of history and to the connoisseur. One sort of reader will get in its way and passively be impacted by the experience of the reality of this representation of the past. Another will perform a kind of bracketing of that direct experience, appreciating this telling of history rather in its distance from the real, as a present experience. Much as Paul Ricoeur spoke of an inherent tension in rhetoric between "speaking the truth" and "saying it well," in the former case the work aims at persuasion and orients the reader back towards the experience of the past; in the latter case, it aims at pleasure and faces towards the enjoyment of its own moment.²⁸

Interpretation begets interpretation. By recognizing this constitutive duality and the metaphorical play that it affords, further iterations suggest themselves. At the next level, the stanza portrays not a *gestalt* scene but rather a sequential process. In other words, those two characters (victim and bystander) are also allegory for the experience of reading and then rereading this text, first in the position of the fool, then again as the aesthete. That this stanza comes at the work's conclusion indicates that it is educating its audience by remarking on its own first-order technique and then promising the further reward of going back again for a second-order experience of that very technique as such. By the same logic, we might posit a third iteration, whereupon this juxtaposition of passive impact and active enjoyment, knowledge about the past and pleasure in the present, ultimately describes neither two distinct readers, nor a sequence of reading and rereading, but a dialectic internal to the very act of reading itself. This interplay of direct encounter and indirect appreciation thus characterizes the practice of engaging with the literary language of political history.

Clearly the *Cuckoo's Song* is cognizant of its words and what they are for. This dualistic self-understanding instills the work with a problematic that calls for readers to recognize and think about what separates or connects these two tasks: representing a political past, and making of it a work of art to be enjoyed in itself. It is this interplay of politics and aesthetics that I want to explore in the remainder of the essay by carrying these insights back to the beginning of the text.

History for the Future

The introduction of the *Cuckoo's Song*, which likewise reflects on the work itself, thematizes this same duality. It announces that the aim of the work is not only to speak of events past, but to

28. Ricoeur (1975) 1997, 10.

orient that telling towards its own moment. It situates itself in history as the endpoint of the past so told; while, at the same time, it makes the eloquent articulation of that history part of the new political reality whose future begins with the telling.

Relevant in this regard is Ricoeur's concept of the "world of the text." Ricoeur was interested in how a work of discourse—that is, communication fixed in writing and detached from its original utterance and reference—orients readers to its own open-ended trajectory. In other words, the work compels its audiences to participate in what he calls "the interpretive dynamism of the text itself."²⁹ Readers make sense of the text in dialogue with how it has already begun making sense of itself, and thereby emplace themselves within the world to which the text refers. As he puts it in another essay, to interpret is "to explicate the sort of being-in-the world unfolded in front of the text."³⁰

The *Cuckoo's Song* is a fine case for taking up these ideas because it so clearly voices itself to an audience positioned, as it were, in front of the text. The future looms before this work in both a real sense and a literary one. As a teleological account of prior Tibetan regimes and rulers, composed at the onset of a new regime, it speaks the past in relation to the speaker's own standpoint at the end of that narrative, in the wake of the recent conquest and on the cusp of what is yet to come. Being in its contents a history *about* the past, it is equally a history *of* the present, indexed to its own moment. As such, it is also history *for* the future. What it celebrates in the telling is the new horizon of possibility that has been made possible by the past thus conceived and conveyed.

It is from the vantage of this precarious moment that the text's own question of the duality of content and style, politics and aesthetics, truth and pleasure, is posed. With what language, from now on, from this new standpoint, ought one speak the past? And to what end, towards what sort of world? To understand how the *Cuckoo's Song* broaches these issues, we must look first to the title, which presages the major themes of the work.

History, Banquet, Song

The title page reads:

*/gangs can yul gyi sa la spyod pa'i mtho ris kyi rgyal blon gtso bor brjod pa'i deb ther/
/rdzogs ldan gzhon nu'i dga' ston dpyid kyi rgyal mo'i glu dbyangs zhes bya ba
bzbug so//*

29. "The text interprets before having been interpreted. This is how it is itself a work of productive imagination before giving rise to an interpretive dynamism in the reader that is analogous to its own." Ricoeur (1981) 1995, 161.

30. Ricoeur (1974) 1995, 43.

This can be translated as follows:

*A Text Principally Discussing the Preeminent Kings and Ministers Ruling Over the
Snowlands:
The Inaugural Perfected Age Banquet, the Cuckoo's Song*

The punctuation in the block-printed text separates the first portion of the title, which specifies the main subject matter, from the second, which uses metaphors to convey the nature or purport of this work of history and the manner of the telling. The former, descriptive portion announces in straightforward terms that this text is a narrative of kings and ministers. The prose introduction, immediately after the opening verses, clarifies why this subject matter is so important:

This benedictory melody, coaxed from the *tambura* [of Sarasvatī], derives from that inexhaustible nectar of absolute wisdom whose source is the Supreme Leader of this Fortunate Age, He whose marvelous heart is a wish-fulfilling-gem cas- ket, a hidden treasure embellished with the beautifying ornament of the eternal knot;³¹ He who wields the ten powers; who is as exalted and resplendent as the full circle of the Water-Crystal Lord [the moon] midst the Garland of the Thou- sand Unfallen Ones [the stars]; and the lofty might of whose surging prayers, which are ‘arrow’-ful [i.e., five hundred in number],³² has a truth-force so pure that Sarasvatī’s divine drum booms all round the three realms to praise him as be- ing like a white lotus: the Aikṣvāka Victor [Buddha Śākyamuni], whose precious dispensation is the roots-and-branches of all peace and prosperity accomplished materially through the meritorious works of living beings, gods too. The activity of its genesis, development, and expansion is something that depends upon a great king who wields authority over all the vast earth. That is why even our own Teacher, once he had beheld the five sights of his clan, country, time, lineage, and mother, took birth as Śuddhodhana’s son. We must therefore begin by discussing some of the history of his [Ikṣvāku] race.³³

31. The eight signs (*rtags brgyad*; a subset of the “marks” of buddhahood) are keyed to the Buddha’s body: parasol over the head, fish on the eyes, lotus on the tongue, conch on the teeth, vase on the neck, knot at the heart, banner at the torso, and wheels on the hands and feet.

32. Tib. *mda’ yis bcings pa’i rlabs po che’i smon lam gyi mthu*. “Arrow” is one of the standard synonyms for “five” (after Kā- madeva’s five arrows) and refers here to the five hundred prayers that Śākyamuni made in his past life as the brahmin Samudrarenū, as per the *Karuṇāpūṇḍarika Sūtra*.

33. Dalai Lama V 1993, vol. 19, 6a–b.

Kingship fathers religion, as it were. In turn, the religious dispensation becomes foundational to societal peace and prosperity. A narrative of kings—and indeed this work is typically classified as a *gyalrap* (*rgyal rabs*) or “royal chronicle”—is therefore a narrative of the vicissitudes of worldly flourishing conceived in Buddhist cosmological terms (making it also, as this passage implies, an extract of *buddhadharma*). Hence the formal prioritization of the Buddha as the first subject in both poetry and prose. Political history thus conceived is a history of the conditions of perfect world order.

The latter portion of the title reiterates that same idea poetically, by way of linking this text (*deb ther*) to two images: the celebratory banquet (*dga' ston*) and the melodious song (*glu dbyangs*). Nordrang Orgyan (Nor brang o rgyan, b. 1933), invoking a standard Tibetan convention for textual analysis, posits that the banquet is just the work itself (the titular *deb ther*), that is to say its expressed subject matter (*brjod bya'i don*), whereas the “song” refers to its expressive language (*brjod byed tshig*).³⁴

Insofar as the text is a banquet, it is specifically one celebrating a Perfected Age (*rdzogs ldan*), the cosmically ideal sociopolitical state facilitated by the fulfillment (*rdzogs*) of the Buddhist dispensation and hence of the kingship on which it depends, as we just saw above (more on this in a moment). The text is referring here to its own novel circumstances. Nordrang states (*pace* Tucci, Lange, and Ahmad) that the somewhat unusual *gzhon nu* (Skt. *kumāra*), which generally means a “youth” (or specifically, a youthful “prince”) here has the sense of being young, fresh, or new, referring as much to the Age being celebrated as to the celebration *per se*.³⁵ This reading is confirmed by the thirteenth stanza of the opening verses, which describes a *rdzogs ldan gсар pa'i ga' ston* or “banquet of a new Perfected Age.”³⁶ A cosmic inauguration party, in other words. Before exploring this idea further, let us turn to that other key image of the cuckoo.

It is of course standard practice for Tibetan texts to describe themselves metaphorically, often in a fashion that communicates something about their generic function or aim. Histories tend to be mirrors, lamps, garlands, and so forth. But notice how the title of the *Cuckoo's Song* stacks one metaphor atop another. If this text is like a banquet (or more properly a banquet-speech), in turn, that sonorous discourse is itself like birdsong. Moreover, this second metaphor adds another degree of figuration. That is to say that the metaphorical vehicle is itself a figurative expression: rather than the literal term for a cuckoo (*khū byug*) the text uses the poetic *dpyid kyī rgyal mo*, “spring queen.”

34. Nor brang 1993, 7.

35. Nor brang 1993, 5–7. Tucci saw *gzhon nu* as a cryptic homage to the great historian Gö Shönu Pal ('Gos Gzhon nu dpal, d. 1481). Lange repeats Tucci's idea and translates the title as “Der Fürsten-Folgen Heft, vollendet durch den vollendeten Jüngling” (1987, 283–84). Ahmad likewise sees the term as referring to the Dalai Lama himself.

36. In the printed text, the accompanying Sanskrit rendition of *rdzogs ldan gzhon nu'i dga' ston* appears to be *satyayuge kumārautsavika*, which would suggest that in this right age it is the celebrating that properly has this youthful quality. Compare Nor brang: *deb ther rdzogs ldan gzhon nu'i dga' ston zhes deb ther 'di rdzogs ldan gсар pa'i dus kyī gzugs su byas* (1993, 5). On the Sanskritization of Tibetan titles see Kapstein 2018.

(This is why some other scholars, in line with Ahmad's translation, refer literally to this work as the "Song of the Queen of Spring.")³⁷ The work communicates several important things about itself by this choice, shaping from its first words the expectations that it places on its readers.

First, the choice to figuratively render its own metaphorical self-image signals that this text is an expert work that employs specialized language, requiring foreknowledge on the reader's part of certain natural, mythical, cosmological, and aesthetic tropes and conventions (for starters, knowing what a "spring queen" is, and why). Second, identifying this work as a melody informs readers as to the centrality of eloquence to the act of speaking the past. Rather than illuminate the past like a lamp, reflect it like a mirror, or string it together like a garland, what distinguishes this history is that it recounts the past beautifully, as a song. Third, the juxtaposition of feast and song expresses the function of that melody and reveals the connection between the two images that unlocks the purpose of this work. The cuckoo is so-called because, after a pervasive trope, its voice heralds the start of the spring season. It is a widespread association: not only Wordsworth, quoted in the epigraph above, but also Kipling dedicated verses to this theme of the bird's season-making powers ("Tell it to the locked-up trees,/ Cuckoo, bring your song here!/ Warrant, Act and Summons, please,/ For Spring to pass along here!").³⁸ By analogy, Spring is to the four seasons of the year exactly what the Perfected Age is to the four epochs of the cosmic cycle.

The mark of the Perfected Age is the utter fulfillment of morality and enjoyment, which is just to say peace and prosperity (conveyed by such dyads as *phan bde* or *bde skyid*). This ideal state is accordingly the highest aim of political rule. It also corresponds to the full flourishing of the Buddhist dispensation, which for cosmopolitan intellectuals like the fifth Dalai Lama meant not just canonical scriptures or orthodox doctrines, but the whole swath of knowledges, practices, persons, and things; or in short, a religiously inflected aesthetic of abundance, what Nancy Lin refers to as "plenitude."³⁹ Fittingly, a common metaphor for this state of fulfillment is the banquet. In this cultural milieu, the banquet was a paradigmatic scene of plenitude, of culture and leisure, learning and entertainment. Actual banquets and banquet oratory were mainstays of political ceremonies at the Dalai Lama's court. These were festive assemblies with music and dancing, prominently featuring eloquent, learned speechmaking.

The cuckoo's voice is therefore that of the skilled orator who rises to address the assembly at this

37. Ahmad (2008, 207n1) reads *dpyid kyi rgyal mo* literally as the Spring Goddess, one of four goddesses of the seasons (*dus kyi rgyal mo bzhi*) in the retinue of the "army-repelling" (*dmag zor ma*) form of the protectress Palden Lhamo, depicted as a dark blue goddess riding a mule (see Tucci 1999, 590–94). Although this is an intriguing and not implausible interpretation (given Palden Lhamo's association with Sarasvatī) there is no evidence to support it; nor does it make sense in relation to the title and themes of the work. Both Nor brang and 'Brug thar understand the term as a metaphor for the cuckoo.

38. "Cuckoo Song," in Kipling 1994, 519.

39. Lin 2017.

inaugural feast. Both banquet and birdsong conjure the experience of a new, beautiful, pleasurable beginning. The common theme is renewal. Or in other words: the future.

The Opening Verses

It is typical in Tibetan literature to begin with several stanzas of verse: sometimes just two or three, but in the grand compositions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as many as several dozen. The *Cuckoo's Song* has thirteen, and they evince a clear structure. Their topics and lengths (all quatrain, in trochee) are as follows:

1. Prayer to Śākyamuni (21 syllables per line);
2. Prayer to Amitāyus (19 syllables);
3. Prayer to Mañjuśrī (15 syllables);
4. Prayer to the Vaidikadevī (Kurukullā) (13 syllables);
5. Prayer to Sarasvatī (11 syllables);
6. Praises of Tibet's dynastic kings, Padmasambhava, and Śāntarakṣita (19 syllables);
7. Praise of the Geluk founder, Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419) (9 syllables);
8. Praise of the Dalai Lama's tutor, Paljor Lhundrup (Dpal 'byor lhun grub, 1561–1637) (9 syllables);
9. Praise of past leaders of Tibet, Phakpa Lodrö Gyaltzen ('Phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1235–80) and Tai Situ Jangchup Gyaltzen (Tā'i si tu Byang chub rgyal mtshan, 1302–64) (9 syllables);
10. On eloquent discourse (9 syllables);
11. On political history (9 syllables);
12. On learned history (9 syllables);
13. On writing this work (9 syllables).

Nordrang, invoking another standard classification, posits that the first nine stanzas comprise an “expression of worship” (*mchod par brjod pa*) and the latter four, an “oath to compose” (*rtsom par dam bca' ba*), meaning a statement of the theme or purport of the work.⁴⁰ But notice that the pattern of diminishing length is interrupted in the sixth stanza. This break also marks a shift in

40. Nor brang 1993, 7, 15.

subject matter and mode of address, from requesting boons of gods (in stanzas 1–5) to voicing praise of humans (6–9, with wordplay on their names). Therefore, while acknowledging the relevance of that classical model, I would rather read the text as employing a tripartite scheme. As it happens, both the Dalai Lama and the Desi Sangyé Gyatso promoted one such scheme, derived from verse I.14 of Daṇḍin’s *Kāvyaḍarśa*, combining verses of benediction (Skt. *āśis*; Tib. *shis brjod*; as in supplications to the gods), homage (*namaskriyā*; *phyag bya ba*; as in praises to gurus, past incarnations, and terrestrial *yidam* and protector deities); and the presentation of the topic (*vas-tunirdeśa*; *dngos po nges par bstan pa*). Several of the Dalai Lama’s later compositions, and most of the Desi’s, employ this pattern, usually with similar subject matter. Though nowhere stated, Daṇḍin’s typology may have furnished the model for the *Cuckoo’s Song* as well.

The first five stanzas establish the celestial hierarchy looming above the text, with the highest, weightiest, and most encompassing position being that of the Buddha, figured in a political mode as Indra, overlord of the Desire Realm and archetype of Buddhist worldly rule.⁴¹ The body of the text is, in a manner of speaking, the world down on the ground below Meru’s massive peak, crested by Indra’s palace.⁴² As these verses descend from the heavens to the earth below, the speaker requests favors of each of these gods, invoking especially the themes of conquest (“bring all three worlds to merit!”; “conquer all three worlds!”) and rhetorical mastery (“grant me your powers!”; “ornament my voice!”; “crown me king of speech!”). The next four stanzas, standing now on Tibetan soil, give the work a personal touch, highlighting key figures from Tibetan history. They center the Geluk tradition and hint at the position of the speaker, as by reference to the Dalai Lama’s own teacher.⁴³

Let us focus on the last four stanzas, which address the work and its readers. They form a running commentary on the titular themes introduced above, expressing the relevance for the future of speaking the political past in this eloquent manner. The tenth stanza makes the work’s first overt statement about itself, and the first in a series of interconnected ideas:

Unlike those posers, though tongue-tied,
 who prattle on their hoisted thrones,
 a source of fine speech, someone smart,
 no matter where sparks pious joy. //10//

41. Not only is Avalokiteśvara absent from these verses; so too is Vajrapāṇi, the bodhisattva identified with the Khoshud *khans*.

42. Tellingly, in other poetic works the Dalai Lama compares his royal palace (notwithstanding its namesake) to Indra’s royal seat of Vaijayanta in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three.

43. The two figures of Phakpa and Jangchup Gyaltzen are invoked in the ninth stanza as exemplars of Tibetan political rule. In his autobiography, recounting the 1642 “gift” of territorial authority from Gushri, the Dalai Lama explicitly likens his situation to these Sakyā and Phakmodru regimes (see Karmay 2014, 166).

*/smra ba'i 'bab stegs mdud pa'i rgyar bcings kyang/
 /mthon po'i khri la dregs pas 'gying min pa'i/
 /legs bshad gtam gyi 'byung gnas blo ldan can/
 /gang du gnas kyang dang ba'i spro ba 'phel/*

Here (as throughout) I have tried to translate the poetry, taking into consideration the meter, word choice, syntax, and economy of the original. Perceptive readers will notice that this sometimes requires taking liberties at the expense of absolute fidelity, losing some of the semantic density of the original. For the sake of discussion, it will help to treat the Tibetan text more literally, teasing apart its tight figurative clusters.

This stanza sets up a contrast between eloquent discourse and its opposite number. The first two lines portray a kind of rhetorical charlatan, characterized by empty language and haughty posturing. Their tongue, the “dismounting-platform of discourse” (*smra ba'i 'bab stegs*)—their speech-ramp, we might say—is bound up in a knotted snare (*mdud pa'i rgyar bcings*). They speak haltingly, inelegantly. We have here the exact opposite of that fine-feathered, true-flying speech-arrow described above. Fittingly, Nordrang says that “they cannot wag their tongues” (*ro 'dzin gyo ba'i nus pa med*).⁴⁴ Notwithstanding these shortcomings, in speaking they pose boastfully (*dregs pas 'gying*) from their perch upon an elevated throne (*mthon po'i khri*). Ordinarily such an imposing status would be befitting of majesty and grandeur, but here it gives the halting speaker a comedic, buffoonish air.

The negative copula at the end of the second line negates everything just described with respect to the thoughtful person (*blo ldan can*) extolled in the third and fourth lines. This is the true speaker, a font of finely spoken discourse (*legs bshad gtam gyi 'byung gnas*). The contrast between the two is one of inertia and dynamism. Unlike the positionally and verbally arrested state of the imposter, this other, better sort of person is characterized by displacement and motion, their words gushing forth from below. It is equally a contrast between moribund and creative speech. All the former speaker can achieve is to dumbly attract attention to him- or herself. By contrast, the latter speaker's words bring something into being, namely, pleasure and illumination. Specifically, they conjure a kind of pious joy (*dang ba'i spro ba*). The term *dang ba* has a double meaning of faith and clarity. Likewise, *spro ba* connotes a kind of joyous rapture.

The image of the throne, both royal seat and speaker's platform, underscores the affinity between power and discourse, proper politics and proper aesthetics. The inelegant stammerer is like a false or undeserving king. Perhaps they merely inherited their elevated station or attained it by deception, but in any case, they prove themselves unsuited for such regal airs. Compare the joy

44. Nor brang 1993, 16.

created by the fine speech of the intelligent orator, which springs into existence “no matter where they stand” (*gang du gnas kyang*). This is a crucial difference insofar as the order of operations is reversed. The first speaker is *determined by* where they are situated; the second *determines* their situation. In the former case, authority precedes words. It may elevate the speaker, but it ultimately proves the futility of their station, as it turns out they have nothing much to say. In the latter case, it is rather the *outcome* of the speaker’s words. Regardless of how they are standing, what they say makes something happen.

More than just distinguishing good from bad speech, then, this stanza claims that true pleasure, the illuminating pleasure of certain faith, can be made anywhere at any time, for it is fine language that coaxes it forth; and this language wields a dynamic, creative power.

Before moving on, let us pause for a moment to acknowledge the larger import of this qualification, “no matter where,” which conveys dislocation in a general sense. It is in my opinion one of the more important phrases in these opening verses. There is a corresponding tension running through some Buddhist discussions about world order and kingship that is relevant here. A classical model of kingship posits that world-ordering kings are a function of the natural cycle of the cosmos. As espoused for instance in the third chapter of Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa*, true conquerors only appear when the human lifespan is at least 80,000 years.⁴⁵ The implication is that from our perspective in an Age of Strife (*rtsod ldan*), kings and Perfected Ages are impossibly distant. What are human beings living in history supposed to make of this fact? Some authors, including the Dalai Lama, insisted that kingship was eminently possible in the world, scriptural dicta notwithstanding. In other words, they acknowledged the empirical truth that kings, too, could determine their situation, rather than just being determined by it. In his commentary on Abhidharma, the Dalai Lama qualifies Vasubandhu’s conservative presentation by adding the category of the *bala-cakravartin* (*stobs kyis ’khor los sgyur ba’i rgyal po*), the forceful world-conqueror, exemplified by Aśoka, Chinggis Khan, Tibet’s three “ancestral kings” (*mes dbon gsum*), and the Phakmodru rulers.⁴⁶

As it happens, one of the concluding stanzas of the *Cuckoo’s Song* (the twelfth) plays figuratively on that very incongruity, using the example of the Tibetan royal dynasty:

Em! Back when bygone divine rulers
beaming peace made Tibet’s lotus-subjects
bloom, the daylight-maker said, “what now?”
and scurried *yakṣa*-ways to Gemini. //12//

45. Pruden 1988, vol. 2, 484.

46. Dalai Lama V 1993, vol. 14, 75b–76b.

*/e ma sngon byon sa spyod lha rnam kyis/
 /bod 'bangs 'dab rgya bzhad pa'i phan bde'i 'od/
 /spros tshe nyin byed bdag gis ci bya zhes/
 /gnod sbyin phyogs kyi 'khrig pa'i khyim du bros/*

This stanza figures kingship as a second sun that preemptively opens Tibet like a hundred-petaled flower, blossoming under the radiance of peace and prosperity. That result comes as a shock to the real sun, which, finding that its natural function has been usurped, abashedly flees the scene.⁴⁷ Human kingship, in other words, artificially jump-starts spring in the midst of winter (when Gemini hangs in the northern sky). If we follow Nordrang's suggestion that the figure here is *utprekṣa* (*rab rtog*) or poetic fancy, which for Daṇḍin meant the attribution of a sentient characteristic to what is insentient and vice versa, we can see that the underlying problem is one of deliberate versus automatic occurrence, human agency versus natural order. Herein lies the point. This verse plays on the inherently poetic quality of a real political incongruity. The coming of a king and the creation of a new order is something of a surprise in history, an artificial break that imposes itself on the natural order of things. Kingship is already a kind of *utprekṣa*. The king-in-history is a creative agent who makes world order flow from their presence, rather than the reverse. This interruption can occur no matter where or when they are standing, no matter how they are situated with respect to the overall order of things.

Viewed in this light, the opposition described above—between the tongue-tied pretender on the high throne, and the dynamic, spontaneous master of eloquence—embeds a more radical claim about language and politics as wielding the same kind of creative power. The right language is a force that can be waged in any circumstance, adventitiously, bringing pleasure into being. It therefore works in precisely the same fashion as a king who interrupts the world and remakes it into a potential paradise.

To return to the opening verses: this point is driven home in the eleventh stanza, which employs the same imagery. It also speaks to the role of history, of speaking the past, as the third term between these parallel tracks of political or aesthetic mastery:

Our forebears' works are lotus groves
 that chill moonlight of evil waxing
 shuts, as in these times the tales
 are told for naught but one's respite. //II//

47. The *yakṣa*'s direction (*gnod sbyin phyogs*) is north, the side of the guardian king Vaiśravaṇa, lord of *yakṣas*.

/ya rabs dam pa'i spyod tshul pad dkar tshal/
/ches cher bdo ba snyigs ma'i bsil zer gyis/
/zum pa'i dus 'dir deb ther gtam rgyud sogs/
/brjod pa rang nyid ngal ba'i rgyu ru zad/

“Forebears’ works,” meaning the deeds of past kings and ministers, comprise the historical subject matter of the *Cuckoo’s Song*, as we saw from its title. This stanza refers to the political past and to the effects of that past on the present conditions of telling history. In place of the flower that bloomed under the daylight of kingship (the sort of pleasurable state about which this text speaks, pleurably) the *Cuckoo’s Song* finds itself in the opposite situation. In these times (*dus ’dir*), the flowers are shut tightly by the moonlight of ever greater evil (*ches cher bdo ba*). It is a wintry state of world-closure (recall Kipling’s “locked-up trees”). This imagery is overtly cosmological. The second line invokes the end times “age of degeneracy” (*snyigs dus*), the nadir during which the five forms of corruption (*snyigs ma lnga bdo*) become ever more rampant, at the expense of the Buddhist dispensation and hence of the peace and prosperity, which, as we have seen, are founded on its flourishing, as it is itself founded on kingship.

There has been a subtle transposition of this cosmological imagery. The stakes are the same, but we are speaking now not of kings, but rather of the speaking of kings. In times like these, evil times during which the *Cuckoo’s Song* raises its voice, it is also discourse that has turned inwards on itself. End times language, so to speak, dwindles down to mere authorial self-indulgence, capable only of causing one’s own comfort (*rang nyid ngal ba’i rgyu ru zad*). To adapt Ricoeur’s terms, “in these times” it is no longer possible for any world to unfold in front of the text. Discourse has forsaken the generative power described in the tenth stanza. The mark of the end times is that tales are told, histories written, for no more than the speaker’s own self-satisfaction, as the last, selfish solace of a dead and darkened world.

The sort of inert language lamented here appears within and is the product of the degenerate times. This would seem to imply that the opposite is also true: creative language, the kind lauded in the tenth stanza, which issues from an intelligent speaker and produces joy, corresponds to the Perfected Age, which after all is defined by abundance and pleasure. In turn, it prompts the question of the relationship between these two elements in each case, in the bad world and in the good one. Which determines the other: world or word? In light of what we have seen, the *Cuckoo’s Song* seems to be inverting that relationship. As with kings, so with the speaking of kings. Whereas dead language is a consequence of cosmic decline, by contrast, in the case of eloquent language, *the new beginning is rather a consequence of it*. For the latter sort of language works “no matter where” it occurs, and its function is precisely to bring into being a kind of radiant, pious pleasure.

Kingship and poetic language, then, both issue forth from within circumstances of decline;

both share this quality of freedom from being determined by those circumstances; both have the power to intercede in and unnaturally arrest that process; and both bring forth their flower-opening radiance like a dawn unlooked-for. Both, that is, are world-interrupting, world-transforming acts that generate the pleasurable, illuminative conditions that characterize a Perfected Age. What, then, is the relationship between them?

This brings us back to the original issue of the work's duality of content and style, which I would suggest is implicated in this question of what we are to make of such playful resemblance between kingship and authorship. In a way, it is the same question: those two roles correspond to what J.L. Austin would call the constative and performative aspects of this work (or, roughly, what it is about, and what it is doing). To raise the question of the relationship of politics and aesthetics is therefore to delve into the workings of the *Cuckoo's Song* itself. The stakes of the text are just those of Tibet, at this moment of its history, on the cusp of a new future. In the new Perfected Age announced in the work's title, is it aesthetics that takes after politics, authorship after kingship, or the other way around? Which is the metaphor for the other; which is the tenor and which the vehicle? And let us not beat around the bush: is it Gushri or the Dalai Lama who is really the subject of it all, the maker of the future?

There may be no pat resolution of this inherent problematic, which it seems is kept from collapsing in either direction (more on this below). But for now let us address the last two opening stanzas:

So, knowers who would ply mind's sail
to fare the seas of all ten arts,
don't waste your time on tossed-off texts
unschooled in what there is to know! //12//

*/khyad par bcu phrag rig pa'i chu gter che/
/blo gros gzings kyis sgröl 'dod rig byed pa/
/shes bya'i tshul la ma sbyangs bstan bcos dag/
/rtsom par rings pa'i tshul la yid mi gtod/*

Here our text turns to face the reader, shifting from description to imperative address. The preceding two stanzas established certain values and historical orientations; now the audience, too, is being implicated in this situation of the work. This stanza poses a challenge as to what sort of person one must be in reading the *Cuckoo's Song*. More broadly, it makes a point about what sort of intellectually fulfilled subjects ought to exist in the new morally and materially fulfilled world that this work is unfolding in front of itself. Its brusque dismissal implies that the *Cuckoo's Song*

is the exception: that, unlike other unlearned works, it is capable of forming just this sort of new scholar-citizen, one capable of navigating the future.

Given how this stanza links the preceding and succeeding ones—standing between degenerate times (stanza eleven) and perfected times (thirteen)—it also indexes the break and transition in the sort of political reality and the sort of aesthetic practices that obtain. In other words, when the text turns here towards the reader, it also turns its back on that old world and announces a change: Enough now with that unlearned, inert, selfish way of speaking! Enough with the moonlit night. Now it is time for daybreak (no matter where we are; no matter these degenerate times). It is time for a new radiance and a new pleasure to emerge. Here is something else.

To enact that change, the final stanza introduces the work itself:

For he whose gusting order which
by might has turned the wheel on earth
this text, the new Perfected banquet guest,
invites—now may its fragrance spread! //13//

*/on tang stobs kyis yangs pa'i nor 'dzin la/
'khor lo sgyur ba'i bka' yi dri bzhon gyis/
/deb ther rdzogs ldan gsar pa'i dga' ston mgron/
'bod byed ma la ya yi rgyud 'di spro/*

These verses elucidate part of the title (in the third line) and performatively commence it as a work (in the fourth line). The final utterance launches the narrative, like the call that gets the party underway. The text also speaks here to its own conditions, namely, the “order” (*bka'*) that prompted its composition. This image of the verbal statement as a gusting breeze (issuing on the breath, that is) literally refers to the request from Gushri Khan to write this history (as the text reiterates at the end of its historical narrative, in the author’s colophon). Like the English pun, more abstractly it might also suggest the general state of order made possible by the recent conquests in Tibet that turned the wheel of kingship on earth. Metaphorically, it is this achievement, this summons, that beckons the learned speaker to rise at the inaugural banquet and celebrate the new world now getting underway. The invitation to speak is the wafting breeze that disseminates the pleasantly fragrant sandalwood scent (after the trees growing on the Malaya range) of this work of eloquence, the *Cuckoo’s Song*.

Here we come to the climactic twist in the progression of the poetry. The reader stands on the verge of an Escher-like collapse of the mutual constitution of authorship and kingship: the future-oriented telling of the history of kings past, and the culmination of the real movement of

past history in the present moment, the moment of the new telling. Kingship is both the outside and the inside of this inaugural authorial moment. In the former sense, it is the motive force of that history, which has at last brought the speaker up out of their seat, rising in the festive assembly to begin their tale. In the latter sense, it is the object of this history of kings, the fragrant discourse that is about to issue from the author's eloquent tongue, a discourse that will conclude in the end by recounting the sequence of events leading up to the order that invited it to speak. The end is the beginning is the end. Is the beginning.

The very relationship of politics and aesthetics may be subject to this same kind of collapse. Past success brings forth the speaker and then, put into the present speaker's mouth, is made the source of future pleasure. It is in this sense that the *Cuckoo's Song* is both documenting and making the world, namely, by turning the world about which the speaker speaks, whose history he tells, towards the world for which he speaks, for whose sake eloquent language must be used to create radiant, pious joy. The work participates in shaping the future arc of history by naming and enacting the new defining aim of opening a pocket of political and aesthetic perfection inside the present degenerate times.

Conclusions

The basic thesis of the *Cuckoo's Song*, as I read it, is that language must be one of the powers waged in really making a new age of fulfillment. As this work defines it, that ideal state is precisely an aestheticized political order, a creative outcome in history that must be brought into being, no matter where or when. From where the speaker is standing, looking ahead to the horizon of that unfolding order, this kind of eloquent discourse is the only way that the past should henceforth be spoken. "Only from the standpoint of the highest strength of the present may you interpret the past," insisted Nietzsche.⁴⁸ The poetry in the *Cuckoo's Song* announces that it speaks the past this way not idly, as art for art's sake; nor strategically, as a tool in some extraneous plot; but rather because it must, because its purpose is to make the future's new language of the past that made it.

Let me end by making a few admittedly speculative suggestions, in the interest of turning these literary reflections back towards the sociopolitical study of early modern Tibet and the fifth Dalai Lama's rise to power. Reading the *Cuckoo's Song* in this way raises several potentially fruitful lines of inquiry.

One is to think more about just that: the fifth Dalai Lama's power. It is already well-trodden ground, to be sure; but there has not been much of a reckoning of what he says in his own words.

48. Nietzsche 1980, 37.

It is worth exploring more of what the Dalai Lama actually did when he took on this role for himself as the author of Tibet, starting with what specifically the *Cuckoo's Song* communicates about kings and ministers; and hence, how it not only represents power but also creates it, in this case especially by recourse to the tropological affordances of figurative discourse. What possibilities of meaning were enabled by this mode of expression, and what did the Dalai Lama do with them?

In turn, a closer analysis of the language of the *Cuckoo's Song* may help us to better understand the work's political function with respect to the precarious balance of power. A superficial appreciation of its subject matter surely indicates that we ought to take it (with Yamaguchi) as primary evidence for Gushri's original supremacy over his Tibetan counterparts. After all, it was both prompted by and dedicated to singing the Khan's praises. As Schwieger emphasized, Gushri is the hero of the narrative proper. On the other hand, the work's first and last words are the author's own. The history that it tells is bookended on both sides by the eloquent speaker at the banquet. And, as we have seen, the work strongly hints that it is in fact this master of eloquent language who fully knows, names, and embodies the values and practices of this future world.

We do not presently have the means to decide conclusively if either Gushri or the Dalai Lama was really in charge at first, or to determine precisely when or how this situation resolved itself in the Dalai Lama's favor, as it assuredly did. Based on what we know, in the beginning *de facto* authority appears to have been distributed in an *ad hoc* fashion among the triumvirate of the Dalai Lama, Gushri, and the Depa Sönam Rabten (who, as the manager of the Ganden Phodrang estate, to this point had ordered much of the young Dalai Lama's life, and who coordinated closely with Gushri). It is worth entertaining the prospect that not all of these agents necessarily shared our contemporary desire for a clear constitutional hierarchy. It may not yet have been obvious to everyone involved just what this emergent political formation was supposed to look like, or for that matter, just what a "Khan" or a "Dalai Lama" meant henceforth, in relation to one another, in these novel circumstances. Nor would it necessarily have been clear to all, or all in the same way, just what power consisted of, and what sort of social, political, cultural, and religious forces should be waged in birthing this new world in central Tibet. The *Cuckoo's Song*, which overtly foregrounds the king but tacitly elevates the author, seems to have seized on that ambiguity, indeed mirroring the same relationship in its own duality of content and style, straight-drawn bow and feathered arrow. In the case of this work, at least, the answer may come down to a matter of preference: whether one wishes to emphasize its constative or performative dimension, whether the decisive factor is what its words speak about, or what it achieves in the saying. In any case, we do have a better sense of the direction things took over the next half-century. Not only was it the Dalai Lama who became paramount, but it could be argued that the legacy of this seventeenth-century regime owes as much to its aesthetic impact on Tibetan cultural, intellectual, and material production and subject-formation, as to any territorial conquests or other narrowly political accomplishments.

Along these same lines, another fruitful pursuit would be to think more about the attractiveness of troped language at this historical juncture. The fifth Dalai Lama and others in his intellectual and political milieu assuredly did not invent the Tibetan craze for Daṇḍin, which had been growing since the first forays of the Sakya Paṇḍita in the thirteenth century. The proximity of literariness to political power is another historical constant. But the success of the Ganden Phodrang cemented indelibly the status of Daṇḍin as a key source not just for composing poetry, but for defining and pursuing courtly or aristocratic excellence, as well as for conceiving abstract values like novelty, fame, creativity, and pleasure. To partake of power in this world meant knowing how to build with Daṇḍin's tools. But what was it about this world, specifically, that some things were best expressed using this higher, complex register of language?

Sheldon Pollock argues that one reason for the general political appeal of such elevated discourse is its capacity to endure, whether because of the fixity of the elite language (as is said of classical Sanskrit) or (more relevant in our case) because of its capacity to express things in lasting terms. He looks to the example of Sanskrit *praśasti* or royal encomium in Southeast Asia, where poets had a marked predilection for literary expressiveness in speaking of kings, and political inscriptions often favored metaphorical allusion over direct description of specific acts or works. Why? For Pollock, this choice indicates a desire, in expressing power, to transform the ordinary into the exemplary. "What power does, however momentous," he writes, "seems far less important than how power speaks; the particular exists only as a vehicle, or occasion, or excuse, for the paradigmatic."⁴⁹ In other words, the appeal of eloquent language corresponds to a desire to praise not the concrete achievements of this or that king, but to show their participation in transcendent or timeless models or ideals, and so attain permanence. "The paradigmatic is the abstraction from the particular that enables fame to be eternal."⁵⁰

On the one hand, this idea comports generally with how the *Cuckoo's Song* uses allusive language to raise particulars to universals, as if making discrete historical facts into a source of lasting appeal. It also resonates with the commonsense notion that kingship is about immortality: sovereign power aims, if not to arrest the world into its best and final form, at least to create the impression of it as such. Hence the steles, monuments, and other dense, durable constructions that tend to cluster around centralized power. In the fifth Dalai Lama's Tibet, it is not only architecture (as in the new royal palace) but also poetry that sometimes shares this quality of heaviness and grandeur, as in the *Cuckoo's Song*, whose first stanza, the propitiation of the Buddha-as-Indra, uses a thudding twenty-one-syllable line that lands like a block of granite (or, more appropriately, a mountain).

On the other hand, of course when the particular is said so obscurely as to become "the

49. Pollock 2006, 140.

50. Pollock 2006, 142.

paradigmatic,” it is also, from another vantage, just that: obscure. It may be worthwhile to consider, in the case of Tibet, the importance of language choice for shaping perceptions abroad, in the interactions of the Ganden Phodrang with their powerful neighbors in Mongolia and China. These Tibetan rulers depended on adjacent polities for financial and military support; but nevertheless, they sometimes expressed themselves in ways not immediately accessible to those partners, at least not before the *alamkāra* tradition had penetrated deeply into their own highest circles (as with the later influx of Tibetan intellectuals into the Qing court). We saw above how a Mongolian translation of the *Cuckoo’s Song* was dead on arrival—a remarkable failure, given the work’s ostensible support of the Khoshud cause.⁵¹ A similar and equally perplexing example is the *Elixir for the Ear* (*Rna ba’i bcud len*), a historical work composed in 1696 by the Dalai Lama’s successor, the Desi Sangyé Gyatso. The stakes were high, as the secret of the fifth Dalai Lama’s death in 1682 had finally been divulged abroad. The *Elixir*, recounting events from that death up to the present, effectively justified the Desi’s actions during those fifteen years. He promptly sent it abroad with messengers to distribute among Tibet’s neighbors. But this is no plain account: like the *Cuckoo’s Song*, the *Elixir* is a literary history that alternates prose and poetry and employs figurative tropes; it also deals with abstruse buddhological matters. A bold choice, then, given the dire straits. Why write in such a high register? And what were the Khalkhas, Oirats, or Manchus expected to make of such a refined and challenging presentation of crucial political events and decisions? Rather than a face-saving appeal, it reads more like a bold assertion of singular mastery over a highly aestheticized and Buddhicized way of speaking—one which, it seems thus to suggest, is uniquely suited for expressing the complex political and theological issues at hand, even if (or because) others might struggle to understand it.⁵²

Finally, there is the question of the relevance of troped language for that other major political value that this reading of the *Cuckoo’s Song* has brought to our attention: not eternal fame or exclusive mastery, but emergent creativity. It seems important to acknowledge the affinity between literary and Buddhist values in this Tibetan context. Pollock gives us another useful term to think with when he remarks in passing that literary language corresponds to “the superreal,” that is, to an elevation of reference beyond the quotidian level of representation.⁵³ This distinction of an ordinary reality (the subject of factual-referential discourse) from an “enhanced” reality (one that calls for a higher mode of expression) is especially salient with respect to the Buddhist cosmo-political concepts discussed above. Allow me to posit that the difference between the degenerate Age of

51. On the translation and use of Daṇḍin in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Mongolia, see Bronner 2023, 342–48.

52. The Desi’s neighbors did not share this conviction, at least not soon enough. In less than a decade, the sixth Dalai Lama would be denounced as illegitimate and the Desi, having fallen out of favor with the Kangxi emperor, would be dead at the hands of his rival, the Khoshud leader Lhasang Khan. The modes of expression that he promoted found more success: in the next century Tibetans like Changkya III Rolpai Dorjé (Lcang skya Rol pa’i rdo rje, 1717–86) produced similarly elevated discourse in reference to the Qianlong emperor.

53. Pollock 2006, 146.

Strife and the fulfilled Perfected Age is precisely that of the “real” and the “superreal.” Not quite in the sense of a difference between what is actual versus what is impossible; but rather, one of inertia versus dynamism, stagnation versus growth, a closed world versus one being opened up.

These Buddhist cosmo-political concepts and their aesthetic connotations imbued political success with an intrinsically aspirational, poietic quality, and so may help to explain the desirability of a suitably creative mode of expression. In short, ruling is all about producing, about transforming the real into the superreal, and hence also being able to recognize and express it as such. In Tibet, raising reality to this higher register meant making Buddhism flourish in the world in all its myriad manifestations. Recall the Dalai Lama’s assertion that the Buddha’s dispensation was the tree on which all material fruits of peace and prosperity would develop, and that kingship was the soil in which it grew. Such a commitment to productivity as a political virtue is borne out in the case of the early rulers of the Ganden Phodrang, as in the voluminous and diverse intellectual output of the fifth Dalai Lama, or the Desi’s efforts to document and extol the state’s myriad achievements. It makes sense that the increasing complexity of this effort to enhance reality would call for an adequately complex mode of expression. Inversely, expert language afforded a means for conjuring precisely this ethos of abundant, intelligent, diverse, and ongoing activity. Indeed, one of the most striking features of Daṅḍin’s masterwork is its unbounded quality, or what Yigal Bronner calls its “air of openness.”⁵⁴ As a characteristic of literary production, Bronner suggests that this openness may have been key to Daṅḍin’s widespread, multi-cultural appeal. As a value, it also resonates with Tibetan Buddhist politics in this era—which, I am suggesting, understood itself as a sophisticated, creative, open-ended endeavor. It drew force from its self-avowed ability to establish a break and contrast between the ordinary, degenerate world-as-it-is, and the newly unfolding, endlessly generative world-of-the-future, the “superreal” Perfected Age. It may be that the aesthetic and the political were mutually constitutive of this situation (as of one another), such that the appeal of troped language as a blueprint for how to speak and behave stems from its capacity to not just express but to embody and even constitute the very ideals and orientations through which the ruling power desired to distinguish itself and its world.

In sum, future research may benefit by reckoning with the importance of language choice and literary expression for the conception, articulation, and enactment of real political circumstances. This would mean reading texts closely for their meaning and manner of expression as well as their factual content, and seeking out affinities between ways of speaking and forms of practice. As one of the Dalai Lama’s earliest and best-known compositions, the *Cuckoo’s Song* occupies an important position with respect to these lines of inquiry. It will continue to play a key role in our reflections on politics and aesthetics in early modern Tibet. More engagement with this text (and perhaps eventually a new translation) is a desideratum.

54. Bronner 2023, 55–61.

I have tried to show that its relevance starts from the words the *Cuckoo's Song* uses to speak about its language. As I read it, this text positions itself at the conjunction of literary excellence and political success. It joins authorship and kingship like a Möbius strip, wrapped around the constitutional task of creating a new world. It is, like Wordsworth's cuckoo, the invisible voice that makes Spring; and it proclaims its ambition, as Margaret Cavendish wrote, to be not only emperor but author of a new world.

Appendix: Translation of the opening verses of the *Cuckoo's Song*

A Fortuned Age, wherein midst heaven's⁵⁵ gilded throne of courage dauntless sits
the Thousand-Eyed⁵⁶ who, seeing all entire, his fame an ear-borne gem afire with
brilliant light,
whose kingly drum one thousand times booms conquest over all ends,⁵⁷ Nec-
tar-less⁵⁸ ones too, Ten-Powered Lord of Sky-Sleepers,⁵⁹
Exalted Bull, Śuddhodan's Son, the Deathless Chief⁶⁰—bring all three worlds to
merit! [1]

You wield eternal *vajra*, vital cross that stymies death of every kind;
your treasury gives pleasure never-ending, everything we wish;
O Victor hailed as Lord of Buddhas thrice, your life and mind unmeasured,
broadly blooming vital tree, do grant your finest fruits, those ripened powers! [2]

They stand to order: anthers of your wisdom, hooks of freshest
beauty to seduce that doe-eyed starlet, Dharma, as
together and apart your artful dance upon Truth's mirrored surface
nakedly appears, O Five-Locked One, now ornament my voice! [3]

Atop that Coral Stack,⁶¹ enmeshed in all the Glowing Treasure's nets⁶²
and well endowed to overwhelm all animate or still, even
your darting sidelong glance, your righteous uncompounded form can give
us shivers, Vaidika, now may you conquer all three worlds! [4]

55. *Fortuned Age*: the Bhadrakalpa; *heaven*: *lta na sdug pa*, Sudarśana, Indra's city atop the Desire Realm.

56. *Thousand-Eyed*; *mig stong can*; Indra, paradigm of worldly Buddhist kingship.

57. *All ends*: *mtha' gnyis*, here, perhaps, the two "extremes" (*mtha'*) of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, or alternatively, permanence and annihilation.

58. *Nectar-less*: *bcud bral*; referring to the *asuras* or demigods, who unlike the *devas* did not partake of the divine ambrosia (or, as Nordrang reads it, any heretic, human or demigod, who by falling to the extremes of permanence or annihilation thereby are deprived of the ambrosia of right doctrine).

59. *Lord of Sky-Sleepers*: *mkhar nyal tshogs kyi dpal*, epithet for Indra.

60. *Deathless Chief*: *chi med gtso bo*, Indra, lord over the gods.

61. *Coral Stack*: *byu ru'i rdul brtsegs*, Mount Meru.

62. *Glowing Treasure*: *snang mdzod*, the sun.

Before your gorgeous fullmoon twiceborn⁶³ face
the doubts of any fool are blanked, your headsprung⁶⁴
*baidūr*⁶⁵ blueblack tresses dangle, Sarasvatī,
language goddess, crown me king of speech! [5]

Here sprawling over Snowland skies
where Buddha's Teachings canopy the Lord of Twelve,⁶⁶
whose chariot of sagely love is driven by the Three Ancestral Kings,⁶⁷
with Vajra Lake-Born Buddha,⁶⁸ also Śāntarakṣita
who knows the Teachings root and branch—
if this our southern earth can't span to brace their kindness,
what is there to ever weigh their wisdom? [6]

Your sapling branches shine with wisdom's glow,
Protector, by the blush of your Fine Mind betinted,
and your Fame⁶⁹ a gem of manycolored hue
whose repute spreads on every side,⁷⁰ forever victor! [7]

Across the plain of dharma's Righteous truth,
upon which Riches of all five arts Naturally Form⁷¹
you are the Master, and your locomotors⁷² *bandhujīvaka*,⁷³
your wondrous diadem the celebrated best! [8]

By Gya and Hor's assent and by your lines⁷⁴

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63. *Twiceborn*: *gnyis skyes*; a metaphor with multiple connotations. Drukthar understands it as meaning a white swan (birds are 'twice born' in being first egg-lain, then hatched as chicks).
64. *Headsprung*: *mgo skyes*, the goddess' hair.
65. *Baidūr*, that is, *vaidūrya*, here specified as *mthing kha*, dark blue.
66. *Lord of Twelve*: *bcu gnyis bdag po*, the sun (lord of the zodiacal constellations).
67. The kings Songtsen Gampo, Tri Songdetsen, and Ralpachen.
68. Padmasambhava.
69. Protector (Jamgön) Fine Mind (Losang) Fame (Drakpa); that is, Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa.
70. *On every side*: *phyogs bral*, without direction or position; thus, irrespective of creed; ecumenical.
71. Righteous...Riches (Paljor) Naturally Form (Lhundrup); Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup.
72. *Locomotors*: *bgrod byed*, feet.
73. Tib. *ba ndhu dzī wa ka*; the Dalai Lama adopts a Sanskrit floral term that is itself a metaphor.
74. Unlike the typical sense of *lung rigs* as "scripture and reasoning," both Nordrang and Drukthar understand *lung* as referring to the "command" (*lung*) of Gya and Hor, that is, of the Mongol Yuan and Chinese Ming emperors vis-a-vis the Sakya and Phakmodru. Drukthar does not comment on *rigs* but Nordrang takes it as meaning the preeminence of the Khön and

with law's wheel pressing high and low alike
presiding, O you Sakya Hero, Noble Scion Lang—
towards such righteous kings, who hasn't faith? [9]

Unlike those posers, though tongue-tied,
who prattle on their hoisted thrones,
a source of fine speech, someone smart,
no matter where sparks pious joy. [10]

Our forebears' works are lotus groves
that chill moonlight of evil waxing
shuts, as in these times the tales
are told for naught but one's respite. [11]

So, knowers who would ply mind's sail
to fare the seas of all ten arts,
don't waste your time on tossed-off texts
unschooled in what there is to know! [12]

For he whose gusting order which
by might has turned the wheel on earth
this text, the new Perfected banquet guest,
invites—now may its fragrance spread! [13]

Lang families in relation to the six progenitor "races" (*rigs drug*) of Tibet and their medieval descendants. Hence these past Tibetan regimes had two sources of legitimacy: foreign recognition and domestic/racial superiority.

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