EPILOGUE
In the reading of Hosshin wakashū carried out here I have gone to some length to emphasize its cyclical character, to show what effects are achieved by the poet and impressed upon the reader as the cycle turns from topic-text to topic-text, as its composer moves among a set of recurring attitudes and reverts to recurring diction, to underlying themes and motifs that are brought to the surface as those texts and the responses they prompt may dictate. We must recognize, however, that the ways these poems are most likely to have been read in the past would not have called as much attention to such characteristics as they have been given here. Medieval readers, whose reading was invariably shaped by the chokusenshū editors, were much more likely to encounter but one or two of the poems at a time, most often classed with others like them as responses to scriptural topic-texts (in some cases, the same or related texts), and therefore read them as examples of a genre, "Shakkyōka"—as representatives of one poet's exercise in that genre to be compared and associated with others apparently like it. Removed from its cyclical context and placed in a generic one, a single poem from Hosshin wakashū, or two or three, juxtaposed with other "Buddhist poems," inevitably would produce a very different set of impressions: each poem would become a free-standing record (among similar records) of its particular author's singular encounter with an isolated scriptural text, and any gesture to other poems that the single poem might appear to make would have to be seen as a gesture to other poems in the whole waka corpus, or in the Shakkyōka genre, rather than to other poems within the organic entity in which it was originally conceived. A reading of Hosshin wakashū as a cycle, however, suggests that its poems make both kinds of gestures, as well as gestures to the poems within that cycle itself.

As reading contexts were shifted and rearranged through time, the potential range of ways of reading poems like those in Hosshin wakashū multiplied, but the range of readings likely to be practiced was diminished. To be sure, the reading of such poems in their anthologized contexts may have been largely responsible for preserving knowledge of the texts that originally incorporated them, and perhaps insured the preservation of those texts themselves, in later copies. But it also meant that encounters with those poems in their whole original frames would be greatly outnumbered by encounters in the new frames that the anthologies gave them. The rare reader who made his or her way through the entire cycle would thereby reenact the whole series of encounters
between scriptural texts and waka texts recorded there, but the reader who was presented with just one of those encounters would know it perhaps only as a representative selection of that larger and more complex series of encounters, or simply as an isolated encounter associable with the similar encounters of other earlier and later poets, enacted intermittently through time. In this way, anthologized reading replaced one sense of the poem’s possible or imaginable relationship to the poet’s consciousness and experience with another, perhaps equally as valid or invalid, but certainly different.

Of course, Senshi herself was a reader of chokusenshū and other collections, and she was probably sensitive to the different effects of the reading practices of her own time. Perhaps she even anticipated that some of her Hosshin wakashū poems might be taken out of their original frame and worked into anthologies, and then be read in the new contexts decreed there. Before that, however, there must have been some among those denizens of the Saiin, the probable first readers of Hosshin wakashū, who read it in its entirety and, in their own way, charted its cyclical paths. But there must also have been occasions when they focused on just one or just a few of the poems, voicing the sounds, examining the shapes, and considering the poem or poems as models for their own creative efforts in a similar vein. In such readings, intense scrutiny must have fallen on each poem’s formal aspects, the discrete elements of its diction, and the precise character of its links to its topic-text—and, perhaps, to its significance as defined by the context of the scriptural text and its own inherent significances. And one additional factor must have done much to shape the context of those early readings: whether a woman in service in the Saiin read the work in its entirety or only a segment or segments of it, she would certainly have read it as the creation of a real person whom she personally knew, with whom she shared the routines of daily life, a person whose poetic sensibilities and skills she admired and emulated, and a person she regarded as mentor in the ways of poetry, in the ways of religion, and in such intersections of those “ways” as Hosshin wakashū itself marks. Such a reader could readily feel the impact of reenacting her mistress’s own intense encounters with scripture, would readily identify with her responses, and would appropriate her mistress’s sentiments as her own. She might feel a new awe for her mistress’s accomplishments and gain a new awareness of the dimensions of her faith, and be inspired to strive still harder to emulate her. The cycle would thus realize its professed purpose.

Before long, however, the immediacy and intimacy of such reading would be irretrievable. When they could, the latter-day chokusenshū editors would always try to recapture something of that intimate way of reading, by giving their readers, in kotobagaki, whatever “information” they had about the poems they were about to read and about how the
poet wrote them, so as to make readings that involve or are dependent upon a consciousness of the poet's persona possible, or inevitable. They thus replaced the intensity of reading experiences that once occurred within intimate social contexts with an intense nostalgia for those contexts as they reimagined them. Historical or pseudo-historical personality, thus enshrined, remains deeply embedded in the *waka* reading tradition, for better or for worse, occasionally transcending or displacing the very poems its evocation is intended to illuminate. We have seen how *setsuwa* and *rekishi-monogatari* narratives shaped a persona for the poet Senshi and influenced some readings of her works, and we have at times allowed that tradition to shape our own reading of *Hosshin wakashū*. Still, let it be remembered that *Hosshin wakashū*, as originally conceived and originally encountered by its readers, was read, in whole or in part, in the context of fully shared experience and understanding, and that the cycle itself was created as something new to be shared, both as an exemplary exercise of the art of *waka* and as a devotional vehicle through which its writer and readers could be borne beyond the limiting conditions of their lives toward a spiritual ideal that beckoned from afar. The medium was of two distinct languages, and the text formed by their interaction was one that constantly, through its form and content, announced itself to be both literary and pietistic and implied that no distinction need be drawn between the two. As the two languages met in a display of their differences as well as their points of contact, so did the secular world of *waka* and the idealized sphere of Buddhism converge. Though absorbed with and fully demonstrative of difference, then, these "Buddhist poems" also showed collectively that the exploration of difference might also be a means toward its diminution and its replacement by a merging of the differentiated: Chinese text met Japanese text, the way of *waka* became the way of the Buddha, and writer and readers, though perhaps still formally constrained, joined with the rest of society in enactment of their Buddhist faith.