

## Essay

# Writing, infinity, and dialogicality

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One of the main features of 'modern' thought, which is also largely how it seeks to define itself, is an oppositional way of thinking. This modern way has indeed travelled a long distance, from its ancient Greek roots, and perhaps has its parallel routes among the other ancients. (Don't we know that the *barbaroi* and the *mlecchas* in two very different civilizational contexts were silent witnesses to the ever jubilant march of oppositional thinking?) Nevertheless, it was in the 17th century Europe that this mode of thinking took on its frozen, crystallized form having a continuity unto our own day. Developments in the sciences, following Newton and Descartes, invented a new time and a new space, and correspondingly a new 'man' who will occupy the centre of this newly invented space-time whose limits were well and sharply defined. The new mode of thought that was 'modern' was wrested away from all that preceded it, and the newly expanding and prospering Europe was marked off from the rest of the world, that of the Orientals and the 'primitives'. The new man was to be defined, as Descartes saw it, in terms of what he intrinsically possessed, that is, his 'reason'. Having relegated god to the background, and, with him, his infinite design of the world, the new man possessed, as per the Cartesian scheme, a potentially perfect map of the world's working in his own mind. He had only to apply his reason in logically appropriate ways to grasp this map. As per the rationalist's faith, the logic of man's mind can be mastered, and by means of this mastery science can conquer the world. Language has an extremely diminished role here. It is just a transparent medium, though ulteriorly meant to serve the principles of the 'rational' mind, consisting of a system of signs which would render clear and distinct man's knowledge of the world.

This elevation of man was already concomitant with the strengthening of several major conceptual oppositions: tradition vs. modernity, nature

vs. culture, Occident vs. Orient (and other primitives), mind vs. matter, reason vs. nonreason. The 'self' of the new man was set apart from all that was defined and degraded as the 'other', be it in time, space, or cognitive modes. Since from now man was increasingly made in the image of the rational man, any category of people which demonstrated a lag or deviation from this perfect model was to be assigned an inferior status in yet other oppositional schemas. Such was the fate of the female of the species, the insane, and the criminals.

### Marx, Nietzsche, Freud

Some of the major intellectual challenges that were posed to this modern world in the 19th and early 20th centuries responded in different ways to the oppositional mode of thinking that they confronted. The names of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud are important in this context. Instead of viewing the world as a unified (and totalized) entity, where the conceptual oppositions have merely a cognitive status within an otherwise static world, and even while grappling with some of the traditional divisions in their own domains of inquiry, these thinkers sought to privilege the less dominant category. The unified space-time-mind map of Newton and Descartes was now forced to give in to multiple and practically valid divisions, and the repressed parts of those divisions were henceforth to be assigned a prominent role. That is how we have on the socio-political plane the privileging of the working class by Marx, in philosophy the overthrow of the metaphysically sanctioned and linguistically entrenched 'true' and the 'good' by Nietzsche, and on the question of human mind the resuscitation of the unconscious by Freud.

The consequences of these intellectual upheavals are well known. Marx championed the cause of a revolutionary levelling of the human society around the principle of labour. Freud, after granting a central role for the unconscious in explain-

ing dreams and certain neurotic phenomena, showed that the former persists in our conscious decisions and practices, with dire and at times dangerous effects on humanity. Of the three thinkers, Nietzsche attacked particularly severely the oppositional, binary mode of thinking that characterizes western philosophy. In tracing the genealogy of morals, he saw 'good' as forming part of the morality of the powerful, where they readily grant moral sanction to their own actions. Nietzsche was even more contemptuous of the dominant philosophical notion of truth which he thought was made up of certain convenient and historically sedimented assumptions, or, of metaphors which have come down to us dressed up as attractive propositions. In his words:

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthro-pomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically embel-lished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and drained of sensuous force (F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1873[1979: 84]).

Philosophically this meant that there can be no validity for the immediate and apparent correspondence between the truth of the world and the language in which this truth is expressed. Politically and socially, all this meant that any closure of the questions of truth and practical morality from the vantage point of the 'conscious' thought of certain privileged people would be unacceptable. New classes, new perspectives, and new mental processes should be admitted in philosophy in its constant engagement with truth, and in its construction and explanation of morality.

Before the end of the 19th century, approaches for studying human and social artifacts primarily in terms of relations between entities, rather than in terms of individuated entities, had been proposed. This methodology later came to be known as 'structuralism'. Retrospectively Althusser suggested that revolutionary Marxism itself was a kind of structuralism because Marx had understood how the working class, bearing an 'imaginary' relationship to its real conditions of existence, tends to be overcome and over-

powered by the ideological effect of the dominant bourgeois class, whom it was theoretically required to oppose. Structuralism, having perhaps had its early roots in botany, flourished in modern European scholarship for nearly half a century. Durkheim and Freud, structuralists before the letter, were scientists who looked for processes and relations that underlie the superficially observable phenomena in their respective fields of study. Durkheim's 'collective consciousness' and Freud's 'unconscious' are easily recognized as being structural phenomena.

### Structural Linguistics

Nevertheless, it was Saussure's linguistic structuralism that provided the cornerstone for contemporary structuralism. Breaking away from the historical linguistic tradition of a positivistic mould, Saussure analyzed the linguistic phenomena in terms of certain fundamental dichotomies: diachrony vs. synchrony, *langue* vs. *parole*, signifier vs. signified, and syntagmatic vs. paradigmatic relations. Saussure advocated the synchronic study of the structural system, or the *langue* of particular languages. Saussure's radical innovation was his notion of the sign (narrowly linguistic, or broadly semiotic) which is bilaterally composed (like two sides of a coin) of a signifier and a signified, both of which were conceived of as mental entities. This system of dichotomies or binary oppositions was further developed in the works of Jakobson, Hjelmslev, and Lévi-Strauss. Jakobson proposed binary distinctive features in what appeared to be the ultimate analysis of the smallest linguistic unit, the phoneme. Hjelmslev extended this analysis onto the semantic plane. Lévi-Strauss went much further to argue that the distinctive feature-based analysis would render perfect what he envisaged as the 'human sciences' in the same way as nuclear physics had perfected the physical sciences. Lévi-Strauss' two-volume *Structural Anthropology* is replete with the celebration of the hopeful possibility of the binary model.

Though binarism and dichotomous oppositions were warmly welcomed within the newly emerging information science, or cybernetics, scholars in linguistics and humanities doubted its validity from the very beginning. They held that diachrony could not be separated from synchrony, nor could *langue* from *parole*. Merleau-Ponty and

Benveniste brought back to significance the historicity, the subjectivity, and the lived sociality of the parole while rejecting as mechanistic the Saussurean idea of langue as a closed system of arbitrary signs.

Examining classical semiotics, we see that while suggesting that most of the linguistic signs are arbitrary, Saussure had stressed that there are other signs, such as the onomatopoeic ones, which are 'motivated'. After considering the functioning of the principle of arbitrariness at different levels of language, such as morphology and syntax, he had come to the conclusion that the degree of motivation or arbitrariness does in fact vary along a continuum situated between the impossible poles of full motivation and full arbitrariness. Similarly, Peirce had categorized more systematically three types of signs, viz. the icon, the index, and the symbol, defined by relations of similarity, contiguity, and arbitrariness respectively between the signifier and the signified. He further divided the icons into images, diagrams, and metaphors. Metaphors, for Peirce, stood midway between the finely motivated image-icons and the highly arbitrary symbols.

Saussure was more concerned with constituting a new linguistics (albeit as a central part of semiology defined as a 'science that studies the life of signs in society') unlike Peirce whose main project was to unravel a whole logic of signs for broader epistemological purposes. While attempting to rescue linguistics from its hitherto prevalent preoccupation with the written language, and wanting to base his 'general linguistics' on the spoken language, Saussure, owing to his natural allegiance to the metaphysical tradition that he inherited, and in spite of his own radical ideas on the question of the linguistic sign, was forced to adopt certain paradoxical positions. This is what Derrida has endeavoured to show in his work on 'grammatology', or the new science of writing.

#### Grammatology

Derrida argues that, on the one hand, Saussure grants equal status to the signifier and signified within the bipartite sign entity. Such a notion of sign entails equivalent systems of signs, be it spoken language, writing, or any other semiological system. On the other hand, in a manner typical of the

metaphysical tradition that he is part of, Saussure grants a privileged status to spoken signifier on the ground that it is closer to thought. Saussure assumes a 'natural' thought-voice link, while the relation between the written-signifier and the corresponding signified is seen as merely a matter of 'culture'. This would mean that there exists a natural, full and self-present signified that preexists the arrival of any signifier whatsoever. The spoken sign is assumed to be the first that can arrive and 'represent' this ever-present or 'transcendental' signified which Derrida thinks is at the bottom of all metaphysics. This always-and-already arrived signified or, what amounts to the same, the unarrived signified must have taken different forms along the course of the history of metaphysics, as ontology, or theology, or Heidegger's 'onto-theology'.

In this paradox, and in this double reading of Saussure (and also of Lévi-Strauss and Rousseau), Derrida sees a possibility. While we notice that though speech is claimed to be the true representer of thought (for Plato, 'the true son of logos'), writing is seen as a 'supplement' of speech (for Plato, 'the bastard'). Derrida stresses on the double orientation of the *supplement*: On the one hand, writing is seen as secondary, an unwanted and corrupt additional mode in relation to the purity of the spoken language, but, on the other hand, it is seen as filling a mnemonic lack that speech inherently has, that is, as an aid to fallible human memory. Again, since ordinary writing (even when it is rejected as secondary) is acknowledged to bear a close iconic similarity to the 'Book of Nature' or 'writing with the finger of god' within an ontology of self-presence in the western tradition, there is an unwitting reversal of the writing-speech relationship whereby the latter, and language in general, can be said to carry a trace of the 'original' arche-writing which itself is nothing but the trace of a *trace*. And further, as Saussure himself had rightly undervalued the substance of the signifier, written or spoken, in favour of the differential form of the sign as the central feature of language, both the primary and the secondary, nature and culture, speech and writing can be viewed as products of a continuous process of difference, a difference without any internal content, or *différance*.

#### Infinity and Dialogue

Thus, without reducing the signifier to a transparency that renders visible the signified in all its natural and self-present clarity, and taking the signifier to be always and already infiltrated by the realm of signified, Derrida views

signification as an infinite, playful procession of supplements, traces, and *différance*. This nonpresence, non-absence that he locates to dismantle the ontological core of western philosophy is well in tune with the ethical (transcendental) philosophy that Levinas had proposed, especially in his *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas believes that all philosophical understanding, that is all ontology and all epistemology, should be preceded by an ethical openness of the self to the other. In this respect Levinas' work is closely linked with the 'dialogical' concerns invoked by Dostoyevsky in the context of 19th century Russia. Levinas stresses on the self's infinite responsibility for the other. An awareness of this responsibility comes along with the dissolution of the self-other binary opposition that 'modern' thought readily takes for granted.

While Levinas seeks to deconstruct the assumed ontological fullness of the self, he also insists that the other is not to be reduced as the same or an equal of the self. Though Levinas acknowledges a direct influence of Buber (the author of *I and Thou*) on his work, he has sought to redefine 'dialogicality' in terms of the sociality of an ethical philosophy, as different from the latter's 'spirituality'. For Levinas, the ethical effort required for a contextual I-Thou relationship is absent in Buber who in his view 'thematizes' this relationship. His critique of Buber hinges on three main issues: reciprocity, formality, and exclusiveness that he attributes to Buber's notion of dialogicality. Levinas maintains that the I-Thou relation is not a reciprocal dialogue between two friendly partners occurring in a pure, formal space or in an 'ethereal medium'. I am already obliged to respond to the call of the other, even before there can be a formal/ontological space of interaction. There is an essential dissymmetry between I and Thou in the sense that I am responding to the 'epiphany' of the face of the other. The other is both 'higher' and a 'destitute' in relation to the self. The otherness of the other is not something existing *a priori*, but is constituted in the face to face encounter with the other.

Thus, instead of reducing the other in a spatial sort of way to the sameness of me within a totalized whole (which would ensure an I-Thou reciprocity), Levinas would retain the radical otherness of the other on the temporal dimension which naturally opens out to infinity. Time's infinite openness further

ensures the nonclosure of the I-Thou relationship. According to Levinas, '[t]ime means that the other is forever beyond me, irreducible to the synchrony of the same. The temporality of the interhuman opens up the meaning of otherness and the otherness of meaning.' Thus we have an entirely new orientation to the question of meaning and language. Correspondingly, Levinas prefers a semiotics of 'saying' to that of the 'said'. Language as saying means 'an ethical openness to the other'. '[S]aying is irreducible to the ontological definability of the said. Saying is what makes the self-exposure to the sincerity possible; it is a way of giving everything, of not keeping anything for oneself' (in R. Cohen, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 1986: 28-29).

#### Writing/Community

Is the principle of dialogicality of consequence only as a relation sought between the self and other? In response to the various communitarian political concerns of the 19th and 20th centuries, Blanchot and Nancy have attempted not only to elaborate some of the above ideas in relation to literature and art, but also to articulate a redefinition of the notion of community in terms of the new perspectives on writing. The 'unworking' of a literary/artistic work is a major preoccupation for Blanchot. Writing, instead of merely being a transmission or communication between author and reader (or, language as transmission of pre-coded messages between a sender and a receiver, as it was for Saussure), is an incessant historical act wherein both literature and community are constantly deconstructed (for Blanchot: 'interrupted') and reconstituted through an infinite dialogical process. This obviously involves rendering writing (and reading) to endless unpredictabilities and undecidabilities whose sources cannot be programmed or preconceived in aesthetic creation. Same is the political (and the aesthetic) condition of the community.

This new notion of writing (which since Derrida is another name for language in general) is also accompanied by a radically different notion of subjectivity. The subject is no longer the Cartesian one possessing a rational interiority expressible in the language of intersubjective communication. Nor is it the Lacanian one which is a hapless product of the field of language to which it is exposed since birth. (In opposition to the expressive speech

of the *cogito*, Lacan had said: 'Language speaks the subject.'

Writing is henceforth the exposition of the singularity of the self to that of a radically other other. Language is thus no longer the communication of an interior essence resulting in an intersubjective cognitive fusion, or a communion. It is, instead, the infinite movement of a trace between differentiated exteriorities or singularities. Subjects as singularities, in this perspective, are constantly being differentiated. Subject is thus not a subject that 'exists' in a strictly ontological sense, but one which 'desists', to use a term proposed by Lacoue-Labarthe.

Nancy views literature and writing in their role of interrupting both the community and the 'myth' that holds the community together. Community reveals itself not to subjects appearing as 'egos', but in their disappearance, or death. Instead of being seen as a fused 'Ego' or a 'We', the community can be understood as coappearing or 'comparing' of many others. In the former instance, the community is founded by a mythic thought that is admittedly fictional. In relation to the community (and this relation is anyway central to it), the myth has the basic feature of *founding by fiction*. The literary process, according to Nancy, is always acting upon this fictional foundation of the community. This is where it is possible to see the literary as that which interrupts the myth and as constantly refashioning the community. Nancy sees this tension within the literary work itself: 'In the work, there is a share of myth and a share of literature or writing. The latter interrupts the former, it 'reveals' precisely through its interruption of the myth (through the incompleteness of the story or the narrative) — and what literature or writing reveals is above all its interruption, and it is in this respect that it can be called, if it still can be — and it can no longer be — a "mythic invention." And further: "Literature" (or "writing") is what, in literature — in the sharing of the communication of works — interrupts myth by giving voice to being-in-common, which has no myth and cannot have one' (J-L. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 1986/1991: 63).

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## Essay

# A pattern of henna on autumn's feet

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Translated from Hindi by Teji Grover

*According to Wagish Shukla reading poetry is like deciphering ancient scripts. Deciphering ancient scripts would mean you are trying to guess at them. Reading literature is guessing at 'what is literature?'. The following essay comprises five ways of conjecturing about the ancient script we call literature. I have tried to grope for this elephant of a question in five ways of being blind. I do realize, however, that this question and I are engaged in a game of musical chairs, and in the uninterrupted music of despair neither of us is likely to get a chance to sit down.*

### 1

In the dense forest of Kausambi, Lord Mahavira has been practicing austerity for twelve years now. The moment he thinks of breaking his fast, he resolves to do it in a particular way. Soon enough, with its most intricate codes, sorrow weaves for him the image of a young girl. From her alone would the Lord consider receiving alms. From her alone — the possibility of whose existence is so lean that the Lord could well have been soliciting death for himself. Famished, he wanders for six months before he chances upon the young girl he had envisioned. She is a princess and is yet in bondage; she's neither at home nor outside of it. With hands and feet bound, she holds in her hands a winnowing basket with a few shells of *urad dāl* lying to a corner of it. Having fasted for three days, she now waits for a hermit to make an appearance. Her eyes have not yet filled with tears; no smile lights up her face. Mahavira turns away from her. Her eyes begin to tear. Once again he turns to her. Her face glows with joy. She now becomes the one from whom the Lord could receive alms, the one he had imagined. The girl whose appearance seems to have been woven with fibres of grief is none other than Chandan Bala (the sandal-tree maiden), bearing some resemblance perhaps with the little mermaid of Andersen's tale who surfaces on the sea gazing at the ruins of her world with lonesome eyes. The grief of femininity, as if grief

incarnate, now appears before the Lord as his resolve. Torn apart from all longing, Chandan Bala's sandal-tree femininity is yet in captivity. (Is it possible, then, to classify various civilizations on the basis of their methodology of controlling or liberating femininity?) There she is, a young girl robbed of all colour, deprived of the rhythm of her feet, the quivering of her hands, the radiance of her eyes, the splendour of her attire. Robbed of all embellishment, she seems to have transfigured into an embellishment of grief itself. Or else, into a sentence (*vākya*) of grief.

She is present between the Lord and death like a sentence of grief.

Literature too is perhaps a way of choosing death. What is visible as writing is like Chandan Bala, the syntax of delay between the writer and his death.

### 2

The shade of the dead escapes from the funeral pyre and returns to our midst.

—Propertius

It's true, they do manage to flee. We all know that. They really do make an escape. Having led their own lives, they escape from the flaming pyre as a death that is ours. There is no such thing as dying one's own death: whosoever dies, dies the death of the living. What we bore to the cremation *ghāt* was but a lifeless body. But what arose from the pyre was not only smoke, not just the flames, nor heat:

it was our own death taking form invisibly in the midst of it all. We bear a corpse to the cremation *ghāt* and return home followed by our own death. The shadow of the dead silently escapes in the direction of our own death.

Literature is the technique of making this transmigration possible.

It is literature that re-syntaxes language to reveal spaces for the death of the writer. It is a way of realigning language with the moment of its origin: an attempt to restore language to the moment of its birth. Men must have been given to invent stories of beings they themselves were not. They must have been naming objects, events, etc., they themselves were not. In other words, humans must have invented language to house 'characters' filled with their 'not-being', filled with their own death. Letting on or not, death has come to inhabit the space, the room of language. Literature is an act of reinventing this room in ways forever new.

The meter (*anūshṭup*) Valmiki employs in the creation of the epic is the nest made from grief-straw, the *kraunch* bird's grief over her mate's death. It's a nest to be taken over by death that arose from the blood-soaked body of the *kraunch*, death that flapped between the fatally wounded bird and the ancient poet.

They do manage to escape for sure. If literature did not exist, they would not find a home for themselves. Literature is the delicate masonry of the living who weave homes for their dead, like some of those tribal or Japanese homes that provide rooms for the dead exactly as they would for the living.

### 3

The 'unknown' came racing out of me. As it became known it returned back inside, more slowly, in its transformed form of 'known'. Then I slowed down. A lengthy lull set in between excitement peaks. I wore dull knowledge. Ignorance was frozen into dormancy. When would it break out again?

— Marvin Cohen

She said, 'If we happen to overhear a secret dialogue, we should be able to imbibe it as a secret.'

Imbibing the 'unknown' so that it would remain so? Perhaps there are several ways available for turning the 'unknown' into the 'known' and