

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

thus finding credence for it; ways by which the 'unknown' is first transformed into what is already known: it is like converting the 'unknown' to the 'known', so to speak. Besides, we also happen to know that the transformation of any 'unknown' into the known is merely the appropriation of the 'unknown' by the instrumentalities of the known.

The unknown keeps pulsing signals of its existence in peculiar ways: in the texture of an intricate human relationship, for instance; in some crinkle of an uncertain twilight; or else in the bewildering array of ripples in water — and this goes on endlessly. This is the way the unknown emerges from within its own depths. This is the way the veiled slowly yields to transparency. Haven't men, perhaps, always faced the attributes of the unknown in two different ways?: by measuring and adapting it on the basis of canons already in existence; and, alternatively, by imbibing it just as it exists. The second way saves the unknown from the ennui of the known and yet makes it possible for it to lend itself to perception (this is the way of literature) devising endless ways of allowing the unknown to find niches for itself, spaces where it could survive as unknown. And to the extent literature manages to shelter the unknown as unknown, it finds its *raison d'être*.

Love is yet another way of sheltering the unknown as unknown.

It's here that love and literature part ways with disciplines like psychoanalysis. The latter analyzes dream in terms of the waking state and looks for strategies to adapt dream to the language of wakefulness. Literature too, like love, lives out the dream. It looks for niches in language where dream remains dream instead of being reduced to codes that enrich the wakeful state. If in any given society love and literature begin to become suspect, it's perhaps because they offer shelter to the 'unadaptable unknown'. And this is what causes apprehension in value systems based on what is already known. The fear is: is the unknown in fact unknowable? And it's here that the defence mechanisms of these value systems are triggered off and put to use against love and literature.

(The creation of literature is

perhaps an act of waiting. Waiting for words to transfigure themselves, to shed their meanings like dead leaves, emerge from the cloaks of meaning as codes that are impenetrable: codes of the unknown that look for a sojourn in language.)

4

Tracing what is absent over what is present.

—Bernard Noël

In the sky of 'being' reverberates the 'not-being'. In the child's mouth the absence of the breast takes form; in the wet clay seethes the absence of the pot-to-be; the pot escapes from the broken pieces of the pot and disappears. Radha's limbs bedeck themselves with Krishna's absence:

When she looks at the beloved her limbs shimmer with despair.

Literature makes caves of 'presence' with the rock paintings of the 'absence'. The order established is that of presence in a way that absence may find its expanse. If the idol-free home of God (*qāba*) and the temple (with idols) are veils over a nightmare, Ghalib's poetry is the wailing of words bloodied in this nightmare. Words do not turn away from this absence; they stretch themselves before it like a sheet of water to be writ upon by it. Literature is the realm in which the light of presence is shredded by the shadow of absence. Bruises of absence appear on the limbs of presence. What you take for 'meter' is the lamentation of blood oozing from these bruises.

5

This is what Mukul Shivputra said: 'He would walk up to the doorstep of Alladia Khan and stay rooted to the spot listening to the master practise his singing. On his part, Khan Saheb would be blissfully unaware of Vamanhari Deshpande's presence. One fine morning Khan Saheb tuned in the *tānpūra* but refrained from singing. This made the visitor step inside—"You didn't sing today," he said to Khan Saheb. "The *tānpūra* turned out to be so pleasing that I was content." That's how they met. Alladia Khan then taught him the *tān* of *rāga bihagrā* that I later learnt from him.'

'So you sing that *tān* in *bihagrā*?'

'Not always. It's an *alankār* I apply when it pleases me.'

Rāga Bihagrā has got lost somewhere

in *rāga bihagrā*, in a way that the possibility of its being found again has not been lost. One has to look for *rāga bihagrā* within *rāga bihagrā*. Looking for *bihagrā* in the wilderness of *rāga bihagrā* is a risky undertaking. The search could well take a dangerous turn. Sung or played, music has to devise strategies to go on with the quest and yet effect an emergence from the wilderness. Singing or playing, while going in search of *rāga bihagrā* in *rāga bihagrā*, one drops over the path of silence various *alankārs* — phrases of notes, *tāls*, etc., (like Hansel and Gretel dropping white marbles) so that the map of the journey and the possibility of return remain alive. Is the syntax of *alankārs* dropped on the path, while searching for a *rāga* within a *rāga*, called music-making, the *rāgadāri*?

Perhaps poetry is also lost in the poetry. (Why music as an example? Because music in its performance is as much an art form as an aesthetic constitution!) Perhaps poetry, like *rāga*, is also lost in the poetry. All the *alankārs* dropped on the way while searching for it are accepted as poetry.

Or perhaps it is not so! There is no *rāga bihagrā* in *rāga bihagrā*. But there is a form of *rāga bihagrā*'s absence in *rāga bihagrā*. There is a way of not-being of the *rāga* in the *rāga*. *Vādi*, *vivādi*, *samvādi*, and *anuvādi** notes trace the figure of *bihagrā* not present in *bihagrā*, or else they adorn the configuration of its absence. Adornment of absence, this preening of absence, is what singing is all about.

'It's an *alankār* I apply when it pleases me.'

In literature too there is an absence of literature. In poetry, an absence of poetry. Poetry attains to its being by decorating the not-being within itself. By *alankār* what I mean here is all the possible devices used for writing poetry as all of them are ultimately techniques of decorating the absence of literature inherent in literature.

The absence of literature in literature is nothing but death (of literature). It's this death that needs to be traced. It's this that has to be decorated, ornamented. Or perhaps the very existence (of literature) is the decoration of the nonexistence (of literature). It is like this perhaps, strange though it may sound. Echoing Ghalib, one could say that literature is decoration; it's a pattern of henna but henna on death's feet:

If spring is, it's (a pattern of) henna on autumn's feet.

*Different kinds of notes in a particular *rāga*. *Vādi* is the note that is emphasized most and is repeated again and again. *Samvādi* engages into dialogue with *vādi*. *Vivādi* is absent in the *rāga* and yet continuously impinges on its form from outside and may at times actually get some place in it. *Anuvādi* notes are the rest of the regular notes in the *rāga*.

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