

Western Poetics and Eastern Thought

GURBHAGAT SINGH



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AND
EASTERN THOUGHT

For
Jay Martin

PREFACE

The intention behind this volume is to work towards international poetics by bringing the violently opposed systems of the East and the West to a meeting ground. The work may be considered a contribution to the genre of *dialogue*. All the essays, written on different topics and presented in the form of papers at various national and international conferences in India and abroad, are guided by the urge to communicate. Many a time I have leaped across and obliterated the boundaries. My intention is best summed up in the concluding paragraph of the first essay: "A Meeting Ground for the Colliding Signifiers:"

The *anthropo-aesthetic signifiers* of the Eastern and Western hemispheres, due to the different geo-historical experiences of their respective cultures, may appear to be colliding head-on in their structures and goals, yet at the basis, they are both guided by the desire of appropriating and elaborating Desire that specifies a human being. His or her libidinal energy, if not the same, is identical with the energy of everything else in the universe, the signifiers suggest. The intense logging in both to realize the libidinal object in the largest sense, is enough of a hope for constructing international poetics aimed at integrating humankind in its diversity, multiculturally and cosmically.

Though I have advanced my intention through poetics, yet I have also used some allied systems as poetics cannot be separated from them. Especially in the East that signifies mainly India in the case of this work, the various schools of poetics are so intertwined with other disciplines that I have considered it apt to use the word "thought" for this phenomenon. Since Indian thought: Buddhist, Hindu, Tantrik, etc., has shaped the consciousness and life, at least of the far eastern

countries, it is not an excess to call it (Indian thought) "Eastern" in order to position it against Western poetics for comparative and integrative insights.

The inspiration to work on these comparative essays comes from a brief but vital association, during my graduate days, with the Program in Comparative Culture of the University of California at Irvine. I am indebted to Professor Jay Martin, the then director of the Program, now at the University of Southern California, for providing me the opportunity to reorient myself. I owe warm thanks to Professor Anna Balakian of New York University and Professor Earl Miner of Princeton University who made it possible for me to be present among the galaxy of comparatists at the 10th World Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association hosted by New York University in 1982. Some of the ideas presented there are keeping me stimulated to work for the futuristic and essential project of international poetics.

Patiala

Gurbhagat Singh

June, 1, 1984.

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1.

A MEETING GROUND FOR THE COLLIDING SIGNIFIERS

During the heydays of Western imperialism over the East Kipling said that the East and the West were two distinct hemispheres with irreconcilable cultures; their communication systems, including the person produced, were so incredibly different that the "twain" could "never" meet. Edward Said has recently told us in his illuminating work *Orientalism* that this kind of approach was always determined by "a network of interests." And what Said calls "a network of interests" is close to Julia Kristeva's "ideologeme" and Michel Foucault's "episteme."

There is a point in Edward Said's criticism. A cultural ontology can be built around class interests, and that indeed was true of the theory of "Orient" constructed over the last couple of centuries in which the "Orient" was presented as a phantasmagoria to be enjoyed or absorbed and the "Occident" a kind of "he-man" culture with muscles to dominate and "educate."

This kind of epistemic differentiation between cultures, is undoubtedly made with vested interests. For that reason it neither reveals the genius of the cultures concerned nor develops a framework to bring them together under a humanistic or evolutionary intention. Now, cultural anthropologists have established in the line of Vico, Herder and Whorf that cultures are shaped by their geo-physical and linguistic experiences. Their differences are valuable epistemological angles to look at the world and organize life. The hierarchical distinction

between "primitive" and "civilized" is meaningless. These categories may be used to denote different ways of organizing the world, valid in their own terms (Levi-Strauss).

A culture's ontology can be determined by two structures: (i) its semiotic of person (anthropological signifier), (ii) its semiotic of arts (aesthetic signifier). To be precise, a culture's difference can be delineated by understanding its anthropological and aesthetic signifiers. No matter by what referents are the two signifiers shadowed but every culture tries to place them with their own, dialogical structures. Since the two signifiers of a culture are inter-connected in their goals, we can also combine them and use the integral category *anthropo-aesthetic signifier* for precision and theoretical adequacy.

The *anthropo-aesthetic signifier* of the West began shaping with Pythagoras and Parmenides. Pythagoras (570 B.C.), perhaps cautioned by the uncontrollable environment around, comes up with his notion of the *kosmos* suggesting form and inherent order. The way of life for his salvation is to be organized "with a view to following god." This necessitates, according to the tenets of Pythagoreanism, a disciplined and ordered life without hedonistic pleasures of flesh. Things in their ultimate nature are mathematically proportioned. Parmenides (515 B.C.) in his poem *On Nature*, through an allegory, asserts that the object of truth must exist, "it is, and cannot not be."¹ In this assertion Parmenides rules out change, motion or "seeming." His stable object is to be discovered through mental reason and not through senses. Both Pythagoras and Parmenides accept only the object of knowledge as stable and changeless, its opposite they say is only nothingness and non-being. Plato (470-350 B.C.) in his *Republic* (Book V) also accepts as valid "intermediate, material objects" realized through senses, though they are "uncertain knowledge" of the "shifting world"² according to him. Elsewhere he terms it "eikastic" knowledge. This uncertain, sensory of "eikastic" knowledge has not been outrightly rejected but given "intermediate" status. Still Plato's knowledge of "absolute being" or the realm of "eidos," is "true" knowledge. Thus the *anthropo-aesthetic* signifier which the early Greeks initiated was rational. It was independent of the body and considered

unreliable for rational consciousness assigned the task of understanding the *kosmos* in its "objective" categories. The mind-body dichotomy was posited at this initial stage. In the medieval times, this dichotomy was further intensified by Descartes (1596-1650 A.D.). He doubted material existence, even the human body. He was sure only of the "thinking I"—the *Cogito* or the transcendental thinking I separated from the body.

Due to its schizophrenic interpretation of consciousness and due to its goal of understanding the universe rationally, Western culture, while cutting across its various production systems and ensuing relations, developed a mind that was always divided between the commands of reason and instincts. Since the mind taught to obey only reason, it repressed the call of instincts. Then it was the privilege of Sigmund Freud to announce his theory of the unconscious as a storehouse of repressed instincts. Even when the unconscious energy was withdrawn from them the instincts could not be de-energized. The unconscious of Freud is explosive and disturbing. David Sachs says that "On Freud's view the unconscious maddens and keeps us mad."³ Even when we come to terms with it, it keeps the mind heterogenous. But still, except in the cases of insanity, instincts repressed or otherwise cannot destroy ego. Id and ego remain together. In his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud made his well known remark: "Where id was, there ego shall be."⁴ In fact Freud holds that the ego's relations to the id can be compared with that of a rider to his horse. "The horse supplies the locomotive energy, while the rider has the privilege of deciding on the goal and of guiding the powerful animal's movement. But only too often there arises between the ego and the id the not precisely ideal situation of the rider being obliged to guide the horse along the path by which it itself wants to go."⁵ The point to be grasped is that consciousness (ego) separated from the body is again being connected with it. In his essay *Negation*, as interpreted by Richard Wollheim, while discussing "introjection" Freud explains even the content of a mental act as a bodily phenomenon.⁶ In the *Project* Freud propounds his theory of consciousness as the *subjective side* of a certain kind of neurophysiolo-

gical process: "Here consciousness is the subjective side of one part of the physical process in the nervous system, namely of a *w*-process; the omission of consciousness does not leave psychical events unaltered but involves the omission of the contribution from *w*." Although Thomas Nagel⁸ does not consider this view "compatible" with dualism or materialism, yet it relates consciousness to a special class of neurons, *w*-neurons. This view is close to what Noam Chomsky has termed the "physical explanation of the "species-specific" response or "higher levels of organization" of the human mind, Thomas Nagel believes.

But the revolution that Freud has brought in the understanding of mind is not just the connection of consciousness with a certain kind of neurons which could at best establish the economy of the mind as organized and "organic" in a somewhat Coleridgean sense. His radicalization is in suggesting that when the id-energies are not allowed entry into the conscious, they remain intact in repressed forms, they do not become matter. Even when they are tabooed, they retain their potential to be re-activated. Despite the strong control of the ego in their own way they intervene and keep adding their dimension to the activity of the conscious. For that reason the mind does not remain "organic" or unidirected, it becomes heterogenous. Even when the mind of a poet appears to be moving towards one goal, its reality has a concealed schizophrenia. The essential condition of the human mind, both normal and creative, is schizoid.

Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst, while reinterpreting Freud, has recently suggested that the mind has to go through double repression. First at the time of learning language and the second at the time of entering the Law of Culture or called the "Symbolic Order." The unconscious, according to Lacan is constituted by this double repression. Its structure is like a language or "a chain of signifiers" so far unknown to the conscious. The unconscious functioning with displacement and condensation is a "concept discourse of the environment" (the Other).⁹ The human mind shaped by the double repression of the unconscious and still surviving clinical neurosis, at least in the creative acts, has been called a "split subject" by Julia

Kristeva. It is an unsettled, questionable and in the process subject engaged in integrating the opposed orientations: the "symbolic" (social-abstract) and the "semiotic" (individual-concrete).¹⁰

The mind, as defined in the recent Western disciplines, is problematic. Even while striving for the unproblematic state of consciousness it just cannot overcome its problem-complex. For the ancient Greeks, the reasons for this were metaphysical and for the moderns social and cultural. No matter what the way or effort is, the mind can see, envision and create only through this pain of "split" which is the price that humans have to pay for their cultural being.

The Western *anthropo-aesthetic signifier* that includes the theory of human subject and the theory of art-work to-day, can be characterized as heterogenous or schizophrenic. Even the "organicity" of the Romantics was not free from the heterogenic taint. Heterogeneity, shaped by the double repression, is empowered by desire, an intense longing for the Other. This Other to begin with is the mother-figure but with the advance of consciousness, becomes a desire to get to origins and shape reality afresh with dream-work. In this process the subject has to go through acute "introjection" and "projections." What is called "I" or its subjectivity is multi-furcated, the body and its various parts are de-centred. As a result of this de-centering the I-ness of the "I" or its subjectivity is minimized. Here lines of argument vary with the present Western theorists. Jacques Derrida extends this de-centring of the various parts of the body to an elimination of the "subject" and Julia Kristeva recognizes and even emphasizes the subject that she believes remains intact although "split," "unsettled" and "un-questionable." "De-centering," as with Derrida, does not mean the "disappearance" of the subject with Kristeva.

No matter what their differences are, still the conflicting Western theorists of post-structuralism agree that the human mind, its possessor the subject and the aesthetic signifier are heterogenous. They are characterized by conflict, but the conflict is not explosive enough to destroy their inside polar positions. Rather they make sense from their positions in an internal economy. A deadly but schizophrenic dialogue keeps

flying from the battlefield, at times aphasic and at times sane.

This divided, quasi/de-centred subject, although defined by the double repression and thereby the explosive, concealed signifiers, goes beyond instincts. The raw libidinal energy is transformed into the process of "signifying." Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, while talking "on the subject of Lacan" elaborate this position of the subject: "The conception of desire simultaneously situates the process of the beginning of the subject across and beyond needs or drives. It is the movement which skips the limits of the pleasure principle and invests in a reality through the presence of the third term, the Other, where it is included, although as a divided and mobile subject."¹¹

The *anthropo-aesthetic signifier* of the West, therefore, is defined, in terms of a divisive and energizing desire for the Other. It is enunciated by an I that is multi-furcated and charged. It articulates signifying structures.

In the East, especially in India, the theory of the human mind and of the aesthetic signifier has remained integrative. Even when the gulf between consciousness, desire and cosmos was posited for a brief period, soon thereafter the integrative principle asserted itself. In the early Vedic period desire was recognized as primal. In the Rig Vedic hymn of creation it has been said: "Thereafter rose desire in the beginning, Desire, the primal seed and germ of spirit." Desire was raised to a deity in the *Atharva Veda*. "Kama was first born; not the gods. The fathers, nor mortals attained him, to them art thou superior, always great; to thee as such, O Kama, do I pay homage."¹² There are several mantras in this Veda to win love. In the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad*, Prajapati's oneness or "aloneness" has been described by using the analogy of husband and wife in "mutual embrace." Knowing the Spirit, according to the Upanishad, also means knowing it in its abode of "desire" and "semen."¹³

The Vedic and Upanishadic writings do not suggest that the libidinal energy should be repressed. Rather in the highest development or cosmic consciousness, this energy flows along. Only its vital presence helps one realize Atma. But soon after that period, Buddha proclaims his "Fire Sermon" in which he

says: "All things, O Bhikku, are on fire." He advises to shut off senses and completely divest oneself of desire if one is to attain to Nirvana. He says: "And seeing this, O Bhikkus, the true disciple conceives disgust for the eye, for forms the eye consciousness, for impressions received by the eye, and for the sensations arising therein; and for the ear, the nose, the tongue, and for the sense of touch, and for mind, and for thoughts and mind consciousness, impressions and sensations. And so he is divested of desire, and thereby he is freed and he knows that becoming is exhausted, that he has lived the fierce life, that he has done that it behoved him to do, and that he has put off mortality for ever."¹¹ Buddha's divisive advice remained powerful until the end of the 4th century. Soon thereafter, as Kanwal Lal has very illuminatingly shown in his work *The Cult of Desire* (First edition, 1967, New Delhi) desire returned with vengeance. Not only in religious philosophy and poetry did it stage a come back but also in sculpture and cave paintings. The famous Khajuraho and Ajanta Ellora art and the temple sculpture spread over the whole of India, are an evidence of that.

The Tantarik texts, later on mythologize desire and present it as the primal, evolutionary and ultimate power of the universe. John Woodroffe, in his preface to a Tantrik text *Kam-Kala Vilas*, quoted by Kanwar Lal in the book cited above, explains how desire was mythologized into *Lalita* or *Tripurasundari* who holds in herself all the Tattvas (cosmic elements) until her rest is disturbed by the desire or will to create: "The Sricakra or Sriyantra is the Yantra or Lalita or Tripurasundari the Supreme Shakti aspect of the Brahman. . . . The Kamkala is the first display of activity in the Brahman Substance after Pralay when the Devi holds absorbed in Herself all the Thirty Six Tattavas of which the Universe in all its variety is composed. She remains for sometime in this state holding within Herself all the Tattvas until rest is disturbed by the desire or will to create."¹⁵

Desire, in the East is cosmicized. Its activation is the dynamic movement of the universe with all the basic Tattvas. For that reason desire is both a quest and fulfilment. It has no dimension of "repression." It is also not a transcendental kind of structure developed out of the abstraction of the libidinal body. The body with its full energy shapes the structure of Eastern desire.

Instincts and drives do not disappear, they only get a new order that facilitates being to participate in the universe with joy, to be more specific with "jouissance" or bodily joy as Julia Kristeva uses the word. Desire, as defined in the recent structuralists and post-structuralists of the West (Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Derrida, etc.), is a structure in quest of significance. It is not a bundle of raw instincts. It is a semiotic movement initiated by the residue of raw instincts after they are derailed by the double repression and necessary sublimation. But desire in the East, as elaborated in the Tantrik texts, the so called "erotic" sculpture, and the medieval poetry, is not a mere signifying structure evolved out of traumatic blockades. Rather it is the centre as well as the way of getting to it. The paradox is that the centred desire also de-centres. It enables the de-individual to participate in the multi-logical and semiotic universe libidinally. The activation of the libidinal energy in its most expansive sense remains both originary and ultimate, physical and utopian, simultaneously.

The *anthropo-aesthetic signifier* of India, therefore, can be defined with the Buddhistic term Nothingness or Shunya to suggest that it goes beyond signification, the maximum range of Cartesian consciousness. But this beyond signification signifier elaborating both the human subject and the aesthetic work is constituted by the body longing for cosmicization not simply as an inescapable way to resolve socio-political contradictions (Marx, Levi-Strauss), but as an bodiated quest for unknown structures. This object is not to be attained through distortion, derailment or sublimation of pleasure instincts, but by retaining their inherent possibility of realizing the highest peak (God, beloved, etc.). This becomes evident in the hymns of a medieval bhakta poet Guru Nanak, especially in his man-woman metaphor:

- (i) The woman who is embraced by her
Spouse enjoyeth every happiness.
She whom God in His pleasure hath
embraced is a happy woman.
- (ii) How shall I survive?
I am dying, O Mother
* * *

My spouse cometh not home;
 I am dying with the pang of separation:
 The flash of the lightning terrifieth me.
 I am alone on my couch and greatly grieved:
 O mother, my pain is as bad as death.
 Say how can sleep and appetite
 Come to me without God?
 Raiment affordeth my body no comfort.

* * *

The lakes and meadows are filled
 with water: it is the rainy
 season—the time for pleasure.¹⁶

The translator of this hymn, Professor Puran Singh, has rendered the original word of Guru Nanak “rang mani” into “pleasure.” Actually “rang mani” can also be translated into celebration or festivity. The realization of the meta-self, Atma, higher consciousness or the point of meeting between the individual and God and thereby also of the community and God as implicit in Guru Nanak, is a moment of festivity. C.L. Barber, while interpreting Shakesperean comedy, has used this word “festivity” to describe “energy-release” or libidinal liberation of an individual or a culture after committing a necessary mistake. Probably Barber had in his mind the Freudian notions of repression and the Nietzschean notion of over-Apollonization that leads to a Dionysiac revolt both internally and culturally. Guru Nanak’s longing for festivity is not related to the necessary mistake, but to a sensitivity of the immediate environment full of beauty. Being a part of it is not enough to realize the originary or cosmic nature of the libido. A sense of cosmic community is what keeps the libido dynamically fixed and directed unto the peak or fulfilment in God, beloved, utopia or the largest consciousness.

The cosmo-communal fulfilment of the libidinal longing is to be in an energy-state that is “sahaj,” normal or cosmically balanced. The “energy-release” that occurs after a necessary or corrective mistake, or after going through the double repression of Lacan, cannot be balanced. It will come as a jolt and tend to touch the other extreme in which consciousness is