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On Philosophy and Poetry in Contemporary Thought

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I extend a warm welcome to all of you, participants in the conference on the *Entanglements of Philosophy and Poetry: Contemporary Positions.* I am gratified that so many of you have responded positively to the invitation from *Tattva Journal of Philosophy* to participate in this event, which his the second to be held since last year. The conference and the increasing number of paper submissions to *Tattva* demostrate that philosophy is a vibrant field of interest in this part of the world. Philosophers from this region and beyond are making significant contributions to the ongoging philosophical discourse.

As someone without profound expertise in the subject matter of this conference, I will offer only a brief commentrary on the entanglements of philosophy and poetry. As the term "entanglement" indicates, the interrelations between philosopy and poetry have frequently been fraught with challenges and impeded by a multitude of obstacles. In this address, I will present two examples of the beneficial influence of poetry on contemporary philosophy.

The first observation is that poetry serves to highlight the constraints of the prevailing conception of rationality and truth. Descartes introduced the idea that truth should be based on scientific, in particular mathematical reason. In this *Discoruse on Method,* Descartes expresses his delight with the mathematics, on account of the certitude and evidence of its reasoning." Conversely, he expresses profound disillusionment with the ancient moralists and masters of widsom, whome he criticizes for establishing "very towering and magnificent palaces with no better foudnation than sand and mud."[1] To resolve this inconsistency, Descartes opts to extend the mathematical methodology to encompass all other

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[1] Rene Descartes, Oeuvres de Descartes. Tome VI: Discours de la méthode. (Paris: Vrin, 1996), 8.

disciplines. This has resulted in a fundamental transformation of the conventional notions of rationality and truth. As a result of its success, the novel, mathematically based methodology has gradually permeated all other domains of knowledge, including our pratical ways of engaging with the life-world. Another quotation from Descartes exemplifies his ambition and the actual evolution of Western culture: "By wisdom is to be undertood not merely prudence in the management of affairs, but a perfect knowledge of all that man can know, as well for the conduct of his life as for the preservation of his health and the discovery of all the arts, and that knowledge to serve these ends must necessarily be deduced from first causes."[2]. However, the indisputable success of the Cartesian method has also resulted in significant drawbacks. It has led to the reduction of the natural world to a mere 'res extensa,' and of human emotions, behaviors, and relations to a purely physical phenomenon. The consequence of this has been the estrangement of philosophy and rationality from the life-world, that is to say, the practical, cultural environment in which human beings act, situated against a temporal and sptial hoirzon.[3]

It is beyond doubt that German philosopher Martin Heidegger challenged the dominance of scientific rationality with the help of poetry. Heidegger regarded poetry as the most original form of creative language, capable of elucidating the world and first naming things. He therefore argues that poetry is more fundatmental for the disclosure of truth than ordinary communicative or scientific language. The poetic word reveals the worldly character of the world and allows beings to appear in their true form; poetry lets beings appear in their Being, *as* what they *are*. Accordingly, Heidegger regards poetry as inextricably linked with truth and the most profound revelation of what is; poetry is a setting into work of truth. The truth that discloses itself in a poem can never be

[2] Rene Descartets, Oeuvres de Descartes. Tome IX/2: Principes de la philosophie. (Paris: Vrin, 1996), 2.

[3] I discussed the consequences of the separation between modern, scientific philosophy and the life-world in more detail in Peter Jonkers, "A Revaluation of Wisdom as a Way to Reconnect Philosophy with the Life-world," in He Xirong, Peter Jonkers, Shi Yongshe (eds.), *Philosophy and the Life-World* (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2017), 41-62.

substantiated throgh empirical evidence, as poetry takes the form of a flow fo essential words that are tuned in to and responsive to Being. In poetry, words remain as things to be enjoyed, apprciated, and understood in their own right, rather than being reduced to material objects that can be calculated and manipulated, as is the case in science and technology. Moreoever, when a celebrated poet speaks, we not only perceive the message conveyed *by* her words, but we also notice and hear the actual *sounds* of the words themselves.

The question thus arises as to the concrete manifestation of this entangled relationship between poetry and philosophy. First and foremost, poetry serves to remind us that philosophy, in its original form, is a form of unconcealment. This suggests that a philosopher should not approach poetry in the manner of a literary critic, nor should she attempt to coneptualize poetry or penetrate its pictorial language in order to ascertain precisely what is being expressed by it. Instead, the philosopher should be interested in what enables poetry to reveal truth, so that she might learn from it and improve the art of thinking and the idea of truth. Both the poet and the philosopher engage in questioning existence in its manifold, historical expressions. The poet articulates that which the philosopher is to think, namely the unthought. This represents the crux of the entanglement of poetry and philosophy. The unthought is not something that a philosopher has accidentally overlooked and subsequently needs to be incorporated into philosophical discourse to gain a comprehensive picture of reality. Rather, the unthought is what is essentially overlooked as a consequence of what is being thought. It can be argued that the greater the power of thinking is and the more truth is uncovered, as is obviously the aim of scientific knowledge, the greater the unthought. In other words, the unthoguth is what escapes not accidentally but essentially the attention of the scientific gaze. In conclusion, poetry has the potential to draw the philosopher into the realm of the unthought provided that she is willing to adopt a receptive and attentive stance towards the poetic word while maintaining a waiting state of mind and being prepared to risk himself.[4]

[4] My interpretation of Heidegger's view of poetry is based on Michael Watts, *The Philosophy of Heidegger* (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 175-197.

The second avenue through which poetry can influence philosophy is the issue of translation. It is a widely acknowledged fact that the process of translating a text into a different language is inherently challenging, particularly in the context of our globalized world, which has been described as "after Babel". In other words, there is an insurmountable disparity between different linguistic horizons. This is particularly evident in the context of translating a poem because the nuances of both meaning and sound are shaped by the specificities of a given language. of a given language. In order to illustrate this issue, I will draw upon the ideas of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur regarding the process of translation. Firstly, the need for translation can be attributed directly to the fact that language exists solely through a plurality of languages. Consequently, translation represents an effort to prevent this pluarilty from devolving into complete incommensurability, which would result in confining ourselves to the linguistic world with which we are familiar. This illustrates the motivation behind the desire to learn foreign languages and gain familiarity with other perspectives, both regarding the self and the external world.

Conversely, living in a world, "after Babel" necessitates an acknowledgement of the limitations inherent to translation.[5] Each language employs a different way of carving things up phonetically, conceptually, and syntactically. Consequently, there is no consensus regarding the characteristics that would define a perfect language and enable it to legitimately calim universality. Moreover, it is unclear whether the specific languages, with all their linguistic pecularities, are or could be derived from a presumed original language. In other words, there is no pre-Babylonian, paradisiac language underlying all the specific languages which could serve as a stable point of reference and a criterion for a correct translation and as focal point of their complementarity.[6] Similarly, within the same linguistic community, each word is marked by polysemy, has more than one meaning. In order to ascertain the "correct" meaning, it is essential to consider the meaning of that word within the context of

[5] Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation,* translated by Eileen Brennan, with an introduction by Richard Kearney (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 3-5, 8.

[6] Ibid., 15-18

a sentence and the broader discourse, including its patent and hidden elements, as well as its intellectual and emotional nuances. A sentence introduces an additional layer of polysemy, contingent upon the world as the referent of the sentence. A final level of polysemy occurs at the level of the narrative, whereby the same messasge can be conveyed in a variety of ways.

These insights into the fundamental heterogeneity of languages lead to the conclusion that "we can only aim at a supposed equivalence, not founded on a demonstrable identity of meaning."[7] This equivalence without identity necessitates the use of multiple translations and retranslations, which can be compared with each other, but not with a hypothetical original language that would guarantee the identity of meaning. In other words, it is necessary to accept the inevitable fact that there will always be something untranslatable, just as there is no universally accepted standard for a correct translation. Conversely, as our linguistic horizon expands, we become more attuned to the possibilities and idiosyncrasies of other languages. This elucidates the rationale behind the desire to translate, which transcends mere constraints and utilitarian considerations. This utlimately entails a call for linguistic hospitality, "where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming house."[8]

It is evident that Ricoeur's observations regarding the potential and limitations of translation are particularly pertinent to poetry in comparison to language in its broader sense. Given its original, creative character, poetry presents a greater challenge to the concept of translation than does ordinary language. Conversely, poets, like all other speakers, are driven to disseminate their message not only to the members of their owne linguistic community but also to a broader audience. In other words, the dilemma between accepting the incommensurability of languages and the need to communicate the linguistic other is most evident in poetry.

What lessons can people engaged in philosophical inquiry learn from this fundamental insight? It is evident that an invaluable lesson can be derived from the study of the intrinsic linguistic and phonetic

[7] Ibid., 33.
[8] Ibid., 10; see also 26-29

particularities inherent to poetic language. Philosophers frequently situate specific occurrences, experiences, narratives, etc. within the framework of an overarching theory. This approach can be observed in the self-development of the absolute idea (Hegel) or the onto-theological structure of Western metaphysics (Heidegger). This tendency has its roots in the history of Western philosophy. The use of poetry enables philosophers to resist this tendency, thereby functioning as an expression of bad conscience for them. In other words, just as there are numerous different translations of a single poem, there is also a multitude of interpretations of the same poem. Philosophers should therefore embrace this diversity of perspectives. Nevertheless, the inherent linguistic and phonetic particularity of poems does not render them untranslatable. The objective of a poem is to be heard, read, and understood by others, including those who are not part of the linguistic community from which it originated. Moreover, translating a poem into a different language presents new avenues for philosophical interpretation and understanding of the world. To illustrate this point with a single example from a related literary work: Sophocles' tragedy Antigone has been retranslated and reinterpreted on numerous occassions, generating a plethora of new insights into the dilemma of having to choose between human and divine law. In conclusion, poetry provides a dynamic contribution to the perennial philosophical inquiry into the relationship between universality and particularity.

Having concluded my reflections on the entangled relationships between poetry and philosophy, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Mithilesh Kumar, the Executive Editor of Tattva Journal of Philosophy, and the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Christ University for their initiative in organizing this conference for the second consecutive year. Furthermore, I want to thank Christ Deemed to be University, Bangalore, for providing financial and logistical support for this event. We are indeed fortunate to be holding this conference on this beautiful campus. Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to all Indian and international participants, many of whom have traveled considerable distances, who will engage in the listening and discussion of various aspects of the entangled relationships between poetry and philosophy. It is my sincere hope that this conference will prove to be both fruitful and enriching for all in attendance.