And: Reflections on the Conjunction of Literature and Philosophy[1]

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Abstract

This article takes the conjunction "and" as the starting point for a reflection on the relationship between literature and philosophy. It posits that these discourses might be distinguished in terms of their orientation towards questions of truth and reference, and their hospitality to figuration. The article highlights the need for modes of reading that allow us to work with the metaphor of truth, through a brief discussion of Ludwig Wittgenstein's approach to riddles. Finally, it examines Barbara Cassin's notion of "philosophizing in languages," and invites discussion on the possibility of such a practice in the context of India's current academic landscape.

The problem of language in relation to philosophy is a very old one. To speak for a moment only of western philosophy, the linguist Hans Aarsleff recounts Herodotus's musings on the subject 2500 years ago, and suggests that "most major philosophers and most philosophical systems have dealt with the problem in one way or another; in fact, so universal has this interest been that its absence, as in Kant, has been the cause of wonder."[2] Jacques Derrida has suggested that not only has language always been a problem, but a significant one: "never simply one problem among others."[3] Those of us who come to philosophy through (or after) literature may be surprised to discover that language is a "problem" in philosophy. For us, this separation—this insertion of an "and" between discourses called by different names, language/literature/poetry[4] and "philosophy"—has to be reverse-engineered. These reflections thus begin by parsing the polysemous conjunction "and." How might we think through the possibilities of this conjunction in the current Indian academic landscape? This article offers some preliminary thoughts.

An attention to conjunction is modeled in Sundar Sarukkai's 2023 lecture on Philosophy and Literature at Christ University, which began by bypassing both "literature" and "philosophy," and honing in on "and" as a trans-linguistic logical operator that opens onto broader philosophical

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questions.[5] Another inspiration in this point of departure is William H. Gass, the 20th century American novelist and philosopher. He observed in a 1985 essay that "and" is a word whose occurrences are "merely numbered, never cited;" and that "the dictionary contains it only as a courtesy."[6] He complains that the word "and" rarely, if ever, receives scholarly attention; but he understands that this is natural—"we do not 'look up' manhole covers when we visit the city," he says.[7] I take this to mean that the conjunction "and" is part of the essential but overlooked infrastructure of language. Paradigms of meaning-making that favour ostention, i.e. pointing at something to indicate a meaning (appearing famously in St Augustine's *Confessions* and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*),[8] do very little to account for the essential yet discrete operations of "and." What could we "point at" if we had to tell someone the meaning of "and?"

Approximately thirty uses of the word "and" are enumerated by Gass in a series of close readings (with a number of delightful digressions), mainly of a sentence from Gertrude Stein's short story "Melanctha." (To share the findings without the close readings robs them of their magic, but I will do it in the hope that it might be a path back for some readers to Gass's close readings.) Gass finds that "and" might be designated by the ampersand (formed by interlocking the letters e and t, the letters in the french word for "and"), or by the plus symbol, by a comma, a colon, or a line break. "And" can signify equivalence, sequence, separation or opposition; it might take the place of the infinitive (as in the verb form to do/to be), or it can be used adverbially. "And" can, on occasion, mean "but," "by," "although," "over against," "you might not believe it." It can be used like the connective "like." It can have a summarizing or totalizing function, and effects that include a rocking rhythm, or emotions like surprise, indignation, dismissal, or nervousness.

In light of these possibilities, I ask what kind of relationship is described in the phrase "literature and philosophy." Is it even a relation, or a non-relation—possibly an antagonism? Is it a progression? An uneasy or easy proximity? A projection or mirroring? It would depend, I suppose, on who you ask.

In my experience, the distinction between poetry and philosophy is primarily one of attitude, or perhaps or temperament, particularly in relation to questions of reference: how do words, statements, literary works, refer to the world? I have found that these questions are delivered in a heightened and anxious pitch in philosophy. Literature seems more comfortable with the fictional, and even seems to assume unproblematically that there is something truthful in it, even if why or how this is the case cannot not be fully articulated. Nietzsche's "mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms"[9] puts him in the company of "anti-philosophers"[10]

who are often relegated to literary studies.

A number of significant thinkers pursue questions of reference under the sign of metaphor. Metaphor is interesting (or problematic) for philosophy because it simultaneously posits identity *and* non-identity. When Romeo says, "Juliet is the sun"—the preferred example of Ted Cohen, the author of *The Talent for Metaphor*—Romeo is saying in the same breath that Juliet *is* the sun (like the sun she is warm, radiant; has an animating, life-sustaining effect) and that she *is not* the sun: this is true in a common-sense way—moreover, if she were the sun, saying that she was the sun would be a tautology, an irrelevant, senseless repetition. In this way, metaphor violates the law of noncontradiction in logic with the force of an "and," by means of what Paul Ricoeur calls a split copula (a split "to be") in his 1975 *The Rule of Metaphor (La Metaphore Vive).*

One could say that what emerges in Ricoeur's book is not a theory of reference or representation, strictly speaking, but one of creation: "metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe [i.e. reconfigure] reality."[11] This is surely the most hopeful, optimistic view that one could have about metaphor's capacities. Metaphor has always had to fend off allegations of falsehood, insofar as it stands in for figuration in language. It has also had to combat allegations of secondariness, of being derivative—derived from literal statements. (The assumption in such a view is that one begins with a literal statement, for example: "Achilles is a formidable soldier." One then progresses to the figurative statement: "Achilles is a lion is battle." We know Achilles is not literally a lion, so we understand this to be a metaphorical statement.)

Suspicions of falsehood and excess have led to numerous attempts to cleanse language of metaphorical impurities, to arrive at something minimal and essential and true. The very task of philosophy is sometimes imagined as involving this kind of reduction: the very name of this journal, *Tattva* (essence, truth, reality), expresses such a notion. Stanley Fish wrote in 1989:

> Whether it issues in the elaborate linguistic machines of seventeenth-century 'projectors' like Bishop Wilkins (An Essay Towards a Real Character and a 'Philosophical Language, 1668), or in the building (a la Chomsky) of a 'competence' model of language abstracted from any particular performance, or in the project of Esperanto or some other artificial language claiming universality, or in the fashioning of a Habermasian 'ideal speech situation' in which all assertions express 'a "rational will" in relation to a common interest ascertained without deception,' the impulse behind the effort is always the same: to establish a form of communication that escapes partiality and aids us

in first determining and then affirming what is absolutely
and objectively true, a form of communication that in its
structure and operations is the very antithesis of rhetoric,
of passionate partisan discourse.[12]

Literary training makes one pessimistic about such purificatory rituals
and exercises. I have been compelled, instead, by the idea that metaphor
is foundational rather than superficial to language. Although Jean-Jaques
Rousseau, the 18th century philosopher, was no fan of the poetic or the
figurative, he was responsible for popularizing the (perhaps) counterintuitive
view that figurative language came first, prior to literal language. In John
Moran's translation:

> As man's first motives for speaking were of the passions,
> his first expressions were tropes. Figurative language
> was the first to be born. Proper meaning was discovered
> last . . . Upon meeting others, a savage man will initially
> be frightened. Because of his fear he sees the others as
> bigger and stronger than himself. He calls them *giants*.
> After many experiences, he recognizes that these so-
> called giants are neither bigger nor stronger than he.
> Their stature does not approach the idea he had initially
> attached to the word giant…That is how the figurative
> word is born before the literal word, when our gaze is
> held in passionate fascination…[13]

If metaphor is prior and primary (as Rousseau suggests), and if it is
foundational (as Rousseau does not), then attempts to excise metaphor, and
figure more generally speaking, are misguided. Jacques Derrida compellingly
argues this in his 1974 essay "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of
Philosophy." Derrida similarly, in the essay "The Purveyor of Truth," argues
against "exhibiting, denuding, undressing, unveiling: the familiar acrobatics
of the metaphor *of* the truth."[14] The irony he so beautifully illustrates here is
that this very desire—to exhibit, denude, undress, unveil, and thereby lay
bare—is itself based in metaphor: nothing is literally uncovered in this truth-
seeking process. Desires for bare truth express above all *metaphors* of truth,
however much this may irritate truth-seekers.

We may want to hold on to the idea that philosophy remains a discipline
concerned with truth, reality, and essence in some serious way, even if
we are compelled by Derrida. What philosophy would then need is not to
reject metaphor, which would be impossible and self-defeating, but more
sensitive practices of reading, ones that are limber enough to move in time
with the figurative. I write about this in some detail in an essay on Ludwig
Wittgenstein (the 20th century language philosopher)—in whose thought the
erasure of riddles from philosophy—i.e. the erasure of the non-transparent,

the enigmatic, the playful—is registered as deeply tragic; imbued with pathos.[15]

Proposition 6.5 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, as translated by C.K. Ogden reads: "For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed. The riddle does not exist." This proposition often appears in studies of the riddle as a literary genre, but is less frequently the subject of philosophical study. I argue that Wittgenstein is, like Levinas, invested in the appearance of enigma in language. If something can be brought into appearance, it is no longer truly mysterious. The wonder evoked by the transcendent, Wittgenstein once said in a gathering of the Vienna Circle, "cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is no answer to it."[16] This may be taken as a reflection not only on the nature of the transcendent but also (conversely) on the riddle's discursive format of question and answer, and philosophy's relationship to it.

Wittgenstein wrote at a time when the rising authority of the sciences coincided with a declining respect for the mysterious and the unknown. His interest in the riddles, and the limitations of scientific and philosophical discourse, puts him in the company of Theodor Adorno, who argued in a 1977 paper that providing adequate answers is the domain not of philosophy but of the sciences. Scientists carry out "research," which "assumes the reduction of the question to the given and known elements where nothing would seem to matter except the answer."[17] These answers complement and uphold the questions to which they respond. It is this kind of discourse that Wittgenstein holds responsible for blocking enigma and wonder: one in which the question and the answer are both equally available.

Wittgenstein has the reputation of being a champion of transparency and the publicness of language; of wanting to fix problems of language for philosophy once and for all. But he is the same person who had to be coaxed and cajoled into attending meetings of the Vienna Circle, a group associated with logical positivism, where he is reported to have elected to turned his back on the group and read out Tagore's *Gitanjali*, which was in vogue in Vienna at the time.[18] This is a very literal enactment of his belief that "one should really only do philosophy as poetry."[19] Philosophy *as* poetry. Wittgenstein gives us, here, another way to think of the "and" in philosophy and poetry: as a way through, or a way to. "And" here is an interweaving, an enmeshment, an intimacy whereby the two are to be imagined not as solid separate objects that might be placed next to each other, but as warp and weft of a single fabric. If we wish to get at the philosophical it must be through the poetic.

This characterization of Wittgenstein's thought is based on previously unpublished remarks and notebooks contemporaneous with the composition

of the *Tractatus*. There is one passage in particular to which I keep returning, which I will share with you now.

> I know that this world exists.
>
> That I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field.
>
> That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning.
>
> That this meaning does not lie in it but outside it…
>
> The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God.[20]

I suggest in my paper "Wittgenstein in the Moonlight" that "Wittgenstein's familiar formula of meaning as use (in his later work, *Philosophical Investigations*) might be read as an expression of the inaccessibility (and simultaneous inexorability) of meaning as 'God.' This latter meaning is expressed, and can be gleaned only, through the existence of this world as it is." God may be outside the world, but can only be known through the world. Without this understanding of the externality of meaning and God from language and the world, the later Wittgenstein's emphasis on "grammar" and "forms of life" loses its particular force and charge.[21]

A helpful analogy is available in music theorist John Cage's famous composition *4'33"*. This is a composition in which—famously, or notoriously—musicians sit at their instruments for four minutes and thirty-three seconds without playing a single note. This piece is sometimes described as four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. A more accurate description might be four minutes and thirty-three seconds of the absence of what is conventionally considered musical. Sitting through a performance of this "composition," —which is also a commentary on authorship—one becomes attuned to ambient sounds outside and within the performance space, the sounds of coughing, sneezing, fidgeting, and shuffling. We are made to attend to these with the same care that we would to classical musical. One waits for a silence that never quite arrives, leading to the conclusion that if any silence to be had, it can be experienced only through sound, in the intervals between sound, in a softness that is never the complete absence of sound.

It is this kind of relationship that one hopes for when one thinks of poetry and philosophy. Rather than a rejection of the poetic in the philosophical, an embrace of the poetic, an immersion in it and through it. What would such an embrace of language, of the figurative, by philosophy mean? What would it amount to in practical terms, what would it look like?

An interest in language as such, as compelling and seductive as it is, can often result in dead-ends; this was the fate, arguably, of structuralism and post-structuralism in the postwar period. Language, at that period in intellectual history, was the explanatory model and horizon of all human activity. Such an orientation has run its course, and has rightly been criticized for its aloofness with respect to concrete questions of history and politics.

An alternative to an embrace of language by philosophy, might be an embrace of languages, of specific languages, their scripts, phonetics, grammars, histories and literatures. A blueprint for this is available in the work of contemporary French philosopher Barbara Cassin. She oversaw the mammoth 2005 lexicon project *Vocabulaire europeen des philosophies: Dictionaire des intraduisible.* Here, philosophizing takes the form of extended dictionary entries on terms such as *pravda*, Dasein, *politique*, abstraction, phronesis, *saudade* and *Wunsch*. An expanded English version of this lexicon, edited by Emily Apter and others, appeared under the title *Dictionary of Untranslatables* in 2015.

Cassin's project involves a study of philosophical terms in a lexicographical mode, following their lives and afterlives in *particular* languages, and their translational journeys between languages across time. To give a small glimpse into her thinking, here is a passage from her 2010 essay "Philosophizing in Languages":

> in Russian: *pravda*, which we usually render as 'truth', means, in the first instance 'justice' (it is the established translation of the Greek *dikaiosunê*), and it is therefore a homonym from the perspective of the French. Conversely, the words *vérité* and 'truth' are homonyms from a Slavonic viewpoint because the terms conflate *pravda*, which stems from justice, and *istina* which stems from being and exactness. The same ambiguity (for us) appears in the root *svet*, light/world, and also in the homonymic problem of *mir*, peace, world, and 'peasant commune' on which Tolstoy continually plays in *War and Peace*. We could unravel a good part of the dictionary if we pulled on this thread. Because evidently it is not just a case of isolated terms but of networks: that which in German is indicated by *Geist* will be sometimes *Mind* and sometimes *Spirit*, and the *Phänomenology des Geistes* will be translated sometimes as *Phenomenology of Spirit* and sometimes as *Phenomenology of Mind*, making Hegel a religious spiritualist or the ancestor of the philosophy of mind. But this also applies to syntax and grammar, the framework of languages, with syntactic amphibologies or

> homonymies caused by word order, diglossias (a high and a low language in Russian, which one doesn't quite know how to convey), the subtleties of tense and aspect that certain languages, and not others, compress, right down to the Spanish couple *ser/estar* which makes the French 'être' and the English 'to be' even more ambiguous.[22]

This passage from Cassin serves as a reminder that many of the texts we study as canonical have an existence in more than one language, and access to these many parallel lives can allow us to explore the philosophical questions they carry in new and ever-more nuanced ways. Implicit in this embrace of languages is philology. Cassin identifies as a philologist. But philology is a discipline with a complicated history that continues to be contested and negotiated.

Philology has been described as origin of comparative literature, world literature, as well as the modern humanities, by scholars as various as Siraj Ahmed,[23] Baidik Bhattacharya,[24] and James Turner.[25] While philological practices existed in ancient times, the term philology primarily brings to mind the 18th century, and colonial figures such as William Jones who identified, enumerated and codified oriental languages in ways intended to serve European political, social, and cultural interests. It goes without saying that India was one of the main laboratories for 18th century philology.

To ask, therefore, whether there is any room for philology in India now, we would have to ask what philology in a decolonial mood would mean, especially when discourses of decolonialism are veiled (sometimes flagrant) vehicles for ethnonationalist aggression, and betray a willful ignorance — indeed, suppression—of the question of caste.

The question of practice is present for us here and now. We already exist in a multilingual context: we don't care to always name, or number, or even translate between languages as we move between them seamlessly in conversation. However, this leaves us with certain institutional and logistical questions which are no less ethical questions: in the interest of philosophizing in languages, should classical and contemporary language learning be integrated in a more prominent way in undergraduate and graduate curricula in the humanities? What institutional, disciplinary, and infrastructural changes would be required to enact such a shift?

English is for us an Indian language;[26] it plays an important role in combatting the hegemony of Hindi, and functions as a language of Dalit self-fashioning, as Rita Kothari argues in an essay from 2013.[27] I wonder, though, if it would be possible, in the near or distant future, to think with, through, and beyond English, so that in our work—as much as in our daily life—we encounter langua*s* and philosoph*ies* in the plural, paying attention to the

minutiae of their syntax as much as their larger histories and legacies, which may be long, or short or (in some cases) partially absent or obscure.

This might serve to complicate our conversation in productive ways. For example, if the exercise were to think of *kāvya* and *darśanaśāstra*, rather than poetry and philosophy, we would be having a very different conversation. *Kāvya* and *darśana* texts could both be, and indeed often were, written in verse. So the questions that would arise, of form and formal contrast, would be different. One could think also of the vast distance traversed between *kāvya* and *kavitā*. One aspect of this transformation is described in a forthcoming piece by Anirudh Karnick, about how the poetics and erotics of Brajbhasha had to be rethought—and mostly censored—for the emergence of Hindi literature as we know it now, for it to appropriately represent the nascent Indian nation.[28]

Attending to these details, and the worlds they open up, not only shakes up and broadens our understanding of seemingly singular terms such as poetry and philosophy, but also allows us to approach nonwestern knowledge traditions from new directions and with new aims. Such a philological approach could combine poetry's concern with language, (in its particularity), and philosophy's concern with fundamentals to open new paths in both, perhaps multiple, directions.

Conversations about these (for lack of a better word) non-Western terms, texts, and contexts do take place, but in different locations, and often with different participants. I wonder, in the spirit of experiment, and of collision, what would happen if those conversations could somehow be made to encounter each other. We may decide, having tried it, that it is not a direction we wish to pursue. But I wonder if this audience feels there is a space for a self-critical, reflexive philology in the current Indian context, a philology with no room for chest-thumping, self-congratulation, or jingoism. I am thinking of a discipline inspired by Marxist scholars such as D.D. Kosambi and Rahul Sankrityayan, Irawati Karwe of *Yugānta*, A.K. Ramanujan of *300 Ramayanas*, D.N. Nagaraj (the great cultural critic and anti-caste thinker), and indeed B.R. Ambedkar in works such as *Who Were the Shudras*.

This would be truly difficult task in the polarized scene of academics in India. Nonetheless, I have a deep curiosity about philosophizing in languages, and particularly in Indian languages and literatures, whose surface is barely scratched in the academic spaces that I have inhabited. In my efforts in the last few years towards building (my very limited) capacity in this area, I have found vernacular texts to be far stranger, far more unruly, and more resistant to prevalent literary theoretical approaches than one would expect.

I conclude by offering, once again, that one way to think about philosophy and language is to think about philosophy *through* language, and that the most particular and nuanced discoveries might be found through philosophizing in languages. This is a valuable direction to pursue, if only in a speculative mode, precisely because the moment one thinks about specific languages, difficult political and ethical questions, that are questions of the contemporary moment, become unavoidable.

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Endnotes

1   This paper is based on a lecture titled "And: Reflections on a Conjunction" delivered on 19 December 2024 at the conference "Entanglements of Poetry and Philosophy: Contemporary Positions," Christ University, Bangalore. The author thanks Mithilesh Kumar for the invitation, and for bringing about (through the conference) something of the conjunction this paper describes.

2   Hans Aarsleff, "John Wilkins," *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesora Press,1982), 278.

3   Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1974]), 6.

4   This clubbing (by means of the backslash) makes sense within contemporary disciplinary formations, but has not been historically static. It will be clarified later in the paper that one possible factor bringing them together (in opposition to philosophy) is their relation to figuration.

5   Sundar Sarukkai, "Talk on Philosophy and Literature," (lecture, Christ University, Bangalore, 24 February 2023). https://youtu.be/1tL1GbPY kfs?si=d_raCBPU5S_GaKG_

6   William H. Gass, "And," in *Voicelust: Eight Contemporary Fiction Writers on Style*, ed. Allen Wier and Don Hendrie Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 102.

7   Ibid.

8   Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10-11; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Anscombe, Hacker, and Schulte (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 5.

9   Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," *The Birth of Tragedy and Other* Writings, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 146.

10   Alain Badiou, "Who is Nietzsche?" trans. Alberto Toscano, PLI: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy 11 (2001), 10.

11   Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny et al (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 5.

12   Stanley Fish, "Rhetoric," *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 475.

[13]   For more on Rousseau's "savages" and his interest in origins, see Stefanos Geroulanos, *The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence, and Our Obsession with Human Origins* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2024), 21-35.

[14]   Jacques Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth," translated by Alan Bass in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 175.

[15]   Eesha Kumar, "Wittgenstein in the Moonlight: On the Nonexistence of Riddles," in "Ordinariness," ed. Annabel Barry, *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 33, No. 1 (June 2024): 35-62. https://doi.org/10.1215/10418385-11125474

[16]   Friedrich Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), 68.

[17]   Theodor Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," *Telos* 1997, no. 31 (1977): 126.

[18]   Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage Books, 1991), 243.

[19]   David Antin, "Wittgenstein among the poets," Modernism/modernity 5, no. 1 (1998): 161. This quote happens to be featured on the brochure for the conference at which this lecture was delivered.

[20]   Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein*, 140.

[21]   Eesha Kumar, "Wittgenstein in the Moonlight," 45.

[22]   Barbara Cassin, "Philosophizing in Languages," *Nottingham French Studies* 49, No. 2 (Summer 2010): 22.

[23]   Siraj Ahmed, *Archaeology of Babel: The Colonial Foundations of the Humanities* (Stanford University Press, 2017).

[24]   Baidik Bhattacharya, *Colonialism, World Literature, and the Making of the Modern Culture of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[25]   James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[26]   See Akshya Saxena, *Vernacular English: Reading the Anglophone in Postcolonial India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

[27]   Rita Kothari, "Caste in a Casteless Language," *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 39 (2013).

[28]   Anirudh Karnick, "Śṛṅgāra: Erotic love, adornment, and changing conceptions of literary language in Hindi, 1883-1931," in "South Asian Untranslatables," eds. Eesha Kumar and Adhira Mangalagiri, *Philological Encounters* 10.4 (forthcoming).