Hunger, World, the X: On Ghosh and Miller's *Thinking Literature Across Continents*

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Abstract: This essay constitutes an unorthodox response to Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller's *Thinking Literature Across Continents*: instead of attempting to conventionally engage with a text that challenges the idea of any unitary totality as a whole, I opt instead to dwell on the interplay between language and silence in three different sites of inquiry within the text: the first concerns the question of *hunger*, for which I take as my starting point Ghosh's own starting point in the first chapter of the book, namely Rabidranath Tagore's reflections on a brief episode on the river Ganges. I excavate the transcontinental provenance of these reflections for western, particularly Kantian, aesthetics before I focus on two aspects within the episode that such a framing misses or remains silent about: the paradoxical tendency of material satiation to demote the importance of hunger (as paradigmatically exposed in Brecht); and the indeterminacy of the kind of hunger that is involved in the boatman's response within Tagore's text (as evidenced by prehistoric cave paintings). Finally, I demonstrate the importance of taking these complications into account when reading Ghosh's own extensive interest in foregrounding hunger within the literary phenomenon and its hermeneutic reception. In the second part of the essay, I dwell on Ghosh's critique of prevailing notions of "world literature" in the fifth chapter of the book by demonstrating the ontological (Heideggerian) rather than empirical meaning of *world* in his writing, and, by extension, the subtractive and absence-centered meaning of what he calls the "more than global." Finally, I turn to J. Hillis Miller's reading of Wallace Stevens's "The Motive for Metaphor" in the fourth chapter as an exemplary site for the exploration of the interface between poetics, hermeneutics and ontology that is central to Ghosh's theory of the literary, and thus serves to highlight, in Miller's very engagement with the failure of language as an issue of concern in the poem, the possibility of dialogue between the two critics: indeed, as I show, Stevens's figure of the "X" serves both as a signifier of the ineffable and as one for criss-crossing, for the "across" involved in "thinking literature across" authors, continents and traditions.

Keywords: Martin Heidegger, Ontology, Poetics, Ranjan Ghosh, J. Hillis Miller

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This essay originates in a text prepared as a response to *Thinking Literature Across Continents* on the occasion of Ranjan Ghosh's visit to Cyprus. At that time, I found myself rather intimidated by the responsibility I had perhaps too rashly undertaken. It was not simply that given its dialogical nature and unusual structure as a text, it is a difficult book to speak about. It was also that, given its tendency

to frustrate any unitary cultural or theoretical metalanguage, I found myself unable to speak *about* the book as a whole. But I took courage in my discomfiture. I was encouraged, for instance, by the fact that Ghosh effectively parts from the reader through paradox: "Our transactional listening to each other," he writes to Miller in his brief Epilogue, "has, hopefully, opened literature as a democratic community where readers are welcome to install and invest their inputs through a separate level of listening that may not be docile always" (259). Yet a mere page afterward, Ghosh notes:

> Sitting by the fireplace in the playhouse of literature, we have also allowed things to grow in silence. Perhaps this silence is what the book urges on its readers, triggering their own explorative ways; the meditation that the book is intended to generate effectuates the stirring of continents and the silences that such stirrings have left behind rather unavoidably for readerly ascension and tenancy. (260)

As writers, then, Ghosh asserts, he and Miller have not been merely "listening" to each other and not only writing to, after, across, with and against each other; they have also allowed things to grow in a silence that is being offered to the readers so as to generate a meditation. What is one being invited to meditate on? It seemed to me—and I repeat that this gave me courage toward undertaking the task—that this invitation, whatever else it possibly involved, was an invitation to meditate on the responsibility one assumes when saying "Here I am," when one offers "the first and only possible response to the call by the other" and thus, when one responds, responsibly and irresponsibly at once, "I am ready to respond, I reply that I am ready to respond" (Derrida 71). For responsibility, it turns out, in being the assumption of a duty to respond, is also a paradoxical imperative, in as much as it presents us with the task of responding not only to the general (I am thinking here of the "response" as a genre of academic writing and speaking) but also to the singular, to the possibility of something unsettling and perhaps not quite or fully comprehensible to a generality, that is nonetheless requesting our response. If *in general*, as regards generality, "the most widely shared belief is that responsibility is tied to the public and to the nonsecret," in the case of the singular it is on the contrary bound to bearing witness silently, in silence and by silence, as Derrida would have it (60, 73). Perhaps it was possible to respond while keeping silent about a number of issues as well, like Kierkegaard's or Derrida's Abraham.

Felicitously, this idea turns out to be fairly central to Ghosh's conception of one of his central and (partially) untranslatable theoretical terms, *sahitya*, "commonly understood as literature" (29). For "the way of sahitya" involves expressing something "in forms, images and thoughts" and yet also puts forth a desire "to stay unnamed" (30) and, by virtue of a withdrawal from language and from nomination, a taste for the *sacred*: "the sacred of sahitya is the substance that stays withheld [...] sahitya's sacredness is its power to avoid being named always" (29, 31). What I will have to say will thus be inevitably caught up not simply in a failure to speak about everything that *Thinking Literature* concerns and is concerned with, but also in a concern for the complex and necessary interplay between speaking, listening, and silence. This interplay takes place within the interventions that make up *Thinking Literature Across Continents*, within the texts it engages and within myself, eavesdropping on a conversation and called up to bear witness to it, in my own voice, which, nevertheless, can never be properly my own. My response, then, will concern three instances, three sites where this interplay

of speaking, listening and silence takes place in this book; I will try to examine how things stand with them, in the text and in my response to it. The proper names given to the first two are *hunger* and *world*; the third lacks a proper name other than "the X."

Hunger

Chapter 1, written by Ghosh and entitled "Making Sahitya Matter," (28) begins with an incident described in the chapter "Realisation in Love" in Rabindranath Tagore's *Sādhāna: The Realisation of Life*. Before relating it, Tagore has raised the issue of the instrumentalization of Man by Man and its ethical consequences: "When we define a man by the market value of the service we can expect of him, we know him imperfectly. With this limited knowledge of him it becomes easy for us to be unjust to him" (109), he notes. Then, by way of illustration, he recalls the incident in question, which occurred while he was sailing on the Ganges river on "a beautiful day in autumn":

> As our boat was silently gliding [. . .] suddenly a big fish leapt up to the surface of the water and then disappeared, displaying on its vanishing figure all the colors of the evening sky. It drew aside for a moment the many-coloured screen behind which there was a silent world full of the joy of life. It came up from the depths of its mysterious dwelling with a beautiful dancing motion and added its own music to the silent symphony of the dying day. I felt as if I had a friendly greeting from an alien world in its own language. (110)

Tagore is nearly ecstatic with this sudden irruption, as it were, within the phenomenal world, of the dazzlingly radiant presence of Being, which, embodied in the form of a being of the natural world, draws aside, however momentarily,[1] a "screen" behind which there lies "a silent world" of joy. From a western standpoint, we are, and I presume that Ghosh is fully aware of this, in Heideggerian territory. This territory is delimited by what Heidegger calls the "Originary Greek experience of *ἀλήθεια*" as "unhiddenness" (*The Essence of Truth* 6) and thus the grasping of the true "as the un-hidden [. . .] as what has been torn away from hiddenness [*Verborgenheit*]" (7-8). In stark contrast to later conceptions of truth and the true, Heidegger would suggest, the "originary" conception of the Greeks—and one which Tagore approximates here—was not a conception based on the "adequation," "alignment," "correspondence," or "equivalence" (6) of a statement to something that exists. It is not "assertions, not sentences and not knowledge" that are "true," but rather "the beings [*das Seiende*] themselves," so that in Heidegger's view "philosophy" is that which "seeks beings in their unhiddenness as beings" (9).

But the blissful encounter with the unhiddenness of beings, to return to *Sādhāna*, does not equally enrapture the boatman accompanying Tagore and handling the helm of the boat. To him, the fish leaping merely seems to conjure the image of a missing repast: "Then suddenly the man at the helm exclaimed with a distinct note of regret, 'Ah, what a big fish!' It at once brought before his vision the picture of the fish caught and made ready for his supper" (110). The helmsman, Tagore suggests, is blind to the momentary unconcealment of a being as offered by the experience of being-in-the-world: "He could only look at the fish through his desire, and thus missed the whole truth of its existence," he notes with philosophical resignation (110-111). This also seems to be the reading that suggests itself to Ghosh, who notes that for "the helmsman, greed and utility eclipsed a glimpse of the other world"

(27)—that of the "Infinite" (35). The terrain has now shifted to Kantianism, as Ghosh's meditations on the aesthetic "value of uselessness" (35) resonate not only with Tagore's own but also with Kant's correlation of the beautiful with "formal purposiveness, i.e. a purposiveness without a purpose" (*Critique of Judgment* 57).[2] For Ghosh, as for Tagore before him, Tagore has "seen" something that the "boatman had missed" (28).

This dichotomy—let us call it a dichotomy regarding vision and blindness respectively—turns out, on closer inspection, to hide a second one. The "desire" which blinds the boatman to the beauty of what he has witnessed, the desire that Tagore evidently masters, is hunger. Hunger, let us recall, appears precisely in the guise of the "faculty of desire" (36)—or the "appetitive faculty," in Walter Cerf's translation (Kant, *Analytic of the Beautiful* 5)—within Kant's Analytic of the Beautiful, where it is correlated to the taint of "interest" within delight in the pleasurable (or sensuous pleasure), and delight in the good (or moral pleasure) (*Critique of Judgment* 37-40). In sharp distinction to them, Kant notes, judgement regarding beauty—the judgement of taste—involves a "pure disinterested delight" (37). Kant's, Tagore's and Ghosh's line of approach is both familiar and clear here: the presence of appetitive desire makes the boatman miss the truth of the beautiful. Indeed, Ghosh later quotes Tagore's suggestion[3] that literature is "our wealth, our plenitude, *that part of our being which overflows in excess of our actual needs, which has not been exhausted in the process of practical life*" (34; emphases added). In the dialogue of cultures that Ghosh's writing both undertakes and enacts this, too, is a familiar *topos*: "man shall not live by bread alone," in the words St. Luke attributes to Jesus (Luke 4:4).

What if, however, Tagore did not so much *master* his hunger as *lack* it? What if he was simply *not hungry*, at any rate not nearly as hungry as the helmsman? The dichotomy of vision and blindness does tend to presuppose a less visible one between satiety and hunger. But dichotomies do not place truth *on one* side of a division. I think, therefore, that one is entitled to continue asking questions: what if it is not only or necessarily the boatman who misses "half the truth"? Is not "not by bread *alone*" already *half* a truth, to the extent that it does not face up to a life frequently lived "not by bread *at all*"? Allow me, then, to come to the defense of the Ganges boatman, in good (in)fusionist spirit,[4] I hope, by giving him a rejoinder, something to say back to the transcontinental dialogue of literature and philosophy (Kant, Heidegger, Tagore, Ghosh) I have been tracing so far. Such a rejoinder might come in the form of the words that another German, Bertolt Brecht, devoted to the matter of matter in "Among the Highly Placed": "It is considered low to talk about food. / The fact is: they have / Already eaten […] If the lowly do not / Think about what's low / They will never rise" (286).[5] Strikingly, the "matter" in question here is the matter-enabled forgetting of matter as such: it is those who have "already eaten" that consider it "low" to reduce, say, a fish to food; and conversely, the lowly cannot rise without contemplating that which is thereby forgotten: the fact that matter—the body in need, the material needs of the body—matters. Literature, perhaps, ought to be no less concerned with hunger than with beauty.

This means that an ethics of sahitya would also involve, as a first step, dialogizing Tagore's disillusion with the boatman's subjection to the law of covetous desire by reminding him that hunger, too, is part of the truth of being-in-the-world. Indeed hunger, leaping fish-like within a scene ostensibly about beauty, draws aside for a moment the many-colored screen of Tagore's own text, even if the silent world it thereby unconceals and makes present is not full but empty, expectant, wistful and

craving. Registering the paradoxes concerning hunger that Brecht points out, it seems to me, would lead us to read Ghosh's words in the chapter he devotes to the ethics of sahitya (chapter 9) far more poignantly than if we contented ourselves with Tagore's or Kant's frameworks: "The ethics of sahitya are inscribed in a variety of hunger. Sahitya creates its own hunger […] It is formed out of a hunger to explicate ways of human experience and engagements with emotions. It is anchored in a hunger that is its *eros*, its creative aesthesis, its power of sustenance and motivation" (Ghosh and Miller 207).

Kant (and probably Tagore as well) would here immediately object that the "hunger" proper to literature and to the aesthetic more broadly, has no proper object and thus has to be sharply distinguished from a hunger that is "lowly" precisely because it has a material object. But that would be reading the boatman's five words, his meagre portion of language in Tagore's brief sketch, far too presumptively. Formally or externally, they express *not appetite but wonder and admiration*—hence the exclamation mark that punctuates them in the text. It is Tagore himself who attributes to this form the content of that specific species of admiration which we call coveting—desire to appropriate that which is admired to one's own self, hunger for possession and consumption. But is it really so easy to distinguish between the two, the drive for aesthetic pleasure and that of material fulfilment, the hunger for beauty and that for food? The boatman is possibly hungry, but that is not all we are entitled to believe that boatmen, men and women marked for being unremarkable, named by remaining nameless, are or have been.

In an article published in the *Smithsonian Magazine* in 2016, Jo Marchant presents the findings of the most recent discovery and dating of cave art in what are at this point believed to be the oldest paintings in the world, found in a cave called Leang Timpunseng, on the island of Sulawesi, in Indonesia. Among them is a drawing of a babirusa, a local pig-deer, estimated to be at least 35,400 years old—"the oldest-known example of figurative art anywhere in the world." On the occasion of these latest findings, Marchant makes a number of points it would be useful to summarize: first, it is now considered quite unlikely that figurative art first arose in Europe, as the Chauvet cave masterpieces in France had led archaeologists and paleontologists to believe for some time. Secondly, it appears Claude Lévi-Strauss was on to something when he remarked that our remote and anonymous ancestors engaged in representing animals not "because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think' " (with): "their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations" (89). Third, and I quote Marchant, "far from being a late development, the sparks of artistic creativity can be traced to our earliest ancestors." "Not by bread alone" seems to have been a law already understood by paleolithic hunters and gatherers, though of course, they went physically hungry quite often. Art appears to have irrupted suddenly rather than gradually or progressively into the world, with all the mysterious perfection, all the evental force of Tagore's leaping fish, or, for that matter, of language.

But irrupted from *where*? And for what purpose? Commitment to memory, anticipation and planning, the ritual communication with a spirit world, the opening up of consciousness to an imaginary sphere, and hence, to recall Miller's discussion of Wolfgang Iser in Chapter 2, the process of "giving pragmatic embodiment" (Ghosh and Miller 64) to the chaotic formlessness of the *imaginary* through the determinate form of the *fictive* (62): all these are possible explanations for the cognitive revolution these drawings silently attest to. But irrespectively of one's response to these, rather hopelessly unanswerable questions, these inscriptions on rock manifest a hunger that would not be

satisfied or sated, a fateful discovery of a lack within immediate experience that calls forth a surplus of mediation and mediatedness; an excess, unique, it appears, to the human animal, that we know as mimetic desire, as a passion for figuration.

I believe Ghosh knows well, perhaps better than Tagore in this instance, how much we owe to this insatiable yet enigmatic hunger, which furthermore appears to have interwoven human creativity across continents, for its signs, more or less contemporaneous, have been found in Africa, in Asia, in Europe, in northern Australia. In Chapter 9, he returns to the question of hunger, foregrounding its irreducible connection to that which, because it is not reducible to utility, cannot be used *up*, consumed and extinguished through use:

> Hunger satiated is hunger generated. Hunger attended is hunger made possible. Hunger is experience realized; hunger is responsibility awaiting fulfillment. The ethics of sahitya argue for various incarnations of hunger. [...] Any courageous stand resulting in an unconditioned reading of a text is hunger of a different level [...] Hunger [...] is [...] the product of forces that are never registered or recorded in our formal understanding of a text's travel down the ages and times. [...] The postaesthetic of hunger is the excess of energy that leaps beyond the interpreter's mortal, limiting abilities to submit to a signification; it is a separate sort of uselessness [...] Uselessness is a hunger whose manifest gain is in a senseless loss. (207, 228, 230)

"What keeps mankind alive," to turn for a moment to Brecht's and Weil's song in *The Threepenny Opera* is, in part, the useless as the correlative of a hunger that does not consume any object but *consumes the subject*—consumes it in relation to the unseen, the unsaid, the not-quite-self-identical. For the being of the use-less, of that which escapes use, is literally inextinguishable. In Chapter 2, Miller relevantly observes that Ghosh "stresses the sacredness of literature's 'uselessness' in the everyday world of getting enough to eat or keeping warm in cold weather" (50). What I tried to show through my excursions in Brecht initially and animal cave paintings subsequently, however, is that an ethics of literature that is attuned to the question of hunger would do well to take stock first, of the vital role of material satiation in forgetting (or discounting) the importance of the material; and secondly, of the fact that, in Tagore's text and against its very grain, as it were, the words of the boatman remain indeterminate as to their relation to material interest or disinterest respectively. An ethics of literature, it seems to me, would therefore also be a reminder of the irreducible indeterminacy of the meaning of hunger in the world, indeed of the double constitution of what we call "world" by hunger as a property of everything living in it. The "everyday world" of which Miller speaks is precisely one where a large number of people do *not* get enough to eat, just as it is also, since the dawn of the species of *homo sapiens*, a world of uselessly hankering after what cannot be eaten, of imitation without determinate purpose and intimation without a proper object, spreading well in excess of the institutional borders of professional "art" or "literature." This is how it stands with hunger: it will always have been difficult to disentangle the aesthetic and the material, Tagore and the boatman, interest and disinterest, transcendence and privation from each other without doing damage to a relation that allows them to frame our experience and representation of the world.

World

Chapter 5, "More than Global," opens with another quote from Tagore:

> just as the world is not merely the sum of your ploughed field, plus my ploughed field, plus his ploughed field—because to know the world that way is only to know it with a yokel-like parochialism—similarly world literature is not merely the sum of your writings, plus my writings, plus his writings. To free oneself of that regional narrowness and to resolve to see the universal being in world literature, to apprehend such totality in every writer's work, and to see its interconnectedness with every man's attempt at self-expression—that is the objective we need to pledge ourselves to. (Ghosh and Miller 111)

Ghosh deploys Tagore here to lay waste to what one could call the empirical and accretionist model of "world literature": the idea, which I suspect he finds embodied in Franco Moretti,[6] that world literature is simply the accumulated totality of "ploughed fields," of neatly bordered "national literatures," whose major generic, stylistic and formal concerns can then be empirically ascertained. Tagore calls such a purely quantitative conception of "the world" "yokel-like parochialism"—a worldview from where *the world* itself is ironically missing. In it, "totality" has lost its subjective and qualitative dimensions and has become a purely mechanical and quantitative fact. It has become a mere agglomeration of "ploughed fields," rather than the hospitable, accommodating and open terrain where "universal being" might articulate itself.

I think these lines are important in providing some orientation toward what Ghosh means by the "more than global," a term that circulates quite a lot in the fifth chapter, but which in my view is not easy to grasp or parse as to its methodological implications. This is partly because of the tricky semantics of the word "more," which seems to point in the direction of accumulation and accretion—in other words, precisely the direction Tagore criticizes as irredeemably parochial. Paradoxically, however, Ghosh's use of the "more" preserves a decidedly *subtractive* dimension: the "more than global," he notes, "is the *destruction* of an expressive and organic 'totality' but is also a way of providing a sense of a totality, a world-wide-forming totality, whose access is not always in accessibility" (113; emphasis added). Ghosh later adds: "The more in the global is the *absence*—the sense withdrawn, nothing as sense—that is where the use of literature lies. The absence that lies in the vessel or in the room is the vacuum that provides form and accommodates content. Similarly, the category of the more in globalizing literature creates absences that are not vacant but are points where thinking begins to open sense" (131; emphasis added).

As I understand it, Ghosh's reference to the inaccessible and to withdrawal in these two passages is telling of an abiding concern with the experience of the sacred. The "more than global," at least when it comes to the experience of literature, stakes its difference from the discourse of globalization on the grounds, then, not only of its subtractive but also of its non-secular character. In Chapter 1, Ghosh had accordingly remarked that the "sacred of sahitya is the substance that stays withheld, a kind of withdrawal" (29); while Miller, having confessed his initial puzzlement with Ghosh's use of the term, subsequently quotes a note in which Ghosh states: "I am using the word 'sacred' to mean a part of literature which is 'untouched,' something that does not give easy access to its readers" (49). "World

literature" would therefore constitute a problematic category for Ghosh to the extent that the noun "literature," properly understood, impacts the meaning of the noun-become-adjective "world." To the degree that it qualifies "literature," "world" is imbued with the experience of the partly inaccessible, which, since Eliade, has been synonymous with the experience of the sacred:

> For a believer, the church shares in a different space from the street in which it stands. The door that opens on the interior of the church actually signifies a solution of continuity. The threshold that *separates* the two spaces also indicates the *distance* between two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The *threshold* is the *limit*, the *boundary*, the *frontier* that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where these worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the *sacred world* becomes possible (Eliade 25; emphases added).

But the "experience of the sacred" does not equal religion, as Ghosh himself emphasizes (29). Its provenance is rather irreligiously ontological instead. This is why, I believe, Ghosh refers to the "absence that lies in the vessel," a reference which I think unmistakably alludes to Heidegger's essay "The Thing." There, let us remember, Heidegger posits the paradoxical situation which has arisen in the so-called era of "globalization," in which "all distances in time and space are shrinking" due to revolutionary technological advances in transport and communication, yet in which it is also the case that "the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness" (Heidegger, "The Thing" 163). The search for the elusive quality called "nearness" brings Heidegger to the contemplation of the nature of things, considered as what is ontically "near" us, and that in turn leads Heidegger to the contemplation of the thingness of an earthenware jug and its nature as a vessel. Heidegger then writes, in the passage that Ghosh most likely alludes to (even if he also thereby alludes to other and similar ones in Sanskrit and Chinese thought): "The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel's holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel" (167).

Echoing Heidegger, then, it seems to me that Ghosh wants to foreground the role and importance of a silent, withdrawn and structuring lack—*of a hunger*—which functions as the support and ground for any engagement with the phenomenon of "world literature." For him, "world" is not a map, nor a picture, nor an agglomeration of empirical facts and details, but an ontological domain in which Being *is* inasmuch as it exists in an abyssal relation to the Nothing.[7] What Tagore called "the universal being in world literature" designates the coming forth of *being-in-the-world*, of finding oneself in thrownness among other beings as well as in confrontation with the Nothing, as the subject-matter of literature. What is "more than global" is thus *worldliness in literature* rather than "world literature": Like Heidegger, Ghosh is not concerned with the production of knowledge about an object, but rather with the matter of *Dasein* as being that is concerned with itself and thus with its own evanescence and questionability, before and beyond the Cartesian duality of subject and object, *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (*Being and Time* 87-89). This is why, instead of consisting simply in an analysis of statements, Ghosh's hermeneutic also tries to hold on to what, within writing, shapes "the void," takes "hold of the impalpable void" and brings it "forth as the container" (Heidegger, "The Thing" 167). To refer to the stakes of the procedure of subtraction or ascesis that Alain Badiou ascribes to one of the writers Ghosh dwells on, Samuel Beckett:

> Beckett rediscovers an inspiration belonging to Descartes and Husserl: if you wish to conduct a serious inquiry into 'thinking humanity,' it is first of all necessary to suspend everything that is either inessential or doubtful; it is necessary to reduce humanity to its indestructible functions [...] If we disregard [...] what is inessential, what distracts us, [...] we see that generic humanity can be reduced to the complex of movement, of rest (or dying), of language (as imperative without respite) and of the paradoxes of the Same and the Other (44, 47).

The X

In *Thinking Literature*, the concern, within the domain of critical inquiry, with what Tagore calls "universal being," Heidegger terms "Dasein" and Badiou names "generic humanity" comes, in my view, in the form of Miller's confrontation with Wallace Stevens's poem, "The Motive for Metaphor." I cite it here in its entirety:

> You like it under the trees in autumn,
> Because everything is half dead.
> The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves
> And repeats words without meaning.
>
> In the same way, you were happy in spring,
> With the half colors of quarter-things,
> The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
> The single bird, the obscure moon—
>
> The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
> Of things that would never be quite expressed,
> Where you yourself were never quite yourself
> And did not want nor have to be,
>
> Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
> The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
> The weight of primary noon,
> The A B C of being,
>
> The ruddy temper, the hammer
> Of red and blue, the hard sound—
> Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,
> The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X. (288).

The explicit subject matter of Stevens's poem is metaphor, but, precisely to the extent that metaphor is what is of concern to it, it is a poem attuned to both *hunger* and world. It is attuned to

hunger to the extent that, in Hans Blumenberg's account, figuration as such points to a principle of "insufficient reason" (qtd. in Donoghue 184), a deficiency within the ontological condition of being human that is covered up by conjuring a powerful excess to the ordinary signifying potential of words. Metaphor, as Denis Donoghue notes in his own reading of Stevens's poem, adds to the world "perceptions that were not there before" (188). But the poem is also concerned with *world* to the extent that "the motive for metaphor," in its own words, is a "shrinking from" the *anxiety* caused by the fundamental or primary reality of being-in-the-world. It is precisely *anxiety* that constitutes the motive for metaphor, to the extent that, as a mood, it "fetches Dasein back out of its entangled absorption in the 'world.'" The result, Heidegger adds, is that "[e]veryday familiarity collapses. [...] Being-in enters the existential 'mode' of not-being-at-home." He concludes: "*Not-being-at-home must be conceived existentially and ontologically as the more primordial phenomenon*. [...] Dasein is anxious in the very ground of its being" (*Being and Time* 182-183). In a sense, with Stevens we find ourselves at the antipodes of where we started: in Tagore, writing was attuned to the joy created by the unconcealment of *a* being from within the silent and obscure depths of Being as such; in Stevens, on the other hand, we are confronted, in the last two stanzas, with precisely Being as such, for which a number of names are offered, as if no one word (and no one metaphor, either) can actually nominate it effectively. If one were to ask, then, "what does *world* amount to in Stevens's poem," the response would be precisely *anxiety*—anxiety as "the A B C of being," its elementary form. Metaphor exists to provide us with the penumbra of shadow, with something to help us obscure and evade "the weight of primary noon," wherein shadows virtually disappear and the constitutive primacy of not-being-at-home-in-the-world therefore unconceals itself in anxiety. In the words of Stevens's "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "the clouds preceded us / There was a muddy centre before we breathed. [...] From this the poem springs: that we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves / And hard it is in spite of blazoned days" (383).

My reading so far owes a lot to Miller's own masterful reading of Stevens. I will therefore not recapitulate it here, except by way of highlighting the importance of his insight that the two seasons named in the poem's first two stanzas, autumn and spring, signify transition and change (99); indeed, "the exhilarations of changes" and the desire for them are precisely what the first line of the third stanza names. Ontologically, of course, change, movement and transition are properties of Becoming. We can thus derive, alongside and in relation to the struggle between metaphor (which literally means transport and connotes precisely movement—in modern Greek it also therefore means transportation) and something that frustratingly and terminally resists it, a conflict between the signs of Becoming and those of Being. Stevens's poem then becomes legible as an exploration of fundamental ontological oppositions. The poem contrasts the markers of seasonal change ("autumn," "spring"); the designators of something that, because it changes, is not-quite-itself ("half," "quarter," "you yourself were never quite yourself"); the gerundial indications of process and of becoming ("melting," "lighting," "shrinking"); the direct allusions to movement and change ("moves," "changes," "motive," "metaphor"); and the reference to the blur-like obscurity produced by motion ("obscure," used three times) with the shadowless thing-in-itselfness of "primary noon," of the "ABC of being" shining forth in an intolerable, blinding "sharp flash" from which "metaphor" is, in the fourth and penultimate stanza, revealed to be mere evasion and shelter.

Essentially, the last two stanzas contain nine different metaphorical nominations for what the

"shrinking," the turning away that constitutes "the motive for metaphor," concerns: metaphor helps us turn away from "[t]he weight of primary noon," of things as deprived of the shadow of figuration, their domestication by language, in my reading; from "the A B C of being," from Being in its precisely "primary," elementary form; from what is described, in five consecutive and related metaphors, as the hammering and hardening of "Steel"— a name, it seems to me, for "objective" reality as alien and hostile to us as humans, set against "intimation," against the sense of spontaneous freedom that consciousness has of itself; and, finally, from "[t]he vital arrogant, fatal, dominant X," which is, as it were, what has been forged by the "hammer," "the hard sound," "the sharp flash" of some primeval anvil.

The last word of the poem distinguishes itself by the fact that it is not, in fact, *literally* a word; if we go by the *letter* of this word, it is in fact only a letter. It also distinguishes itself by the fact that in it, in this word that is in fact a letter, the question "what does this mean or stand for?" is already posed by the word, or letter, itself. To ask, while reading the poem, "what does X mean?" is to ask something "X" itself already asks. "X" transcends being merely a letter and becomes a word only to the extent that it becomes a sign for the unknown, the equivalent of the signified "unknown." Miller duly registers this, of course, noting that "X is the sign in mathematics for an unknown" (103). This is no doubt both significant and true; but the very fact that, mathematically speaking, "X" stands for something whose value *is not predetermined*, being indeed indifferent as content to the procedural logic of an equation, already suggests that "X" is *a placeholder* whose content can, in different contexts, be occupied by different contents, many of which happen to belong to the semantic constellation of the negative and of negation: prohibition and the demarcation of a zone as inaccessible or dangerous (these, incidentally, are properties that are fundamental to the marking of the zone or site of the sacred); deletion, rejection, cancellation, and the marking of error; death and enforced silence or censorship. In Wallace's poem, as Miller shows, the "X" is the "darkness at noon," the silence in which the poem, as it were, vanishes—a terminal locus beyond the rescue of metaphor; but it is also, *as metaphor*, and a multivalent one at that, that which holds the whole poem up, its silent ground. This—the being of X as a sign for the terminal failure of metaphor and as the ultimate metaphor of the poem—is no doubt paradoxical; but is it not equally and relatedly paradoxical that if metaphor, according to the poem, offers us a "shrinking" from the "A B C of being," this ABC from which we shrink manifests itself to us, at least according to Heideggerian ontology, by and through shrinking from us? "[*A*]*ttunement discloses Dasein in its thrownness and, initially and for the most part in the mode of an evasive turning away*" (*Being and Time* 133; Agamben 97).

Despite appearances, then, the poem is not really the stage for a final and apocalyptic battle between subject and object (as Northrop Frye apparently interpreted it) (Donoghue 186-187) or between metaphor and something doggedly prohibitive and inimical to it, but rather about the very *ground* on which such oppositions stand, and in the space of which they *appear*: "*Being* means, for Stevens, I dare to assert, not just what is, 'things as they are,' 'without evasion by a single metaphor', but also the invisible ground or rock beneath. This ground is the substance of things, not only in the sense of their isness, their existence, but also in the etymological sense of what stands beneath them and holds them up (their sub-stance)" (Ghosh and Miller 104).

These are Miller's words, but it seems to me that they could just as well be Ghosh's; the ground on which Stevens's poem stands and from which it simultaneously dramatizes its anxious flight is

the question-posing terrain where an encounter that thinks of literature “across” continents, texts, disciplinary formations can and does take place. *Crisscrossing*, of course, is another of the meanings of “X.” That *other* semantic field, in which “X” resonates with the derivatives of the “trans” and the “across,” includes the intersection of otherwise divergent paths or roads, cross-lacing as a binding technique, as well as stitching together or suture. In such cases, “X” stands for something which brings things (paths, itineraries, languages, subjects, continents, affective dispensations) into momentary contact or, alternatively, holds them firmly in place, in mutual support and in the *symplokē* of a conversation, which, as we all know, involves speaking, listening, and silence, in turns, by turn, at once.

Notes

1. But only momentarily, in fact, instantaneously if we follow Heidegger: “As it reveals itself in beings, Being withdraws. Being thereby holds to its truth and keeps to itself. This keeping to itself is the way it reveals itself early on. Its early sign is ἀλήθεια. As it provides the unconcealment of beings it founds the concealment of Being” (*Early Greek Thinking* 26).
2. Or, as Kant has it later, in the Definition of the Beautiful derived from the third Moment of the Analytic of the Beautiful: “Beauty is the form of *purposiveness* in an object, so far as this is perceived in it *apart from the representation of an end*” (*Critique of Judgement* 60).
3. Quoted from Prabas Jiban Chaudhury, *Tagore on Literature and Aesthetics*, Rabindra Bharati, 1965, 17.
4. Ghosh describes the (in)fusion approach as “a philosophy of seeing, a hermeneutic desire, that diffracts to interact,” adding: “(In)fusion, then, can be considered an orientation, a kind of investigative spirit that respects knowledge regimes, the boundaries of tradition, the sacrality of paradigms, but also dares to infringe on them” (4).
5. Similarly, in “What Keeps Mankind Alive,” Brecht writes: “You lot, who preach restraint and watch your waist as well/ Should learn for all time how the world is run: […] Food is the first thing. Morals follow in./So first make sure that those who are now starving/Get proper helpings when we do the carving.” (145).
6. Indeed, Ghosh notes in one of the footnotes to the chapter: “The concern is about resurrecting literature from the fuss and fizz of world literature. I want to see it freed from the uncritical comparative modes of doing literature, from Franco Moretti’s sweeping categorizations, and from the seeming authority of acknowledged universals of ‘global literature’” (278).
7. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 11, 54-55, 63-64; and: “The Being that we are asking about is almost like Nothing, and yet we are always trying to arm and guard ourselves against the presumption of saying that all beings *are not*. But Being remains undiscoverable, almost like Nothing, or in the end *entirely* so” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 38). Heidegger adds: “aside from the philosopher, the poet can also talk about Nothing—and not because the procedure of poetry, in the opinion of everyday understanding, is less rigorous, but because, in comparison to all mere science, an essential superiority of the spirit holds sway in poetry” (28).
8. Blumenberg, “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric” (qtd. in Donoghue, *Metaphor* 184).

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