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DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4173220
Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies ISSN: 0972-3331
Vol 12/1-2 Jan-Dec 20012 19-38

"Temple and Image are a Scandal:" Paradoxical Stories Leading Meaningful Lives

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*Abstract***:** We may distinguish between two different modes of representation: verbal and non-verbal languages. Among the non-verbal are those languages without words: songs, tears, and laughter. What is revealed on the borderline between the non-verbal and the verbal, where the word is devoid of semantic content and becomes pure sound? These languages begin where words leave of and their purpose is not to close but to open. They are the rising up of the void. Therefore, at times they overflow and sweep us of in the irresistible multitude of their waves; therefore, at times they

Thelakat, Paul. (2012). "Temple and Image are a Scandal:" Paradoxical Stories Leading Meaningful Lives Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies, Jan-Dec 2012 (15/1-2), 5-18. http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4173220

cost a man his wits, or even his life. Only pre-languages can bear witness to this void, a dangerous realm that reverberates with horror and death. At the same time, however, "every creation of the spirit which lacks an echo of one of these three languages is not really alive." There are important authors and mystical thinkers who demonstrate various ways of transforming theological tropes and transcendental concepts into the aesthetic realm—poetic and musical. In "absolute music", a symphony, for example, gives listeners emotional insight into and access to divine spheres by letting them experience what cannot be described. Being linked to the "absolute", music, art, literature and rituals become part essential part of religion. Music has been given shape to the divine Name.

Religious language in turn is a form of poetic discourse. In it the human imagination is at work, creating new forms of response to God's actions upon us. The truth claims of religious texts are more like those of the poet than of the historian or the scientist. Jesus is the Parable of God. Heavenly is imprisoned in the earthly, the opposition of heaven and world is reconciled in the incarnation. Can an adequate realization of the spiritual in the sensuous be achieved without tension? Life gives language to the Holy but tongue can only stammer. In Ephesus of St. Paul's time, "temple and image are a scandal."

Keywords: Scandal, Image, Religious language, Poetic discourse, Modes of representation, Name of God, Aesthetics, Living through stories

1. The Violence of Idol-Breaking

"Now when the Lord spoke to Moses in Egypt, he said to him, "I am the Lord. Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt everything I tell you." But Moses said to the Lord, "Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to

me?" His tongue is not flexible. Thought is easy; speech laborious. Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country" (Exodus 6:28-&: 3). Aaron will be enlightened; he shall be your mouth! From him will your own voice then issue, as from you come my voice! But when the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Exodus 32: 1-3).

"Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets"(Ex.32:15-16).The ecstatic dance and singing around the golden calf infuriates Moses, he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it. He ordered the Levites to kill and in one day about three thousand of the people died.

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), an Austrian Jewish composer, converted to Protestantism, before returning to Judaism in the 1930s composed his Opera *Moses und Aron.* He wrote the Confession of the Jew: "It is our thinking of the one, eternal, God who is invisible, who forbids imitation, who forbids to make a picture and all these things, which you

perhaps have realized when you read my *Moses und Aron* …The miracle is, to me, that all these people who might have forgotten, for years, that they are Jews, suddenly facing death, remember who they are"[1]

Aaron asks Moses in Schoenberg's opera, "Can you Worship what you dare not even conceive?" Moses retorts "Dare not? Not conceived because unseen, can never be measured, everlasting, eternal, because ever present, and almighty. The one God is almighty." The distinction between the concrete image (Aaron) and the abstract idea (Moses) is conveyed through the use of different musical styles. Moses' words serve as the motto of the whole opera: "Only one, infinite, thou omnipresent one, unperceived and inconceivable God."[2] God is characterized as the one and only, which emphasizes the revolutionary aspect of monotheism relative to the polytheistic religions. Other characteristics are the infinity of God, his omnipresence and finally the inability to conceive and perceive him.

We may distinguish between two different modes of representation: verbal and non-verbal languages. Among the non-verbal are those languages without words: songs, tears, and laughter. What is revealed on the borderline between the non-verbal and the verbal, where the word is devoid of semantic content and becomes pure sound? These languages begin where words leave of and their purpose is not to close but to open. They are the rising up of the void. Therefore, at times they overflow and sweep us of in the irresistible multitude of their waves; therefore, at times they cost a man his wits, or even his life. Only pre-languages can bear witness to this void, a dangerous realm that reverberates with horror and death. At the same time, however, "every creation of the spirit which lacks an echo

of one of these three languages is not really alive"[3]. There are important authors and mystical thinkers who demonstrate various ways of transforming theological tropes and transcendental concepts into the aesthetic realm—poetic and musical. In "absolute music", a symphony, for example, gives listeners emotional insight into and access to divine spheres by letting them experience what cannot be described. Being linked to the "absolute", music, art, literature and rituals become part essential part of religion. Music has been given shape to the divine Name.

Here, there lies the danger of music, as conveyed, for instance, through the singing of the mythological sirens. An act of violence to which the listener must surrender, for the soul is incapable of resisting its sensual temptations, music also embodies a powerful threat: elevation and surrender become two sides of the same coin. This danger is inherent in all forms of art and expression. The formless truth of Moses can become violence of dictatorship. The expressions of Aaron can degenerate to paganism of idolatry and irresponsible ecstasy.

2. He Shall be Your Mouth

Where Moses accuses Aaron of enslaving the people with images while it is Aaron who is standing, before them and before us. To take the prohibition of graven images to its extreme—at least in the way Moses does—is to become one of the world's great taskmasters. So Aaron asks Moses, "What are the tablets in your hands but idols?" In that bitter anger he threw the tablets, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. Later Moses was commanded to cut two stone tablets like the first ones in which God "wrote the words that were on the first tablets" (Ex.34:1-2). This indicates not a radical questioning that, in the case of Moses and Aron, can be seen to break into the claims of the Absolute's unrepresentability.

We are now in a position to say why Aaron builds the idol. His message explains why he becomes master of ceremonies at the orgy, fanning its flames until Moses can witness it to break the idols. And the message is not merely that we cannot do without images, a fact that Aaron takes for granted and on which he builds. Moses sees himself as liberating the people from lies, as he has liberated them from Egypt; Aaron, in the calf, points to the perils of liberation, to the fact—to continue the lesson—-that the desire to rid ourselves of idols is equivalent in experience to the ultimate idolatry. Aaron suggests it, but Moses does not hear. In breaking the tablets, he has come as close as possible to the "nothing" that is the modern ambition to create, a nothing that is nevertheless not nothing, since it is a representation of nothing, but he is not comfortable in this position; he rushes too fast to deconstruct; he cannot live with the fact that "the image is constantly reborn"; [3] he will thus destroy and destroy again.

Religion can never break its link with art, literature and music. These are venues of man's value creation. The language any religion employs is poetic. The poetic experience, the musical experience, and indeed the experience of the work of art embodies strife and calls attention. This poetic, musical, artistic experience is thus a transformation not of the world, but man, and thus of the world. "In music sounds resound; in poems vocables, material of the said, no longer yield before what they evoke, but sing with their evocative powers and their diverse ways to evoke, their etymologies."[4] "Music, feelings of happiness, mythology, faces worn by time, certain twilights and certain places, want to tell us something, or they told us something that we should not have missed, or they are about to tell us something; this

imminence of a revelation that is not produced is, perhaps, 'the aesthetic event'." [5.] To undergo this experience is to re-attune to the origin of being, and this transformation is a musical one. As man comes to embody the song whose instrumental properties withdraw during use like the hammer, poetry becomes the 'pointer' toward a musicality which is in constant withdrawal. The poetic (musical) experience with language reveals a nexus in which sound, organization and signification meet in the place of man. As man is both the common origin and the point of convergence for these ontic manifestations, the experience of this point intrinsically implicates a systemic abstraction which in turn 'calls' the implementation of a technique into play. "The function of art is expression"[6]. Art, however, expresses itself in different ways, speaks in different languages, and employs different modes of expression. "An artist—even a painter, even a musician—tells. He writes of the ineffable." [7]

3. Original Sin of Art

Adorno describes beauty as the "original sin"[8] of art; it is that which makes art a "permanent protest against morality." [9.] By opposing beauty to the living and to morality, and by characterizing it as a source of violence and of guilt, Adorno closely approximates Levinas's indictment of beauty in "Reality and its Shadow." Levinas, by comparison, treats the beautiful work as "essentially disengaged" [10] and "a dimension of evasion."[11] According to Levinas's view, fundamentally opposes engagement and the demands of responsible action; when experiencing art, one feels "as though everything really can end in songs."[12]

"The artist has given the statue a lifeless life, a derisory life which is not master of itself, a caricature of life."[13] The artwork imprisons its characters, locks them in, thereby substituting an immobile plasticity for a living history. During Hitler's

regime, Adorno reminds us, the beautiful was exploited in the service of the most barbaric ends. "The more torture went on in the basement," Adorno writes, "the more insistently they made sure that the roof rested on columns."[14] Despite employing very different terms, Levinas recognizes a similar problem with aesthetic enjoyment and binds pleasure in beauty to a feeling of guilt and shame: "There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague." [15] "If in modern artworks cruelty raises its head undisguised, it confirms the truth that in the face of the overwhelming force of reality art can no longer rely on its a priori ability to transform the dreadful into form. Cruelty is an element of art's critical reflection on itself; art despairs over the claim to power that it fulfils in being reconciled."[16] Adorno explains: "His poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative. They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings, indeed beneath all organic language: It is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars."[17]

Aaron's final answer in Opera is as follows: "Image of your idea / they are one, as all is that emerges from it . . . / Yet the knowing ones surely will I ever again discover it"—words at ease with a multitude of images, a variety of representations. "It is just as much a property of language to sound and ring and vibrate, to hover and to tremble, as it is for the spoken words of language to carry a meaning. But our experience of this property is still exceedingly clumsy, because the metaphysical-technological explanation gets everywhere in the way, and keeps us from

considering the matter properly."[18] Any person, whether musician, philosopher, or both, who embarks upon the formidable task of writing about music will encounter the inherent impossibility of writing about it and encountering it at the same time. We are always just before it, or just after it. We chase its traces and spectres. Perhaps the problem confounds itself in the case of generative music. We seek here to textually explore an experience, and furthermore wish to transcend the subjective nature of this from within. We thus arrive in a space which is perhaps best describable through analogy.

4. Aesthetics Inseparable from Ethics

Art is substituting the object with its image, not its concept. Art kills reality producing its images. Image in itself is not art, but art utilises the image. Conceptless, substanceless relation is pure sensation, and thus the whole world can be perceived aesthetically. To Levinas, an image is not transparent like symbols and signs are, but it is connected to its object in resemblance. Intention does not reach an object within a picture. Yet image is not an independent entity, as reality is the cause of the image. "A being is that which is, that which reveals itself in its truth, and, at the same time, it resembles itself, is its own image."[19] As this cause, reality includes its own shadow, its image. "To say that an image is an idol is to affirm that every image is in the last analysis plastic, and that every artwork is in the end a statue—a stoppage of time, or rather its delay behind itself…the artwork does not succeed, is bad, when it does not have that aspiration for life which moved Pygmalion. But it is only an aspiration…a caricature of life".[20]

Art is not representation but materialisation. Art immerses us in an idolatry of pleasure. The idea of idolatry is returned into below. A critic is useful for breaking the public's passivity in receiving the art, as the critic does not contemplate in silence.

The critic integrates the artwork and the artist to the real world and calls out the artist's irresponsibility. Art is not completely useless nor unethical as it may act as a useful tool for philosophy and thought. Levinas uses his religiously imbued language to describe what art is not: it is not part of creation, nor is it revelation. God can be represented in language, because unlike art, language can render absence, - - it does not allow any blurring of the representation and the thing represented, the signifier and the signified; while one cannot take words for things, one can be deceived into confusing pictures of things with the things themselves." [21] "One might think that art is limited to rendering what is finite and present. Aniconic art seeks to render the infinite and to put presence in question." [22]

Instead of sacred, there is holiness. Things and spaces, the holy Land, may be holy but people are holier.[23] Derrida describes a conversation he had with Levinas, and how Levinas told him, "You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy."[24] Ethics is a religious experience. To turn this logic backwards, religious experience is ethics. Levinas himself tells an example of this "I am reminded of a visit I once made, as part of a religious ceremony, to the church of Saint Augustine in Paris. It was at the beginning of the war, and my ears were still burning from the 'new morality' phraseology that for six years had been circulating in the press and in books. There, in a little corner of the church, I found myself placed beside a picture representing Hannah bringing Samuel to the Temple. I can still recall the feeling of momentarily returning to something human, to the very possibility of speaking and being heard, which seized me at that

moment"[25]. Bible cannot be read literally as science text. The scriptures play their part in the "naming of God" reframed as "the logic of equivalence" and the "logic of abundance". They act as mutual correctives, although Ricoeur does not offer an equivalent to *phronēsis* (ethical sense) in the economy of the gift. According to Levinas, aesthetics is inseparable from ethics, which requires us to enhance the tools of artistic judgment within the ethical discussion. In one of the few articles which he dedicated to the subject of art, Levinas expresses the concern that art leaves man alone with himself. "There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment" [26.] He writes, leaving us to contend with the question of whether artistic creation is indeed an egoistic action. Is the act of artistic creation a re-entry into "the cave"?

5. Bible Prohibits the Bible

Prohibition of graven images should be taken further than it was originally intended, meaning that it should be turned on the Bible itself. We are surely aware that this is a parasitical position, not only because the critique of the Bible relies on the existence of the Bible, but because, the prohibition is already taken this far in the biblical text. The Bible shows us the prohibition of the Bible. The sacred fragment given to us can be grasped as long as, at the same time as we resist the enthusiasm that would marry us to the image, we also resist the countervailing enthusiasm that would have us smash the image the moment it arises. "Language which has become Holy Scriptures, and which maintains its prophetic essence—probably language par excellence—the Word of God that is already audible or still muffled in the heart of every act of speech, is not solely a matter of the engagement of speaking beings in the fabric of the world and History, where they are concerned with themselves—that is to say, with their perseverance in being." [27] Biblical text demonstrate how the various modes of discourse disclose "styles" of faith. "The

‘confession of faith’ that is expressed in the biblical documents is inseparable from the forms of discourse, by which I mean the narrative structure.”[28]

These various forms include prophecy, parable, or hymns, and each constitutes a “style” of confession of faith that creates a “polyphonic language.” Sometimes God appears “as the hero of the saving act, sometimes as wrathful and compassionate, sometimes as the one to whom one can speak in a relation of I-Thou type, or sometimes as the one whom I meet only in a cosmic order that ignores me.” 29 Because these forms for discourse do not establish a unified style of faith, one’s “theological significations” will be “correlatives of forms of disclosure.” [30] Religious discourse adopts the same creative dimensions active in poetic texts. The text solicits the readers, allowing a possible world to manifest and challenge him or her to project their own possibilities within this world.[31].

Jesus Christ himself, exegesis and exegete of Scripture, is manifested as logos in opening the understanding of the Scriptures. But secondly, and already within the New Testament, a correspondence is effected between “the interpretation of the Book and the interpretation of life.” Levinas concludes: “It is one thing to answer a question, in the sense of solving a problem that is posed; it is quite another to respond to a call…” [32.] So we begin to stutter, to murmur, or to mumble; then the entire language reaches the limit that sketches the outside and confronts silence. “The artist refuses to be only an artist,” Levinas asserts, “…because he needs to interpret his myths himself.” [33]

6. Lifting the Veil: Epiphany

The Temple of Isis expressed a sublime thought: "I am all that is and that was and that shall be, no mortal has lifted my veil". Is revelation of art higher than all wisdom and philosophy? How to gaze "the starry heaven above and moral law within" of Kant and attain the epiphany? "What we call sublime in nature outside us… becomes interesting," writes Kant, "only because we present it as a might of the mind to rise above certain obstacles of sensibility by means of moral principles."[34] For Kant, sublime experiences make "intuitable for us the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility."[35] By directing the subject toward those aspects of humanity that go beyond the level of the merely sensible, in other words, toward the dictates of practical reason, Kant describes the experience of the sublime as raising the "soul's fortitude,"[36] and keeping "the humanity in our person from being degraded."[37]

Marion uses the metaphor 'screen' to convey the sense of what he thinks is the mediating nature and the conditionality of the Heideggerian Being. The only way to escape idolatry altogether, Marion proposes, is to break the 'screen', to think God without any condition, not even the condition of Being. The task is twofold, corresponding to the double meaning of Being, that is, Being understood in the tradition of metaphysics, and Being in the Heideggerian non-metaphysical sense. The first step of the task is to free God from metaphysical Being, which is precisely the theological significance he finds in Heidegger's criticism of onto-theology. Beyond the idolatry proper to metaphysics, another idolatry, the second idolatry, proper to the thought of Being as such. By idolatry Marion means any regionalization of the divine. The solution to this second idolatry, therefore, is to dissolve or break the 'screen', to abandon the anteriority of Being, to de-centre Being, or as Marion puts it, 'to think God

without any condition, not even that of Being' and 'to think God without pretending to inscribe or describe him as a being.' [38]. Obviously 'screen' is used by Marion as a condition in its negative sense. It makes God visible to human eyes, but at the same time closes our access to His invisibility and reduces His infinity.

Book of Questions by Edmond Jabes states: 'All faces are His; this is why He has no face'?" Richard Kearney said in an interview "This is one of the dangers of monotheism, and arguably, principally of Christian and Islamic monotheism, both of which appeal to one special face, Jesus and Mohommad. It is particularly an issue for Christianity. Yahweh has no face, but all faces are Yahweh's face." "Now as I understand it, this refusal by Jesus as *prosopon*, to be reduced to a singular face/person, is the refusal of possession. It is the refusal to be made into an idol or property of any particular church. This refusal by Jesus proclaims that, as much as we may try, we cannot latch on to him as the unique *Noli me tangere*. He must go, so that the spirit may come. Now what is the spirit? Well the spirit for me is other faces." "Then the face of Jesus becomes—potentially at least—every face. That is very different from saying there is only one Jesus."[39]

"The first I see of the other is his face, not as one among other visible aspects of him, but that which I see first. It's to his face that my plight is addressed, his face that holds my attentive gaze. The face is visible. But the face has a peculiar status in the visible: it is at the same time expressive. It does not remain trapped in a plastic form. It overflows its expressions. It is irreducible to a grasp, a predatory perception."[40]

"For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands". "The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the existing to my own measure and to the measure of its ideatum – the adequate idea …To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instance he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching [*enseignement*]. Teaching is not reducibile to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced."[41] I can never fully grasp the Other's own unique relationship with language. It involves 'no more than the most elementary of gestures: "from self to Other"; not a mode of thinking or observation, no inner intention but responsibility –a going toward, a being for the Other, responding to his or her turning, his or her face –giving.' [42]

7. We Live in Stories, Rituals and Metaphors

The storyteller 'tells stories of the gods, but his yarn is spun from the ungodly, human heart'.[43] Every story is also an idol we have to retell and deconstruct. Unnarrated life is not worth living. A society is inspired by narrative imagination rather than doctrinal sermons or abstract treatises. We live in stories, in metaphors and idols. By imitating 'the exemplary acts of mythic deities and heroes', writes Mircea Eliade, 'man detaches himself from profane time and magically re-enters the Great Time, the Sacred Time.'[45] We belong to history before telling stories or writing histories. The historicity proper to

story-telling and history-writing is encompassed within the reality of history. 'For whomever [the story] becomes the truth it does so ... by hammering out a shape of life patterned after its own shape ... the shape of the story being mirrored in the shape of our life is the condition of its being meaningful for us.' [46]

Liturgical acts are showings of faith and hope and love. Silence of love is transformed into a new showing, a showing that involves words. Action and multivalent words mutually shape and correct each other, dancing in constant tension so that neither becomes stagnant or faded in the Christian imagination. Faith, hope, and love cannot be said; they are not subject to proof or scientific investigation. They are altogether different from anything that could be subject to empirical inquiry. Language and the acts into which language is woven form the language game, which is dynamic; it changes and acquires variations as often as people grow and progress through the ages. For the Christian theologian it may serve as a reminder of the *via negativa*, that in everything we affirm about God (and ourselves in relation to God), we also deny. Ricoeur understands these stories as a species of religious language. Religious language in turn is a form of poetic discourse. In it the human imagination is at work, creating new forms of response to God's actions upon us. On Ricoeur's view, the truth claims of religious texts are more like those of the poet than of the historian or the scientist. Jesus is the Parable of God. Heavenly is imprisoned in the earthly, the opposition of heaven and world is reconciled in the incarnation. Can an adequate realization of the spiritual in the sensuous be achieved without tension? Life gives language to the Holy but tongue can only stammer. Hölderlin writes in a later

version of the elegy "*Brot und Wein*": "But in Ephesus temple and image are a scandal." [47]

Notes

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