Editorial Introduction

Poetics of Self-construal in Postcolonial Literature

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How man is made and how he makes himself was at the crux of the anthropological inquiry launched by Immanuel Kant in his 1798 *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. The subsequent story of the discipline, progressively aided by others, both from the field of humanities (philosophy, sociology, psychology, ethnography) and of sciences (biology, physics, physiology, psychiatry), followed one or the other paths opened by the Königsberg philosopher.

The self grounded in physiology is considered by Kant egoistic, self-centred and motivated by irrational drives: involuntary perception, subconscious associations, arbitrary taste or unaccountable desires.

On the contrary, the pragmatic self is historically and culturally generated in an individual who has a motivation and a purpose in his effort to civilize himself, living in the spirit of law and morality. As values transcend the empirical self and are shared in common with peers, these constitutive states and activities of the psyche point to the existence of a common human nature which, however, changes across time and space.

Kant's successor, Johann Friedrich Herbart, attempted a rationalization of the activity of the senses, applying mathematics to the response to sensory stimuli in view of identifying predictable associations. Wilhelm Wundt started as an observer of the physiological response to the world in psychopathic patients of his Leipzig Laboratory and progressed towards a self capable of organizing his chaotic perceptions according to repetitive patterns into relevant and irrelevant mental stuff, anticipating in his *Logic* Edmund Husserl's eidetic process of phenomenological constitution.

Husserl's phenomenological self, serving as a site of the world coming into view, was redefined by Martin Heidegger's social ontology as an existential self thrown into a world which is revealed to it (*Dasein*) by interacting with others:

> Dasein as Being-with lets the Dasein of Others be encountered in its world. Being-with is in every case a characteristic of one's own Dasein; Dasein-with characterizes the Dasein of Others to the extent that it is freed by its world for a Being-with. Only so far as one's own

Dasein has the essential structure of Being-with, is it Dasein-with as encounterable for Others.(Heidegger 2001, p. 157)

The term might be misleading if applied to the Paul Sartre existentialist experiencing a sense of alienness in a world where the others are Hell (Sartre, *No Exit*, 1944). The Sartrean self is processual, both subject and object of becoming, denying all heritage, emerging as an intentional subject in its realized projects (Sartre famously said that Jean Racine is the sum total of his plays – *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1946).

In the postwar world, the constructions of selfhood, self-awareness and identity came in a cascade of contradictory conceptualizations. summed up by G. Strawson (Strawson 1999, web) as: "the cognitive self, the conceptual self, the contextualized self, the core self, the dialogic self, the ecological self, the embodied self, the emergent self, the empirical self, the existential self, the extended self, the fictional self, the full-grown self, the interpersonal self, the material self, the narrative self, the philosophical self, the physical self, the private self, the representational self, the rock bottom essential self, the semiotic self, the social self, the transparent self, and the verbal self." Despite this dizzying variety, Roger W. Sperry and Polly Henninger are trying to find a leading path through the later half of the last century culminating with a revolutionary moment - the cognitive turn:

This still expanding outburst can be traced, on both logical and chronologic grounds, not to chaos theory, ecology, the new physics, or dozens of other currently ascribed sources, but rather to the cognitive (consciousness) revolution that immediately preceded. These new approaches all share one key feature in common, namely, they all depend, directly or indirectly, upon a refutation and successful overthrow of the long dominant materialist paradigm.   (Sperry & Henninger 1994: web)

Self-construal in the postwar period can, however, hardly be called materialist. More appropriate would be the word "spectrality" which can apply to the whole intellectual history of postmodernism.

Deconstructionist philosophy did not leave the self untouched. It came to be seen as an empty signifier, the I of discourse, reduced to "an autobiographical animal:"

 It happens that there exist, between the word I and the word animal, all sorts of significant connections. They are at the same time functional and referential, grammatical and semantic. Two general singulars to begin with: the I and the animal designate an indeterminate generality in the singular and by means of the definite article. The I is anybody at all; I am anybody at all and anybody at all must be able to say "I" to refer to herself, to his own singularity. Whosoever says "I" or apprehends or poses him- or herself as an "I" is a living animal. (Derrida 2002, p. 417)

The instance writing is thus itself a semiotic construction emerging in time since infancy through exposure to conversation and entry into the intersubjective order of language which allows only of a metonymical presence (Jacques Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious", 1966).

For New Historicism, the self is the agent missing from all histories, reclassified as exercises in rhetoric (Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse,* 1978) or as provisional narratives of problematic

relevance. The self is believed to be constituted by naratives of its embodiment (gendered, classed, raced textual body) or by counternarratives of the haunted postcolonial world.

Most important of all in the deconstruction of the Cartesian self is the posthuman panoply of critical theories.

Heidegger was probably the first to raise the alarm. As early as 1938 he deplored the role of technology which replaces the human subject with bureaucratic procedures and protocols. The highest exertion of the intellect – scientific research—is now commissioned by publishers, established in international conferences, and designed by directors of studies (Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," 2002/1950). Knowledge is reduced to a set of rules or rather a template for generating discourses approved by the power system (Michel Foucault, *The Order of Discourse*, 1971). Writing itself, from a monument raised to eternity, morphs into a site haunted by previous texts.

The new self has ceased to be human, participating in the information network of the planet. It is just one layer of a stratificational system whose degree of organization varies from the quantum particle to the brain or a phase in the autopoiesis (self-creation, similar to quantum self-organization) of the living (J. Mingers, 1995) which describes biological processes in the physical space.

The talk about models of human conduct, of the good life, has assumed a quantic garb. Innovation in society is a matter of attractors and localization (a concept which earned Philip Anderson his 1977 Nobel Award). Novelty is at first limited to a small number of subjects who become attractors creating around them a basin of localization. The new information spreads out in time until it penetrates the whole system whose state is changed. Does one need to redress the backwardness of some society? There is no need for speeches and disputation or other personalized forms of address. It is enough to implant therein a few individuals of the opposite persuasion for the character of that community to be gradually changed. Sociologist Jeffrey Goldstein calls this "the arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns, and properties during the process of self-organization in complex systems." (Goldstein 1999, p. 49).

Sometimes there seems to be no antidote. More recently there are texts about which we do not know whether they were generated by human agents or AI techniques. The software has been created which identifies AI generation, but there are also prgrammes which assist these machinic authors in hiding fraud.

Changes are systemic (Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962), uniting epistemically East and West. If the Vedāntic myth of the Over-Soul was emulated by romantics (Hegel, Emerson), connections are now established between the Buddhist Dharma and General Systems Theory (based on notions of mutual causation or dependent co-arising). (Macy 1991).

This starburst picture of discourses theorizing the self might be simplified to a list of topics of more general concern and intuited as legitimate paths to what Immanuel Kant regarded as the work of man upon himself to understand its nature and aesthetically shape his personality.

In our world of migrants and vanishing identities and traditions, it is Heidegger or Gadamer (*Truth and Method*, 1975) who speak to us more convincingly than posthuman discourses about cognitive neural networks. As Heidegger says, we cannot imagine a human being without a world.

Self-construal is first of all the search for a home in the most general sense of the word. Homing is this fusion of self and world.

Gadamer's philosophy of the dialogic self identifies its emergence in conversation. Born at the intersection of self and world, identity is always something liminal, emergent, an in-betweenness of states of consciousness. The self-other relationship is a co-arising process.

Being in the world, the self will be a form of identitarian embodiment (classed, raced, gendered, etc. body).

Finally, there is also an imaginary self – either the one explored by psychoanalysts or created as simulation models by builders of possible worlds.

In his books of dramatic monologues, Debasish Lahiri creates such possible worlds yet rooted in a historical reality which still haunts the present one. The foundation epic of European culture is proven to carry traces of its Sanskrit origins. In his poem, "Gaspar's Dream", he alludes to Philip Larkin's famous "Church Going", wondering like his predecessor what modern man can find in those religious vestiges of Europe. Larkin's answer is a sense of the past inspired by "so many dead [who] lie around". The story of Christianity goes back to the miraculous star, guiding the magi, one of whom was Gaspar, India's king. But then again, who knows anything for certain about them? Were they kings or beggars? The nothingness of Gaspar's dust collecting in the stone artefact rendering his representation material and enduring is the only certainty.

Essential and unchanging human identity would have to be located in the origin. But the origin is permanently receding. We are harking back in the abysm of time, but *Who knows whence it first came into being?/He, the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it,/ Whose eye controls this world in the highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not ...*

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