

From Silence to Rhetoric¹

MICHELLE CAHILL

Editor of *Mascara Literary Review*

Like the world itself, the textual encounter permits infinite possibilities. But how does language contain the undisclosed? This question is internalised in the process of writing but it is also relevant to the spiritual quest. My detours as a writer, from silence to rhetoric comprise a journey that is difficult to describe but which is triggered by discontents of one or another cause, displacing me towards different ways of seeing. Sometimes the path has been to practise meditative silence, at other times it has compelled me to resist the silence of colonialism, to reclaim a culture and heritage lost to me but renegotiated within the tropes of rhetoric. I made several journeys to India to research the poems in my recent collection, *Vishvarūpa*. But what pitfalls does the poet face as ethnographer? How can myth and memory reconstruct a postcolonial identity? Writing is a space that emanates from silence. But it is also cultured and gendered, encoded by the positive terms of language and its philosophical assumptions. I would like to discuss these concerns within the framework of Buddhist and Hindu philosophy and with reference to Tyler's discourses on postmodern ethnography and rhetoric. In much the same way as we consider culture or a literary tradition relative to the writing it produces, I think it is worthwhile to give consideration to detours, to the journeys of displacement, which are marked and re-marked by language though they occur outside of language. Such flights inscribe and renew a writer's relationship to writing.

The Semiotics of Meditation

A journey needs maps and directions so I would like to begin by quoting a well-known Zen proverb: *The finger that points to the moon is not the moon.*

This aphorism is typical of how Mahayana Buddhist logic is deconstructive in its negation and reversal of meaning (often, it expresses a double negation). In this analogy, the moon is enlightenment and the finger represents both the signifier and signified combined. The finger denotes both the word 'enlightenment' and all possible notions we may have about it. The assumption here is that by looking beyond all relative notions of enlightenment we may begin to experience it for ourselves. The phrase is image-like and rhetorical; in Barthes' lexis it denotes a linguistic message while it also connotes the esoteric, the concurrence of oblivion within essence.

I became deeply interested in Buddhism thirteen years ago. I was privileged to have a wise teacher, Venerable Pra Ajahn Po. At Wat Suan Mokkh, a forest monastery in Thailand founded by the well-known monk Buddhadasa Biku, who was committed to social change and the teaching of Buddhist practice to Westerners, I learned what I describe as the semiotics of meditation. I travelled there because I needed to find space. Because, like most of us, I wished to be liberated from suffering. What I encountered in silence among the grass snakes and geckoes, was my petulance and frustration.

There is an essential emptiness in the way that Buddha responded to the metaphysical questions of reality: questions such as the unity or the separation of the body and the mind, or

questions about the afterlife. He suggested that reality is devoid of speculative or philosophical designations and therefore that language is a priori insufficient. Interwoven into the structure and quality of consciousness, language is a cultural phenomenon, based on arbitrary distinctions and differences, a systematic and organised use of symbols, which has semantic, logical, and expressive meaning. *Ānāpānasati*, also known as mindfulness of breathing, is a sixteen-step contemplation of body, feelings, mind, and dhamma. It comprises both *śamatha* (concentration) and *vipassanā* (insight). In this sutra the activity of the mind is diverted from the production of meaning towards the recognition and abandonment of signifiers. The mind is trained in non-identification with signifiers or signified, which are transitory and provisional, in particular the hindrances to mental harmony.

The dhamma (a term which is interpreted in many ways by different schools) was described by Buddhadasa Biku as ‘natural law’, being more like a science than a philosophy. It proposes there is nothing permanent or absolute within the mind. Rather, our minds are a part of nature. For me this realisation was profound. Given that I have always found solace in nature it should not have been surprising. The Buddha apprehended a reality that transcends the order of ‘worldly’ objects, in which things are perceived beyond affirmation or negation, independent of categories or conceptual thinking. The phenomenon of the real is like a flickering, empty of form, interconnecting, in a state of constant flux. Like most Westerners, and despite having a science background, my ego and logic resisted in particular the teaching of *anatta* or non-self. *Anatta* refers to objects and conditions, without exception and including *nibbana* (enlightenment), as non-being, non-self, lacking any essence or substance that could properly be regarded as a ‘self’. This premise does not deny the existence of things, but rejects as problematic the facile relationship between a phenomenal signifier and a theoretical signified. During *śamatha* meditation one observes the pixelation of senses, feeling, thinking, observing, and knowledge. Buddhism then, is an empirical practice of non-materiality, aligned to post-structuralist theory. It predicts Derrida’s critique of Western metaphysics, with its implication that:

There has to be a transcendental signified for the difference between signifier and signified to be somewhere absolute and irreducible. (*Grammatology* 12)

Sceptical of metaphysics, the notion of a ‘transcendental signifier’ was hardly foremost in my mind when I travelled to Thailand. But Ajahn Po’s account of ‘non-self’ was perplexing, contesting all my university training. It was announced with clarity rather than with conviction. ‘Not me, not my’, he would utter slowly in reference to *anatta*, his thick southern Thai accent stripped of rhetoric in the quiet of morning after we had been meditating since well before dawn. This was a time when the colours of flowers seemed most vivid. When I opened my eyes, Pra Ajahn Po’s face had a wild and gentle appearance, much like a snake’s. How could it be that the self did not exist? From quantum physics I knew that atoms are the building blocks of matter yet at their core they are empty. I had read about anti-matter and the unspecified particles of dark matter, which emits no light and is invisible.

During meditation silence is broken by mental constructions: the Lacanian other/Other already inhabits the self and has been encountered in both the imaginary and symbolic sense. Thoughts arise and decay. In such a space language is not static but fragmented, ephemeral; neither language nor thought can be held indefinitely. Only when the mind floats free of hindrances can it dwell in sublime ‘pure’ silence, beyond thought, beyond signification; a

foreignlanguage. To recuperate Foucault's term, I describe this space as a heterotopia resisting a stable identity. Foucault tells us that:

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. (25)

Theravadan meditation acts as a counteraction to refigure the way the self is seen as fragmented, as *anatta*. Active and passive, it resonates outside of place or time, conditioned by impermanence, closed and private in one sense yet infinitely open to the mind's gestures. So it is interesting that Buddhism predicts a deconstructionist notion of the Same, the Ideal, in its critique of realism and the logocentric production of meaning.

Langue et Parole: La Voix Moyenne

Language and Speech: The Middle Voice

Over the course of some years I made several sojourns to Buddhist monasteries in Northeastern Thailand and in Laos. As a visitor I was asked not to speak, not to write, or read. The function of language in the sangha community is minimal, whereas in a literary community, language is a commodity, indulged, and accessorised. When I asked Pra Ajahn Po, what I should do on returning to my Western existence, he advised that I should practise meditation at least twice a day and not speak too much. When I asked about the status of writing, he said that I should abandon it because it is to do with the self; it is an attachment to the self. Certainly writing participates intensely in many thoughts, feelings, discernments, and categories of consciousness from which Buddhist practice tries to detach. For years this had perplexed me. While it seemed like a compromise I convinced myself that writing and meditation were parallel journeys. Yet given that a writer must detach from writing in order to liberate writing, I now consider that Pra Ajahn Po's advice to me was correct. I have come to appreciate how the Buddhist perspective on any given concept is nuanced by a depth of field which reverses that concept. So within its own parameters any answer may contain its question, any presence, its absence, any self, its Other.

Buddhism describes this coexistence of conditions of being and non-being as 'the middle path'. As Jin Y. Park writes, quoting aptly from the *Nirvāna Sūtra* and other Pali texts:

As the Buddha tries to explain to Kaccāyana, to say that there is no self is only another way of saying that there is self. ... By putting the affirmation and negation in the same category Buddhist thought deviates from the dualistic discourse in which being and non-being, presence and absence, active and passive form binary opposites. (10)

Derrida critiques the many discourses in which dualisms underlie the metaphysics of essence and presence, in privileging speech (*parole*) over written language (*langue*). Writing he asserts is already inscribed in speech as absence is in presence. Derrida's 'middle voice' is not a dialectic, rather the collapse of opposites. A simultaneous operation of neither word nor concept, it marks a juncture, an epoch. *Différance* is the detour from the univocal, the trace of delay and interplay. It could be described as inter-being, as meaning's double desire, its stenography and its scars, the scribbled disavowal of memory, the scriptures of articulation. Park quotes Derrida's account:

différance is neither simply active, nor simply passive, that it announces or rather recalls something like *the middle voice*, that is speaks of an operation which is not an operation, which cannot be thought of either as a passion or as an action of a subject upon an object ... or on the basis of, or in the view of, any of these terms ... (Derrida quoted in Park 12)

Buddhism and deconstructionism both rely on practise, returning to the breath or the circuitry of the text. The middle path of Buddhism may even resonate with the middle voice. I wrote a sequence of poems in my first collection which are a homage to the journeys I made to Theravadan monasteries. They gesture towards touching the void somewhere between knowledge and wisdom, which summoned my curiosity and seemed necessary to trace. Such experience oscillates between words and the realm of silence. So even a description of the desire to be free from desire, is desire. Here is the poem 'Dukkha'.

Dukkha²

Does it surprise you
to be torn by this dialogue?
To feel the ribbon of your breath
trip, your joints burn?
In the jungle you sweat,
stumbling step by step,
swearing blindly that this
was not what you expected ...

how your logical bones defend a corpse.

Grass swallows the monk
walking through a coconut grove.
Burnt saffron, the sun steals his robes.
Without want you see
tree snakes coil over leaves,
toward the gully.
Sometimes the walls
percuss with geckoes,
each gift, a birth.
Ease for the shock of knowing
your life's making and going.
At dawn you bathe by a well
naked of words or laughter.
Thoughts retreat like colours
in the untarnished light.

(*The Accidental Cage* 48)

The poem contains images which some might describe as exotic, such as the appearance of a tree snake in the absence of name or category. The second person voice is personal, self-inquiring in tone. The poem describes an alternative cultural and philosophical experience and it hints in the final lines at the process of meditation where thoughts retreat. The study of experience, phenomenology and the way it is structured consciously intrigued me as a writer. And while the poem is not free from this reality, it partially fulfils its lyric promise of image, narrative, voice. My interest in the tension between inner and outer worlds led me to witness themes of entrapment and liberation as they reflect the four noble truths of Buddhist philosophy. We are seduced by thought and mental constructs; we suffer because of attachment to identity but the mind is subject to natural processes: birth, decay, and impermanence.

Years later I still have a beginner's mind and do not wish to suggest myself as an expert or scholar. There are many forms of Buddhism: broadly speaking Theravada and Mahayana, which includes the esoteric traditions of Zen, Tibetan, and Tendai. Extant discourse on the intersections between Buddhism and deconstructionism has been marginalised though budding at the interface of philosophy, theology, Asian studies, and postmodernism. It often extends to a comparative analysis of Buddhism and deconstructionism's negative theology which I am not trying to establish. Critics and academics like Jin Y. Park, Robert Magliola, Fabio Rambelli have focused on Mahayana Buddhism which is founded on the writings of the sage, Nāgārjuna. A 2nd century South Indian philosopher, Nāgārjuna's engagement with emptiness is readily analogous to Derrida's theory of trace and erasure. His tetralemmic logic questions the subject/predicate relationship as a way of dismantling theories of identity and dhamma.

However, my encounters with Theravada Buddhism establish it, for myself, as a thoroughly semiotic and empirical practice which closely observes Pali text, and in which the function of meditation is performative, deconstructing received concepts. *Ānāpānasati* does not merely observe language in a highly systematic manner, but it questions the status of knowledge and the authority of signs.

Two Kinds of Silence

For the postcolonial purpose, concerned with reviving a material identity in a predominantly homogenised literary discourse, Buddhism's tropes of silence appear at first glance to be problematic. But in rejecting the coherence of signification to an original, unified self, Buddhism contests the logocentrism and ethnocentrism of dominant Western discourse with its silencing of Others. The Buddha anticipated a critique of Platonic intolerance to a blend or *mélange* of heterogeneous terms. My growing awareness of the nature of hybridity has become an intuitive aspect of my work, writing from the perspective of difference where the notion of identity becomes problematic and fractured.

Contextualised by a historico-political climate of white neo-colonialism and racial supremacy my activism has merged with writing. Yet writing from the interstices towards the middle voice is a practice which helixes along what is quite possibly the same axis as a spiritual path. There are many nuances to consider in the way language might cross its violent edges and boundaries. Five years ago these detours found me researching the Upanishads of Hinduisim from which I had been deracinated as a postcolonial subject.

In the Vedic tradition there appears to be a tacit acceptance of an ultimate reality. Non-duality implies that there is no separation between the soul and the Brahman. Yet the distinctions between self and other, between mind and body, between active and passive are apparent within Hinduism's varied communities. Nāgārjuna raised serious doubts about non-duality in 250 AD by pointing out the emptiness of selfhood, and the paradoxical nature of acquiring knowledge.

Non-duality has had its rough ride over the centuries but it poses intriguing questions. In what state of awareness is the experiential world real or illusory? Dream, waking, sleep, or the fourth state, described as 'pure' consciousness? This had been the subject of syllogistic analysis amongst Vedanta scholars, particularly Gaudapada (8th century Advaita) and Ramanuja (10th century). The poems I wrote in *Vishvarūpa* are structurally connected by slippages between dream, memory, waking, and myth as non-linear events. Readers who are expecting to find a temporal or logical order to the poems might miss the crossing over fault lines. The diasporic consciousness resides in more than one locus or time; it moves in a reverse and a forward direction, both enabled and troubled by what Salman Rushdie describes as 'stereoscopic vision' (19).

Hierarchies of event and place, of real and mythic, of coloniser and colonised can be transformed by liminality. In my story 'The Lucid Krishna' a Newtown-based psychoanalyst has a dream about befriending a vegetarian saxophonist, called Krishna. During the course of the dream, the psychoanalyst begins to exercise her own purpose thereupon empowering the god-like musician. From a volatile, heterotopic space I have written a *bildungsroman* about an Indian girl of mixed ancestry who migrates to Australia. I have come to appreciate the complementary merits of the Buddhist and Vedic spiritual disciplines, inspired by the syncretism apparent in the Himalayas (Nepal, India) and in Bali, with its Hindu and Buddhist avatars.

An influential text for me has been Christopher Isherwood's translation of the *Bhagavad Gīta*, in which Krishna counsels Arjuna, preparing him to take a difficult action to slay his cousins on the battlefields of Kurukshetra. Krishna advises Arjuna of a middle path: that there are two paths towards realisation, the path of action and the path of contemplation. But Krishna's two paths if pursued to the end will ultimately intersect, leading to one place. This delayed transcendence appears to be reinstating an undivided Self. So the resemblances between Vedanta Hinduism, Buddhism, and deconstructionism are partial.

While I question the idea of 'an ultimate reality' or the undivided subject of ethnocentric representations, what interests me in Hinduism is how the silence of the subject may be broken by rhetoric, destabilised by liminality, de-historicised by myth. The poem 'Two Souls' is an example of the frisson between non-duality and non-self (*anatta*):

Two Souls

My cat cries when I enter the garden, as
if I have aroused her from winter's dream,
or as if she wants to sing to me, her name.

What do cats dream of Lord Krishna?
A coconut shell of milk, or a glittering fish?
Now her slender limbs complete their asanas.

Now her neck arches, her jaw, an elastic.
The sharp eye constricts, discerns wind
in the quivering grass from a grass-hopper's

camouflage. But there's no mistaking *Maya*.
My cat rehearses the accurate lunge of her paw.
She cries, as one compelled; hungry, yet not.

Perhaps my being here, deserves an answer.
For weeks, I too, have watched her, how
she hunts. I've heard the moan of her catch

at dusk, which is your hour, Lord Krishna.
Then, no bird sings and only a cat with two souls
dreams of death, her stigma left on a lizard,

or on a butterfly, whatever moves towards
the shadow of meaning. As I am born of fire,
I burn, my Lord, but I sleep in your arms.

I am one Upanishad moon, on fragrant nights.
By day I am the consort of oceans, rice fields,
pale and invisible to you as the sky's temple.

(*Vishvarūpa* 81)

At surface the poem hints at Hinduism's polytheistic monotheism which departs from Buddhism's non-theism in preserving a transcendental signifier. Yet meaning in the poem is destabilised by perceptual ambiguities of image and time (the quivering grass mistaken for an insect, the cat's moan, a memory) and the speaker is variously mutable as consort, temple, symbolised by fire, moon, or sleep. Non-dualism is an aporia where self and non-self are realised as mutually interdependent but unified in the 'ultimate' state of reality.

So regarding identity the central question for Vedanta Hinduism is not unlike the question that nations face: namely what is Brahman and what is the nature of the relationship between the multiplicities of its individuals to this ultimate reality? Hindu mythology is replete with visceral, karmic, erotic, and homoerotic narratives. An outside observer will notice the interchangeability of its avatars, its double gender incarnations, as in the *ardhanārīśhvara* which transexualise the identities of Śiva and Pārvatī.

The Intrusion of Rhetoric

One celebrated interlocutor was Welsh-born lawyer and Sanskrit translator William Jones. In 1784, soon after his arrival in India, he wrote a seminal essay 'On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India' in which he draws analogies between Hindu and European mythological deities. His thesis of common origins endorses the rational superiority of European culture vis-à-vis the primitivism of Hinduism's polytheistic worship which is stereotyped as imaginative and feminine. Jones also wrote hymns to Hindu deities which brazenly legitimise colonial rule, economic and legal exploitation (for further detail I direct readers to Sugirtharajah's

research). Orientalist writing inscribes an ethnographic mapping of Asia as marginal and inferior. As Edward Said has brilliantly reasoned it was highly complicit in textualising empire.

A staging of postcolonial interventions in the rhetorical canon has been revived by critics like Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, whose work straddles both theory and politics. Similar strategies are apparent in my recent book. In particular these poems ply an aesthetics of paradox, transition, and ambivalence. They free play with hybridity, graftings, translations, or they focus on absence. Counteracting sexist identifications I take a feminist slant on the androgene configuration of deities in my poems about Kālī, or in ‘Durgā: A Self Portrait’, which deconstructs the myth of the beautiful warrior, the femme fatale, for whom comparisons are drawn to Phoolan Devi, the Dalit Queen, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

Today I am androgynous, engineered as a split sex. I copy
Shiva’s face, Vishnu’s arms and Rama’s hair. Light congeals
with strength in my bones to mend a crisis the male gods fail.

I memorize Mahisura’s praise: *You are too beautiful for anything
but love*, he declares, *too delicate to fight*. Half an hour later, after
he morphs from a buffalo to an elephant, a lion to a man,

I castrate him with a graceful blow. My suitors surrender to this
transcendental play. As for Vishnu I spin him right round, like a record.
Men desire me for the fruit of knowledge. Want no handmaiden,

yet still a second sex; the sum of my parts being multiples of one.
My instruments, my weaponry and my props are channelled
from sensitive New Age gods, with their fondness for repetition.

(*Vishvarūpa* 58)

The poem works by soliloquising Durgā’s cognitions and perceptions; making of them a discursive object, a self-revealing instrument. The monological voice of the observer becomes sceptical, and is in two minds, aware of her potential to exceed the power of men, whilst acknowledging her limitations. My poem is not directly inspired by the *ardhanārīśhvara* myth, which Indian feminists have critiqued for a binary which subsumes the female aspect, Pārvatī, into the male aspect of *īśvara*, or Lord. The right half of the body assigned to the male god is culturally privileged, being the seat of the intellect, and traditionally the wife sits to the left of her husband in what is known as *vamangi*. So the apparent equality of *ardhanārīśhvara* is misleading, if taken out of cultural context.

The Poet as Ethnographer

This raises the issue of the poet’s role as ethnographer, observing the Other with an inescapable cultural bias. Ethnography is an accountable discipline existing between contested representations at the interface of cultures, classes, races, and gender. The poet ethnographer exercises her discourse with paired speech, with double vision, travelling as both participant and observer. My insider/outsider perspective absorbed encountered texts and experiences through the filter of literary craft, to produce a piece of writing which creates

the illusion of a coherent whole and in which the poetic and political seem inseparable. Transliterations, historical notes, and commentary relativise the text so that a space is created for an external staging, a play of references. But there are subtle distinctions between historical precision, objectivity, and the dangers of a univocal allegorising identity. Without the instrument of rhetoric destabilising the presence of self in writing there is a tendency to exoticise the Other by what Tyler describes as an inescapable ‘occultation of the native’ (101).

The emergence of rhetoric as an instrument of communication and dialogue contests mimetic writing. Rhetoric in the contemporary sense is aligned to a culture of oral discourse and transportable type, where the writing process becomes an instrument of thought and reason. Susan Jarratt has argued that ‘hagiographic discourse contains the beginnings of a rhetorical consciousness’ (35). I think that I intuitively developed this in my work in the portrait poems and persona poems, the dramatic monologues of the devas and mahadevas. These poems do not necessarily dramatise true or false selves but intersect fictional elements with historical and biographical shavings to construct a space of counteraction to memory, myth, history, and its errata, a playful hybridity of polyphonic voice. They shift in tone, ranging from humorous to sceptical or devotional forms of textual enactment where identity can be revised.

In ‘Sita’ references are made to the cross-dressing myth of Krishna-Mohini, which South Indian transsexuals identify with. *Aravanis* are the transgender brides of god who take on the persona of Krishna-Mohini. Implicit in my poem is an empathy that the economically privileged First World child observer feels towards the low caste, disempowered but mythically formidable *hijra*. Her body becomes a site, which questions how cultural codes and conventions sex the body into binaries of power and powerlessness.

The physicality of words themselves encodes difference. Despite limitations of typography and my concerns about the legitimacy of romanising translations of a language I could not read, let alone speak, the title of *Vishvarūpa* speaks over the coloniser’s voice. Tyler evaluates the tropes of ethnography and translation. He claims that both practices are motivated by a desire to dominate difference ‘by means of identities or equivalences which make native life fit the civilised contours of our own discourse, make it palatable to our spacience and amenable to our interests’ (96). I might be criticised for this but in my defence I am not writing from the perspective of white male colonial privilege. The textual simplification had I chosen not to use diacritics would have erased all cursive and phonetic trace of Sanskrit. The incompletions that compromise a correct transliteration of the Sanskrit words in *Vishvarūpa* are arguably a form of ambivalence which strategically locates the exotic within a local (Anglophone) context. They underline the imperceptible difference between grapheme and phoneme, marking a trace of what is absent, inaudible, and invisible.

If we think of poetry as a space whose boundaries are exclusively linguistic, as Simon West proposes in a recent essay on translation, we avoid the recognition of cultural and gendered spaces which have been occupied by language. The coloniser relies on connections between language, economic progress, and social status. These elements are mutually interdependent in the practice of domination by one culture over another. West positions translation within a colonial context which establishes Eurocentric and Anglophone hierarchies:

Perhaps we are so used to considering Australian poetry within or in relation to Anglo-Celtic and US literary spaces (the spaces of English-language poetry) that

it has been easy to overlook foreign-language influences, particularly those of Europe. (54)

While I welcome his exegesis on contemporary translation, its description of the ‘variously international’ (54) is typical of Australian perspectives which absent Asia almost entirely. West acknowledges the complexity of cultural considerations; he acknowledges translations as ‘imperfect artefacts’ (57) but his focus is on the aesthetic ideal as a territory of translation. This separation of culture from language is one way the poet as ethnographer accomplishes a transition to the symbolic. Language is not pure abstraction; nor is it hermetically sealed. Both medium and instrument; it structures culture and gender. Cultural and linguistic alienation locates in the body and its memory a habitation, a discourse negotiated in language, a space that is fragmented and incomplete, present in absence. Language variance can be metonymic of difference, both cultural and sexual, shifting the poem from mimesis to rhetoric.

Conclusion

Perhaps my writing has shifted from a phenomenological consciousness to a rhetorical one, prompted by displacements of language, inspired by the fragmentation and multiplicity in Buddhist and Hindu discourses. Like deconstructions these teachings describe the inherent suffering, the ‘double bind’ arising from desire, which always drifts beyond the present experience in search of fulfilment or disclosure. Sociologically, the Upanishads differed from Buddhist texts having been handed down within a hierarchical order, which prevented the spread of its ideals to the ordinary people. (This aspect of Hinduism was critiqued in the 19th century by Swami Vivekananda.)

Like the Buddha, who wandered with his monks through the villages and townships of northern India in the 4th century BC, I feel in exile from the life which chose and which sustains me. Having less time to practise meditation I drift into the unwritten, writing to and from a middle voice. Pankaj Mishra in his memoir, *An End To Suffering*, describes the Buddha as being a social reformer as well as an enlightened being. The Buddha’s path to liberation is inclusive of all castes, all living beings, be they brahmins or sudras; or be they outcasts, what the Portuguese might call *desterrados*, what Gayatri Spivak describes as the subaltern.

This is what compels me, this hybridity, which is rich and inventive. When we use language we invest it with meaning, with reasoning, invariably adopting an epistemological stance. But it is worthwhile to consider the detours, the junctures into which a writing voice collapses. Such a voice absorbs all the ambivalence, insecurities, and isolation of the imaginary life. It transforms that imaginary life into something tangible. A self on the point of becoming something else is performative, uncertain of its movement or its representation. The textual encounter permits for me a fantasy of identities, riven by migration, linguistic exile, economic and cultural subordination. Yet however symbolic the dominant language might appear, its semantics and its logos are a construction like the pages of a book that is falling apart even as we read it.

Works Cited

Cahill, Michelle. *The Accidental Cage*. Brisbane: Interactive Press, 2006.

- . ‘The Lucid Krishna.’ *Southerly* Long Paddock 70:3 (2010) n.pag. Web.
- . *Vishvarūpa*. Melbourne: 5Islands Press, 2011.
- Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus. Eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- . *Of Grammatology*, Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Foucault, Michel. ‘Of Other Spaces.’ *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-27.
- Jarratt, Susan. *Rereading the Sophists: Classic Rhetoric Refigured*. USA: Southern Illinois University, 1991.
- Mishra, Pankaj. *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004.
- Park, Jin Y. *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Granta, 1991.
- Sugirtharajah, S. *Imagining Hinduism: A Postcolonial Perspective*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Tyler, Stephen. ‘Ethnography, Intertextuality and the End of Description.’ *The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue, and Rhetoric in the Postmodern World*. Ed. Stephen Tyler. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987. 89-102.
- West, Simon. ‘*Hautes Fenêtres*: Thoughts on the Place of Translation in Recent Australian Poetry.’ *Australian Book Review* 333 (2011): 54-57.

¹ Part of this essay was originally written for a panel on ‘Writing and Buddhism’ held at the Mildura Writers’ Festival in 2009, in which fellow panellists were Sophie Cunningham, Robert Gray, convened by Paul Kane. A more recent version was delivered as a paper at the Asian Australian Conference, University of Wollongong, 2011.

² Dukkha: Pali or Buddhist word meaning suffering.