3

Unstable Meanings, Multi-directional Journeys and Disrupted Continuities*

I have a long title, in itself a text to be decoded. I wish I could have made it longer and added 'unreliable memories'. But it still manages to say a great deal as it brings contradictory elements together, moves through several disciplines and points towards several clues which can serve both as entry points and outwardly directed inquiry in the concerns of the text's relationship with discourse. It points towards language, travelling discourses and interventions in the linear development of thought. More than all else it imagines the possibility of decipherment. Language may be lucid, but it is at the same time polysemic and ambiguous. In fact, its strength and ability to transgress lie in these characteristics. At times, it is not even fully equipped to express the congregation – the coming together – of ideas. Alternatively, it may be deliberately pared down to compress meaning, or convey a state of being. Simple or complex, it carries with it the writer's engagement with a variety of discourses, past readings and future implications. It hardly ever stops at being a statement. Again, discourses may have a commonalty of thought, even though generic differences cloak them differently. Text and discourse do not present a one to one

---

equation or any identifiable mathematical proposition. The title of my paper is in itself an attempt to explore the several meanings of discourse. It works like a dramatic segment compelling us to ask as to who is the speaker and who is addressed, and what is the occasion. Moving across multiplicities, it resists singleness as much as termination.

Text does not inhabit discourse as a smaller circle or world would inhabit a larger one. They also do not present two independent worlds linked together by language. Discourse, again, does not constitute a text or emanate purely from it. Surface clues as picked up through linguistic analysis do not necessarily reveal the text in its fullness. Discourse analysis by focusing on the semiotics of a text, perhaps suffices as one approach but it unfortunately carries within it the limitations of New Criticism. The current emphasis on general semantics is an attempt to include philosophical debates within the scope of meaning, seeking to arrive at a more defined relationship between word and meaning. At times I wonder how one can adequately visualise the relationship between text and discourse. Is it possible to draw three separate circles – the writer's world, the reader's world – each with its own socio-political ideas and epistemological formulations – and the connection which comes into being in their meeting? No matter how we visualise or project the relationship, no single, uniform definition is likely to emerge because discourse is marked as much by its multiplicity as by its fluidity. Moreover, engaged as the text is in a constant negotiation between reality and representation, it has the capacity to generate new discourses.

The problematics of this issue – discourse and text – I think were set in motion by the upheavals of the early decades of the twentieth century when accepted knowledge systems were destabilised and several new disciplines emerged as a result of human attempt to hold on to some semblance of meaning. The 'newness' of knowledge was both disruptive and destructive and the category of the 'human' was placed under a question mark. [Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929), Ortega Y. Gasset's *Dehumanization of Art* (Spanish original 1925, an enlarged edition including *Other Writings on Art and Culture* came out in 1948),

and Walter Benjamin's, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production' (1935).] I am aware that one could debate the use of the word 'human', as defined by the west became a category to be deconstructed for with the surfacing of colonial knowledge as the debates about cultures and civilisations demonstrate.[1] What matters more than the problematics of the human are the social and political revolutions set in motion through the dynamics of new knowledge.[2] The resurgence of art movements – such as surrealism, dadaism, theatre of cruelty – like the new researches were all attempts to make sense of the outside chaos.

It was at this time that the Frankfurt group of thinkers – Adorno, Habermass, Horkheimer and the rest of them – pushed the 'text' into a social existence, liberating the term from a placement in a written document. It was at this point that the ongoing debates about the relationship of art with reality culminated in a fullsome acknowledgement of the interconnections between the two. Foucault in his essay, 'Structuralism and Post-Structuralism' (1983) acknowledges the school's contribution to post-structuralism and goes on to admit how the French academia continued to live in ignorance of them as it struggled towards similar positions (440).[3] Adorno in his work *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, commented on the dissolution of the 'subject' – the subject as human being, as a thinking person, as a voice – was no-longer-in-itself. The concentration camps, he pointed out, had annihilated the existence of the individual subject.[4] Adorno writes, 'Though the subject still feels sure of its autonomy but the nullity demonstrated to subjects by the concentration camp is already overtaking the form of subjectivity'. It was through this double movement – the loss of the autonomous text and the loss of the autonomous subject (more fashionably talked of as death of the author) that criticism sled into critical theory and the text was placed in a continuum of time, in the flow of history.

Space and time are of importance to both text and discourse. Paul Ricoeur in his essay 'Human Sciences and Hermeneutical Method: Meaningful Action Considered as Text', works through these tempero-spatial dimensions and describes discourse as located in the temporal while language as virtual. Foucault

throughout his work reflects an ongoing concern with space. In his essay 'The Thought of the Outside' (1966), he defines discourse as a 'to and fro' between interiority and exteriority, the point of inter-section is situated in the moment when language arrives at its own edge, engaged with its own invisibilities and un-graspabilities and moves into a spatial outside (152–154). Self-reflexity of both text and writer is a contributory factor. Text and discourse, as they connect, bring alive the Heideggerian concept of *dasein*, 'being-in-the-world' as the text comes alive within discourse.

Returning to the literary text and its linguistic dimensions, I draw attention to two passages. The first of these, written in 1947–48, reads as follows:

> Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattman of a personal God quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia a divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell ....

You would have recognised this as the beginning of Lucky's speech in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a speech without any punctuation marks with lots of meaningless interventions and interminable in itself. How do we read it? Is it intended to make meaning and connect up somewhere? Perhaps one could weed out words and phrases like quaquaquaqua, one could treat repetitions as points of fresh beginnings like 'reasons unknown' and 'time will tell', or one could go ahead to open out the incomprehensibility of all knowledge and the flow of time as it unfolds its meaning. Appar-ently meaning is there, even if it is in the distance. *Waiting for Godot* is a performative text; Michael Lindsay-Hogg in his film frames Lucky's speech, placing Lucky in an upright position, out of his servile bending, with his white hair flowing, standing atop a hill-rise, and speaking in a prophet-like manner. Performance too is a language to be read, imagined or seen. Then there are proper nouns like Puncher and Wattman: who possibly are they? Philoso-phers, scientists, publishers – producers and conveyors of knowledge? Would it make better sense when we go down the speech with its recital of the discoveries and inventions of man,

directed towards human immortality – all the medical and physical sciences? Incidentally, in 2005, an Australian publishing house (David Musgrave) adopted Puncher and Wattman as its name providing an example of discourse reaching out into the future. No mere close reading is enough to comprehend the passage. We need to go outside into the world of religion, existentialism, psychology and the functionings of the brain. The prefix divine used to mark apathia, athambia and aphasia words that describe lethargy, disengagement, loss of memory – words of disconnection, do they signal a disconnected disinterested god? There is a reference to time eternal and existence of a personal God, there is also an inbuilt uncertainty and distancing. The evidence is second hand, is it to be believed or not? Divine love is not available to all for some unknown reasons, thus once again referring back to the word 'personal', to the story of the two thieves mentioned earlier on in the play on several occasions, to incomprehensibility and the state of limbo. Where is the rational connectivity? Why are the public and the personal contrasted? Our questions lead us deeper both into the text and outside the text, to loss of faith, to a host of other things including the location in space, in bondedness and a life without personal choice. The white beard resurfaces at the end of the second act. Lucky's speech sets itself in a central focal point in the text and against the background of the contemporary world – heavily loaded with happenings that bode ill and take away the possibility of action. It also hearkens back to Beckett's novels written before the play and his enigmatic, monosyllabic heroes. Lucky's speech poured out without a pause contrasts with the monosyllabic, forced conversations of the two friends. There is simply no way it can be summed up in an explanatory note or pure textual analysis or a contained one.

The second passage is from Foucault from the first of his 'Two Lectures on Power' (7 January 1976). Reviewing his own work, he describes it as fragmentary and diffused and says:

> None of it does more than mark time. Repetitive and disconnected, it advances nowhere. Since indeed it never ceases to say the same thing, it perhaps says nothing. It is tangled up into an indecipherable, disorganised muddle. In a nutshell, it is inconclusive. (78)

Uncannily echoing the Beckettian stance, the very first question one is prompted to ask is: do we take his statement at its face value? The innocent listener/reader may be tempted to do so. But the mature reader resists. The speaker apparently is posing a challenge and inviting the reader to come forth and participate in the task of unearthing the meaning by decoding the text, to ask the significance of repetition and why repeated journeys are necessary. The words which stand out are 'repetition', discon-nected and inconclusive, words which project movement, aimlessness and an ongoing search. The passage works perfectly well as a manifesto for Foucault's work and spells out the need for deciphering both the linguistic text as well as the philosophical discourse. Its embodied circularity is a representation of the nature of power which is neither a possession, nor extricable without effort and, like power, it has the capacity to shift. Once again it creates discourse at multiple levels – the discourse of the text, the whole philosophical discourse from the Enlightenment onwards, the writer's own philosophy as expressed in his other works, the shifting political scenario of his times, – the 1960s and 1970s – when 1968 was a period of turmoil in France. Going beyond the present, the passage invites the reader to participate not merely in the text but also in the context of our times. The use of linguistic schemata creates a methodology and helps the unearthing of clues, of picking up openings and identifying polysemic nuances. But they work from outside inwards. There is another way of entering a discourse where linguistic analysis may be summoned later, after first initially entering the text – the hermeneutic way – which works with ideas, origins and exegesis.

Every text attempts to say something; it seeks to communicate. And all communication does not employ language; it does not have a definite signified or referent. The writer's relationship with language may very often be one of grappling with the inexpressible. The efforts to express then seek other forms: epigraphs, repetitions, intertextualities. Through these the text spills outside its confines and invites the reader to take them as clues and explore her relationship with all earlier contacts with them – with sayings, quotations, observations and earlier statements. Intertextuality is introduced stirring up old memories and constructing new ones.