

STARTING BEFORE THE BEGINNING

"... *uta tvah paśyan na dadarśa vācam uta tvah srnvān na srnoty enam.*" *And many a one who sees has not seen speech and many a one who hears does not hear it.* — Rigveda 10,71,4

"*If you cannot picture God in a way that strengthens you, you need to read more of my poems.*"
— Mirabai (c. 1498—c. 1546)

"*All the three worlds would become engulfed in blinding darkness if the light called 'word' did not shine throughout creation.*"

— Dandin, *Kāvyādarśa* (Pariccheda 1.4) (earliest known text on Sanskrit poetics)

To startle is to start. And each word is startling, in that it exists, and in that it somehow makes sense. And making sense starts and starts again, and so sense suffers as it "becomes" over and over and over again, unable to get over itself, to put an end to sense-making.

The original startling event is, of course, existence itself. Perhaps cosmologists would be the first to attest that the observable world could not have come from absolutely nothing. There were prefatory conditions, were there not? Such conjectural conditions are considered un-demonstrable and typically fall outside of conventional scientific inquiry (as does unconventional prosody).

I've been writing about prosody for decades. At one point, well into my telling of the story of prosody, I felt I needed to stop, go back, and start from the beginning. But I quickly realized that prosody itself doesn't start from the beginning. It starts before the beginning ... even in the unbegun. What is most astonishing about prosody is its originative role in the scheme of things. It is constitutive of its own initial conditions, and these very conditions and cosmogenesis itself are one and the same process. More specifically, as prosody can only be known experientially, this writing will present a practicing of prosody — as distinct from (though inclusive of) an understanding and history of prosody.

And this startling, creational nature of prosody can indeed be immediately practiced.

How to credibly start this story before the beginning, in prosody's cosmogonic role? I began by writing a tantra for the practice of listening back before the appearance of observable phenomena, to prosody's constitutive role in creation's initial conditions. Although "tantra" is a troubled term, it is its equivocal and controversial nature itself that I find accommodating. Tantra is a syncretic, exegetical form of theory, theology, soteriology, ascetic instruction and bodily practices rolled into one; it struck me as the only sort of writing that could accept the experience I needed to undergo. I was also well aware that many of the texts I'd turn to in order to tell this beginningless story would be tantric, and that I would be formally influenced —even liberated — accordingly.

Through tantra it can be asked: is there a sacrifice that poets are no longer performing that is crucial for maintaining the intricate web of being and the wellbeing of the interrelationship between being and not-being?

SELF-OCCURRING WORDS

The impossibility of arriving at a starting point for a writing that must start before any beginning was resolved when I learned that not only prosodic patterning (proleptic phoneme-potencies, seed-sounds, meters, incantatory cadence-templates, mantras, unmanifest speech) but poets themselves were indeed the "non-existence" that preceded creation! The 6th book of the *Satapatha Brahmana* (an Iron Age Vedic commentary) opens with this seemingly implausible claim:

"... in the beginning there was here the non-existent. As to this they say, 'What was that non-existent?' The poets (rishis), assuredly, it is they that were the non-existent. As to this they say, 'Who were those poets?' The poets, doubtless, were the breaths: inasmuch as before this universe, they, desiring it, wore themselves out with toil and austerity, therefore they are called poets."

"Toil and austerity" in the above citation translates the Sanskrit word *tapas*. Tapas are practices integral to the receiving and writing of poetry. The basic meaning of tapas is "to heat up." Tapas are hardships, devotions, meditations, mortifications, acts of compassion; the burning away of impurities with oneself as one's own alembic.

Who can fully fathom what a poet is? Perhaps there is a particular fundament per poet. Perhaps the whole point is that poets are those who exist without inferences. How do words arise? With what do we understand? What is the practice of hearing-before-the-beginning? How carry out an exacting introspection into that which introspects and the concomitant terms for understanding the introspective process? Just as poetic and cosmogonic *tapas* were prerequisite for creation, they are requisite for realizing our individualized creativities in their constitutive relationships with phenomena.

The Vedas are not a portal into prehistory and the primordial because of their age. We see creations come and go in Vedic verse because of the way in which their poets were not "original." The Vedas as a whole (the *Samhitas, Upanishads, Brahmanas and Aranyakas*) are defined as *Śruti* (that which is heard) and *apauruṣeyā* (unauthored). The Vedic seer/sage/poets, through their rigorous ascetics and aesthetics, wore themselves away in order to open the cognitive heart and *hear*, and to see (root: *drs*) what is real (*rta*) though their hearts' (*hrd*) inspired insight (*manasa*); a phonophany, a tapping into a ceaseless, ambient, omniscient stream, with any constructedness on the part of the poet consistent with such synesthetic vision—attesting to the play of the veil between the evident as hidden and the hidden as evident.

For the worn away, elemental poet, language is revealed, not learned or built-in. Or, perhaps it can be said that language is a matter of learning how to bring forth what is bestowed. Insight into the process of revelation may prove (has it not already?) to be the missing link in understanding the elusive origin of language as well as the nature of cognition in relation to the arising of words. Revelations of world and word are identical, not only indivisible.

Prosody didn't begin with the primordial substance (*prakrti*). It was, and remains, an expression of the consciousness that brought forth the universe. Vedic verse/mantras are sound correlates of the phenomenal world. Recitation of the sound signatures contained in the mantras continuously brings the world forth and maintains its harmonious working order, its coherence. This early sound/phenomena nondifference set a major precedent for subsequent poetic and religious movements on the subcontinent (Upaniśadic Pranava, Mīmāṃsā philosophy, Bhakti *nama-kirtana*, etc.).

Opposite and apposite to unauthored poetry, it must be noted that the context in which names and objects are non-different is not the same context in which names are conventionally assigned and nonduality is dismissed or disdained as esoteric. Only in a mundane mono-dimensionality are all levels of existence not experienced as one.

"In the beginning Brahmā formed, from the words of the Vedas alone, the names, forms and functions of the gods and other beings." — Vishnu Purana I.5.62

FROM VAK TO VEDIC RITUAL TO UPANIŚADIC SOUND SOTERIOLOGY AND BACK

What, exactly, were the *rsis* hearing? — the conveying of the cosmogonic language which conventional language is derived from. In Puranic cosmogonies the Creator is typically depicted as being composed of the Vedas. With each new creation cycle (or *kalpa*, which the *Bhagavata Purana* defines as 4.32 billion years, or one day in the life of Brahmā) recitation of the originative mantras brings forth the manifold forms anew. The Creator (whether identified as Brahmā, Śakti, Vishnu, Īśvara, Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, Devī, etc.) is, in effect, this recitation, while the *rsis'* hearing of *apaureysa* (authorless language) is a direct receiving of the creation. Integral to this cosmogonic recitation is the *natural* language of Sanskrit, distinguishable as the non-difference of word/name/sound/meaning/form/function — a non-difference initiated by mantra, thereby defining the nature of mantra.

The *Mīmāṃsā Sutra* (ca. 300-200 BCE) refers to the uncreated, inherent bond between word and meaning as the doctrine of *autpattika sambandha* 'eternal correlation' (I.1.5). The thoroughly inter-correlated world of *autpattika sambandha*, and the consistency of the bonding of word and meaning throughout all languages and mutations, as a fundamental understanding of the origination of language and language as origination can greatly inform our contemporary, confused conflict of innate versus acquired language.

Creation itself is the vast *avatāra*; with each word — natural or conventional — as the sound and meaning embodiment of divine presence (perhaps our speech is even more miraculous if oblivious to this.) Moreover, the cosmogonic interdependence between word and meaning corresponds to the uncreated mantras pulsing elementally, as phenomena's unobservable initial conditions. In this light, the mantras are either before the beginning or beginningless ... and there is a traditional practice for experiencing precisely this fluctuation.

Although the four oldest books of the Vedas are a form of mantra (as defined above), we don't ordinarily associate mantra — typically known for its brevity — with text, hymn, scripture, instruction, philosophy or even poetry per se. It was the Upaniśadic sages (c 800 BCE—200 CE) who re-purposed mantra, demoting and paring down the elaborately ritualistic Vedic sacrifice and recitation to direct meditative knowledge realized through root mantras, seed-syllables and lone phonemes, ultimately abbreviating and encapsulating the entirety of Vedic wisdom in the potency of *Om*. On one level this writing is a tracing of this shift from word primacy (*Vak* and *Sabdabrahman*) to sound primacy (*Nadayoga*), and its concurrent impact on the prosodic practices I'm calling upon in circling back to the "word."

The impulse to speak, the uncoiling of each word, from wherever, from nowhere, from Narayana, nonexistence or the Unstruck, is the Beloved, is the Name, Energy, Kundalini, Tatvamasi, Sarasvatī, Śakti. The impulse to speak is the root of the Pranava, is love of Vāk, love from Vāk; it is what is omniscience — the only sufficient word for which is ... *word*, though unheard, like a language of vibration-in-waiting; in order that we might go on expressing ourselves ad infinitum, ad nauseam, so that "anything can appear"; in order for there to be potential owing its own being to our acts and accidents. The impulse to speak and to conceive — our hearing, our phonics, spoken, unspoken and unspeakable — is perhaps the only possible analogy for the act of Creation, i.e., for itself, as that act. It is its own analogy. What this means is that awareness is unrestricted, at this point, at this *bindu*. Each word is a dissolution of the speaker, both terrifying and joyous — as that's what it takes to utter a word, to blackout to be able to break the air, to bring forth what is happening to us by means of speaking. Vedlyically, the event of speech is called the *cosmogonic udder*. Burning butter, cream of cremation. We're offered up, word by word. We're no more owners of our own coherence than, say, bottled water corporations — Nestlé, Televisión Azteca, Comcast, PepsiCo — own the water pumped from common aquifers. Ownership is an impression, a scar. Just as one's words may also harm others. (Language is *samsara*'s weapon of choice.)

Speech is one body, across species, throughout both the sentient and the insentient — name it what you wish. Our illimitable words are unable to be created or destroyed, while language's limited speakers suffer every loss.

Each word is a sacrifice. Speech can only be purifying, even when it putrefies. We can't damage language. It's pure energy. We can, on the other hand, hurt ourselves to no end. Stillness is the greatest reverberation. The air in one's lungs is part of all of space. The water in one's cochlea is inseparable from water of life or the mythic watery chaos. One's metabolism is an infinitesimal center of infinite energy (and vice versa.) The sound waves we produce accord with those fluctuations that formed the observable universe. (It's why we sound the way we do.) We're here, and then we're not. Nothing could possibly be more esoteric than the externalized world!

All sorts of views fall outside one's limited vision — we see things differently — and this is necessary for filling out the picture, the phenomenal portion of the space of all possibilities. And the living corpse, the reactant, readily seeks and accedes to limitation and division, while prosody is the openness and fluency between us.

UNSTRUCK AND UNHURT

And this startling, inceptive nature of prosody can indeed be practiced, moment to moment, unbeknownst, or knowingly madly in love with Mother Language, conversationally or as pointedly poetic. Or it can directly be practiced before the beginning by our unbegun minds attuning to sound-origination.

In hearing before the beginning, that which is heard is named *anahata-nada*—literally 'unstruck sound.' *Anahata-nada* is a South Asian soteriological sound meditation dating back at least to the later *Upaniśads*. Unstruck sound is sound without a material cause. There's no contact, no conflict, concept, conditions, friction, confrontation or contradictory forces. It's self-arising, bearing the potential for all sound and consequent differentiation of form.

Anahata also means 'uninjured' — less in the sense of "healing" and more significantly "that which can't be hurt" (though the two states are obviously interrelated.) *Anahata* is the name of the tantric heart center (*cakra*), as well. *Anahata* is thus a hearing heart, an inhering sound that can't be put to work, pick up a cause, comply with conditions or transport a force. It's an *inhearing*. As such, it's associated with equanimity and non-reactivity and the ability to make decisions outside the realm of cause and effect and personal bias, uncoerced by our fatalistic tendencies — an open, spontaneous "listening with the ear of your heart" (as Bhaktas, Benedictines or Buddhists would say).

Stemming from — and searching for — the pulsatile nature of consciousness, a 3-week-old embryo's heart-tube spontaneously begins to bulge and beat for a lifetime. Nonetheless, this heart center in tantric practice has been named *anahata* "without beat." Typically, the unstruck sound is described as that which is heard in the heart — a paradox that overrides its very functionality as that which beats ... attesting to its deeper nature as the organ of expansive listening and equanimity.

The Unstruck is a tremoring of the basic energy underlying all phenomena. It's the ground of formative rhythms. The ground that is nature inclusive of cosmos, held in the heart. Living light. The luminosity attributed to the unstruck is a metonym for consciousness. Cosmogenically, the unstruck sound was produced when consciousness initially turned toward itself. In part, unstruck practice is an awareness of words as awareness-as-words. Words from wisdom-as-what-is, this is the unauthored heart-hearing of the space in which all things arise and subside.

Because the Unstruck is nothing whatsoever, absolutely anything can come from it. It doesn't change into all that changes, as if it were a mirror accumulating all its reflections, blotting itself out. The sage, aesthetician Abhinavagupta (924-1020 CE) referred to the unstruck sound as the highest form of consciousness; we need only follow the reverberation home, until it dies down in omniscience ... while we're yet alive.

As a meditation practice, *anahata-nada* has been transmitted with remarkable fidelity on the Indian subcontinent for at least a few millennia — from the isolation of phonemes in the *Samaveda* through the principal and later *Upaniśads*, Patanjali's *Sutras*, Kashmiri Śaivism, the medieval *Nāth* and *Hatha* Yogas, the Sant Mat movement, Sikhism, right up to Sri Aurobindo, the Surat Shabd Science of Kirpal Singh and the present.

Although unstruck meditation is a strictly traditional practice, it is also, at once, openly elemental, introspective and adaptive. It's an intimation of the nature of phenomena that ultimately accords with one's particular experience. (In my case, *anahata-nada* parallels prosody's cosmogenic role.) This propitious mix

of strict instruction and free introspection is why the practice persists. Depending on a practitioner's background, *anahata* can be heard as revelation, entheogen, theophany, mystery, mercy, om, omniscience, Tara, Iśvara, Maka-akan, Izanami, Alaha, Abba, Immah, Ayaba, reality, ambrosial immortality, Anuttara, Mut, Nut, Nothing, Nada Brahmana, Bhairava, Pranava, Moksha, Mokosh, Kiskelemukong, El Eloah, Sat, Aham, Asat, I Am That I Am, or, for that matter, I Am That or just Am or vast I.

Soteriological sound traditions don't exist in their own vacuums. They exist in interdependence with unstruck *word* traditions, such as the unauthored Vedas and the ancient lineage known as "poetry"—liberation through language revelation (*Śabda-mukti*), through the sounds for the word, words for the sound, the uncreated, self-arising word. Does it exist? Is it practicable?

ANAHATA ŚABD OR WORD TANTRA

Anahata-nada is quite well known, even in the West. An explicit *Śabda-yoga* (word-yoga) lineage is far more difficult to trace. Yet, if one listens intently and accordingly within the vast and resounding Hindu universe, it will come forth.

"In the beginning" (and perhaps earlier) was *Vāk*, the Word, the Goddess who gives life to all. In the Vedas she speaks in her own voice only once, in the *Devīśūkta*. She speaks in the poetic form of *ātmastuti* (self-praise), asserting her primacy, then, addresses the poet — her conduit — directly. Paraphrasing from *Rigveda* 10.125:

"I am Sovereign, the provider of wealth...foremost among those deserving sacrifice...The gods have distributed me in many places—so that I have many forms and cause many things to enter me...Whoever eats, whoever sees, whoever breathes, whoever hears what is spoken, does so through me. Though unaware of it, they live from me. I'll tell you only what is deserving of belief. Listen, o you who are listened to...Whom I love, I make awesome, a sage, a seer...I spread out to all creatures...Like the wind I blow forth embracing all worlds—I've come into being of such size and greatness."

Not only the vibratory precursor of all lifeforms, she is every permutation of the hypostatized Word as well. Chronologically, by the time of the *Yoga-Upaniśads*, *Vāk* had been recast as *Śabda-Brahman* (Word-God). Tantric and Yogic texts further recast *Śabda-Brahman* as *Nāda-Brahman* and *AUM*, emphasizing sound over word and name per se. As I trace the course of *Vāk* forward in time, the Hindu cosmos turns more generally sonic than specifically vocal, as OM becomes identified as the exact sound-form of the Unstruck as it is given primacy as the originative, enlightening vibration, and as Vedic verses and the rituals of the *Brāmanas* become concentrated into salvific syllabic bits as meditation-aids for cutting through ignorance in an instant.

It is more so the Medieval *sants* (poet-saints) that continue the *Śabda-yoga*, word within as *arché*, lineage. From the 15th century *bhakta* *Julaha Kabir Das*: "Apply yourself, O friend, to the practice of *Śabd*. The *Śabd* from which even the creator came into being." And the 16th century *yogini* *Mirabai*: "One night as I sat in quiet, I seemed on the verge of entering a world inside so vast I know it is the source of all of us."

"There are two Creators to be meditated upon: sound and non-sound. Non-sound is revealed only by sound. In this case the sound-Brahma is Om. Ascending to it, one comes to an end in the non-sound ... This is immortality." (Maitri Upaniṣad 6.22.)

Unstruck is sound/non-sound interdependence (if not *non-difference*). It's only the limitation in our understanding of *Śabd* (not *Śabd* itself) that would give primacy to one over the other.

Moreover, *Vāk* is also translatable as *speech*—everyday, conventional, speech—and not purely as a product of the realm of the absolute, as *Śabda-Brahman*, Word, Logos, Epiphany or Prophetic Dictation. The capacity to speak is beyond our comprehension. Imagine being mute, without cognition. Each word stirs all the energy that exists. It startles mind and matter. Once we cease believing we're self-made language supremacists, our speech is revealed as a gift, words are as phenomenal as we are, we are phenomenal as the world, and "*there is nothing in possibility more wonderful than what is*" (Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī) as "*we're moved to believe the words...insofar as the reward of eternal life is promised to us if we have believed.*" (Aquinas). This is the startling basis of the Unstruck, of The Unbegun, Unfabricated, of Tacit/Explicit Non-difference. Living is limitless communion. Its medium is prosody. (Again, try to imagine any bio-signaling—human, other, trans—without pulse, pause, pitch, palpation, punctuation, prominence, pattern.)

SPEECH IS A SPIRITUAL ORGAN (CORBIN?)

The nature of language is pristine. Use is another matter. Language is the ground from which language arises. Words are not innate, they are the innate. Words that fall short and words that fulfill come from one source.

Speech, a collection of a few dozen graphemes and phonemes fitted to the body, is for realizing infinite expression. It is for overcoming our fixation on what can and can't be said by realizing the nondual. Our embodying of the luminous body of language is *Vāk*. No matter how responsible, respectable, reliable we may appear to be as speakers, speech is not our words but Words'. Who knows this knows *Vāk*. Clinging to what one would say oneself is asphyxiation. Point a finger at the place from which words arise; language will swallow you alive. It's unlocatable. As a process, clarity requires the inconceivable in order to be unconstrained.

SYNTAX AND TEXT AS *AVATĀRA*

What is a sentence? The transmuting of the *prima materia* of words into awareness, and awareness of words into awareness itself? Is syntactic soteriology an actual science? Would its path be recondite or a natural right?

5th century CE linguist Bhartrhari refers to grammar as *dvaram apavargasya* 'the door to salvation' (*Vākyapadiya*, I.14) and "*the best of all the austerities, the one that is nearest to Brahman*" (*Vākyapadiya* I.11).

Clearly the early science of grammar was not separate from Yogic practices for raising consciousness to the subtlest stage of language, a stage sometimes referred to as *Para-Vāk*. Bhartrhari also used the term *Śabda-pūrvava yoga*, roughly translatable as "union with the word in its undifferentiated primordiality." (This grammatical yoga resonates directly with the word-yoga (*vāg-yoga*) of Patanjali.) Bhartrhari referred to this salvific process as *sphoṭavāda*. *Sphoṭa* means 'burst' or 'flash.' *Sphoṭavāda* is thus the doctrine of sudden, superseding insight, as a summation or consummation of the sentence. It's in fact the *sphoṭa* that communicates, by means of the words, not the words per se! Meaning is thus an interiorized bursting forth in which syntactic sequence of syllables and sounds is incinerated as the "flash" unites with the initial, also yet undifferentiated, impulse to speak, in a state referred to as *Paśyanti*, or the *Śabda-Brahman* itself. Grammar in this regard is a series of steps for breaking down the double-door of ignorance and ego. It's patent that the limitations of language are a condition of the speaker, not the words themselves. What must grammar be, inherently, to be salvation? The patterning of creation? Omnipresencing? The fact that we have freedom of speech hardly alters the fact that each arising word is being gifted to us from the very energy that constitutes and connects all forms. Words are revelation. They're *uncreated*; denotative of themselves.

Bhartrhari revised the rival, language-oriented school that preceded him (*Mīmāṃsā*) just as the subsequent school of Śankara's Advaita-Vedanta controverted Bhartrhari's claims. When Śankara stated that everything is illusory and that reality could only be known from itself, he was taking direct aim at language as prime instrument of ignorance (however necessary for being led along the path of knowledge.) The *Mīmāṃsakas*, on the other hand, sought to establish the authority of Vedas as absolute dharma, incontrovertible Divine Law. Here the self-existence of the text is exteriorized, phoneme by phoneme, as the ultimate reality. And text as *avatāra*, built up from the unstruck to the vibratory, to sound, syllable, om, word and then the sentence, to establish a tradition of the "book itself" as salvation and god-sameness, is certainly at the core of the Abrahamic religions. The text as guru or god (*grantha-avatāra*) can also be found in Sikhism's *Guru Granth Sahib* (completed 1604) and Vaishnavism's *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (c. 800-1000 CE). The recited narratives of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* serve as speech-incarnations of Kṛṣṇa, with the ontological premise of Vedic *apauruṣeyā* as venerable precedent and paradigm. In the Tibetan Tertön tradition texts and teachings (*termas*) are transmitted through time, through mind streams and manuscript reincarnations, to be discovered, unearthed, at auspicious moments.

Peoples are then woven together and torn apart by continual scriptural citation, salvational assurances and contradictory dictates.