

Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, "Dialogic Space in art: A Reading of Goutam Biswas' *Art as Dialogue: Essays in the Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*. in *The NEHU Journal*, Vol II, No.1, January 2004/pp 117-125.ISSN. 0972-8406

Dialogic Space in Art: A Reading of Goutam Biswas'

*Art as Dialogue: Essays in Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience**

SUKALPA BHATTACHARJEE

There has been a paradigm shift in aesthetic praxis and the understanding of its historical manifestations in the fundamental categories of poiesis, aesthesis and catharsis. The canonic concerns of mainstream art theories had been the polarity of art and nature, the inseparability of form and content, the attribution of the beautiful to the true and good and the relationship between structure and meaning, creation and imitation. The meaning of aesthetic experience was a peripheral concern in literary hermeneutics. European philosophy since the enlightenment had accorded a high priority to aesthetic questions. Kant found a promise of the reconciliation between nature and humanity in the aesthetic while Hegel did not assign an important place to art. Again, the aesthetic or aesthesis for Kierkegaard is a stage that precedes the attaining of ethical and religious values¹ and for both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in quite different ways, aesthetic experience is a representation of supreme form of values.

The legacy of western Marxism from Lukacs to Adorno assigns art a theoretical privilege, creating a polemical space for the materialistic current of thought. And so with Adorno's formulation, that art is a space of inscription of social conflict, one perhaps finds an opening to a new sociology of art. The engagement of art in the past, with rituals and religious beliefs was replaced in the age of enlightenment by an autonomous status of art, which

soon got enslaved to a commodification, by the operations of the market. Thus art became an element of superstructure and, as Adorno says, artistic space got subjected to ideological control. A deconstructive conceptualisation of art allows for conceiving of the artistic space as 'aphoristic' in nature. It is not Utopian where all social conflicts would be sublated, it is neither a Keatsian realisation of the illusionary nature of the aesthetic pleasure nor what Trilling calls 'freeing the self from thralldom to pleasure'. It is a field of displacement, a *differance*, an opening up of myriad possibilities where experience is displaced from *being* to the *other*. It is almost a play of the principle of non-identity as a basis of *negative dialectics*, which in the Hegelian sense is a movement towards its other. Heidegger's project of overcoming metaphysics and Derrida's deconstruction of the logos are perhaps constitutive of a double bind of transcendence of the 'being' and an opening to the 'other'. A sublime, which is ideologically produced, or a poetics of irony, fantasy and boundless *jouissance* is that which marks disenchantment with aesthetics. The problem with one's philosophisation of aesthetics begins from this disenchantment, which recalls the imperative to structure the experience. For a revisionary aesthetics of this kind, a problem like "Is there an object of aesthetic experience?" is reformulated in terms of a phenomenology of that experience. Goutam Biswas' phenomenological essays are polyphonic responses to such a problem, following Martin Buber - a leading existentialist thinker who characterises aesthetic experience as a dialogue between *I and Thou*.

Maurice Friedman, in his book *To Deny Our Nothingness: Contemporary Images of Man*, reads Buber's "I-Thou" dialogic relationship, as a "relationship of openness and mutuality between man and man"- an aspect where Buber, along with Marcel and Karl Jaspers, departs from existentialist thinkers, especially Heidegger and Sartre. While some existentialists considered the relationship between *selves as central to human*

existence, Buber saw the authentication of the *self* or *I* through an understanding of the *other*. He makes a distinction between direct mutual relation (I-Thou) and an indirect interpersonal relationship (I- It). Dialogue between the *self* and the *other* has a facet of *over againstness and separateness* and so the boundary of the *self* and the other both collapse in a dialogic embrace in the hyphenated space between *I* and *Thou*. Dialogic space is therefore a fusion of horizons, where, as Gadamer says, the knowledge of the *self* (familiar) is related to the knowledge of the *other* (alien). The hermeneutic phenomenon encompasses both the *alien* and the *familiar* into a dialogue where the self overcomes its own boundness. Goutam Biswas explores the possibilities of dialogue in art, in determining the relationship between the *artist-art object-critic/ beholder* and the nature of aesthetic experience. Bakhtin makes a distinction between “aesthetic seeing” and “aesthetic being” and says that: “I myself and the object of my aesthetic contemplation, must be [...] determined within the unitary and unique being [...] which encompasses both of us equally and in which any act of aesthetic contemplation is actually performed but that can no longer be aesthetic being”.² The dialogic interface between *being* and the *seeing* makes the relationship between the *art object* and the beholder alive in relation to art.

The project of Goutam Biswas in a way consists in overcoming the theories of dialogue. Such theories are constructed by way of interpretation of Heidegger, Gadamer and Bakhtin, by ironically engulfing all of them in their own independent interpretations of dialogue. This is how the concept of dialogue has reached its closure. The author’s extraction from Buber, on the ever-unfolding openings of dialogue, replaces the necessary metaphysical closure associated with *dialogue*. In that sense Goutam Biswas’ serendipity through closures does not inaugurate another project of re-figuring dialogue but configures the internal dynamism and life of dialogue, which is an open project, a project without a project. Therefore Goutam Biswas’ strategy is to take

the already named thinkers as they are or were. He does not dither in calling an aesthetic object, an aesthetic object. In other words, he does not problematise the resources of explanation. The explanans remain the same but the explanandum (art object) changes to bring in a new explanation.

Biswas takes the experience of art as *phenomenological* that overcomes the binary non-intentional or intentional to show up the figures of the subject and the object in a transmuted I-Thou relationship. The relationship presupposes a situation of a beginning, the standing over and against of an artistic object. This presupposition of an initial separateness with a familiar/unfamiliar object of art is a *situation* of the subject who is self-conscious and conscious about the effect of standing over and against an art object. Biswas characterizes the situation following Buber's I-Thou relationship.

One can obviously question whether it is an extrapolation of Buber in an uncertain terrain. The question arises against a background that Buber conceived of I-Thou relationship as a relation between man and man. So Goutam Biswas could be valid only if within the Buberian framework the relationship between man and art could be explained in terms of man and man relationship. Goutam Biswas' reconceptualisation of an art object in terms of an aesthetic experience of human beings draws an equation that *being* of art is the being of a dialogue between *man* and his other. The other appears as an *It* which is characterized by the author as *meeting* following Polanyi's framework of personal knowledge, in which it is neither the *self* nor the *other* which is important in itself. This meeting signifies a *between-ness* which is the space of the relation's own being, an existential space which allows a leap from one level to another level and in which art becomes a dialogic constitution. The transmuted other enters into human consciousness neither as a Kantian thing-in-itself, nor as an image of the sublime but as an inseparable entity in consciousness. This feature of human consciousness is not innate

but it emerges during an encounter and lasts in virtual time and space. The encounter occurs in the nature of a tension between empirical time and virtual time, which is vital in understanding creativity. This encounter is therefore crucial in Martin Buber's basis of dialogue. Goutam Biswas modifies and widens the realm of this encounter. His inferential component ordines a vector of Philosophical Anthropology - wider than man and man relationship, enforcing itself over the basic experiential dimension and drawing shutters as linguistic entities. The author recovers Buber from this dead end of language and resituates human language in the basic experiential dimension which crosses out the being expressed in language and opens the being of language to its anteriors: prelinguistic and translinguistic - both freezed in its moment of staying in language. The camera obscura of human language is now open to the dialogue, the transaction and the exchange between humans and their world.

Goutam Biswas' retrieval of Buber from the rubbles of aestheticism and cognitivism sets its own task by renaming *philosophy in art as philosophy of art*. The task is not merely to show the bridge between the subject and the object, just as between the camera and the object, but in the flow between the subject and the object enveloped in the field of experience. The exteriority of the art object is an already constituted and produced object that presents itself as before and after of a dialogue. This before and after of a dialogue available in the exteriority of an art object is configured in dialogue in such a way that the temporalised moments appear in a continuity with an unfolding representation, as series inexhaustible in any located position of subjects. Subject taken as enveloped in the consciousness reveals itself in conjunction, transaction, expression and exchange. Revealing is an act of exteriorisation from what has been so far concealed in consciousness. This simultaneous splitting and doubling of consciousness without the defined subject and the object, without polarities, make a continuum filled with various temporalised

moments. These moments are merely renamed as I-Thou relationship, a relationship in flux only to reveal the relationship with the trace of its identity.

Goutam Biswas' explication of the I-Thou relationship and his essays on the phenomenology of aesthetic experience(s) have also provided for an inter-textual space. His understanding of art as a "relational network comprising man, world and the work" (p.16) conceives of *artistic unity* where the roles of the artist, the beholder and the critic overlap. This unity is like the Emersonian *Over-soul* "within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other". Biswas's thesis seems to echo the problematic idea of the centrality of man in Emerson, and that "man is the soul of the whole, the wise silence; the universal beauty of which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal one."³ However, Biswas deconstructs the ontology of Man into a dialogic encounter between man and man - (for there is not one man but many men in the world), and stresses that "dialogue is the basis of knowledge of man by man" (p.45). A world of art then becomes a poem in the Wordsworthian sense, with a man speaking to man.⁴ The I-Thou dialogic relationship renders an esemplastic element to art, a shaping and modifying power like Coleridge's secondary imagination, "which by its plastic stress - reshapes objects of the external world (...)"⁵ It is almost, as Goutam Biswas says, "a transcendence of the disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity in art" (p.40), the play of an active agent, which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate".⁶ The aesthetic object reappears in a dialogically meditative space, in between where *I* as concept or substantial entity loses its own significance as I and emerges as a *concrete experiencing being*. The dichotomy of the subject and the object is thus dropped out. The intentional acts follow from the relation's own being. For Goutam Biswas, even this kind of transcendence is a dialogical one where dialogue(s) enter(s) into metadialogue. This transcendence is also central to Tagore's views on art and aesthetics. For Tagore, there is a "self-conscious principle

of transcendental unity within man” (p.99) and truth, beauty and harmony are knitted together in art when *personal man* is in dialogic encounter with the *world*. Similarly, in Radhakrishnan’s philosophical inquiry, man is in dialogue within the World through human intuition, which is a form of “sublimated knowledge”. Thus Goutam’s essays redefine dialogue as that which exists not only in language, but in “preceding and over passing language” (p.4). Dialogue according to Goutam Biswas starts with experience, proceeds through language and reaches beyond language. One of the significant facets of this dialogue is its translinguistic quality, which accommodates “silence or suspension of verbatimism” (p.5) as dialogue between man and man, man and art. Silence in art while making art appear as inexplicable, opens up “ever unfolding possibilities of meaning” (p.15). The element of silence renders an objectivity to art objects which is beyond the traces left by the artist. Aesthetic object thus becomes, as Dufrenne says, “meaning within itself and is a world unto itself”. This point perhaps can be best explained by Keats’s poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” - as to how art objects retain their identity as separate from artists, beholders and critics. The world of the Grecian Urn with its inscriptions is a world in itself, which is capable of telling a tale even without words, or producing music without sound. A dialogue between the urn and the poet is capable of communicating those qualities that all beautiful things have and so the aesthetic experience is produced. Aesthetic experience is trans-experiential (experience in the empirical sense), because it is capable of making us conceive of that which is beyond our experience. The urn is only a point of reference, from which the poet starts his detour and then comes back to it, only to see a different urn. Aesthetic experience is never exhausted, for, the meaning(s) of art object can never be deciphered fully and so Keats in the “Ode on a Grecian urn” says - “Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought/As doth eternity.”⁷ Aesthetic meaning and *aesthetic meeting* is an endless *difference*, which is never conclusive but dialogic as Keats finally ends the poem.

succeeding only in relating beauty and truth into a dialogic chiasmatic construction.

Goutam Biswas' explication of the element of *quasi-subjectivity* to aesthetic object, after Dufrenne could have been explained better, in relation to the Romantic tradition in literature. His passing reference to Baudelaire would tempt one to remember the Aesthetic Movement and the Decadence. The author would do well if he had elaborated his point on *being for itself/themselves* by mentioning the French doctrine of the self-sufficiency of art object along with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Poetic Principle" of 1850 which states that the supreme work is a "poem per se". According to the author, one of the primary tasks of the phenomenology of aesthetic experience is to explicate the nature of dialogue and communion, not only as a means of transcendence but also as an end - the consummation of art experience. Perhaps Yeats best expresses the nature of this consummation in his vision of the land of Byzantium - a refuge of art and artifice in his poem *Sailing to Byzantium*. In fine, one must admit that Goutam Biswas' text is extremely insightful and brilliant in its projection of the possibilities of dialogue(s) in art and literature.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

* Goutam Biswas, *Art as Dialogue: Essays in Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*. Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi, 1995.

1. Kierkegaard's hedonistic idea of aesthesis or sensuousness is the first of the three stages of the aesthetics-ethical and religious. Maurice Friedman discusses the ethical and the religious position of Kierkegaard in *To deny our nothingness: Contemporary Images*

- of man*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1967, p. 263.
2. Bakhtin's categorical assertion of the disjunction between the "Content of aesthetic seeing" and the "actually performed act of the one who sees" is made in the book *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993, pp. 15-17.
 3. From Emerson's *Essays*, Sherman Paul, Everyman's Library, Dutton, New York, 1980, p. 150.
 4. Wordsworth defines the poet as a man speaking to man in the *The Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798.
 5. Coleridge makes a distinction between 'Primary Imagination' and 'Secondary Imagination' in the XIIIth Chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*, published in 1817. While the Primary Imagination is a 'repetition in the finite mind', 'Secondary Imagination' is a power to re-create.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. Quoted from *Keats' Poems of 1820*, Edited by D.G. Gillham, Collins Publishers, London and Glasgow, 1969. The poem is an explication of Keats' vision of Hellenic beauty.