

# MANIFESTO OF THE UNWRITTEN WORLD: THE CURSE OF DIALECTS

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## 1. The Pain of Not Being Able to Write

Those who vouch for the culture of the written word believe that they cannot breathe without these scribed entities. Many feel that they live happily between the two folds of a book which they always wanted to read. Long after the din has died down, when we read our own words written ages ago, we get a feeling about how lonesome we might have been, how much of melancholy there was in life at that moment, or how we passed a difficult moment so bravely – but all these we did with our journals, notes and the written words. When one develops a relationship with another person, country or community, words come to our rescue. When we are bereft of such bonds, it is once again words that we fall back on – reading other people’s words in a book that comfort us. Only some souls such as Rumi or Tagore would value the lack of words, or sing songs in praise of silence. In one of the stories titled ‘The Letter’ in *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006), the British author Dianne Setterfield had a protagonist in her story who had received a letter to her surprise which made her spellbound. Why does she react in this manner, she explains – which shows the power of words: “There is something about words. In expert hands, manipulated deftly, they take you prisoner. Wind themselves around your limbs like spider silk, and when you are so enthralled you cannot move, they pierce your skin, enter your blood, numb your thoughts. Inside you they work their magic. Wind themselves around your limbs like spider silk, and when you are so enthralled you cannot move, they pierce your skin, enter your blood, and numb your thoughts. Inside you they work their magic.” It is this magical character of the written world that arrests our attention in the modern-day society.

On the other hand, only when we know what the Written World can achieve, which one cannot do otherwise – or if we know how it feels if we cannot put our thoughts on walls, paper, or virtual space – that as members of Unwritten Speech Communities, can we understand how painful it could be. Or else, in a material world where only the written word is trusted and every object is evaluated accordingly, not having one's own feelings,

commands or wishes expressed graphically seems to imply that they have no "value".. There is, of course, a school of thought which is based on the belief that the spoken word must be accorded primacy over the written form of such words because the primary and most fundamental method of communication is through oral interactions, and that writing is only a secondary means and therefore, a derived method of capturing that speech. This phonocentric view, often associated with Saussure or even Rousseau, is pitted against logocentrism in several theories of language and communication. Viewing writing as a somewhat parasitic and unhealthy derivation of speech as Rousseau seems to have done in his 1781-essay titles *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, may be extreme but Leonard Bloomfield (1935: 21) went one step further to claim in his chapter of 'The Use of Language' that "writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible mark." Saussure had reserved the term 'language' for the spoken form of communication which he thought was primary, and that writing which almost always attracted our attention was another and a distinct system of signs, different from that of speech or language. Emphasis on written forms of communication in certain societies rather than on oral speech only reflects how we place these two systems vis-à-vis our belief system.

A millennium of orality could perhaps prompt one to discover ways and means of somehow keeping a record of the Spoken Words. There are theories about how the spoken cultures had developed methods of keeping records of great texts or knowledge systems orally. But in a technology-driven world, it is unthinkable to do without written versions of such texts, or other expressions that are purely written, and are never spoken. It is only when a speech community learns to use both 'speech' and 'Writing' and still uses technological tools, that we understand how different recording devices were created to retain each form of communication, and how man has always tried to build a bridge between the two systems or forms of communication. In the intervening period, our oral texts are sung, recited from memory and are performed, and perhaps – eventually – get also written about. Writing has thus emerged as a technology that replicates, albeit inaccurately, that which is being said, or that which could have been said – something that remained submerged under the millions of thought particles in our mind.

## **2. Many Faces of 'Writing'**

Assuming that 'Writing' was only a 'technique' of rendering the Spoken Word, the question is: Did the technology come from our aesthetic inclination of line-drawing & painting? *Encyclopedia Britannica* says, Yes: "Writing appears to have been evolved from an extension of *Picture Signs*: signs that directly and iconically represented some thing or action and then the word that bore that meaning". In such schemes, other words not represented or those for which it was not possible to draw a picture, are 'assigned picture signs' that often stand with some additional mark. Although the likes of Hoogan (2000) would suggest reproducing Derrida's (1998) argument that speech suffered from many of the same inherent flaws as writing, it would also have to be understood that it was writing that gave rise to many corruptions of the sense of a communication. Howsoever members of phonocentric cultures may believe that there existed once an ideal state of unity of man with nature when the Spoken Word ruled and the societies sought a transcendental form of expression through speech. Today, however, we have ample evidence to show and suggest how speech could also corrupt or fudge senses just as writing did.

*The First Curse: Accident, or Creativity?* There are no historical records to tell us if 'Writing' was a chance discovery of human beings, or an answer to Man's creative urge – just as we do not know but can only make a guess as to when it all began with paintings and scribbling on walls. My conjecture is that this was Man's conscious attempt to get rid of the first curse of dialects. I would call it the Curse of the 'Rapid fading' nature of human speech. Mike Sharples (1999) began his book on 'Writing' with a section titled 'Writing in the head' where he warns that there is no guarantee that one would be able to write well if one were to think clearly or speak well. Writing is chained by many constraints (of grammatical, stylistic or topical issues), whereas it is also true that there could be other kinds of constraints – both internal and external that have to do with the context in which one writes, or the culture that is around the author. Many agree that planning, ideation, text generation, and revisions are four steps for any successful writing. Was writing then a planned activity whereas most speech was not? There cannot be a uniform answer to this tricky question but many great speeches are seriously and meticulously planned sets of action. That all great writing is a product of serious analytics is undeniable now. Flower and Hayes (1981) considered writing as a problem-solving process which is also an interesting position to take. As for creativity and writing, the theory would overlap, as underlying mechanism of creativity remain the same for writing as well: "daydreaming, forming analogies, mapping and transforming concepts, and finding primary generators" (Sharples 1981: 8). But all said and done, the spark

to ignite a fire or to generate a text would surely come in a flash as a momentary activity that would kindle an imagination.

*The Second Curse: Foregrounding the Logos:* Writing came also because of Man's attempt to rid himself from the second curse of 'Groundedness'. Communicating an oral text was grounded – bound by both vertical and horizontal dimensions. By being able to write one's speech, Man has now learned to communicate across time and space – both of which had imposed a kind of constraint on us. In a way, as a logocentric animal - this was Man's discovery of being able to foreground the Logos.

*The Third Curse: The Curse of Iconicity:* The third curse of the Unwritten world is to remain tied to another text that has precedence, i.e. To be only "iconic" – not the real thing. It is also the curse of being "derivative" – or translative. No wonder we use expressions such as 'transcript' or verbs like 'transliterate'. 'Trans-' as we know is a word-forming element that means "across, beyond, through, on the other side of, to go beyond," derived from Latin, and perhaps originally present participle of a verb \*trare-, meaning "to cross". As iconic expressions, writings have the burden of both hiding and expressing meanings. They open themselves to numerous interpretations – just as painted images do.

Writings at times begin practising brevity – by ascribing much less symbols and signs for something that was spoken with so much of eloquence, as if the two are different performances. At other times, speech is minimal, and writing elaborates it with numerous *Tiikaa-s* & commentaries. For example, the Old Testament Chapter 5 story of King Belshazzar tells us about the disembodied hand writing iconically - "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin" or "two minas, a shekel and two parts" after which Daniel, the exiled Jew, warns the king of the folly of his arrogant blasphemy, before decrypting or re-reading the text as "numbered, weighed, divided", i.e. God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; shekel, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; half-mina, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians!" The Emperor could not see the writing on the wall and gets killed that night.



An image by Carvaggio

*The Curse of historicizing civilization:* Speech Communities that had discovered 'Writing' for themselves are the ones that had always attracted the attention of historians, merely because they present records and evidence, and the Spoken World has not been cared for by the majority groups. Those who could not make this transition were dubbed as 'primitive' vernaculars. Major languages had also acted as "killer languages" replacing the variants and deviants, and drawing members of smaller speech communities into their fold. The result is a disjoint between what is spoken at home and what is written in formal domains around.

### **3. The Moral of the Legend for the Written World**

All these remind us of the Narcissus legend too. Narcissus, the son of the river god Cephissus and the nymph Liriope, was so proud of himself that he disdained all else, and drove them away – just as he did to the mountain nymph, Echo who fell in love with Narcissus. The heartbroken Echo went into isolation, and spent her life in only echoing sounds of others. The Goddess of Revenge, Nemesis decided to punish this self-centered character, and lured him to see himself reflected in a pond. Narcissus was so charmed with himself that he did not realize that this was a love that could not materialize, and hence killed himself. Our civilizations seem to be teaching us to only care of our own selves – something that Tagore

had warned long ago in his much hated but much debated treatise on '*Nationalism*'. And, how are our civilizations built? Our civilizations are usually built with walls around Culture, says Tagore in *Sadhana* : “The civilization of ancient Greece was nurtured within city walls. In fact, all the modern civilizations have their cradles of brick and mortar. These walls leave their mark deep in the minds of men. They set up a principle of "divide and rule" in our mental outlook, which begets in us a habit of securing all our conquests by fortifying them and separating them from one another. We divide nation and nation, knowledge and knowledge, man and nature.. ...” (Rabindranath Tagore *Sadhana* 1916).

#### **4. Manifesto of an Unwritten Civilization**

If an unwritten but old world civilization that has so far defied historians wishes to *speak* a 'manifesto' about its own nature and use, how would one go about it? To be able to understand that, let's also see how the term gets the present meaning from Latin *manifestum*, meaning 'clear' or 'conspicuous', via the Italian route. Its first use in English happened in a 1620-text: Nathaniel Brent's translation of Paolo Sarpi's *History of the Council of Trent* (OUP). In 1909, Feb 20, the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti penned 'I manifesti del futurismo', or 'Futurist Manifesto' where, at the turn of a century, he advocates rejection of the past to bring in modernisation & cultural rejuvenation, in celebration of speed, machinery, violence, youth and industry. The composed life of the '*bhadralok*' in India penning insipid poetry far removed from reality, or a relaxed civilized existence of the gentry in Europe perpetuating its colonial rule in different parts of the world before 1900 AD - gave rise to this text.

The Futurist Manifesto said things in 1909 when one could neither imagine the two World Wars nor the Russian Revolution, but this was an attempt to push the limits of literature to accept industrialization, speed of change, and sudden onslaught of all-around progress, and emerge as absorbing all these, and help man pass through all variations and change. Unfortunately, it also eulogised the hygienic properties of wars and violence through which cleansing and purification will happen. Demolition of all things past including libraries and museum, and fighting all forms of cowardice are peculiarly blended with this manifesto. A question: Would the new Manifesto of the Unwritten Literary expressions like to create new genres and narrative structures in defiance of the ways known so far in the written world? Since all unwritten languages give primacy to speaking or emitting meaningful noises, all

their creativity have to do with deployment and manipulation of noises and performances accompanying them, what could one say about the art and aesthetics of noises?

*The Art of Noises* or *L'Arte dei Rumori* by Luigi Russolo (1913) becomes important in this respect. Our ears are so accustomed to the speed, energy, and noise of the typical urban and industrial soundscape that to excite us with new kind of noises, our sonic palette demands new approaches to musical composition and instrumentation – so crucial in Oral creativity. In order to stir our sensibilities, today's creators need to create a "complicated polyphony" because our once desolate sound environment has become increasingly filled with the noise of machines. As cities are trying to dislodge the original landscape, and as urban sounds blared through radio, television and mobiles, are increasingly making intrusions into the soundscapes of the Unwritten World. Although Russolo's conclusions are more relevant for music aestheticians as to how new sound technologies would allow futurist musicians to "substitute for the limited variety of timbres that the orchestra possesses today the infinite variety of timbres in noises...", his futuristic manifesto of the art of noises outlines what will bring in novelty.

The six families of noises that an Oral Culture with a strong singing-performing tradition use include these – the most basic & fundamental noises, where all other noises that we in the written world create are only associations and combinations of these:

1. Roars, uproars & outcry; Noises of Sunderings & Thunderings; Plosions including explosions; Banging, clanging & rattling; Booms, bursts & blasts as captured by human voices;
2. Whistling & Hissing, esp. whirring, wheezing & seething; Puffing, gasping & heaving;
3. Whispers, Sighing, Susurrations; Murmuring, humming, rumbling & mumbling or muttering; Gurgling, babbling, chuckling, & cackling
4. Screeching & Creaking, Rustling, Buzzing, Crackling, and Scraping noises
5. Noises emitted when one beats on metals, woods, skins, stones, pottery, etc.

6. Voices of animals and people such as Shouts, Calls, Screams, Shrieks, Wails, Hoots, Howls, Sobs & Death rattles, etc.

The permutations & combinations that make infinite emissions possible with finite set of speech organs open up enormous possibilities for the Unwritten World – intuitively known by the speakers of these languages which we don't even want to consider just because they are “not written”. The Futurist Creators should strive to replicate these infinite timbres in noises as they compose newer kinds of entities which defy our traditional categorizations. Only then the diverse rhythms of noises will appear and bring in the next breakthrough in creative & performing arts; without them, anything that we try and claim as new would seem like replicating something else from somewhere else.

As there is an infinite variety of noises, and so is man's creative ability, the World of Orality is awaiting to be discovered.

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