

Fanny Howe

THOUGHTS ABOUT THOUGHT

Not long ago I realized I was wrong about the relationship between the human and the divine. This revelation did not come to me the usual way—through thought and writing—but in an experiential way, walking on a path alone on an ordinary winter day, and it needs no description, except to say I stepped into eternity beside a river, on a path, in Ohio.

The monk of Sonoma was perplexed and advised me, “It sounds like an approaching psychosis. Maybe you should read Bharthari.”

He also told me, “You have to watch out. Any thought that does not bring you closer to God or make you more loving towards your neighbors, should be discarded.”

(The Devil is not “in his right mind.” He is instantly recognizable as wrong about everything.) I was trying to act out on a small rug, the way it felt to step into eternity. The monk was alarmed by my awkward moves.

Who is Bharthari? An Indian grammarian who wrote in Sanskrit in the 5th century.

He was, people think, also a poet by the same name, but this cannot be proved. He and his fellow scholars “were seekers of a higher than verbal truth and used words merely as suggestions for the illumination towards which they were striving.” For them the written word was inferior to the spoken word because it was unable to produce the nuanced music that the breath gives to speech. Only poets could, sometimes, achieve on paper what speech could.

The language poets used in writing, Sanskrit, gave them a grammar that folded speech into to its secret, hidden music.

What Bharthari himself was determined to explain was his perception that the meaning of each word in a speaker’s mind exists in the mind of the

hearer of the word. This is called recognition and he found it astonishing, wonderful. The hearer waits for one word to emerge from the mouth of the speaker, and knows that word at once because it already is hidden in his own mind. He understands (can slip the two into one) what she has said.

The theory that Bharthari developed places language at the service of the eternal. It places speech in the realm of ethics and common ground. If there is an underlying language born in the minds of all people, expressing and shaping itself according to culture, then there is a prototype for the human being, a single recognizable type that contains secret, hidden elements identifiable when expressed.

Bharthari believed that the letters that compose the hidden word do not have a common meaning but only the complete word does.

Pitch, modulation, object, intention—these of course alter the way the word is heard when uttered. The whole word is greater than all of these and the letters. The word is what is remembered and what is carried along through generations.

When the hearer of words receives them (entering as they are uttered) his perception moves at lightening speed, eliminating possible errors from his understanding. This will include all the innuendoes of tone and pause. The hearer is like a person who sees a dark mass moving across an arid plain and cannot be sure what the mass is made up of, until it comes closer and closer, eliminating one possibility after another, and only being fully recognized when it is viewed in a three-dimensional sense.

A listener quickly assesses spoken words before making the final judgment, in the spirit of one truth-seeking.

How does this relate to my entrance into eternity by a river in Ohio? Bharthari was talking about eternity as if it were a river on which words whirled this way and that, without a first or a last, and only acquiring their meaning in a relationship of exchange.

Without two people, there could not be one word.

Bhartrhari described four levels of language:
the articulate (external and audible)
the middle one (mental and potential)
the witness (latent and formless)
the supreme watcher (fundamental to being and transcendental)

He had a cyclical view of creation, rather than a linear one: there is no beginning or end but a series of continual regenerations. His was an agricultural reading of creation.

(The horses ford the brook at six, the midges emerge at eight, the rooster returns to his coop, the fish sink in the pond and the flower petals fold in. The proboscis is used as a straw for drinking nectar and some insects lean over and salt their eggs.)

He studied language as a way to liberate oneself from the feeling of being alien. At that time all disciplines were yogic disciplines. Yoga was not limited to physical stretch and breath; every kind of work, done wholeheartedly, was Yoga.

Bhartrhari believed in the immortal soul.

His study of language affirms his conviction that a person is born with linguistic intuition, inherited from earlier generations. All the properties of a thing are reducible to its relations within a system.

As Jacques Lusseyran said: "This is what you had to do to live in the camp: be engaged, not live for yourself alone. The self-centered life has no place in the world of the deported. You must go beyond it, lay hold on something outside yourself. Never mind how: by prayer if you know how to pray; through another man's warmth which communicates with yours, or through yours which you pass on to him; or simply by no longer being greedy."

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"We see a poem as true because we intuit the initiating argument, the argument that persuades our belief....Logic is constrained by what we already know; it only tells us what we are allowed to say," a literary scholar told me.

“We follow this into what is behind our censored past.”

The beginning arguments, never stated, exist in the past and are never introduced into the work itself. The poem arrives as an effect of these arguments and as a result of discarding infinite possibilities for the poem itself.

Bhartrhari puts it this way, “By treading the path of untruth, one attains truth.”

I think revision is both the most mystical and the most rational part of the writing process.

What are you looking for when you erase a word?

Why do you smudge your adjectives as if they were charcoal on a sketch-pad?

Why do you suddenly hate a line that you loved?

Why do you claw at a phrase and break it into bits, scattering the parts around?

What is this all about? What are you really looking for behind the words that first emerged from you?

Where they began?

Look at you. You scratch, erase, re-draw and stare at the shapes.

But what perfect form are you seeking? Is it a form of nonverbal consciousness that was there before the words emerged like an army of troubled, hunched and curled-up ants?

It certainly feels as if you are seeking an original, rather than something ahead in the future, when you revise the version you have written.

Now read what you wrote out loud in front of some other people. They will hear something that you didn't write down.

They will hear what was there before you began revising and before the words fell into your hands. You found your way back through speaking the poems.

The audience will hear the original, the way-back, the lost, the beginning one. They will recognize what was thought before it was written.