

# Learning in the Labyrinth: Irony, Contingency and the Question of Responsibility in the Texts of the *Mahābhārata*<sup>1</sup>

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## Moving in the Double Bind

The *Mahābhārata* is both a conservative and transformative text of unparalleled magnitude. In its conservative vein it safeguards the import of the Vedic heritage. The text is replete with affirmations and assurances of the Vedic themes, goals and practices. It reinforces the essential need for conserving and repeating the thought and deeds of this heritage.

But the *Mahābhārata* appears to be a composition in response to an interdiction; it is a text emerging in a context of a double bind. Whatever its privilege and its nobility, the strength and survival of the Vedic heritage are tethered to a finite limit. The heritage rigorously delimits its addressees; the borders of its passage are severely guarded. This interdiction, however, does not homogenize the effects of the heritage nor does it affect its ensured continuity in accordance with a prior sanction. The addressees multiplied from within the borderline and their receptions of the heritage became divergent. It is in this context of the double bind—to conserve the heritage but move beyond the interdiction—that one finds the *Mahābhārata*'s transgressive novelty. In its mode and in its reach the texts of the *Mahābhārata*,

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while carrying the burden of the heritage, breached a passage across the demarcated border of the heritage.

A patron king who desired the re-creation of the *Mahābhārata* in Telugu in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century proclaims that he had heard the *Mahābhārata* in many languages, many modes and from diverse groups of people<sup>2</sup>. This multiplicity of languages, people, and the heterogeneity of modes was outside the heritage of the ceremonies and rituals of the Vedas. The patron king, Rajarajanarendra, vouches the boons of this heritage for *all* those whose awareness is bound by the Bharata in these many ways and from many people. It is in these gestures that the *Mahābhārata* at once conserves the heritage and infringes on its borders. In its mode it mixes genres of narrative, exhortation, ethical discourse, tales, legends, songs, lamentations, description, drama and above all the epistemic imports of the Vedic heritage.

The transgressive distinction of the texts of the *Mahābhārata* lies in multiplying its addressees. This heterogeneity of addressees is not only an historical occurrence as such—the divergence of its recipients was already in essence assumed in the narrative design of the text itself. This division of constituencies of reception and the naming of specific disseminator are all identified in the text by none other than the putative or imaginary weaver of the text of the *Mahābhārata* itself—Krishna Dvaipayana Vyāsa. Vyāsa assigns to five of his disciples the task of spreading the epic across various regions/audiences in the entire universe<sup>3</sup>.

It must be noted that none of these constituencies (except a very exclusive category of gods and humans) is the determined recipients of the Vedas. But curiously the textual heritage of the Vedas that guards the boundaries and demarcates its recipients is a heritage that is affiliated to this very sage whose adventure (of the *Mahābhārata*) violates the interdiction.

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2. In this paper I have used Telugu (and Sanskrit) text(s) and resources of the *Mahābhārata*. Telugu is a South Indian language spoken by over 70 million people. Telugu literary history is customarily traced back to the *anukṛiti* (composing or forming after) of the *Mahābhārata* in c1025. Three major poets from 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century are said to have completed the *anukṛiti* of the *Mahābhārata*. These are Nannaya, Tikkana and Erra Pragada. *Āndhra Mahābhāratamu*, 1:1:18, Hyderabad: Telugu University, n.d. 3.

3. Nārada was to take the *Mahābhārata* to the world of gods, Devala to the world of ancestors, Suka to the world of Yaksha/Gandharvas, Sumanta to the world of Snakes (Nāgas) and Vaisampāyana to the world of humans. *Ibid.*, 1:1:66, 13

Vyāsa is the famed compiler and classifier of the Vedas—so inform us the texts of the *Mahābhārata* repeatedly. This exceptional, imaginary author compiles texts which both conserve and transgress limits, and thus initiates a detour in the context of the double bind. The *Mahābhārata* is the textual manifestation of such a detour. In fact, Vyāsa is the one who is said to have divided and differentiated the Vedic corpus into four parts. In this regard he is the taxonomist of just the entire heritage<sup>4</sup>. The composition of the *Mahābhārata*, which is woven with double binds, moral dilemmas, manifests as an event oriented toward negotiating with an aporetic context. Unlike what some of the Orientalist Indologists viewed as a “chaotic” or “monstrous” “text” “which is no text”<sup>5</sup>, the *Mahābhārata* survives as a mediated chaos turned into a textual cosmos, or to make use of a term coined by Deleuze and Guattari, into a textual chaosmos<sup>6</sup>. This labyrinthine mediation is precisely what we have called the detour of the heritage.

### Violence of the Imaginary

But the irony of the *Mahābhārata*'s success is that it can only recount the story of a failure—an epic failure. It recounts the tale of a failed learning, of an impossible lesson. It is the kind of irony which Paul de Man discussed in his work as the “permanent parabasis” of the literary text<sup>7</sup>; it's a constitutive irony that interrupts the narrative flow of the text and disallows a unification of the fictional world with the world of the so called reality.

The lesson that the texts of the *Mahābhārata* hope to impart concerns the differential structure of the body with its other. This lesson gets imparted at least three times in the epic. The mnemotexts of the epic are always already distanced from the original scene. It is

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4. Ibid., 1:1:30, 4–5.

5. “This is the epic,” wrote the Indian philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal in his series of essays on the moral issues in the *Mahābhārata*, “which well-known Indological scholars like Hermann Oldenberg and E. Washbrook Hopkins have called ‘the most monstrous chaos’ of an epic narrative, ‘a text that is not a text’.” Cf. “Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics,” in his *Ethics and Epics*, edited by Jonardon Ganeri, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, 21.

6. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Translated by Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson, London: Verso, 1994, 204–205.

7. Paul de Man, “The Concept of Irony,” in his *Aesthetic Ideology*, Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1996, 178–179.

impossible to know what the context of the original scene of learning was. One learns about the *Mahābhārata* always at some point in its proliferated heterogeneity. This is the condition of all the addressees of the *Mahābhārata*—both inside and outside the reach of these texts; they all have heard about it already—but would like to hear it again<sup>8</sup>.

Thus Janamejaya, for instance, requests Vyāsa to permit him to learn about how such a devastating war in the clan erupted even after the venerable elders like Bhishma and others including Vyāsa himself have done a proper distribution of kingdom among brothers. Janamejaya's inquiry, which provides one contextual or perargonal border of the mnemotext itself is broached in a scene, which is devoted to decimation of an entire species—the Sarpayaga. Janamejaya was curious to listen to the story of the destructive family division. Clearly Janamejaya has already heard the story—but is now rearing to hear it again. Vyāsa, instead of directly answering the question, assigns the task of narrating the entire account to Vaisampāyana—who in turn recalls what he had heard already and renders it again.

Similarly the Naimisha forest provides another parergonal context for the recall of the text once again. Yet this scene as well, which is devoted to planetary well being, consists of interlocutors who are already well aware of the legendary narrative. Shaunaka and other sages of the forest, descendants of the illustrious Bhṛugu lineage, are also participating personages in the narrative—they are already recalled into the narrative from the future as it were<sup>9</sup>. This uncanny recall of the future is structurally woven into the narrative fabric of this text. Bhishma, for instance, recounts the yet-to-occur legend of Janamejaya to Yudhistara—as an account of the past<sup>10</sup>. Above all as Vyāsa recounts the narrative—he himself gets woven into the text. On one count he appears forty one times in the texts of the *Mahābhārata*<sup>11</sup>. The “second” narrative scene in the Naimisha forest recalls this other

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8. *Āndhra Mahābhāratamu*, op.cit., 1:3:5–6, 54–55.

9. *Ibid.*, 1:3:19–41, 315–318.

10. *Ibid.*, 12:3:344, 121

11. Alf Hiltebeitel following J.L. Mehta's pioneering essay on the “author-function” of Vyāsa in the *Mahābhārata*, gives a more detailed and theoretically informed account of the place of Vyāsa in the text. Cf. J.L. Mehta, “Krishna Dvaipayana: the Poet of Being and Becoming,” in his *Philosophy and Religion: Essays in Interpretation*, New Delhi: ICPR, 1990, 215–224. Hiltebeitel, “The Author in the Works,” in his *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, 46.

scene of narration and dissemination of the text. These parergonal contexts multiply and proliferate.

But what is common across all these parergonal frames is that each of them reiterates the anamnestic status of the epic. It is a narrative that is always already recalled—recounted in/as another context. The “present,” the now of the narrative is never available as a domineering center; it often recalls and regurgitates from the labyrinthine interstices of the “already there” narrative. The deepest impressions of the structure of memory profoundly mark the “living present.” Janamejaya, the Bhṛgu (Saunaka and others) all realize themselves in the intimations of that structure of memory.

Yet each one of these recalls is significant; in each specific invocation of the “already there” structure, the addressees emphasize a certain aspect of the mnemotext which is in rupture with the epistemic import of the *Mahābhārata*. As it happens in the case of the addressees within the narrative frames, the invocations of the addressees of parergonal frames confirm the impossibility of learning the epistemic lesson.

Janamejaya broaches the already-there inheritance with a question precisely about the internecine war and clan-rivalry—a war that leads to an alarming depletion of population. The scene of these questions, let us recall, is itself dedicated to another vengeful pogrom of obliterating another species. The apparently 12 year-long fire ceremonies of the Bhṛgu sages of the Naimisha are not aimed at any annihilation. On the contrary, they are for the benefit of the entire planet. But curiously the very first question with which the sages wish to enter this nightmarish text of devastation and deprivation is about the scene and measure of repeated carnages that permeate the text. Of all the textual tags that are enumerated to the sages (apart from the Parva Samgraha and Parvanukramani, the celebrated reception of the *Mahābhārata* as a dharmasastra, as Vedanta, as a moral treatise, as a Maha Kavya, as a Purana, or an Itihasa, etc.<sup>12</sup>)—they chose to enter the volcanic fields through the blood-soaked tracks of the labyrinth. The sages of the serene forest immersed in rituals for universal well-being ask the bard Ugrashravas first of all to elucidate on the scene of Shamantapanchaka and about the maximal organizational unit of war—the *akshauhini*<sup>13</sup>.

Now we learn from the bard, who explains, it is said, with “delight” (relishing—*preetito*) that Shamantapanchaka was a scene of a terrifying

12. *Āndhra Mahābhāratamu*, *op.cit.*, 1:1:31–36, 5–13.

13. *Ibid.*, 1:1:74, 14.

carnage wherein another earlier epoch the ancestor of these very sages in the audience now, has hacked away the kings for 21 generations. The bloodshed during this annihilation filled five lakes with which the avenging ancestor offered his ritual oblations to his ancestors—and thus he kept the memory of the ancestors warm in its survival. In choosing to recall this past the Naimisha sages reinforce the bonds with a lineage. Now this very scene of a ferocious vengeance is also the place for a planetary violence in another epoch within which the event of the *Mahābhārata* war is located. Shamantapanchaka gains the name of Kurukhsetra—the battlefield of Kurus—and stages another epochal violence<sup>14</sup>.

We get a measure of this violence when we compute the composition of the war machine called *akshauhini*. According to the figures Ugrashravas enumerates, each *akshauhini* consists of 21,870 chariots, same number of elephants, 65,510 horses and 109,350 warriors. Now we know that the Kauravas had a massive force of 11 *akshauhinis* and the Pandavas a colossal army of 7 *akshauhinis*. Given that only ten people survived the war (seven on the Pandavas' side and 3 on the Kauravas' side), the numbing filicide, resulting in the heaps of corpses and debris, amounts to a staggering figure of 240,570 elephants, 1,573,640 horses, 4,723,910 humans and 393,660 chariots. The Striparva goes into the gory details of heaps of carcasses, mountains of mutilated bodies and the maddening devastation and death<sup>15</sup>.

The baffling magnitude of the war machine can be grasped when one remembers that the war lasted for exactly 18 days (led for 10 days by Bhishma, 5 days by Drona, 2 days by Karna, half a day by Shalya and the last half day for the fight between Bhima and Duryodhana). The figures could be truly unreal; the pre-modern demography may disallow such a scale. What matters here is not so much the reality of the figures—but the fact of the figuration of the war machine, the projection of the war imaginary at such magnitude. What is even more intriguing is that the sages of the Saunaka group—sages who are supposed to distance themselves from the worldly violations of domestic benefit should choose to invoke such a catastrophic imaginary as their source of entry into the mnemotext. The bard, Ugrashravas, it must be noted, has just made a visit to the epochal killing fields after hearing the epic from Vaishampayana at Janamejaya's violent *yaga*.

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14. *Ibid.*, 1:1:78–79, 14–15.

15. *Ibid.*, 1:1:80–81, 15.

This rather repeated recourse to the violent imaginary, and rememorization of the events of the internecine feuds, in both the scenes, clearly indicates the failure of the epistemic lesson to reach home—the instance of an impossible learning that the *Mahābhārata* embodies.

It is not only the textual frames “inside” and “outside” the received *Mahābhārata* that fall prey to the impossible lesson but even other unintended receptions of it—they also do not escape this ironic predicament. All the determined addressees of the texts are expected to learn from the epistemic discourse—but the lesson does not seem to reach home. It gets betrayed once it is imparted.

### (Im)Possibilities of Learning

But what is this epistemic lesson, this impossible communication that the *Mahābhārata* yearns for but fails to find a worthy disciple to bestow upon? What are the contexts of its chance appearance? What are the consequences of this failure of learning? The epistemic lesson could be described as the aporetic relation between the body and its other; it is the agonistic relation between the body and its other. This lesson gets repeated at least three times in the texts of the *Mahābhārata*.

One of the most sustained modes in which the lesson gets formulated occurs (though this is not the first time) in the scene of the most colossal confrontation between the land or body of dharma and the land and body of the Kurus (*dharmakshétré Kurukshétré*). The lesson itself, to repeat it, is indeed about the relation between the body (*khshetra*) and its other. It in fact concerns the question of responsibility and singularities of response in the structure of relation. As is well known this occurs in the most widely represented scenes of moral dilemma where Arujuna is faced with the disturbing task of annihilating his own kith and kin. Unlike the entire textual weave of the composition with episodic narratives, the mode of figuring the impossible lesson is devoid of narrative and episodic form. The compositional form is deictic—identifying interlocutions largely with pronouns and substitutes for proper names (Partha, Parantapa, Kaunteya, dhananjaya, mahabaho, etc). Although the parergonal borders that enframe the texts of the *Mahābhārata* also consist of deictic communication, the text of the *Bhagavad Gīta*, which carries the epistemic lesson, remains unique in the entire composition, especially for its different texture of address. The deictic structure of the *Gīta* can be said even to mark

an interruption in the episodic narrative assemblage of the larger composition of the *Mahābhārata*. Let us explore this track of the epic labyrinth.

The *Gīta* is a worldly text—a text that addresses the question of responsibility in the context of a double bind; it emphasizes the necessity of response in the absence or ineffectiveness of the available normative order. In the interlocution between Krishna and Arjuna in the blood-soaked body/field of the Kauravas and of Dharma, Krishna initially provokes Arjuna to decide precisely by appealing to the normative order and received perceptions of the warrior caste. Not to kill is a shame, it will be construed as cowardice, says Krishna<sup>16</sup>. Overpowered by the remorse about the prospective carnage of the kin, Arjuna isn't convinced by this appeal to the norm. The war is worthless, Arjuna offers worldly reasons: annihilating the lineage leads to the obliteration of clan, which would result in the loss of memory about the cherished ancestors; above all it would lead to *varnasankara*, miscegenation. Beggary, or “soliciting” (*yāchakamu*, *bhikshamu*), says Arjuna, appears to be a more worthy vocation than annihilating kinsmen, the most illustrious teachers and elders.

Krishna then counsels the mournful Arjuna about another way of relating oneself to the world of bonds and binds, another mode of rendering responsibility and response to the given in the world. This rendering of another relation remains the epistemic burden that the *Gīta* and the *Mahābhārata* carry—with ironic effect. This other relation is delineated by way of the structural bond between what could be called the “*para*” and the mediations of the body.

Now the peculiarity of *para* is that it can only be figured through negatives. It has neither an essence nor substance, neither birth nor death. Consequently, it has no objectifiable possibility or positivity. But paradoxically it can only be discussed or discerned in the context of the mediating body. Wherever the mediating bodies emerge—whether the realm is that of the divine or human, plant or animal, stone or wind, in a word just everything that composes the universe—*para* remains immanent to these entities.

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16. *Srimadbhagavadgīta*, 2000; Gorakhpur: *Gīta Press*, 2003, 2:31–38. This edition has Sri Jayadaya Goyandaka's commentary. The commentary is typical in its theologization of the text. I have avoided using the commentary in the text. I have avoided commenting on this commentary. Hereafter the references to the *Gīta* are given in the text.



*Para*, it must be noted, is one in a series of terms used in the *Gīta* and the episteme to mark the fundamental differential structure within the “same.” The “same” is coded in the *Gīta* as *prakriti*—which gets divided into “*para*” and “*apara*” partition. If the latter in general is delineated as the body-complex, the former has other substitutes such as: *jeevatma*, *atma*, *purusha*, *paramātma*, *akshara*, *khsetrajna*, etc. (the *Gīta* 7:4–6, 8:3, 13:1–19).

Yet this constitutive immanence does not imply any agentive status to *para* with regard to the body. The body, like the elemental universe itself—elements that constitute the body—(biological, plant and non-living)—is always already there. It neither has a beginning nor an end. Only an interminable economy of repetition and mutation regulates the universe and all the bodies that populate it. Being immanent, *para* has only the status of a witness (*sakshi*) with regard to the body. But there is no judiciary outside the differential structure, which can extract an account from this silent “witness.” The place of justice, if there is one, is in forging responsibility in the gap between the differential *para* and the binds and bonds of the body. The body may attempt to erase this structure of distance and difference (which the *para* actually implies) and circulate itself as the self-adequate entity. Without an essence of its own the term *para* can be grafted on to the most opposed syntagms of meaning. There, *para*, like a parasite, functions as an affix—as in *parama neecha* (the meanest), *parama pujaneeyudu* (the most venerable), *paramātma* (the supreme being) and *parama moodhudu* (the most idiotic).

Above all these divided senses, the term *para* refers to the other: *Para* is the other within the immanence of the body. *Para* in other words emphasizes a differential structure distancing the body from itself. Without such a differential structure the body’s own relation to a past and a future—its divergence from an illusory present—would be impossible. It is this enigmatic *para*, which puts to work the body’s discontinuous extensions and chance continuities into a past and a future. It is in this context of the necessarily divided structure of the body that the *Gīta*’s counsel urges one to be responsible for and respond to the pulls and plays of the worldly occurrences.

The texts of the *Mahābhārata* embody this peculiar bond between the body and its other—the *para*. They offer an epistemic lesson about relations. It’s the lesson about the constitutive double bind of the universe and every relation in it. It is the impossible experience of the aporetic relation between the bind and bond of the body and its

ineffable other. This is a relation that cuts across all vertical divisions and horizontal integrations of the world-body. The double bind of the lesson insists on choosing—and the choices exerted in the narrative design of the texts betray the epistemic lesson offered in the epic.

The two entities in the relation are not oppositional nor are they reconcilable or unifiable with each other. Although there appears to be a hierarchy between the two entities, neither is a derivative of the other; nor can they exist exclusively from each other; and if they do we have no way of knowing it. They are the two effects of a division within the same. This division is essential for the emergence of the universe and all other moving and unmoving entities of the universe (the *Gīta* 7:4–6).

Without their commingled emergence (the *Gīta* 13:26) birth and death have no sense. Yet each of these entities gives a different meaning to birth/death/survival. The body is affected by temporal coordinates—the beginning and end. It is in a way the object of the vulgar concept of time. For all practical purposes it comes into existence and ceases to exist—in course of time. Whereas the other cannot be measured in terms of birth and death—for it is neither born nor does it die (the *Gīta* 2:17–18, 20, 23–25). It is neither a substance nor a force; the space-time coordinates cannot affect it in any direct ways. The enigma of *para* is such that it cannot be comprehended by the sensorial organs of the body. While being immanent (and exterior [the *Gīta* 13:15]) to the body—the other is unavailable to and ungraspable by, most proximate but also very far away to, the body apparatus and its sensorial relays (the *Gīta* 7:24–25; 2:25–28). Unaware of its inadequacy with regard to the other, the body nevertheless is constantly engaged in binding it down, entangling it and reducing it to its own temporality (the *Gīta* 14:5–8).

Whereas the *para*, being nothing but a cipher or a crypt of difference, remains at variance with the forces of the body. Since this difference can become legible only in the context of the body, it can be thought only in relation to the body. The other is the difference and distance of the body with itself. Without this structure of difference, without the cipher of the other asymptotically differentiating itself from the ephemeral but effective space-time coordinates of the body—the latter alone will claim the status of a real essence. The insular body would claim self-sufficient and self-originating status for itself (the *Gīta* 16:8-9). It must be noted that in identifying the body as such here one is not invoking the binary convention of body versus mind.

The differential other of the body is not the mind. In the lesson that the *Mahābhārata* embodies, not only the mind but even the so-called intelligence/intellect/discernment (distinctly named as *buddhi*) is a part of the body apparatus and its sensorial relays (the *Gīta* 42–43). What is the function of this differential cipher then? The other opens up the possibility of the body's discontinuous relays and random continuities beyond its ephemeral existence as a material substance. It radically undermines the body's reductive existence as an insular, self-sufficient entity. The other without being an agent or substance functions as the mnemo-trace and crypt of the past-future. In opening a past and figuring a future of the body, the other not only turns hollow the body's claims of autonomy but complicates its relation to death.

The *Gīta* and, if one could venture to say, the Indian episteme in general, appears to be indifferent to the question of terminable or founding origin. *Anādi* is the most circulated term in the episteme (the *Gīta* 13:19). The episteme engages the entities and practices that are always already there—its burden is to engage with the repetitive-mutative structure of what is already there. The code word for this mutative-reiterative structure in the texts of the *Mahābhārata* is *Kāla*. No one (not even gods) can hope to have a mastery over this structure.

If origin in the sense of a governing and determining arché has no epistemic status, the question of end too must have a similar fate in the episteme. As there is no fundamental originating beginning to the universe (including that of gods), there can be no final termination of it. There can only be mutating repetitions of what is always already there. Exposed to such a structure one can no longer talk about the question of agency—an all intending, governing, controlling entity; there can be no place for any command-control structure here.

Although the structure of the universe may be without origins and ends, the elements that compose it are exposed to mutation and indeed mutability. They suffer the inexorable force of cessation—in their singular, determined forms. No wonder that within the structure of the already-there, the epistemic engagement with the question of death is intense and pervasive. Death as permanent cessation, the final terminus of existence does not allow us to see its essential connection to the structure of survival—the living on of a past and the possibility of a future. The other-*para*, which is outside the circuit of birth and death, when it emerges with the body, divides it with anamnestic and anticipatory possibilities. The other divides the body from its self-enclosure. Conversely, although the other is nothing and has neither

matter nor quality in it, it cannot escape the impression that the apparatus of the body leaves on it. The impression that the other in fact carries in its crypt can affect the body—that remains the future possibility (the *Gīta* 15:8–9). This recursivity of the impression occurs at random, discontinuously.

As a concentrated epitome of these traditions and as the episteme's privileged articulation—the *Gīta*'s meditation on death is both singular and general. The context of this meditation marks its singularity. As is well known the *Gīta*'s starting point is none other than the question of death itself: death and bereavement and ones' own response/responsibility to this inescapable event. Arjuna with all the years of preparation and blessings and honours of gods feels enervated at the prospect of terminating lives, by the idea of him playing the agent in imposing death on millions. The bonds and binds of the body disarm and debilitate him.

The *Gīta*'s counsel aims at enabling Arjuna to discern the differential structure of the *para* and the body and learn to deal with death while being in the world-body. Death has a double effect—that of return and of remainder. The elements of the universe (water, wind, earth, space and fire) that compose the body return to the universe after death—when the corpse is burnt and the remains are mingled in water or scattered in air. Yet there is tenacity to the qualities of these elements which cling to the *para* from which the body is distanced. The death activates a structure of memory and inaugurates an open hospitality for the return of the *para* with its remainders. The codes of ritual, the repeated acts of convention that enable the “living” practice of hospitality for the return of the *para*-other and thus make the survival of the dead possible (the *Gīta* 15:8, 2:22).

Yet death is an event of rupture. Although it promises the possibility of survival and a possible return—what returns cannot be identified with what was supposed to have been present earlier. The discontinuity is radical and irreducible. Death is said to pluralize what survives it. What survives gets interiorized and the interiorized keeps the interlocution from within. The *para* that is beyond the logic of life and death, the *para* that carries the remainders is the interiorized other within the body of the living (but not assimilated through incorporation). It is this fundamental difference within the same, this immanent other in the home of the living same, that the interlocution between Krishna and Arjuna repeatedly dramatizes.

The impossible lesson of the *Gīta* is to learn to live with this radical other within the same—the experience of the *para* in the *sva*. What is impossible to know or experience are the continuities of the *para* in its adestinal wandering (the *Gīta* 2:26). The remainders that survive the death of the empirical body and cling to the drifting *para* can never be traced back to their “original” habitat—if there is one. For the universe itself of which they partake is without origin—its drift is without finality. The elemental body, the empirical *śarīra* won’t be able to track the continuity of the surviving across bodies—at least with its sense relays and bodily organs. Only the figure of “Krishna” will be able to track these continuities across mutating bodies (the *Gīta* 7:26). It is impossible to learn this experience of the continuity within the empirical body.

The differentiating structure that the *para* institutes in the body has two implications: (i) the body carries within itself an alien, an other who is larger than the hosting body; and (ii) the guest-*para*-other is a witness with a palimpsest of pasts and their interminable remainders. The body must only learn to be hospitable to the alien within the body. Thus, in a way, as one always already carries within oneself an other drifting across other bodies, one can never be completely present, can never be “contemporary.” Krishna thematizes this relation vividly. When the body fails to recognize this structure of difference, or tries to efface this difference of the other by capturing it in the sense nets, the body becomes an enemy to itself—its hostility with itself destroys the body. Whereas when it learns to be hospitable to the other within the same, when it learns to respect the difference of the *para*—then the body will have a relation of friendship with the *para* (the *Gīta* 6:5–6).

Friend and foe both inhabit the structure of the same. It’s the relation, one’s *sambandha*, and one’s response to the other that determines the nature of the body in question. This relation of *mitrutva*, of befriending the “alien” in the body, is emphasized in the *Gīta*.

### Epistemic Intimations

The entire narrative dynamics of the *Mahābhārata* enacts an agonistic relation between the forces of the body and the other. The narrative and epistemic force of the *Mahābhārata* repeatedly exemplifies the structure of differential relation between the body and the other. The epistemic import of the text insists on the freeing of the surviving trace from the forces of the body and its relays. This is also the most

privileged lesson of the *Mahābhārata*: tending or training the forces of the body—or drawing the sensorial of the body from within. It is a lesson about comprehending the other in its constitutive difference—a lesson which appears to be an impossible experience to gain. And this is so for at least two reasons. One cannot comprehend the other by means of the sign forces and sense relays—those very knots that hope to bind and shackle the other. The other must be seen to be unavailable to these forces; it cannot be caught or objectified by them. The text, at every juncture, when the question of comprehending the other appears, clearly points out the inadequacy of these means of comprehension (the *Gīta* 2:25,28). But if comprehension of the other is possible at all, then such learning has no use for the sign forces and the sense nets that network the body. But curiously all the determined addressees of the texts of the *Mahābhārata* betray this lesson. The most shocking and the crudest betrayals of the epistemic lesson come from the best disciples in the narrative: Arjuna and Dharmaraja.

When one fails to learn this mutating relation, this differential bond between the structure of *para* and the body, one condemns oneself to the mechanism of sorrow. The fact that the most paradigmatic of internecine wars, an imminent carnage within the home of the same (clan), is just about to devastate the epoch, goes to show that there was a failure to learn the lesson of friendship, failure of hospitality in the clan. The irony of Krishna's counsel is that it's a bit too late in the day—as counsels are wont to be. But will this thematization of the differential structure, the counsel of the *para*, be adequate to the experience and performance of learning to live with the other within the same? All the determined addressees of the *Gīta* in particular and the *Mahābhārata* in general are after other domestic benefits rather than this lesson about learning to live with immanent alterity.

As a worldly text—a text concerned with what to do and how to live in the world, the *Gīta* repeatedly attends to the question of the body. In learning to live with the differential structure, how does one respond to the body and its activities? The body, composed of elements from the universe, abides by a hierarchy of the senses. The senses abide by certain faculties of reflection and perception such as *manas* and *buddhi* (the *Gīta* 3:42). The senses cannot help but follow certain functions (the *Gīta* 3:5)—such as the eyes for seeing, ears for hearing, feet for walking, hand for offering, sexual organs for gratification and the bottom for releasing excreta (the *Gīta* 3:1). It is impossible to manage the body without putting to work these senses

of the body. Given that these are the inescapable function of every *body*, it would be better to render these functions in accordance with the codes of the heritage. But the episteme also indicates that the most valuable learning is something that must be grasped beyond all the calculated codes and their effects. And that learning is none other than the differential crypt of the *para*.

As the texts of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Gīta* aim at conserving and transforming the heritage of the tradition, they generalize the codes beyond the interdict, the inner border of the heritage (the *Gīta* 3:3–41). Although there is a determined addressee to the epistemic lesson of the learning to live with an interiorized other, Krishna declares that any body could receive and respond to this epistemic import (the *Gīta* 18:32<sup>17</sup>). Undoubtedly the *Gīta* reiterates the social categories of “hierarchical” differences and reinforces the tradition’s insistence upon performing in accordance with codes of specific clan/group (the *Gīta* 18:41). There is no epistemic sanction for a general code to be adopted across communities as such. Yet the *Gīta* like the larger textual corpus of the *Mahābhārata* emphasizes that the body with all its hierarchy of the sensorium, organs of activity, and faculties of reflection must render the codes sanctioned by the (respective) singular heritage(s) instead of letting the body-complex be led by its self-serving forces.

The most powerful and indestructible of such forces, the *Gīta* declares, is desire (*kāma*). The peculiarity of this force is such that it can cathect/occupy (invest) any concerted effort to suppress or eliminate it. The faculties of the body cannot hope to suppress it—for it returns as the driving force of such suppression itself (the *Gīta* 3:37–39<sup>18</sup>). In the hierarchy of the faculties of the body, the *buddhi* (discernment/intellect/intelligence), without succumbing to the volatility of *manas* (mind), must deal with the resilient force of desire and its vicissitudes. Now, in order to recognize the interiorized structure of the other in the same, the hosting body, in order to receive the alien witness, *para*,—the body-complex must first act through an internal fold. It is here that the *buddhi*, which is recognized as a part of the body-complex, can non-coercively, non-repressively, draw the body-complex to recognize and live with the alien in the self. *Buddhi*, it must be noted, is not a transcendental segment with any existence prior to the body-complex.

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17. *Āndhra Mahābhāratamu*, op.cit., 14:1:226–227, 511

18. *Ibid.*, 14:1:124–131, 502

It is coextensive with the body organs and faculties—and as such it is only an internal fold within the complex (the *Gīta* 3:42–43).

If the structure of the living with the alien is of the most general significance, the *Gīta*'s second counsel of most general import beyond all regional codes and protocols, concerns the putting to work of the *buddhi* within the body complex. In order to avert the body's potential destruction of itself, its hostility with itself, the *buddhi* must inculcate the body-complex to honour the other in us, to be hospitable to the irreducible other within us. The *buddhi* is also very much the work of the body accomplished by a certain detour. Without such a detour not only the body's survival within its complex but beyond it is impossible. If there is a place of responsibility, a place or chance of responding to the other within us, it is in putting to work the *buddhi*. The place of response/responsibility is very much within the complex and folds of the vanishing, ephemeral, body itself. Yet as we have noted earlier, the work of *buddhi* cannot ignore or even cannot hope to eliminate the charged elements that compose the body complex. The pulls and drives of these elements are incalculable and irreducible (the *Gīta* 13:19–20; 18:40). They can only be tended non-coercively (on the problem of using force [the *Gīta* 3:6])—to form a bonding of friendship within the body of the self and the universe.

The putting to work of the *buddhi* can take the route of rendering the deeds and codes calculated for a determined category of bodies properly (the *Gīta* 4:13, 18:41); or it can follow the path of exploring the body-complex itself as a field of sacrificial offering (the *Gīta* 4:26–27, 29–30, 37<sup>19</sup>). The path, that is, could track the exterior, or interior domains. In either case the work would require a stance which is neither aggressive nor self-turned, passive nor agentive, neither entirely objectifiable nor objectifying. It is a stance that distances and differentiates itself from the equivocality of good and evil, praise and ignominy (the *Gīta* 2:3–8, 56–7). It receives the utterly heterogeneous with an in-difference; it comports with equipollents unaffected. A sort of agentivity is at work in this non-passive stance (the *Gīta* 3:27). While engrossed in performing sanctioned deeds, the stance discerns inaction in work and action non-work (the *Gīta* 4:18, 5:89, 234). As this stance puts to work what is given—what is already there—it does not proclaim its agentive status. But it also does not leave the stance as a passive recipient. What matters in this stance is how the given is received. The

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19. Ibid., 14:2:13–17, 514–15.



*buddhi's* anagentive response to the given makes all the difference. The *Gīta* reckons this stance as *udaseenata* (the *Gīta* 14: 23–25). Exposed to the dualities of ritual passions and tragic perturbations, overwhelming joys and paralyzing sorrow, good and evil, this stance learns to live with them without succumbing too hastily to their force. It recognizes the structure of friendship with the other beyond these dualities—but essentially from within the structure of dualities. *Udaseenata* can be discerned as a certain hospitality toward the utterly opposed—a reception of antinomies of the world without investment. It responds to the heterogeneous with an equal view—whether the other is the noblest soul, the biggest animal or the lowest creature or even the most abject being (the *Gīta* 5:18). This open hospitality without domestic benefit is not offered as a peculiar privilege of a determined group. This stance has a force of generality that can cross categorical borders.

Thus, to recapitulate: in this interruptive text of the *Gīta*, one can grasp at least three insights of the most general import in dealing with the here and now. As described earlier they can be understood as (i) the ethic of living with an interiorized alterity; (ii) the task of putting to work the *buddhi* for tending the body-complex; and (iii) an *udaseena* stance of hospitality for the heterogeneous. Disavowal of this epistemic counsel condemns life to a destructive path and a mechanism of sorrow. As this epochal counsel ends, the destruction begins that leaves only ten people alive after the annihilation of over 4.75 million humans. The learning often appears honoured only in letter.

### Betrayals of Learning

Destruction and sorrow pervade the texts of the *Mahābhārata*. Legends and episodes of fathers losing sons and plunging parents and kinsmen into sorrow are everywhere in the texts. Vyāsa, the imaginary architect of the texts of the epic, himself loses his much loved and exceptionally born son—Suka. Almost thirteen out of eighteen parvas are dominated by killing, destruction and endless sorrow.

One of the survivors, the inheritor of the kingdom after the destructive war, is devastated by sorrow and remorse. All the surviving brothers, Draupadi and even Vyāsa try to console Dharmaraja and recommend expiatory rituals to overcome his remorseful sorrow. They offer him all the calculated means, sanctioned codes that would normalize him. Only Krishna reminds him that the prescribed ritual performance of the sanctioned will in no way mitigate the imminent

death, the inescapable truth about human mortality. Therefore, a way of coping with death, the way one must try to cope with desire, is suggested by Krishna. Such a way would be the one that is epitomized in Krishna's counsel to Arjuna. This time with Dharmaraja, Krishna would not repeat the counsel himself—but assigns the task to the dying Bhishma who is lying on the bed of arrows awaiting his own death. Bhishma demurs and inquires why Krishna himself would not counsel Dharmaraja. Krishna says this would accrue for him supreme glory—something that he [Krishna] himself would not need. Then Krishna imparts his own discerning *buddhi* to Bhishma to undertake the task. The epistemic counsel gets repeated by a detour for the second time.

The timing of the counsels must be noted. The *Gīta* counsel occurs at the beginning of the colossal war; Bhishma's counsel repeats the epistemic lesson after the devastation. Both the addressees are overwhelmed and paralyzed by remorse and sorrow—one before the event and the other after the destruction. But the modes of the two sessions differ. Krishna's counsel is devoid of narrative and illustrative examples. What gets exemplified in Krishna's account is in fact "Krishna" as the figure of the *para*. In this interlocutory drama of Krishna and Arjuna, the figure Krishna provides the fiction of alterity speaking for itself—in its own voice. But as we saw earlier, this communication of the other is about its nothingness, its anagentive stance and its in-difference—above all its irreducible difference within the interior of every body, every entity. Whereas Bhishma (and his account) cannot perform this fiction. It imparts the epistemic lesson through other voices and examples. Bhishma's counsel is a narrative replete with exceptional, exemplary legends and anecdotes.

Dharmaraja's learning process is extensive—his inquiries are contextual and concatenated. They emerge like links in a chain, from each of the conclusions Bhishma provides. Each answer gives scope for another inquiry, and each inquiry leads on to another question (questions concerning the best dharma, strategies of warring, types of friendship, paths of knowing truth from untruth, etc.). Bhishma the savant of dharma covers all the branches of the heritage in his counsel—thus confirming the epic's detour through the double bind. Bhishma's counsel is in fact a digest of the salient features of the tradition. But above all, Bhishma imparts to the sorrowful Dharmaraja, the highest epistemic lesson concerning the *para* and *udaseenata*. Despite such an extended counsel and despite the collective efforts of the most

learned of the tradition—Bhishma, Krishna, Vyāsa, Shukra, Brhaspati, Narada—Dharmaraja, covered by the smoke of his sorrow, looked unconscious even though he gained awareness.

Even until the very end, he persists with questions and seeks clarification from Bhishma. This extended inquiry from Dharmaraja is rather intriguing in the texts of the *Mahābhārata*. The odd thing about this inquiry is that in spite of all the elaborate counsel he receives from Bhishma, Dharmaraja is unable to overcome his sorrow—unable to incorporate sorrow and become normal. Only after Bhishma's death, the sages persuade him to celebrate Ashvamedha, seek expiation and continue ruling the kingdom. They appeal to his *Khsatradharma*—the codes and customs of the warrior caste. Although Bhishma and others before him had invoked precisely the category-specific codes of the Kshatriya clan, Dharmaraja persisted in his inquiries and deferred his decision to conform. It is rather difficult to know how these sages' counsel had an effect on Dharmaraja, when every one else, including Krishna and Bhishma's epistemic lessons should fail to assuage his corroding remorse.

When one attends to all the two hundred and odd questions that Dharmaraja asks Bhishma and ponders the multiple narratives of edification that he receives—one cannot help asking: Does Dharmaraja really need education? Apart from the fact that Dharmaraja has had extensive counsels and exhortations from Romasha, Shaunaka and other sages and divine personages during his forest years, he himself counsels the vengeful Draupadi and Bhima during those years. We must remember that these counsels were precisely about the epistemic lessons. For instance, Shaunaka tells him the need to distance oneself from the body-complex and about the importance of *yoga-karmas*<sup>20</sup>; and Dharmaraja himself exhorts Draupadi the importance of patience and equanimous temper. Above all, Bhishma himself while praising the virtues of Dharmaraja describes him as the most learned and serene sons of the Kuru clan. We must also remember that he earned the life of his dead brothers from Yaksha precisely by answering questions concerning (among other riddles) the greatest dharma. In a later scene, during the *ajnavasa* (living in disguise) Draupadi gives an elaborate account of Dharmaraja's virtues to Bhima, and identifies him as the one who is exemplary even to sages.

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20. For a more detailed and closer reading of these themes, cf. Hildebeitel, op.cit., 172–176.

Now, one cannot help wondering whether this Dharmaraja really needed an education. This most learned of the Kuru siblings, this man of knowledge, the savant of strategic and lofty learning, this paragon of patience and forethought, this riddle-buster learned in the subtleties of dharma—indeed the son of Dharma himself—should this king of all learning need edification? Doesn't he already know what is the supreme dharma? Isn't he aware of the virtue of *udaseenata*? Is he ignorant of the corrosive and ineliminable power of *kāma*? Doesn't he know the etiology of his sorrow and the roots of his remorse?

Indeed so! Even before he approaches Bhishma, Dharmaraja clearly identifies the sources of the devastating war. Agonized by the weight of sorrow he bursts forth: "Dhrtarashtra is a king devoid of the virtue of hospitality—he is incapable of receiving the heterogeneous with in-difference and unaffected by their expollence." If Dhrtarashtra's lack of equi-view of the divergent is one force with disastrous consequences, the honest Dharmaraja, now contrite, confesses his own complicity in the design of destruction. "Because the desire to possess the kingdom lurks in me, I have committed extremely grave wrongs"<sup>21</sup>. After such wisdom what learning? No wonder the celebrated addressees of the epistemic lesson—Arjuna and Dharmaraja—fail to learn the epistemic import. The epistemic counsel gets betrayed in both cases.

Now Dharmaraja clearly knows what has led to the destruction of the entire body-complex of the Kuru clan. Yet the failure to redress the body-complex's (his own desire for the kingdom) aggressive and self-consolidating encroachments condemn one to sorrow and (in this case) remorse. Curiously, this blinding bond with self-orientation cannot be missed even when Dharmaraja exhorts to Draupadi about epistemic virtues. He proclaims to Draupadi, who asks him the value of temper of equanimity towards enemies, that the great elders and teachers of the clan—Vyāsa, Bhishma, Vidura, Krupa, Drona and Sanjaya—"commend my patience." He questions her whether she, like non-believers, is suspecting dharma and is once again eloquent on how the elders commend him: the keepers of dharma such as Maitreya, Markandeya, Vyāsa, Vasishtha, and Narada "regard me as the follower of dharma." He quells Draupadi's questions with the weight of elders' testimonies—testimonies that are turned to cherish his self's imaginary. (Dharmaraja's question to Bhishma and Drona

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21. *Āndhra Mahābhāratamu*, op.cit., 12:1:44–47, 6–7.

on the battlefield, just before the clash of the clans begins, is the most cunning one in self-interest. He approaches them, apparently to salute them before the war commences, to ask how they can be killed.)

The narrative races ahead to normalize Dharmaraja with the therapeutic of the clan codes. Consequently the epistemic lesson of the most general kind fails to reach home. In the “last” scene—even in heaven—Dharmaraja is seen beset by envy as he finds the “villain” Duryodhana ensconced on a throne in heaven, whereas his own brothers languish in hell. Not only Dhrtarashtra but even this “unlying” prince of dharma (one must note the common root *dh* of their names) lacks the vision of hospitality for the contraries. No wonder this Ajatashatru suffers from enemies from within—his body-complex turns against him.

Arjuna’s betrayal of the epistemic learning is the greatest and the most shameful. Arjuna, the greatest archer in the world, the most privileged and protected character and above all the greatest and dearest friend of Krishna—Arjuna is seen paralyzed at the beginning of the battle. Krishna’s most exceptional counsel and his stunning, rarest of the rare appearances are provided to Arjuna for edification. After the very long (700 verses) counsel, Krishna, as if in doubt of his addressee’s capabilities, asks him: “Hey! Partha, have you heard this discourse of the *Gīta* with single-minded attention?” (the *Gīta* 18:72). Acquiescent Arjuna consents: “[I] have gained awareness. Now I have been freed from doubts. Therefore now I shall receive your commands” (the *Gīta* 18:73).

The exceptional privilege granted to him on the battlefield has to enable him to undertake the worldly acts while cherishing the epistemic lesson just imparted. The same lesson gets repeated through a generic and narrative detour, during the edification of Dharmaraja. Arjuna is very much a part of the scene of this second session as well. Yet immediately after Dharmaraja’s “normalization,” Arjuna makes the shocking confession to Krishna that he had forgotten what all was imparted to him on the battlefield. He requests Krishna to repeat the lesson again, to “fill his ears” with those sentences. Krishna, with a smile, embraces Arjuna and chides him for his lack of attention and concentration. Krishna calls him the wretched of *buddhi* and *tattva*<sup>22</sup> and says:

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22. *Ibid.*, 14:1:154–155, 504–505.

*Brahmapada Vedamunaku barama hetu  
 Bhootamulu nati vakyamul, buddhi danma  
 Harthamulu nilpavaiti shakyambe yinka  
 Navvvachanamulu seppanga nalaghu shaurya.*

Although, the texts of the *Mahābhārata* are said to comport the heritage beyond the tradition's interdiction, what Krishna says here makes the *Mahābhārata's* response to the double bind of the context even more radical. The sentences of that day are, says Krishna, the supreme elements of the very words of Brahma's Veda. Whereas you can't focus your *buddhi* on the profundity of their meaning. Is it possible to recount those sentences again? The epistemic source and significance of the discourse of the *Gīta* is clear from Krishna's response here. As the possibility of recounting the same discourse in the same mode is doubtful, Krishna nevertheless goes on to repeat the lesson once again—but within a new format, otherwise. The reckoning this time takes the mode of narrative exemplification, the mode chosen by Bhishma. In this rendering once again the epistemic insights are reiterated. The addressee this time is not Arjuna but a female—a Brahmani—who seeks the learning from her husband. But when Arjuna tries to know the identity of the couple, Krishna allegorizes the narrative and identifies the couple with the differential structure of the body itself. The Brahmana and Brahmani couple is a division of the figure of "Krishna" himself into two—it's the structure of an interior difference. It is the structure in which the body-complex is intimated with the necessity of living with the other in the same shelter—the lesson of hospitality. It is precisely in the context of such structure that Arjuna's forgetting is like the betrayal of the body-complex—the body's failure to learn to live with difference. This failure continues till the end of the narrative of the *Mahābhārata*.

Arjuna, like Dharmaraja after Bhishma's counsel, *again* forgets his learning and is condemned to the mechanism of sorrow. Arjuna, with all his invincible weaponry having failed to protect the Yadava women, after the death of Krishna and Balarama, from the nomadic bird catchers (Boyas)—the humiliated Arjuna seeks counsel once again, this time from Vyāsa (Bhishma and Krishna are no more). Vyāsa recalls for him the lesson of *udaseenata* and the stance of receiving the given with equanimity. Vyāsa's counsel once again goes to prove, as in the case of Dharmaraja, the failure of the epistemic lesson, the betrayal of learning with which the texts of the *Mahābhārata* comport.

## Luck in the Labyrinth

But the *Mahābhārata* carries a strange kind of failure within it: the failure or impossibility of learning the epistemic lesson. The success of this monumental textual adventure, the weaving of a chaoid texture, is contingent upon this failure.

Let's recall the point we made earlier. The composition of the *Mahābhārata* emerges in the context of a double bind—that bind formed by the injunction of limits and the necessity of moving beyond the determined parergonal borders. The *Mahābhārata* achieves this only too successfully. The texts of the *Mahābhārata* are pervaded by the essential thematics of the heritage (*Varnāshramadharmā*, the dharmas of the Vedas, the discourse of dharma, Yoga, myths and legends, the norms of caste and clan, contingent norms, etc). These codes and norms, as Bhishma reminds, manifest in multiple modes and respond to contingencies. But beyond this heterogeneity of the heritage, there are epistemic insights which can be generalized beyond the determined categories and demarcated constituencies of the heritage. These intimations of the heritage concerning hospitality, putting to work the *buddhi*, and equi-stance of *udaseenata*, have neither a presupposed origin nor any certainty of destination.

We recall that not all of the disseminators of the *Mahābhārata* are from the delimited, conventionally identified, categories. As we know our primary access to the corpus of this mnemotext is through the bard Ugrashravas who is a *sūta* (charioteer caste). Similarly neither Vyāsa nor Krishna, not even Bhishma, are the traditional bearers of the heritage—as in the case of the entire Vedic corpus and its commentatorial extensions. Yet: although the mnemotext of the *Mahābhārata* succeeds, like these epistemic intimations of the most general kind, in comporting with and thus conserving the heritage—the chance of an open ended destiny—within its own habitat, in the interstices of the textual labyrinth, the text records the effects of a profound failure of the epistemic learning. The gigantic multiform narrative of the *Mahābhārata* exemplifies the inadequacy of the text to its precept; it underwrites the perennial possibility of the letter going astray—the irony of intention failing to govern its destiny, the epistemic loss of moral luck.

Perhaps there is a deeper ring to the thematic of sorrow that the *Mahābhārata* captures with such moving poignancy. It is the sorrow of an interminable mourning, of the textual failure to keep its promise; it is a mourning of a text for its inadequacy, its failure to capture in its

sign forces and sense nets what it covets. This is like the mourning of the body-complex's failure to capture and unite itself with the alterity in its interiority—the *para* in/of the *sharīra*. Apart from the inadequacy and ambivalence of the body-complex toward its inaccessible other, the epistemic learning itself is somehow at variance with the mode of discursive edification.

One of the remarkable features of the impossible epistemic lesson concerns the mode of imparting it—the process of offering and the relation between the interlocutors. What is striking in most of these scenes of learning is that whatever is imparted, it is often offered in the “language” of affect, in a performative that no language can adequately capture. Thus, for every question that Dharmaraja asks the dying Bhishma, the latter responds with kindness (*daya*), cordiality, love, and affection. Similarly Krishna's counsel communicates to Arjuna in the language of love and friendship. Toward the end of the *Gīta* Krishna reassures him about the *paratattva* and tells him that he [Arjuna] is the most beloved one for him: “Te pratijāni priyosi mé” (the *Gīta* 18:65).

Krishna informs Dharmaraja about a peculiar bonding between him and Arjuna during the war. This is a bonding of friendship, discipleship and that of a relative<sup>23</sup>. This is a bonding of affect and such bonding seems essential for learning. It looks as if the condition of learning appears to be cordiality and patience, affection and humility. This condition is neither bound by a normative discursivity nor exhausted by the protocols of existing and calculated rules. Affect is more related to silence which can only have an effect—effect not the result of any calculation, but unforeseen. Such a gesture of affect cannot be regulated by any discourse. The mnemotexts of the *Mahābhārata* are permeated by these non-discursive gestures.

The inadequacy of the text is structural and it has little to do with the competencies of the composer-weaver-bard-disseminator of the mnemotext. Consequently, the textual mourning remains interminable even as the literal mourning tapers off, and the prescribed rituals permit normalization. This interminable mourning is the textual irony that disallows narrative closures and permanent resolution between art and what it yearns for. Perhaps it is precisely in this failure, in this textual inadequacy, that the possibility of art and articulation, response and responsibility, lies. Perhaps it is in this deepest mourning that lies the possibility of a promise and future. It is in the hospitality to the

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23. *Srimadbhagavadgīta*, op.cit., footnote on 858–859.



radically other within the body-complex that lies the responsibility and destiny of this complex. The reduction of this alterity—this *para*—to the identities of the self of the body can only end up in celebration of a dangerous triumphalism in gaining a kingdom after the decimation of millions. *Para*, it must be learnt, is “placed” in the hierarchy of the body-complex beyond the state of articulation (*avyakta*). The sign forces and sense nets can only grope toward the *para* on the borders of *avyakta*—never hoping to succeed with certainty. Art can only hope to capture this interminable groping; art, thus, in recording its inadequacy can only make an offering of tears, a testimony to the mourning of art. The permanent parabasis of the text, the irreducible irony of the text, wrote de Man, reminds the reader “of the essential negativity of the fiction.”<sup>24</sup> Learning in the labyrinth of the *Mahābhārata* one realizes that it is in the pervasive sorrow for the deepest epistemic failure that nests the greatest success of this mnemotext.

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24. Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, London: Methuen, 1983, 218–19.

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