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Preface

Of Blood and Tea

Georges Van Den Abbeele

Ranjana Ghosh here invites us to think along with him, to think critically and relentlessly across every imaginable border, thus thinking not only as *transnational* and *transdisciplinary* but also in or as every kind of *trans*: translation, transition, transference, transculturation, transhabitation, transvestitism, transexuality, transversality, transaction, transcendence, transmission, transformation, transection, transience, transduction, trans-plantation, transvaluation, transgression, transposition, and so on. Other words, like transmutation and transmigration, resonate loudly in this context while appearing curiously pleonastic: a changing change or a moving movement?

But what about 'trans(in)fusion,' the title of this book? And what about its implied relation to 'critical thinking,' of which this book is said to be a series of 'reflections'? Or perhaps even its relation to what we continue to call critical theory? Trans(in)fusion already urges a transformation in our thinking to the extent that at least two words, two different concepts are at play here: (1) transfusion, which is the transfer of some form of liquidity from one vessel to another, as in a blood transfusion, and (2) infusion, which conjures up the image of some substance dissolving in a liquid medium, as in the preparation of tea leaves in hot water. Fusion occurs from the intermingling or blending of substances — be they blood cells or aromatic leaves — into each other, but also potentially into *something else* entirely, such as the culinary, chemical miracle that is tea. Now, mix the two together, trans-fusion and in-fusion, and what do we get? I'm thinking blood and tea, and how these two life-sustaining liquids play not only into notions of bodily care but also, and quite forcefully so, into the cultural and political registers of social identity. Not just the stereotypical blood and soil ballyhooped by nationalists, but the cultural appropriation of commodities, traded transnationally, as the very sign of the nation. In the case of tea, we need go no further than its symbolic ascendancy in England as the very core of being English despite its obvious historical expropriation in the course of the colonization of South Asia. But just as commodities can ebb and flow in all kinds of aleatory ways, so too can there be multiple mixing and/or spilling of blood as well as cataclysmic shiftings and shakings of ground that leave the classic determinates of identity in uneasy

and unsteady shambles, try as might the advocates of national and other identities. We can see why Ghosh concludes, 'trans(in)fusion, for me, then is less a compulsion and more a campaign. It is an experience which we, most often, cannot do without – a delectation, an allurement, a latency and education'. Indeed, I would add that what he gives us in this book about trans(in)fusion is less a thought or an argument per se, than a call, or as he says, a 'campaign' to heed the relentlessness of thinking, of thinking of *and* as 'trans', in all the multifarious senses of the term. Above all, the trans of trans(in)fusion is thinking (in) migration, that is to say, thinking migration in the very course of migrating, the literal *trans* of migration as the (impossible yet inevitable) locus of thought, thinking not just of but as migration.

Thinking (in) migration turns out to be necessary in order to avoid missing the work of trans(in)fusion, the very blending of tiny particles suspended in the endless swirling of a liquid environment, both a metaphor of critical thinking and its conceptual milieu, steeped in the swirls of cultural and linguistic tradition (and Ghosh has a lot to say about the use and abuse of tradition, as we shall see). Ghosh thus gives us to think the very physics of (critical) thinking, from molecular interaction to quantum entanglements, the universe in trans(in)fusion, which means not a world but a perpetual worlding, or perhaps just a *whirling*, the incessant swirling of a mad Brownian movement of states in trans, or of trans as the only state, unsettled not by exception but by its very being. Ghosh approvingly cites Michel Serres' poetic claim that 'the world is a vortex of vortices, interlacings, a maze of waves'.

Crucially, this is why there really can be no 'world' literature, but only literature as worlding, as trans, not just trans-national, but 'trans' in every other conceivable way. Literature emerges in and as transmigration, and I'll chalk my hesitation between the prepositions 'in' and 'as' up to the very volatility of the practice we call literature. Despite countless efforts since Goethe first coined the term, one can never arrive at a satisfactory definition of so-called 'world literature' that would apply some suitably 'global' standard that could reliably separate the wheat of works that are of presumed world status from the chaff of those that considered to be of merely regional or national interest. The impossibility of such a standard is further sealed by the limits even of the most polyglot among us, who can rarely rise to fluency in more than a dozen languages from among the thousands of documented tongues in which human beings have crafted their musings for millennia. One cannot speak then of something like 'world' literature no matter how expansive the concept, but only of the world of literature, literature as world, as world-becoming but also of the world as literary, as becoming literature. Literature is the trans(in)fusion of languages and cultures.

As Ghosh elaborates,

Trans(in)fusion, builds an experience of what I have elsewhere called aesthetic imaginary,³ molecular imaginary, plastic imaginary, transductive imaginary and transversal imaginary. It is not a calculus to work with but a method and non-method, agentiality and pleasant dispossession – a dynamical plasticity. Thinking precedes thinking as much as it relishes post-thinking.

This statement serves as one example of the Ghosh critical vortex, as we pivot from one imaginary to another until thinking itself is revealed as a dynamical plasticity, which in turn represents another instance of trans(in)fusion itself. Thinking (in) migration is the key to a style of critical thinking as well as to the very concept of critique. We are perpetually in flux, literally *in medias res*, between and betwixt the mirage of beginning and end, the illusory stability of fixed objects, concepts, borders and conclusions. There is only ever really the middle or *milieu* of the world wherein we drift, whirled in suspension. And this goes even for those comfortable distinctions between solids and liquids, as in liquid concrete or liquid crystal, complex (trans)iterations that question the very distinction between stable and unstable. Trans(in)fusion obliges us to think dynamically and well beyond what Jean-François Lyotard used to call 'the solace of good forms'. Let's return to those exemplary liquids implied in trans(in)fusion, blood and tea. Are they really simply liquid? Or does the liquid medium provide the ambience for the swirl of substances, tea leaves, seeds, grains, platelets, all manner of individual cells, both red and white, perhaps all moving in a similar direction but not for that matter exempt from the aleatory shock of the clinamen, from unforeseen and unpredictable interactions, that can lead to novel combinations and permutations, new tastes and aromas, singular senses of every kind! These can be life-enhancing, even salutary against sickness and injury, a nourishing tea, a restorative IV, but they can also be harmful or fatal if the wrong mix of substances makes their way into the brew. As I write these lines during a moment of pandemic, my very movements restricted by the regime of social distancing, I cannot but think that transfusions and infusions can just as readily turn into transmitting infections. They can bring death as well as life in the myriad ways the freighted particles interact, from the chemical level of molecules down to the quantum level of spooky entanglements, for neither blood nor tea can be presented as a 'simple' liquid, but at levels below our perceptive senses, they occur as a lumpy sew of solids floating in liquids, defying any conventional notion of saturation (or for that matter, satisfaction). These entanglements of liquid concrete or liquid crystal defy our commonsense repartition of the world into recognizable objects

even as they make such perception possible in the first place. But Ghosh's adventurous metaphor of (critical) thinking as liquid-solid trans(in)fusion, the aleatory process of hermeneutic investigation if you will, is also the ever-shifting context we in fact inhabit. The metaphor is thus also a world-or world-becoming, worlding as our very impossible condition of possibility, what Heidegger called our thrownness, but which we might here relabel as whirldness: the wildness or wilderness of our whirling become world.

Ghosh explores this whirling or worlding along two great axes, the verticality of history or 'tradition', and the horizontality of cross-cultural exchange, or 'translation'. The first of these concerns our relation to time, to the past, or specifically to time *as* past, without for that matter reducing the past to what is merely past, to mere dead time. As if to gloss William Faulkner's famous quip that 'the past is never dead. It's not even past', Ghosh elaborates:

If history is primarily about recording the past, history is also in extending the past, escaping the past to make a separate sense of the past. Thinking past is thinking the non-linearity and non-identity of the past. Tradition ceases to be the grand narrative and becomes a point of re-turn and return. The past exists because past revises: history is the philosophy of actual becoming.

The past is non-linear, and we are constantly remaking it as we reaffirm the very presence of its pastness, its past presence and its present past, as 'actual becoming'. Ghosh alludes to Foucault's archaeology of knowledge and the history of the present, but in many respects, the closest model would be Hayden White's notion of the 'practical past', a formulation he rechannels from Michael Oakeshott to describe the historical past that is actually available to us at any given moment as a source of practical information or guide to how we live the present. Of course, this is a past that is almost unimaginably shifty and changeable with succeeding presents, a past whose shifting and non-linear shape both informs and is informed by current exigencies. Ghosh offers a similar formulation when he asserts that 'historical sense then is a kind of construction which happens and is made to happen, but is nowhere a living in empty time'.

At a social level, the practical past also rejoins what we call tradition as an ensemble of received mores and protocols within which current practices emerge as either following or breaking with tradition. Ghosh, though, reminds us with an important corollary that even the most radical break with tradition also paradoxically reconfirms the very weight of its existence: 'Is tradition within the trans(in)fusionist imaginary a destruction or preservation or "leaving behind"? Tradition fosters inheritance, initiates labour, inspires transgression and is a "presence" too; it presences itself to build its own patterns of thinking'. Tradition, as shifting repository of the past, 'swirling and whirling in the hot brew of time, both 'fosters inheritance'

and 'inspires transgression'. What Ghosh then calls 'trans-habit' is itself a trans(in)fusive way for 'the permanent past making itself a part of the present through affirmation and cultivation'. Habituation describes the process whereby we lose consciousness of a given custom, by its becoming unconscious as habit, what Ghosh terms the 'iterative torpor' resulting from 'the repetitiveness of habit and consciousness'. At the same time, though, he adds that 'tradition is habit and habit-shedding where the repetition is the possibility for a new habit': 'Tradition moves; it transgresses and transmits; it is the phenomenon of trans-habit. Tradition is trans-habit. It shows that 'meaningful communication' across cultures does not have to be a matter of common denominators and agreed-upon terms'. The issue here comes down to how we are to understand repetition itself, or the gesture of a present that signals its break from the past in the very act of paying homage to the past. No need here to re-rehearse the long philosophical tradition of debate, from Heraclitus to Wittgenstein to Deleuze, regarding the degree to which repetition is primarily about the same or the different. Easier perhaps to think this conundrum from a Lucretian perspective where our particles suspended in liquid — blood or tea — swirl in an endless repetition pumped by a beating heart or a twirling spoon only to deviate ever so slightly from the prescribed pathway, the infinitesimal swerve that is the *clinamen*, the event if you like that inaugurates the field of space-time, the thought that signals the deviation of critique, or in Ghosh's terms the 'trans-habit' that both 'transgresses and transmits' the past of tradition, that energizes 'the possibility for a new habit'. Trans-habit is the provocation of a certain malleability, or a certain plasticity (a theme which re-joins Ghosh to the work of Catherine Malabou while charting the direction for his next major project on the 'Plastic Turn'). Ghosh extrapolates:

Trans-plastic-habit sees tradition as entanglement — a state that has an integral DNA of understanding mapped into it, but not without a differential dwelling that is epigenetic in nature. Tradition cannot survive without sequences and systems of thinking; but the differentiation and re-contextualizations with time and the changes in material-social milieu matter in its formation as well. Trans-plastic-habit forms and has the capacity to receive and give form.

But if trans-plastic-habit allows us to imagine the temporality of trans(in)fusion itself to the point that 'it shows that "meaningful communication" across cultures does not have to be a matter of common denominators and agreed-upon terms', would this not be true *a fortiori* for that other axis of trans(in)fusive world-becoming, translation as movement across the space between cultures and languages? For Ghosh, the problem of translation is not simply that of the incommensurable rendering of one language into another, not just the old adage of 'traduttore traditore' or some more elegant expression of the eternal angst one feels before the impossible 'task'

of the translator. It is not just that there always remains some residual and perpetual 'untranslatability', nor even that there are 'untranslatable' that circulate between languages (*pace* Cassin, Lezra and Apter), but something else entirely:

But a word that fails to get translated and defies precision when rendered into a different language can sometimes carry a new weight of meaning, adduced, inducted and induced from its interactions with a language from a different culture or community.

Words thus circulate among and between differing languages through all kinds of sub-molecular entanglements that bear new meaning, or rather what Ghosh terms 'a new *weight* of meaning', a semantic and pragmatic ponderousness subject to the gravitational pulls that define and alter the space-time they and we inhabit. And here we encounter another form of 'trans-habit' that is the in-habit of a habitation, the *in-stallation* of a home away from home: 'The word does not deny its parentage but learns to build a home with greater accommodativeness and stirring power'. What Heidegger celebrated as the 'house of Being' reveals a certain transiency here, not necessarily nomadic but transigratory, an acquiescence to its own foreignness, to its having come from some 'elsewhere', as the offspring (*ursprung*) of some distant 'parentage', just enough so that it is seen to fit without fitting in, to belong without belonging. But whatever this home is, it is understood as having been *built* 'with greater accommodativeness and stirring power', although this formulation – one that very economically states the very essence of trans(in)fusion – remains ambiguous: is it the house itself or the word that builds the house that is characterized by increased accommodation and 'stirring power'? The transmigrated – or dare we say translated – word has the kind of stirring power to twirl and whirl the linguistic elements in its environment into some other kind of meaning structure, a conceptual tea, or soup or even a boundless ocean of altered sense and signification. Ghosh calls this process 'conceptual translation': 'Concepts generate their own productivity through such travellings'. Akin to Derrida's notion of 'abusive translation', conceptual translation questions the very boundaries between languages as the untranslated *travels* the world of concepts, trans(in)fused in the swirling eddies of meaning-making and world-becoming: 'Conceptual translation then becomes conceptual rewriting'. This is why again, concludes Ghosh, that 'there cannot be a global theory of literature', but only the trans-national, trans-lational and trans-migratory flows of meanings and concepts, swerving unpredictably into each other, serving up new and unheard-of teas and bloodlines.

Some languages/cultures/homelands may be more available than others to such transigratory semiosis. This is the vitality, for example, that Edouard Glissant detects in the supreme inventiveness and creativity of various creoles. Ghosh distinguishes such potentiality, however, from

what Ricoeur calls 'linguistic hospitality', defined as 'the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own home, one's own dwelling'. Such a welcoming of the Other into the language home, no matter how generous or hospitable, differs from the work of conceptual translation. There, 'the translated makes its own home through a creative othering, a dwelling of its own'. So, instead of the target language welcoming the word into its own fold as one of its own, in this case, the word here makes its own home in the target language, inhabiting the language without belonging to it. The result is a 'creative othering' that makes the language othered from itself, hosting an alien dwelling-within that takes the form of a 'transference of meaning and transmobility of concepts', in other words, the very whirliding of sense that we recognize now as trans(in)fusion. The latter emerges then as a 'creative othering' that marks the foreign within the native or mother tongue, the introduction of some foreign or parasitical agency that also transmutes into a certain flavour of the tea, a certain colour or 'type' of the blood. Such is the creative othering Ghosh explores, among other examples, in Chattopadhyay's translations of Robert Frost into Bengali, enabling an unexpected blending of tongues, of cultures, of critical ecologies, whose interface 'allows asymmetries as a creative-critical move in thinking: queer as a concept is translated and not the word'. What Ghosh calls 'conceptual translation' becomes 'a kind of problematic interface with alterity' that surfaces in 'silences, certain zones of insecurities of meaning, some deficit in understanding and creative-cultural indulgences'. The foreign remains foreign, the other remains other, within what only gives itself as the native, the same, the illusion of identity but which becomes profoundly unsettled and deeply displaced through the creative othering and taking up of alien abode by the work of conceptual translation. The intrusion of the other enables the trans-fusion and the in-fusion of what can no longer be distinguished as same and other, as native and foreign. Ghosh writes, 'The charm of enjoying the poem in translation is the acceptance of the acts of unsettlement that translation brings'. The claim behind this affect of 'charm' is both outrageous and liberatory, as it frees us from the melancholia or shame of not being able to read the so-called 'original', rather than its necessarily flawed (or betrayed) translation. Instead, the translated text is free to be enjoyed as its own conceptual *rewriting*, as a certain pleasure – aesthetic of course – in the 'unsettling' effects of twists and twirls a language experiences at the hands of a skilled but appropriately abusive translation, in the abyssal realm of trans(in)fusion. This is why Tagore, cited by Ghosh, admits that 'one cannot quite translate one's own works', translation requires the in-dwelling of the foreign, the in-stance of the other. The 'charm' in translation stems from the magic of its alchemy, the artfulness of the *mélange* that emerges from the saturation of tea leaves in hot water or from the transfusion of some substance to make the blood be the blood the body needs to live.

Finally, the specific charm of this book on trans(in)fusion comes from the heady mix of Ghosh's writing, which draws upon an almost unfathomably deep familiarity with modern critical theory (from poststructuralism to postcolonialism and well beyond), with the history of philosophy and religion, with the most recondite scientific concepts from quantum mechanics or molecular bonding, all along with Ghosh's stunning ability to draw upon an unparalleled breadth of literary, cultural and linguistic traditions that truly span the world, not just his core basis in the Anglophone world and South Asia, but also in surprising and delightful ways, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and East Asia. While correctly discounting global theories of so-called world literature, he is exemplary in navigating a truly capacious blend of transnational waters. This book can be taken as a wondrous shot in the arm, or it can be deliciously savoured in small amounts, injected as a beneficial transfusion, or imbibed as a rapidly variegated and expansive infusion, as the sustenance of blood or the nourishment of tea. Enjoy the charm and be prepared for the critical challenges of a thinking and questioning that knows no bounds but only the perilous joys of every kind of *trans*.

1 *Trans... (in)... fusion*

Alexander wept when he heard from Anaxarchus that there were an infinite number of worlds, and his friends asking him if any accident had befallen him, here turns this answer: 'Do you not think it a matter of lamentation that when there is such a vast multitude of them, we have not yet conquered one?' Plutarch, *On the Tranquillity of Mind*¹

I stand at the seashore, alone, and start to think...

There are the rushing

waves mountains of molecules

each stupidly minding its own business

trillions apart

yet forming white surf in unison....

For whom, for what?...

Deep in the sea

all molecules repeat

the pattern of one another

till complex new ones are formed.

They make others like themselves

and a new dance starts.

Growing in size and complexity

living things

masses of atoms

DNA, protein

dancing a pattern ever more intricate.

Out of the cradle

onto dry land

here it is

standing:

atoms with consciousness;

matter with curiosity.

Stands at the sea,

wonders at wondering: I