

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Tympanising Philosophy: Luxating the Disciplinary Margins through a Derridean Reading of the *Mahabharata*

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I have attempted more and more systematically to find a non-site, or a nonphilosophical site, from which to question philosophy. [...] My central question is: from what site or non-site (*non-lieu*) can philosophy as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner?¹

The present excursus argues for an alignment of ‘embattled adversaries’, namely philosophy and literature, and it does that by referring to Derrida’s seminal work, *Margins of Philosophy*. To press further our argument about the alliance of philosophy and literature, we also allude to Indian philosophy and the great Indian philosophico-literary epic, the *Mahabharata*.

Foundational Indian philosophic texts such as the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* and countless other subsequent metaphysical texts were articulated through poetic hymns which are endowed with rich literary inflexions. This literary inscape of Indian philosophical texts is ‘in-stressed stressed’ and substantiated when Bharatamuni – the ancient author of *Natyashastra*, the celebrated dissertation on Indian drama and dramaturgy – defined the *genre* of drama as the ‘Fifth Veda’. There are four *Vedas* in Indian philosophy and they are regarded as the foundational core of Indian metaphysical tradition and when Bharatamuni elevates drama as the ‘Fifth Veda’ he does that on the assumption that drama is born out of the literary seeds ingrained or embedded within the *Vedas* which are primarily known as philosophico-religious texts.²

All these assumptions on the part of Bharatamuni signify the close kinship or non-duality of philosophy and literature and in what follows we take up this coalition of philosophy and literature to hint at a possible commonwealth of epistemic possibilities and to do that we bring in Derrida’s plea for blurring all genre distinctions between philosophy and philosophy’s Other, i.e. literature. Derrida began his *Margins of Philosophy* (1982) with a call for tympanising philosophy and by ‘tympanising’ he means to problematise the traditional definition of philosophy. If one elaborates it further, we understand that Derrida frequently used the terms ‘tympanum’ or ‘tympanon’ to signify the unicity of philosophy or its circumscription within its own sovereign ‘ipseity’. The tympanum is the closely guarded border that totalises the regimes and sovereign mastery of philosophy. This intransigent border patrolling to retain its unique totality has been debunked by Derrida when he talked of de-totalising philosophy or gnawing at its border through a ‘limitrophic’ violence, a violence that opens up the conversation with philosophy’s Other. Derrida names literature as philosophy’s self-appointed Other, something that philosophy has been excluding for many centuries³ and Plato’s expulsion of the poet testifies that conscripted unicity of philosophy that does not allow its borders to be luxated.

¹ Jacques Derrida and Richard Kearney, ‘Deconstruction and the Other’, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 108.

² Sri Babulala Shukla Shastri (ed.), *Sri Bharatamuni Pranitam, Sachitram Natyashastram* (Baranasi: Chaukhamba Sanskrit Sansthan [Reprint edition], 2009) [Chapter 1, Verse 12, page, 4 and Verse 17, page, 6].

³ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* translated by Alan Bass (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982).

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Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Philosophemes, Derrida complains, generally disallow semiotic egalitarianism and any logic of heteronomy is denied the importance it deserves. The margins of philosophy, therefore, generate a sovereign ‘envelopment’ and ‘hierarchy’ and Derrida in his *Margins of Philosophy* asked for the blurring of such boundaries, for de-tympanising the imperial borders of philosophy. The present paper attempts such de-tympanisation of the boundaries which philosophy erects around itself through a deconstructive analysis of the *Mahabharata*, the Indian foundational text which enjoys a unique disciplinary *non-site* as mentioned in the beginning in the words of Derrida. Derrida has previously been linked with Eastern philosophic paradigms and theological traditions in several works⁴ and the present paper continues to explore the possibilities of similar alignments between Derridean deconstructive templates and the *Mahabharata*.

Let us add here a note for the sake of convenience. Tympanum is something that inhabits the border, that activates the border itself, and that keeps the pressure from either side of the border in taut balance. Therefore, as and when we tinker with the border of something delimited, we actually criticise the act of bordering or limiting that thing. Inhabitation of tympanum is inhibition of the bordering process.

Thus de-limiting is different from delimiting. One can see that this simple act of hyphenation makes all the difference, while the difference is actually nothing but a simple act of acting upon the limit itself. While denegation of the limit is delimiting, the negation of the same is transgressing (and not transcending in the Hegelian sense proper) the limit or ‘aufhebung’ – the installation of the ‘limit/passage’. This is precisely what we do when we propose to read the *Mahabharata* through some philosophic optic. We tympanise philosophy to criticise its ‘envelopment’ into the ‘philosophemes’, and to untie it by ‘de-tympanising its imperial borders’. Thus de-limiting could be read as ‘de-tympanising’ or lifting the *border*, which has all along held the *order* of the philosophical manoeuvring needing now to be tympanised/criticised holistically to re-set the border at some point/joint (un)foreseen. Perhaps the *Mahabharata* may constitute some wild and unforeseen frontier at the tympanising juncture of philosophy; and hence it can be located in a sort of ‘non-site’, as in spite of being a literary epic in its form and content, it is generally considered as a book of philosophy as well. And here we seriously affirm the idea of the non-site as the *Other* of philosophy, in absence of which philosophy would be delimited.

How do we situate or characterise then a text like the *Mahabharata*? Is it *philosophy as literature* or *philosophy and literature* both at the same time? We would argue that it perfectly adheres to Derrida’s notion of tympanising philosophy, enabling the retainment of the sovereign status of philosophy and simultaneously causing the dispersal and dissemination of philosophy’s essential singularity of presence. We would imagine and it is commonly established too that the *Mahabharata* in fact is in a way an emanation and expansion/exegesis of the *Upanishads* and related works of Indian philosophy.⁵ For us, then, the *Mahabharata* is both *philosophy as literature* as well as *philosophy and literature simultaneously*. We would try to establish this claim by foregrounding on the philosophical theme of cosmography or cosmological time/deep

⁴ For example Robert Magliola, *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture* (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1997); Harold Coward, *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); John D. Caputo, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) and Jin Y. Park, *Buddhisms and Deconstruction* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

⁵ Sitansu S. Chakravarti, *Ethics in the Mahabharata: A Philosophical Inquiry for Today* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2006).

time (in our sense that departs from Daniel Lord Smail's usage, which we will return to at a later point of this essay)/*kala* or what we call *thick time* as enunciated in the *Mahabharata*. Time comes out here in our schema as the primary philosophical signifier and in the subsequent sections we would see how the *Mahabharata* philosophises on the philosophic category of Time and even a cursory glance at the *Mahabharatic* treatment of Time qualifies it as the elevated non-site of both philosophy and literature simultaneously. In the course of the discussion we would demonstrate how in explicating the notion of *thick time* or 'contretemps', the *Mahabharata* exemplified Derridean idea of the deconstruction about 2,500 years ago. Since Western philosophy is built upon its Greek origins, the distinction of philosophy and literature can be traced back to an earlier Western metaphysical origin (Nietzsche's use of ancient pre-Socratic chorus may be mentioned in this context. We would return to it, however, at the end). But Derrida debunks this *genre* distinction or devaluation of literature by reading it as *the* site where philosophy can reconsider itself, 'By looking in the mirror of its other, like for instance the mirror of literature, philosophy can start to rethink itself.' The present paper is inspired by this Derridean dis-bordering and such negation of margins and limits allows us to brave the hazards of genre distinctions and we intend to read literature and philosophy coextensively. As Derrida reminds us,

If philosophy has always intended, from its point of view, to maintain its relation with the nonphilosophical, that is the antiphilosophical, with the practices and knowledge, empirical or not, that constitute its other, if it has constituted itself according to this purposive entente with its outside, if it has always intended to hear itself speak, in the same language, of itself and of something else, can one, strictly speaking, determine a nonphilosophical place, a place of exteriority or alterity from which one might still treat of philosophy? Is there any ruse not belonging to reason to prevent philosophy from still speaking of itself, from borrowing its categories from the logos of the other, by affecting itself without delay, on the domestic page of its own tympanum (still the muffled drum, the tympanon, the cloth stretched taut in order to take its beating, to amortize impressions, to make the types (typoi) resonate, to balance the striking pressure of the typtein, between the inside and the outside), with heterogeneous percussion? Can one violently penetrate philosophy's field of listening without its immediately – even pretending in advance, by hearing what is said of it, by decoding the statement – making the penetration resonate within itself, ... In other words, can one puncture the tympanum of a philosopher and still be heard and understood by him?⁶,

The penultimate sentence of the above quote, we believe, is highly significant and this is exactly what we have been trying to suggest through our reading of Derrida and the *Mahabharata*. The sovereign singularity of philosophy is undone by so called non-philosophic categories and yet such non-sites emerge as alien insiders, the Self rubs shoulder with the Other to attain better self-knowledge. And to adduce a *Mahabharatic* evidence we may quote from the 2014 book, *Mahabharata Now* that drives home similar points.

Although philosophers, both in medieval Sanskrit and in modern English, have formulated a separate 'systemic' Philosophy of Vyasa or Philosophy of the *Mahabharata*, when we approach it with sharp ethical or metaphysical questions, in answer, the book, Bhishma or Krishna tells us one or more stories and leaves it at that. Its job seems to be simply to

⁶ Derrida, *Margins* x, xix.

describe in suggestive detail the actions of different people ... in particular situations. [And one may recall, in this context,] Ludwig Wittgenstein's advice to philosophers, 'Do not explain, just describe'.⁷

In these just quoted lines, literature is assigned the role to philosophise and philosophy is seen to be musing through literary modes. The philosophers are sometimes lost in their abstracted and abstruse vocabulary – though the vocabulary is often generated/played in the concreteness of popular life. We invite *the Other of philosophy* – be it literature for the time being, as Derrida says – to offer the concrete stories of life to the philosophers. The present paper therefore, attempts the Derridean 'purposive entente' with the outside of philosophy, allowing the possibility of finding philosophy 'hear itself speak, in the same language, of itself and of something else' and determining 'a nonphilosophical place, a place of exteriority or alterity from which one might still treat of philosophy.' We believe our critical Derridean reading of the *Mahabharata* blurs the border zones between philosophy and its alterity or non-philosophical places, enabling cross-borderal supplementation through the 'logos of the Other'. Such a reading practice is tantamount to epistemic 'ambush' luxating the frontiers of philosophy only to enrich it and in the process what comes out in the open is the 'repressed of philosophy.'

Consequently, to luxate the philosophical ear, to set the loxos in the logos to work, is to avoid frontal and symmetrical protest, opposition in all the forms of anti-, or in any case to inscribe antism and overturning, domestic denegation, in an entirely other form of ambush, of lokhos, of textual manoeuvres.⁸

Will it be said, then, that what resists here is the unthought, the repressed of philosophy?⁹

The unconcealment or *aletheia* of the suppressed, if we recall Heidegger, occasions the manifestation of *Dasein*, an unfurlment that causes multiplicities of flowering – making *disclosures* but always stopping short of truth-claiming as such – or polysemies of significations, a task, according to Derrida, that philosophy must aim for. Such a polysemic approach owns up the dis-owned outside.

It may be about this multiplicity that philosophy, being situated, inscribed, and included within it, has never been able to reason. Doubtless, philosophy will have sought the reassuring and absolute rule, the norm of this polysemia. It will have asked itself if a tympanum is natural or constructed, if one does not always come back to the unity of a stretched, bordered, framed cloth that watches over its margins as virgin, homogenous, and negative space, leaving its outside *outside*, without mark, without opposition, without determination, and ready, like matter, the matrix, the khora, to receive and re-percuss type.¹⁰

Once we allow the suppressed/repressed Other of philosophy its unconcealment, we attain the epistemic polysemy or the epistemic egalitarianism that Derrida envisaged. To do that one needs to expand one's traditional optics to envision philosophic lineages even in so called non-philosophic sites, as did Heidegger by illustrating his notion of 'unconcealedness'.

⁷Arindam Chakrabarti and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (eds.), *Mahabharata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014) xxi.

⁸ Derrida, *Margins* x, xix.

⁹ Derrida, *Margins* x, xix.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Margins* x, xix. (Emphasis ours.)

Philosophic exposition of Time in the *Mahabharata* comes out as that unique reality where philosophy and literature coalesce to constitute the common terrain of epistemology where philosophy borders onto literature and *vice versa*. The present paper keeps in mind this disbordering and tries to achieve that by dwelling on Time through a reference to the philosophical trajectories of the *Mahabharata*. In the *Mahabharata*, we believe, philosophy's self and the Other cohabit. In the subsequent part of the paper, we would go further and would claim that the *Mahabharata*, in spite of being primarily a literary text, belied all genre distinctions and it contained thousands of years ago the philosophic grains of deconstruction. Derrida's tympanisation of philosophy seems justified as a symbiotic co-habitation between Derridean philosophical deconstruction and literary deconstruction,¹¹ as exemplified in the *Mahabharata*, can open up new philosophic 'epoches'.

The philosophic treatment of Time in the *Mahabharata* prompted us to read this epic through a Derridean deconstructive optic to come out with new domains of alternative values. The *Mahabharata* philosophically offers in our deconstructive reading enough grounds of agential scaffolding at a time when agencies and subjectivities are denied to us. Here we must remind our readers that ours is not a deconstructive reading of the whole of the *Mahabharata* because such an exercise would be impossible to achieve within the span of a paper. We would go for selected readings of some episodic portions of the *Mahabharata* to establish our argument of the disbordering of philosophy and in doing that we explore new signficatory horizons of the *Mahabharata*, extracting new contemporary philosophical relevance of the epical text written long back. In the process of reading the *Mahabharata* as a seminal text of adequate contemporary metaphysical relevance we also take the liberty to align our epical reading with current philosophical positioning of Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben. We would demonstrate that the *Mahabharata* enshrines enough examples of Derridean aporia or the deconstructive philosophical contretemps – or counter-time – and it also contains the same interpretive horizon of Badiouian notion of 'subtraction' or 'event' and Agamben's idea of 'inoperativity' – the ideas which are in demand to fashion a constitutive temporality of change and subjectivity. In the course of the discussion, we would elaborate on these ideas to show that the *Mahabharata* foreshadows contemporary Western philosophical axioms in a significant way. The notions of 'inoperativity' and 'subtraction' have a great deal to do with Time as a philosophic category. Capitalism induces in us a hegemonic model of homogeneous and linear temporality, a paradigm of conformity with one exclusive unidirectional model of Time and Badiouian idea of subtraction, Agamben's theory of inoperativity and Ranciere's radical doctrine of *dissensus* call for subverting this unidirectional dictum of time. Both of these ideas suggest a complete withdrawal from the existing patterns of ideology and call for deconstructing the given temporal structures of conformism and collusion. The notion of Time in the *Mahabharata* subscribes to this philosophy of *subtraction*, or the philosophy of deconstruction. In what follows we take up this whole idea of Time and deconstructive philosophy in the *Mahabharata*.

Time as a Philosophical Category, Deconstruction and the *Mahabharata*

We would now straightaway address the issue of Time in our lives today lived under the condition of global capital. At the outset, we would like to clarify that we were inspired in

¹¹Derek Attridge, 'Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning on Literature', *Acts of Literature* by Jacques Derrida (New York: Routledge, 1992).

initiating this discussion by a Bengali newspaper essay on Time and the *Mahabharata* written by Arindam Chakrabarty written in three parts in *Ei Samay*, the Bengali newspaper. The essay, entitled 'Samay Je Nei' [There is no more any time], engaged with the problem of late modern paucity of time, wondering in the process the mystery of time-lack in a world surrounded with gizmos and gadgets meant to generate surplus free time by reducing human labour. Professor Chakrabarty points at our haste, the sick hurry and our subservience to the linear model of temporality as induced by capital. On the one hand we have no time to ponder and perhaps we have no such times because we do not feel the necessity to ponder at all, allowing us to be subjugated by the hegemonic temporal order of capital or the temporal narratives of power that by rewarding conformity does not allow any deviation from the given temporal order.

Here we may also recall Daniel Lord Smail's notion of 'Deep History' and the treatment of 'deep time' in his seminal work, *On Deep History and the Brain* that induce us to take into consideration a different paradigm of time as distinguished from the chronological homogeneity of global capital and traditional historiography, a chronology that Western history could not trace back before what it calls the dawn of civilization. Let us quote Smail.

With the sudden and widespread acceptance of geological time in the 1860s, western Europe's chronological certainties came crashing down. Stephen Jay Gould has called the discovery of deep time a cosmological revolution of Galilean proportions. Over the course of several decades in the mid-nineteenth century, the great historical sciences – geology, biology, paleoanthropology – were made or remade as the bottom dropped out of time, exposing a nearly endless vista.¹²

Smail was thus opposed to the short vista, not unlike the author(s) of the great epic we are talking about. Perhaps the hurried and harried nature of Western civilisation has got something to do with the unnecessarily myopic vision of the time purveyors living there, the vision that attempted another kind of centrism other than Eurocentric and geocentric ones. But this time the centric configuration is delimiting more on the line of time than on space. The virulent form of anthropocentrism is perhaps rooted in this crippling short vision too. Smail holds that this lack of *longue duree* replicates the Christian mythological range of time which is no more than merely about five thousand years since the idyllic days of the Garden of Eden. Smail thus claims that Western historiography suffered from the 'grip of sacred history'.¹³

On the other hand, Indian epics and mythologies are full of astronomical numbers. Although the main story of the *Mahabharata* centring on the War of Kurukshetra corresponds to the temporal order not out of human proportions, the supplementary stories often make mind-boggling claims about durations. The curses, austerities, penances, oaths etc. would more often than not take hundreds and even thousands of years. Now if we are permitted to look at a different mythological register, we may note that the measure of time like Kalpa is also huge and Brobdingnagian. Kalpa is one diurnal and nocturnal cycle of Brahma, which equals to twice 4,320,000,000 years!¹⁴

Perhaps the traditional Indian mind – of course we are running the risk of making a hasty generalisation – generally likes to bask in time as an entity to live *through*, enjoying the same by living substantially within it. Time is 'thick' for them insofar as it is an end in itself. The

¹²Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) 1.

¹³Smail 1.

¹⁴Jnanendra Mohan Das, *Bangala Bhashar Abhidhan* (Dwitiya Bhag) [Bengali version of *Dictionary of the Bengali Language*, Volume 2] (Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, 1986) 460.

opposite is to treat time as too 'thin' to be felt, and to employ it as an instrument – i.e. the means to 'other' ends. And today's global capital knows the best what could be those 'other ends' could be. This may lead us straightaway to the ideas of 'reflexive modernity', 'reflexive modernisation' etc. – enunciated by Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash among others – which would be instructive for our purpose of understanding the time-hurry nature of our life today.

Reflexivity may refer to several things in social sciences which are not always too close to one another. In addition to the old philosophical import of 'seeing with added eye' or its widely known current meaning of 'self-referentiality', or the 'systematic reflection on the unconscious presuppositions' or the continuous feedback of social scientific knowledge to the commonsense, it is also even somewhat symptomatic of hanging in the midway of the conscious and the unconscious.¹⁵ We are mostly interested in a sense close to the latter one but with more specific shade of acting on the spur of automatic *reflex* as opposed to basing on well-thought *reflection*, so to speak, the hall mark of modernity.

Beck ... often works from the contrast of 'reflex' with 'reflection'. Reflexive he argues has more to do with reflex than reflection. Reflexes are indeterminate ... Reflexes cope with a world of speed and quick decision-making ... Beck [however] often omits to say that [the 'contemporary'] individual must choose *fast*, must – as in reflex – make quick decisions.¹⁶

This 'Reflexive modernity' and we, i.e. its children, are left, on the other hand, with no time to reflect on what to act upon or act along or react to, nor having any need to do any reflecting nevertheless, for to reflect is to relate, to relate is to relay, to relay is (to delay and) to relax, to relax is (to wax and) waste – i.e. wasting away of energy, resource and most importantly, time, which is money itself through the operation of capitalistic logic of the interest rate and through the functioning of capitalism as a system that must not be dislocated, deconstructed, subtracted or 'inoperated' in the interest of the upward spiralling of the interest rate. And, on a different but related meta-linguistic detour, to reflect is to ponder, and to ponder is to wonder, to wonder is to wander, and, then, to wander is to squander i.e. to waste, (and thus we may opt to be delivered onto the former route, or we may decide to experiment with a different paradigmatic register that could lead) even to blunder, to subvert, or at least to criticise and, in Derridean terms, to tympanise.

Time therefore is crucial in our philosophic argumentative frame. The ruling ideology of the temporal is crucial to understand and unravel the contours of our current existential condition and it is also instructive for any possible way of emancipation. And a Derridean reading of the *Mahabharata* dwells on a critique of this ideology of time. One primary reason to do such a reading is to establish again the point we began with, namely the equivalence of philosophy and literature. Time has been a very important philosophic category since Heraclitus' deliberation of Time and flux, and the *Mahabharata* does the same by philosophising on it.

We intend to focus on the politics of time that does not allow any room for 'aporetic time' or the moment of Derridean *aporia* or deadlock which could well be, to employ another Derridean term, 'contretemp'. The idea of *aporia* brings us to the Derridean logic of *differance* and deferment or deconstruction and we would argue that the philosophic notion of *aporia* also helps

¹⁵Ulrich Beck et al, *The Theory of Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994) 174-178.

¹⁶ Scott Lash, 'Foreword', *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (London: Sage, 2002) ix. (Emphasis in original).

us in arriving at the possibility of ‘time out of joint’ or the enjambment of time. We would imagine that the logic of systemic status quo thrives on the deterministic logic of linear temporality that imprisons the subject into the closure of linearity or into the panopticon of time. In the hands of power, time is a disciplining tool and a punishing or controlling apparatus of hegemony.

Consequently, the hegemonic narratives of our times have valorised terms and concept metaphors such as ‘multi-tasking’, ‘workaholic’, ‘multi-skilled’ etc. The chariot of time is always at our back and we are constantly having a phase of ultra-involvement in their time or what we call ‘thin time’, a state of temporality that ousts the possibility of ‘soul time’ or ‘thick time’ or our time and the ever diminishing state of thick time has made us time-paupers. Arindam Chakrabarty in his essay on *Mahabharata* and Time has exactly elaborated on this condition of time-pauperity and he referred to the *Mahabharata* to explain how we need to nurture more our moments of thick time to tympanise – or criticise – the hegemony of time-lack under the condition of global capital. So this act of tympanising the hegemony of time-lack aligns us both to the philosophic task of attaining soul time in moments of Time-pauperisation and also to the primary Derridean task of ambushing the border between philosophy and literature because very soon we would see how the *Mahabharata* through its deep philosophisation of Time belies all attempts for limiting the margins of philosophy. We should now mention Clifford Geertz, whose development of the idea of ‘thick description’, while writing ‘an interpretive theory of culture’, might have some tacit influence on us, as we coin the notions of thick time (or soul time/our time) and the thin time (or impoverished time/their time).¹⁷

As stated earlier, in this article we propose to hold time as our *problematic*, for we feel inclined to re-examine a host of old and new philosophical questions about time and ethics. And we have decided to look into the body of the great Indian epic/ (philosophico-epic?) of the *Mahabharata* in particular to obtain some alternative temporalities, since therein we recurrently come across epical characters like Vyasa and Ganesa as a couple, Bhishma, or Arjuna, or Chirakari, or Ahalya, who, sometime, putatively, procrastinate and postpone, as well as deconstruct issues, to explore the possibilities of justice despite, at times, the apparent impossibility of the same. And in those classical textual cases we confront different kinds of time scaling too that lie juxtaposed alongside each other, or are ‘folded’ into, or invaginating, one another as in the event of millennial waiting of Ahalya; or in the instance of the sudden postponement of the War of *Kurukshetra* by the qualms raised in the then apathetic mind of Arjuna eventually causing the hundreds of verses of the *Gita* to be produced meanwhile. Both the incidents – one concerning Ahalya and the other, Arjuna – are actually ‘folded’ within a sort of a primary and overt time frame, which is apparently more inclusive but scalar – and therefore impoverished and emaciated – than these dramatic versions of secondary and covert time scales that, purportedly, make the notion of time itself nonlinear, if not non-chronological, and should we say, contemporal?¹⁸ To our mind, these manners of ‘subtraction’ from the spectre of compulsive progress by employing the strategy of deferment by the above *dramatis personae*, and those evidences of, say, ‘rhizomic’ multiplication of the framing of time by the storytellers of the previously mentioned early foundational text – we mean the *Mahabharata* – with their

¹⁷Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 3-30.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, ‘Aphorism Countertime’, trans. Nicholas Royle, *Acts of Literature* edited by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992) 414-433.

pre-empting of the discipline provided by the singularity of the (presumed) modernist ‘arrow of time’, might tempt one to scrap or at least to rethink the ideas around the *linearity* and *integrity* of chronological time. In what follows we continue this discussion with reference to the *Mahabharata* and Derrida.

Thick Time, Deferred Time and the Contretemporal Habitus and a Derridean Reading of the *Mahabharata*

The hegemonic temporal order of global capital induces us into what we call a *thin* and *impoverished temporality* and subservience to the latter, denying the possibility of a *thick time* of variance and deviance as well as resistant subjectivity. Borrowing the deconstructive *dharma* of Chirakari, a character from the *Mahabharata*, we would presently argue for a paradigm of *deferred time* or ‘contretemp’ as counter-time. The liberal capitalist mode as the master signifier calls for ‘agonistic’ reading practices as possible vehicles for counter-hegemony and ‘subtraction’ from the reigning (mono-) temporal (World-) order. As the entire socius is a continuous sign chain, where the possibility of action lies in the dynamics of the disruption of this chain to construct a grammar of radical supplementarity and ‘differance’, our everyday dimension of linear time as induced by global capital can be disrupted by what Badiou calls ‘events’; and when an event occurs time is ‘out of joint’. It represents both an invitation to a full appreciation of our ‘being’ and a disruption of our cosy perception of the linear time, an interruption to the normal temporal order, a radical ‘breaching’ open of time – i.e. a deliverance to a $\dot{}$ juncture wherein the minor beings of designated time-space like subjugating/subjugated being or examining/examined being open up or unfold unto the ‘khoratic’, ‘rhizomic’ as well as golemic substance and/or substrate of being-and-scalar-time on the one hand, and nonbeing-and-polysemic-time on the other. This is perhaps a ‘luxatic’ turn out of the ‘khoratic’ and ‘tympanic’ diaphragm or the hymenal membrane: a non-‘posit’-able but immensely *posibilising* ‘liminal’ place of nonbeing/ being that blurs the inside and the outside, the pressing and the pressed, the separator and the medium, the protector and the invocator and the desiring and the desired – or which could be generalised/ reduced to agency and structure both or either agency or structure. This may also stand as the background and foreground of the agential. And this is standing aside while inhabiting (on) the sideline, staying apart while remaining a part, something alike a totalising philosophical manoeuvring from/with a de-totalising non-philosophical position/posture. The ‘margins of philosophy’ are the lines wherein swarm the infinite moments of the life and the world, lives that are *the* worlds – the ‘lifeworlds’. The stories of the imagined but concrete persona or the narratives that constitute the literature are the only fully fledged registers that we really have about these lifeworlds. But that concreteness thrives in what Bergson calls ‘homogeneous time’ – a spatialised species of time – a philosophical concept of time, nevertheless, that has long before percolated into the sphere of the mundane with the aids of common measuring rods – old and new – of time. But, at the depth of our conscious being, the ‘animal therefore I am’ cannot but feel the ‘*duree*’ and *duree* alone – yet another philosophically abstracted notion proposed by Bergson – which is the extreme concrete version of experienced/sensed time.¹⁹ Now, literature is (his)tory in every spatiotemporal detail where s/he is a whole being straddling the *duree* only. And to augur singular and holistic philosophy *during* and from them is therefore always tympanic – an ‘*epoche*’ or *event* which is critically distant yet sensitisingly merging with the *singular* literatures that could never be pluralised without

¹⁹Alfred Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970) 60-62.

damaging their individuality. And there are sciences of all creeds that busy themselves doing the pluralising, to the point of generalising, work which are instantiations of totalism of the ‘middle range’. Thus we are given literature, which is, perforce, at the beginning of all stories. And perhaps Schopenhauer anticipated something like it much earlier than us and we will return to it later.²⁰ In the *Mahabharata* we find the flourishing of the very foundational substance that go into the making of the philosophy of a civilisation. The *Mahabharata* war stands at one of the significant junctures of ‘time-reckoning’ too, if we follow the opinion of the Indian historian, Romila Thapar, who claims that the post *Mahabharata* ‘dynastic time ... takes the functional form of historical chronology’. She also mentions Manu(s) and their ‘large time cycles’, the seers representing eons of Indian mythological time.²¹ Sometimes these eons are separated (or blurred, as water is a liquid that has great connecting/dissolving quality?) by the great tide of water – the *Mahaplabana* or the great inundation²² – that dissolves everything at a massive ‘khoratic’ and ‘evental’ moment. Thus, as the name itself suggests, the *Mahabharata* stands at a confluence – the confluence where cosmic eternity of the mythical meets the quotidian everyday of the chronological-historical.

And, from the stories of great demise we may suddenly revert to a story which begins afresh, time and again. Can’t we see that this epic is always a told story! A story that begins with Souti, an epical character telling the hermits – assembled in the annual sacrificial rite of the great sage, Sounaka – about what Vaisampayana has narrated at the King Janamejay’s snake sacrifice rite from the great epical text composed by Vyasa by *telling* Ganesa to write them down²³ – a kind of a series of temporal homunculi always starting afresh. Thus the beginnings falter not unlike our Arjuna stumbling before the Kurukshetra war in the *Gita*, or Ganesa making Vyasa pause even before the scripting of the story commences. We will elaborate on this theme in a later section. But now let us turn to Derrida again and, viewed in Derridean optics, how can we forget that all these relaying narrators are actually pouring things onto the *ears* of their listeners thus occasioning a series of *tympanising* phases only to be followed by the subsequent ones?

And now for Derrida, ‘it takes time to do without time’ and any interaction involves a ‘*contretemporal* habitus’, an untimely *habitus*, and a *deferred time* to deconstruct the hegemon. We argue that some instances in the *Mahabharata* can provide such *contretemporal immanence*, as described by Derrida. And one of them is the befuddling story of Chirakari, whose name means, literally, the one who does a task taking time without end.

Chirakari – the Literary Derrida – and the Mythical Parents of Deconstruction

In the *Mahabharata* we meet Chirakari, the son of Rishi Goutama and Ahalya. To us, i.e. to the inhabitants of our time, Chirakari is an enigma. Always keen to do justice to his good name, he remained a habitual procrastinator. He always gave considerable, if not incredibly immense, thought before embarking on some action. Once Indra, the king of the heaven, came to the hermitage of Goutama, the sage, and managed to deceive Ahalya by assuming Goutama’s persona to get into a sexual liaison with her. Meditating, Goutama came to know about the

²⁰Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1962).

²¹Romila Thapar, *Time as the Metaphor of History* (Reprinted in *History and Beyond*) (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) 30-1.

²²Thapar 30-1.

²³Rajsekhar Basu, *Mahabharata* (Bengali version) (Kolkata: M.C. Sarkar, 1356 Bengali Era [1960-61]) 1-2.

adultery and with fury he instructed his son, Chirakari, to kill his mother with a sword. Having decreed such a cruel thing, he immediately left for the forest.

Now Chirakari got into a session of intense thinking. To kill or not to kill his mother – the kind of a dilemma that Hamlet had to bear! On the one hand, it is a serious sin according to ancient religious injunctions not to carry out one's father's order. On the other, it is no less an offence to commit the sin of matricide. Hence, Chirakari went on deliberating and pondering over various aspects of his act and the more Chirakari thought about all these, the more he got deeper and deeper into the problematic of the situation, which, as far as his mode of life is concerned, could hardly be resolved with any haste. Thus, in the end, Chirakari experienced a very great dilemma only, and he did so in the context of a case where such dilemmas are quite natural. Chirakari was brought to a point where one may either decide to abide by the severe rule of terror issued by the father and commit the matricide, or else may flout this fatherly order in order to remain on the side of life and that of the life of none but his mother. With this fatefulness writ large, Chirakari could do nothing but giving the case at hand more than sufficient thought.

Meanwhile, however, Goutama's fury subsided, and the moment that happened he started to run back to his hermitage. All the way he wondered whether Chirakari would be good enough to act according to his name today and defer the killing of his mother. Finally, when Chirakari put down his arms at the feet of his father, expressing his perplexity about the value of this killing, the no more regretful – yet guilty – father adored and praised his son for being so discreet about matters of grave importance.²⁴ And we are also advised that the benevolent deeds should be expedited, if possible; but the menacing things may be postponed for an indefinite time ('*Subhasyashighran, asubhasyakalaharanam*'). Sometimes even a minimal *taking of time* or postponement to act might save hundreds of lives.

This essentially 'deconstructive' episode appears in the epic called the *Mahabharata* about 2,500 years ago. And in the same epic we also find the maxim – to define is to close.²⁵ And we have already seen that capitalist modernity leaves a very little time for us to *rethink* the extant definitions.

However, to 'luxate' the things at our disposal, let us draw towards the close this '*Mahabharatic*' essay with one authentic genesis story – the genesis of the *Mahabharata* itself – to which we have already alluded. We will see here that the paradigmatic depth of the hermeneutic and the unending nature of the circles of their meaning, the polysemic and the polyvocal *Slokas* (verses) of the *Mahabharata* would always engender opportunity for deconstruction. Even what happens at the surface finally leads us to delve into the deeper layers – and that is exactly what happens during the too 'literal' 'tug of war' between Vyasa (the author of *Mahabharata*) and Ganesa (the mythological scribe or stenographer of *Mahabharata*). The latter imposed a condition on Vyasa that he would agree on the act of composition only if Vyasa dictates the verses non-stop. This imposition was settled by Vyasa in a clever way and both of them eventually came to a negotiating point where Ganesa would not have to wait for the subsequent instalment of the verses, but only on the stringent condition of his always already going through all the layers of 'differential' meanings before writing them onto the surface.

²⁴Kaliprasanna Singha, *Mahabharata* [5th Volume](Bengali version) (Kolkata: *Saksharata Prakasan*, 1976) 258-260.

²⁵Chaturvedi Badrinath, *The Mahabharata: An Inquiry into the Human Condition* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2007).

Thus Ganesa himself turns into a veritable ‘tympan’ who first understands on his own, letting the meanings have impressions on him; then and only then would he make the writing business to push or *press* the storyline for the posterity to listen to and, subsequently, to communicate further. The lurking layers of the absent other meanings are all summoned to present themselves at the call of this mythical parents of deconstruction – Vyasa and Ganesa –who dismantle the univocal speech out of hand and amortise it into an ever-widening series of deconstructed meanings with the aid of (and the respite of) the act of writing. A foundational literary text thus anticipates a philosophy which would take its birth millennia apart and continents afar. Can we call it a Derridean ‘double session’? This also has a Bakhtinian dialogic trace as the text contains multiple contesting undertones of meanings, enabling heteroglossic interpretations, thereby deconstructing the univocity of meaning.

We have just seen in the event of the imposition of the condition by Vyasa to Ganesa that script-writer must not write anything without understanding the meaning as polysemically and thickly as possible. This, however, emboldens the present authors to return to their proposed idea of the ‘thick time’, which is now all the more necessary with our Ganesa, for he needs hours to meet what has been required of him. Ganesa compels Vyasa to think as fast as he would finish writing; but Vyasa, the unlettered composer, could make the table turn onto his erudite accomplice by posing his challenge to the latter by inviting him in an unending hermeneutic exercise before doing the mechanical part of the scripting job. May we now move to another Derridean idea – the idea of the existence of a variety of texts even preceding, or existing alongside, any of the scripted form of languages? We are actually hinting at the possibility of prevalence of a veritable ‘text’ anterior to what Ganesa has written, otherwise how could we explain the possibility of ‘many levels of meaning.’²⁶ But where was that ‘text’ actually located? Was it housed in the body of the verses that were being composed by Vyasa only at the hour of its scripting, or they were full of intertextual layers, while these intertextual imports were rendered by the ensemble of pre-*Mahabharatic* tales from the Vedas and the Upanishads on the one hand, and the etymological and other sources of meaning on the other? And drifting toward some other direction, we may think of the differential renditions of the *Mahabharata* that were formed in various parts of India in different historical eras; so much so that prestigious Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in India had to think of writing a ‘critical edition’ of the great epic. Can we not take any of them as one more ‘tympanised’ version of the *Mahabharata*? The *Mahabharata* is thus always a medium as well as the mediated, always in the process of being formed, be in the mythical versions of multiple sessions of its being retold and reinterpreted, be it by Souti or Vaishyampana in their role of narrator or by Ganesa in his sessions of *deep* writing, or during the innumerable sessions of their narration amongst the populace.

Finally, to return to the issue of time, we can very well understand that Vyasa has little worry about time crunch. With each verse he breaks open some more time to think, now Ganesa too, having joined him and always taking a long time to understand Vyasa, they are literally ‘subtracting’ them from the mundane. This ‘eventuality’ of ‘subtracting’ oneself *a la* Badiou is true for Chirakari as well as Arjuna in the war front too. Subtracting is related to the idea of morality in the form of duty and justice. With inventing, or breaking open, extra time each time a dilemma occurs, the epical (Chirakari and Arjuna) and meta-epical (e.g. Vyasa and Ganesa) characters are subtracting themselves from the linear and inexorable time with which we are

²⁶Badrinath 2.

almost obsessed as the only possible version of time. In the acts of contemplative Chirakari or Arjun, do we not find a kind of an attempt to make the impossible possible – a refrain in the later Derrida’s repertoire of philosophical vocabulary? And to do so one always needs time. Thus time is the measure of criticism itself. An original act is always expensive in its extent of wastage of time. And an original act is always a critique of what has been handed down to the present. Thus the Chirakarīs cannot but raise questions that take time to be resolved. And who tell us that we really need to hurry? If they are our respected elders, as Goutama was to Chirakari, we only need to face them with our ‘argumentative mind’ awake, as Chirakari did despite Goutama’s clear order to carry out an inordinately cruel job.

Then, what do all these have to do with the tympanised khoratic zone of literature and philosophy? And how does our critique of temporality help in turning philosophy to literature and *vice versa*? Those will constitute our conclusion that would, of necessity, stop short of concluding themselves, for to conclude is to put closure, to stop tympanising, which might be the most *unmahabharatic* act. We really never know how to conclude the *Mahabharata* or conclude/infer anything from its text?

Conclusion

There are at least three senses of time in the *Mahabharata*.²⁷ To our mind, these senses can be mined to get to the essence of our ‘tympan’ of philosophy that the *Mahabharata* is. Let us quote:

There is, moreover, *the question of history and meaning*. This is explored in the *Mahabharata* at many different levels. *Kala*, ‘time’, in which everything originates and is destroyed, the determining factor of one’s destiny, is not the historical ‘time’. Neither is it the ‘time’ that is physically measured. It is a force, say, akin to God, in which originates all that *is* and also all that *is not*. It is the ultimate cause of all happenings at another level, *kala*, ‘time’, is the measure of appropriateness. It is combined with *desha* and *patra*, ‘place’ and ‘the person concerned’. These three, *desh*, *kala* and *patra*, that is, ‘the proper place’, ‘the proper time’, and ‘the proper person’, determine the appropriateness of an act and thus its *meaning*. In other words, they determine the *context*, in which a person lives and has his, or her, being; and meaning lies in context. At still another level, ‘time’ as *history* is examined as giving substance to one’s life. The three attributes of history of, the ‘past’, the ‘present’ and the ‘future’, and one’s relationship with them as one’s relationship with oneself, constitutes one of the subjects of the inquiry into the human condition. At the same time, acknowledging the power of *kala* in different forms, the *Mahabharata* raises the question: *am I my history alone?* Is ‘context’ all that there is to ‘meaning’? And with that, the inquiry moves on to a different plane – that of the relationship between history and its transcending, between the eternal and transient, *nitya* and *anitya*, as the substance of life and relationship. All these questions are to be found throughout the *Mahabharata*.²⁸

We will shortly return to the first and third of these senses. Let us now add something on certain events of the *Mahabharata* where the notions of time and its deconstructive value can be intriguing. Perhaps this would help us to understand not only the ‘aporetic’ time, but how the *Mahabharata* ‘tympanises’ or ‘dis-borders’ the divide between philosophy and literature. The

²⁷Badrinath 9.

²⁸Badrinath 9.

Mahabharata narrates the battle of Kurukshetra in a great way and this mega encounter has been portrayed in the epic as the battle of all battles that would decide the fate of humanity. At the time of the commencement of *War of Kurukshetra*, Arjuna, one of the protagonists, felt devastated at the possibility of this gory battle that would cause, perforce, the death (or murder?) of his closest relatives and relations who are now more or less distributed between either of the confronting sides. Krishna, the Avatar as well as the divine charioteer of the valiant Arjuna, then began to sermonise Arjuna about the philosophy of *karma* or righteous action and all his philosophisation form the great text of the *Bhagavadgita* that contains hundreds (actually 701) of Slokas. During this session, Krishna had to demonstrate his *Visvsaroop* (theophany) too, right inside the battlefield before the eyes of thousands of warriors who were eager to flaunt their belligerence. And this epiphanic episode cannot but take hours to happen. However, apparently, the whole thing took place in a kind of time-and-space warp, within which a charioteer turns into the prime-mover, leading from the front quite literally. Now it is naïve to measure these mythical intervals realistically. And in the *Mahabharata* itself there are ample evidences of such time-outs. But one may note the specialty of the occasion. The most climactic situation turns against itself, gets dilated – if not ‘luxated’ – and Arjuna, the man chosen by Krishna – the *Avatar* – for assisting him in his divine mission of destroying the evil forces on earth, is then trembling with compunction. Thence follows an argument that suspends everything usual in the warfront. What a theatre to stage a deconstructive act!

After Arjuna, let us now return to Chirakari, the other *Mahabharatic* character whom we have already talked about extensively in our essay. He is an active deconstructionist who breaks open the linear and scalar time to get inside of what we call thick time or soul time. There, and then, he keeps on *meditating*, and that too not unlike a philosopher, over Cartesian sorts of rights-and-wrongs of either side of his sage-father’s order to kill his mother for her presumed involvement in an illicit sexual encounter with a lecherous god. His meditations, however, invent a kind of a third way, and he thereby differs and defers from taking any of the alternative positions without testing them by rigorous reasoning that could challenge any simple-minded Cartesianism; for, he never came to the *closure* of a conclusion about the right and wrong of the order, but suspended the same all along, for that could cause an irretrievable loss. Finally we may refer back to the dilemma that our divine stenographer, Ganesa, encountered before the counter-condition of Vyasa. This last instance belongs to a different category, since Arjuna and Chirakari were made ‘inoperative’ while harbouring fateful doubts about what to do or not to do amidst their own biographical context, while Ganesa was obliged to engage himself with differential meanings before materialising the ‘text’ by writing it down.

With the selection of a very few cases from the *Mahabharata* that seemed really pertinent for our purpose, we do not claim to have made an all-round experiment with the epic of Derridean deconstruction, but we have attempted to spend a ‘tympantising’/criticising session on the epic, keeping in mind how these deliberations can make a case for dis-bordering of philosophy and literature on the one hand, and, on the other, could attempt a critique of temporality by challenging a kind of an un-philosophical drift of the contemporary times that has flattened the thickness of our reasoning and turned compassionate time into thoughtless haste of time-craziness. And, as we have just mentioned, herein we have to delve into rethinking the thing one may call ‘philosophy in literature’. Perhaps the genre distinction is never as acute as in the modern times, the times when the linear time has penetrated literature through ‘realism’ among the other things.

The moment Arjuna and Chirakari start thinking, they ‘subtract’ themselves from the flow of real, ‘historical’ time. These ‘events’ are some of the most philosophical moments of the epic, with their moral, logical as well as ontological interrogations. On the other hand, our epical stenographer, Ganesa, too has been left with very little scope to betray much reverence to the univocal symbolism that realist literature allows. He acts as a khoratic context where polychromatic possibilities of alternative realities may flourish in the mythological literature that approaches philosophy of deconstruction. Under these circumstances, philosophy and literature may transgress each other, this transgression being directly associated with what Derrida calls (and we have elaborated substantially) ‘tympanising’. Now ‘time’ is an extension of ‘being’, for being cannot but exist *in* time. But, with the enthronement of global and universally applicable historical time our individual beings and their soul times get decimated as well as emaciated.

The *Mahabharata* is inspirational for us for it offers us to live with a sense of time that is akin to *Mahakala* on the one hand without throwing us away from the more homely historical time we are ensconced in. Human beings cannot but live in a ‘joint’ of different kinds of time – *Mahakala* on the one hand, which is religico-philosophical, and biographically sliced historical time of past, present and future on the other, taking the first and the third senses of the *Mahabharatic* time, as stated by Badrinath (see above). The transgression between them is impossibility when things are considered too realistically, but with the aid of a mythological text we very often suspend our wide-awakeness, so to speak, and subject ourselves in an experience of a *déjà vu* with our penchant for khoratic return to the wombs of our many beings. We hold that the multiplexity of the *Mahabharatic* time offers the opportunity for ‘eternal return’ quite effectively. This transgression is akin to the Derridean *Aufhebung/Aufheben*, which is, as we have said in the beginning, ‘[l]imit/passage’, and which ‘relaunch[es] in every sense the reading of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, eventually beyond ... Hegel’,²⁹ that is, as we understand, beyond his notion of *transcendence*. We have the clue that Derrida likes the idea of *transgression*, but not *transcendence* that does not pay heed to the mediating tympan. And without that bridging thing one cannot be its *Other* any more. For Hegel, Othering is a relation between thesis and antithesis, and their resolution is synthesis – a closure, and a transcendence to a new site altogether. Thus, in Hegelian *Aufhebung* there is scarcely any mediator, only abolition, preservation and transcendence, while preservation hardly functioning as an important middle term, or an active bridge, from what has been abolished, from his function of a philosopher to that of a man of literature. And Attridge hints that Derrida’s oeuvre is a testimony to that too. Does not the ‘tympan’ help the philosopher to hear what he himself says, as Derrida himself alludes to in ‘Tympan’? Now, moving from one tympan to another, does not literature ‘unconceal’ the philosophemes, which hide the ‘worlded’ nature of the everyday life? Where can we find the ‘non-site’ of philosophy if not at the (non-)place where it visits much more than occasionally as if to transgress itself? And when the *Mahabharatic Kala* in the first sense includes everything what *has* been (‘originated’) there and what *has not* been (‘originated’) there, as we have read above in Badrinath’s rendition.³⁰ Can we not claim that this mighty ‘khoratic’ Time is not only deeply philosophical, but even transgressive in principle? And would it be irrelevant here to get back to Nietzsche and his compliments for the Dionysian cult and the chorus (Khora and chorus are of the same etymological origin) of the pre-Socratic Greek dramas, which – we mean the latter – had association to the pre-Socratic philosophy. We have

²⁹ Derrida, *Margins* xi.

³⁰ Badrinath 9.

mentioned the ancient Indian *Natyashastra* of Bharatamuni and its relation with philosophy earlier in this article. Schopenhauer too had a deep regard for art (and literature is a form of artistic production) as depicting a universal in terms of an imaginary particulars.³¹ Thus we have the *Other* of philosophy always lying alongside philosophy itself. The *Mahabharata* is one massive paradigm of this juxtaposition.

Acknowledgement: We are grateful to Dr Sudip Chakravorty of SKB University, India and Dipyaman Bhowmick for academic and other help.

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³¹ Durant 314.