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# The Teacher as the Hermeneut of Faith: The Calling of 'Hearing' (Sruti) and 'Recollecting' (Smṛti) at the Threshold of Indian Literature<sup>1</sup>

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The present essay is concerned with a problem of communicating faith, but from two perspectives. On the one hand, it considers the teacher's meaning of faith and, on the other, the student's understanding of faith. Both these aspects are examined in the context of the absence of a written text or the meaninglessness of a written text in the event of the 'death of God'.

The situation at the threshold of Indian literature appears to be one of not having a written text for centuries. And what is available in written form is considered to be eternal and authorless. However, while paying lip service to this eternal Veda, Indian culture seems to be embarrassed about not being able to find a unified meaning in the Vedas. Without a written text, the teacher and his testimony become all-important. All that the student could hear was the words of a teacher. How can we find the authority of the scripture in the unwritten words of a teacher? While this is a problem of understanding faith in all oral cultures, this is particularly problematic in the context of the Vedas since these are considered eternal and authorless. Furthermore, all authority comes from *sruti* (hearing) and *smṛti* (recollecting).

In the Western experience, on the other hand, there is the authority of revelation that points to certain written texts. But with the 'death of God' experience we are left with a written scripture but without any authority and therefore without meaning. To complicate the problem further, the predicament of contemporary man appears to be a situation where, as T. S. Eliot says, 'We have the experience, but missed the meaning.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion on 23 October 1969.

<sup>2</sup> *Four Quartets*, p. 24.

The present essay is set within these contexts. However, in dealing with these problems through the vocation of the teacher, it is necessary to point out the following limitations and presuppositions:

First of all, this essay does not attempt to enter into any of the highly technical and sophisticated problems that are related to the study of hermeneutics or faith as they are confronted by scholars in the fields of theology, philosophy and literature.

Secondly, while the central concern here is to illuminate the vocation of the teacher, it does not seek to proof-text its arguments from any written sources or authority. Even though the locus of this enquiry is placed at the threshold of Indian literature, the pointing to such a locus is merely intended to direct the audience to the only possible authority that it invokes, namely the authority of winged words that are evanescent in time and not the authority of fixed texts that are apparently permanent in space. The present essay does not consider, as Father Walter J. Ong seems to suggest in his *Presence of the Word*, that the oral-aural culture is something that existed once upon a time, to which we might nostalgically wish to return, but it is impossible to do so. The presence of the words 'hearing' and 'recollecting' in the subtitle is not intended to measure the rhythm in hearing; neither does it seek to gauge the 'mnemonic techniques' of the teacher in order to flush out a text behind memory. Without presuming an 'eternal recurrence' of the image of the teacher as it once was during the pre-Vedic times, and without affirming a linear progression in the understanding of the teacher, this essay simply invites a group of teachers of religion to recollect the reality of the teacher that is in themselves. In order to distinguish programmed teachers from the messengers (hermeneuts) of faith, certain timeless possibilities for the teacher from the threshold of Indian literature will be pursued.

Thirdly, in order to make this happening possible without mere prestidigitation, the indulgence of the audience is sought to declare a voluntary moratorium on the particular clichés of meaning that they might have brought with them, whether these lie in the category of philology or textual criticism, phenomenology or linguistic analysis, or even a hermeneutical method. Just as the lover making love with his beloved does not have to follow the *Reader's Digest* method, it is assumed here that the genuineness of the vocation of the teacher will betray itself without resorting to an objectified methodology.

Finally, it is assumed that the timeless qualities in the vocation of the teacher can be heard more effectively if these are brought to focus in the immediate situation of the contemporary teacher and the student.

Since all Vedic knowledge and its authority are based on *sruti* (hearing) and *smṛti* (recollecting), we shall consider the calling of the teacher from these two central positions. First, we shall examine the problems and possibilities in understanding the teacher

in relation to this 'hearing', a hearing that is eternal and authorless. This is done within the problematic of a faith in which gods and words are not primary, symbols are without meaning and truth is without canon, and where a failure of speech and thought leads to a 'conscious delight of being' *Sachchidānanda*.

The second consideration proceeds from the first, and it focuses on 'recollecting' as a way of learning that might reveal the image of the teacher. Here, apart from the housekeeping matters pertaining to the 'economy of memorizing', attention will be given to the Heideggerian interpretation of memory as 'taking to heart'. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to relate this to the Socratic and the Kierkegaardian images of the teacher in the maieutic role of recollection and in its after-effects in the problem of error.

The final section would make an effort to see the teacher as the hermeneut of faith in a non-objectifying sense, as the bringer of a human presence that might initiate a transformation of being. It is hoped that such a teacher might bring together the art, religion and literature of a culture as the common medium to invoke a hearing of the unhearable, at a time when God has become the chief failure of man (cf. Vahanian) and when man's experience of himself has become meaningless.<sup>3</sup>

## I

Prior to the writing down of the Vedas in text form, Indian culture points to an experience of 'hearing' by the sages.<sup>4</sup> For thousands of years before the advent of the written text Hindu faith was contained in what was heard by the sages, and what was learned of the sages by their sons and pupils. Objectively seeking meaning in them through what is available in the written form, we find a conglomeration of names and images, of rituals and sacrifices, of charms and spells, out of which it is hard to find any unified meaning. Plagued by the almost insoluble difficulties in finding objective meaning of ancient forms and words which do not appear in later speech, dissatisfied with the traditional interpretation of the Indian scholar Sayana, and the later conjectures built upon Sayana's interpretation by the European scholars, and being impatient with the substitution of a fabrication of meaning for the sake of consistency rather than authentic interpretation, Sri Aurobindo suggests that the only proper way of interpreting the Veda is a psychological and spiritual one.<sup>5</sup>

In the face of these difficulties, it is obvious that a philological, mythological or even a *religionswissenschaftlich* approach

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<sup>3</sup> T. S. Eliot.

<sup>4</sup> One of the initial inspirations in pursuing the experience of 'hearing' by the sages has been received from personal conversations with Prof. N. A. Nikam as well as his book, *Some Concepts of Indian Culture*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> *On the Veda*, pp. 2 ff.

may not be satisfactory. When attempts at an objective consistency fall a prey to the fabrications of meaning, only the authentic witness of the teacher in his integral experience (*anubhava*) can give credence to the 'hearing'. The teacher's integral existence becomes authentic when it is one with the 'hearing' (*sruti*). *Sruti* is self-certifying because it bears testimony to existence. What the teacher brings is a self-certifying truth as is evident from the following story of the Upanishads:

It is said that gods, demons and men went to Prajapati (the Lord of the Universe) for instruction. They were asked to live with Prajapati for a period of time 'with austerity, chastity and in faith', at the end of which when they sought to learn, Prajapati uttered the syllable *da*. The gods understood this to mean *damyata* (self-control), men understood it as *datta* (give) and the demons understood it as *dayadhvam* (be compassionate). As a result of living with the teacher, they were able to hear the truth of their integral existence (experience).

Here the sound *da* does not have any fixed lexical, objective meaning. Meaning evolves out of the hearing consequent to being with the teacher, out of one's own conditions and experience of existence. As for the teacher, he could be a person like Prajapati or simply a natural event like thunder. The story of this instruction ends with the statement: 'That very thing is repeated by the heavenly voices in the form of thunder as *da, da, da*—.'<sup>6</sup> The teacher is anyone who can invoke a 'hearing' which is self-certifying to the integral experience of the student. The Vedic teacher has no historical beginnings; he is any sage who owns an integral experience where words have no primary meaning, but hearing does.

It is a 'hearing' that either clarifies or alters the way in which we live. It is not a 'hearing' that is fixated in words. It arises from the sort of way we live in response to the sort of questions we ask. The teacher brings his own presence but by pointing out that it is not inevitable that we live the way we do. He takes us beyond ourselves, like Wallace Stevens' 'Man with the Blue Guitar', who could not play things as they are yet he experiences that things are changed upon the blue guitar as he played it. Listen to Stevens:

They said, 'You have a blue guitar  
you do not play things as they are.'

The man replied, 'Things as they are  
are changed upon the blue guitar'

And they said, 'But play you must,  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves.'<sup>7</sup>

The teacher plays a tune beyond himself, yet himself.

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<sup>6</sup> *Br. Ar.*, V, ii, 1-3.

<sup>7</sup> *The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems.*

A 'transformation of Being' is the goal of the teacher, but if it is, he brings it to the student in a most peculiar and paradoxical way, a paradox similar to the one where Plato insists that 'education begins not with the truth but with a "lie"'.<sup>8</sup> We shall consider briefly two of these paradoxes.

First of all, the teacher is the invoker of 'hearing' but does not himself bring any meaning to the student. Secondly, the teacher exposes 'the lie in the soul' of the student, but he does so paradoxically by telling lies himself. The oral performance of the teacher, the poetic form of the earliest Vedic hymns, and the images in the Vedas and Upanishads concerning the teacher seem to support this view.

The teacher as the invoker of 'hearing' does not bring meaning. But neither does the student come to it without being with the teacher. He simply lets the student be with him and when the student is ready he permits him to ask questions. As Ananda Coomaraswamy says: 'There should be no teacher for whom teaching is less than a vocation, and no teacher should impart his knowledge to a pupil until he finds the pupil ready to receive it, and the proof of this is to be found in asking the right questions.'<sup>9</sup> The right questions come not from 'unearned opinions', but from experience (*anubhava*). As Professor N. A. Nikam points out, unlike the socratic teacher who questions the friends to expose their ignorance, in the dialogues of the Upanishads it is the pupils who question the teacher. And the dialogue is not a discourse on method or theory but an 'experiment in living', where the living together of the teacher and the pupil becomes a communication.<sup>10</sup> What is sought in this living together, as the Upanishads say, is that experience with which

The unheard or the unhearable becomes heard,  
the unperceivable or unperceived becomes perceived,  
the unknowable becomes known.<sup>11</sup>

Such an experience is at once 'a failure of speech and thought' (*yato vaco nivartante aprapya manasa sah*) as well as a 'conscious delight of Being' (*sat-chit-ānanda*). When primary questions are raised from one's own integral experience, a primal hearing of the unbearable that transforms takes place. And primal hearing is attested to by one's own experience, since it exposes the 'lie in the soul' (Self). When an integral experience exposes the truth of one's own lie, one discovers the 'lie in the word' as well. He becomes speechless. As Wittgenstein says: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'<sup>12</sup> But man constantly refuses to be silent even when his speech has ceased to make sense. Enamoured by the word, in its power to control

<sup>8</sup> q.f. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia*, II, p. 211. Cf. *Republic*, 377a.

<sup>9</sup> *The Dance of Shiva*, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Some Concepts of Indian Culture*, pp. 12-13; *Prasna*, I, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Chandogya*, VI, 1, 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Tractatus*, p. 189<sup>a</sup>.

men, one becomes an idolator of the Word. He not only refuses to see the despotism of the word, but more important, in his building of the Towers of Babel he misses the eluding truth that words conceal. When one lacks the integrity of experience, the 'lie in the word' could hide the 'lie in the soul' but only at the cost of the loss of communication—the very purpose of the word.

The second paradox in the vocation of the teacher is set in this context. In response to the questions of the student, the teacher's calling is to reveal the eluding truth that words and appearances conceal. His task is to help the student realize that that which the words and appearances reveal in themselves is a lie. But in this very process the teacher uses the medium of a lie.

In the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, there is the story of two students, Indra, the King of the gods, and Virochana, the King of the demons, who went to Prajapati to learn. They were asked to live with the teacher for 32 years practising Brahmacharya after which they were permitted to ask questions. At the end of the period they asked to be instructed of the truth of the self that is free from sin, old age and death. Prajapati said to them: 'The person that is seen "in the eye", the person that is seen "in a pan of water" or "in a mirror"—"that is the self".' Seeing them going Prajapati said: 'They both are going away without having known and without having realized the self. Whoever of these, whether gods or demons, follow this doctrine shall perish.' Virochana went to the demons and preached this truth and hence it is known as the demon's truth. The teacher tells a lie about the true self in order to invoke a 'hearing' in the student. But in the process he also exposes the lie in the student.

The vocation of the teacher is precisely the exposure of this lie, to help the learner to recover a 'hearing', a hearing which has been lost amidst the confusion of tongues in the Towers of Babel. To the dilemma of T. S. Eliot, the response from Indian culture can be seen in the vocation of the teacher. He seeks to recover a 'life that is lost in living' to salvage a 'wisdom that is lost in knowledge' and to redeem a 'knowledge that is lost in information'. In pursuing his vocation he invokes the God-word, to be sure. But he does this in order to expose the lie even in the God-word which is where 'the lack of God helps'. For the man who 'poetically dwells on the earth', language has the possibility of the 'house of Being', but with the lack of 'hearing' it becomes the 'dog-house of being' where man is the prisoner of his own words in his own home. It is when the rationality and dogmatism of the teacher and the theologian refuse to confess the 'lie in the word' that no 'hearing' can take place through the teacher. And that is when the crisis in the university and the 'death of God' becomes a necessary prelude to the 'primal hearing', rather than the teacher.

But let us not exaggerate the vocation of the teacher. All that a teacher could offer is simply his presence. If he does not teach, it is not because gods have forbidden him to teach but

because he discovers the lie in the word, God, even as he sings it—God as fire, god as wind, god as sun, god as the creator, god as the destroyer. It does not matter, even as it is all that matters. Offering sacrifices to the fire, or chanting the hymn of creation, he might bring the 'primal hearing' to the student. And again he might not:

You cannot see the seer of seeing, you cannot hear the hearer of hearing, you cannot think the thinker of thinking, you cannot understand the understander of understanding.<sup>13</sup>

The subject-matter of 'hearing', whether it be of words or gods, does not matter, but transformation of being does. 'Primal hearing' brings transformation of Being which is *yajna*, the sacrifice, the act, the creation. The teacher brings only the 'lie in the word' in the form of rituals and riddles, poetry and prose, charms and chants. But when this is not done, the vocation of the teacher becomes irrelevant. A recovery of this lost vocation of 'primal hearing' may not be found unless the teacher is willing to revise his methodology possessively. The dynamic of the transformation of Being lies in the proximity of the teacher, in the 'hearing' that lies hidden in his words, but not in the words themselves. One cannot hear the living among the dead.

## II

The second authority of the Veda is *smṛti* (recollection). There are at least three ways of understanding *smṛti*. The first is technical and refers to a body of Indian literature. As a body of literature *smṛti* contains epics like *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*, the *purānas* (ancient tales), fables, legends and *śāstras* (manuals of discipline). Whereas *sruti* literature provides the primary occasions for the 'hearing', the *smṛti* literature illustrates these occasions in the garb of everydayness. Whereas *sruti* invokes the primary conditions for 'hearing' in its poetic, ritualistic, mystical and abstract modes, *smṛti* illustrates these conditions in the prosaic, yet concrete forms of drama, fable, and manuals of instruction on ritual and religious discipline. While any objective distinction in form between *sruti* and *smṛti* in the above categories could be quite misleading, it might be useful to distinguish them either on the basis of a 'primal hearing' or in order to arrive at it. The authority of *smṛti* begins and ends with the illumination it brings to the authority of *sruti*.

The second sense in which *smṛti* is understood is literally remembering, memory (the act of recollection). In an oral-aural culture, so long as there is an emphasis upon the preservation of a text, *smṛti* is literally understood to mean learning by heart that which is recited by the teacher. As Arthur A. Macdonell observes:

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<sup>13</sup> *Br. Ar.*, III, iv, 2.



The Vedas are still learnt by heart as they were long before the invasion of Alexander, and could even now be restored from the lips of teachers if every manuscript or printed copy of them were destroyed.<sup>14</sup>

But limiting *smṛti* to mere learning by rote not only reduces the sublime to the ridiculous, but also mistakes the ridiculous to be sublime. Learning the 1,028 hymns of the *R̥gveda* by heart may be a mental feat; it might provide exciting data to the neurologist on the possibilities of the brain; and in the absence of written text such an act of remembering might have contributed to the preservation of the richness of a culture. But it cannot give the profound possibilities of *smṛti* as remembering.

The third meaning of *smṛti* is that it invokes its own authority in relation to the authority of *śruti*. And what is evoked by memory is the 'hearing' of the eternal and authorless Veda. This is the sense of *smṛti* with which we are primarily concerned.

The Upanishads say: 'Hearing is divine wealth' (*śrotam daivam*).<sup>15</sup> What is remembered must bring this 'hearing' (divine wealth) and must be contained in it. In so far as divine wealth is that which is edifying, what is remembered must be edifying as well. *Smṛti* cannot be edifying unless it contributes to the 'transformation of Being'. Literally speaking, or on the surface, what memory brings might be a collection of hymns that are necessary for the performance of the rituals and sacrifices. But the medium must also contain its message. Primarily, *smṛti* must recall existence in response to the 'hearing'. Memory in this sense is a 'taking to heart', using it in the way in which Heidegger considers it. In this sense *smṛti* becomes a 'taking to heart' of that which has happened to one in his existence or that which is related to it. 'Primal hearing' does not take place without such a recollection. This recollection refers to the Self as we hear in the Upanishad, where it says:

Verily, my dear Maitreyi, it is the Self that should be realized—should be heard of, reflected on, and meditated upon. By the realization of the Self, my dear—through hearing, reflection and meditation—all this is known.<sup>16</sup>

The reflection of the Self is recollection. Sri Sankaracharya, the Vedantic interpreter of the Veda, considers *śravaṇa* (hearing), *manana* (reflection) and *nītidhyāsana* (meditation) as the basis for all knowledge.

Hearing the sacred texts regarding identity (*śravaṇa*), reflection (*manana*) and meditation (*nītidhyāsana*) on them remove hindrances to higher knowledge (*vidyā*) and aid its manifestation.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Br. Ar.*, I, 4, 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Br. Ar.*, II, iv, 5.

<sup>17</sup> J. Sinha, *History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II, p. 588. Cf. *Samkara Bhashya on Brahma Sutra*, iii, 4, 38.

Recollection, in so far as it is for the realization of the Self, cannot be an academic reflection upon a text. It must bring a concrete recollection of the existing Self, if the *śabda* (word, sound, testimony) which one hears is to make any sense (*artha*). *Śabdārtha* is word-sense, sound-sense, sense of testimony and it must come through the recollection of the concrete, existing Self. The crime that Indian idealism has committed against Indian culture is the separation of *śabda*—the word, the text, from its existential context of meaning. How far Western scholarship on Indian thought has contributed to this separation of meaning from the word would be interesting to pursue (but that would need a separate treatment and cannot be handled here). When *ātma-sākṣātkāra* (self-actualization) becomes an intellectual exercise which the philosopher does in his study, it is something that is separated from life. It becomes reflection, without its existential context of 'recollection', namely 'pulling oneself together' before a 'primary hearing'.

What the teacher essentially does is to help the student recollect his own existence when he hears the teacher say: 'Da.' Depending upon the conditions of existence in each of the students, they understand it: One as *damyata* (self-control), another as *datta* (give) and the third as *dayadhvam* (be kind). What is recollected here is a 'lie in the soul'—the god remembers his own pride, the man remembers his own sins of acquisitiveness and the demon remembers his own cruelty and the misuse of power. Recollecting these lies of existence they find the meanings—*damyata*, *datta*, *dayadhvam*. And the teacher agrees that they have understood. The teacher's utterance is the same as that of the poet. But unlike the Greek understanding, where the 'poet's utterance was a standard for all men to admire', the Vedic teacher's utterance is an occasion to remember one's own existence which is both the cause and consequence of 'hearing'. In this spirit the teacher says: *Aham Brahma asmi* (I am Brahman), *tat tvam asi* (that thou art), *neti, neti* (not so, not so), contradictory as these may be. Because the Vedic teacher does not have to fix meanings for the God-word he has the freedom to tell lies. God is Agni (fire) and God is Water. The dwelling-place of fire is water, etc., etc. If these are understood to be ways of seeing God as personifications of nature, we might be missing the point. Recalled possessively it might mean different things to different men, or different meaning for the same man depending what is recollected at the moment of speaking the word. Perhaps the meaning of this recollecting might become clearer if we compare and contrast this with the Socratic and the Kierkegaardian images of the teacher.

The Socratic teacher is one who is 'forbidden to bring forth' but he is 'compelled by the gods to be a midwife'. While the maieutic teacher can invoke in the learner a knowledge of his own error, he stands helpless in teaching truth. It is at this point that Kierkegaard raises the 'pugnacious proposition' in the

*Meno.* He agrees with the Socratic image of the teacher. He says:

As between man and man no higher relationship is possible; the disciples give occasion for the teacher to understand himself, and the teacher gives occasion for the disciple to understand himself.<sup>18</sup>

However, despite this autopathic and sympathetic possibility of a confessional recollection of man's error, how shall one learn of his error without a knowledge of truth if the teacher were not to bring it to him? Observing the problem closer Kierkegaard says:

If the teacher serves as an occasion by means of which the learner is reminded, he cannot help the learner to recall that he really knows the truth; for the learner is in a state of error.<sup>19</sup>

Realizing the decisive significance of the problem, Kierkegaard asserts:

Now if the learner is to acquire the truth, the teacher must bring it to him; and not only so, but he must also give him the necessary condition for understanding it.<sup>20</sup>

Kierkegaard's solution to the problem is to proclaim 'God as the teacher' who 'gives the learner the requisite condition and the truth'. While the Socratic teacher does not bring the truth and therefore remains at the maieutic level, the Kierkegaardian teacher substitutes God for the human teacher and thereby solves the problem of both truth and of error. But a big problem remains: How shall man understand God and his atonement, when, as in the contemporary experience, 'God is dead'?

The Vedic teacher is Socratic in the sense that he, too, is a recollector, but neither as a midwife nor as a begetter, but one in whose *presence* the learner may find an occasion for recollection, an occasion which might enable the learner to discover his own error. At the same time he could also find agreement with the Kierkegaardian teacher, but negatively, to the extent that the Vedic teacher bears testimony to the need of 'hearing' in order that he may distinguish between what is abiding and transitory (*nityānitya-viveka*). But unlike Kierkegaard he does not proclaim God as the teacher.<sup>21</sup> The God-words of the Vedas are so ambiguous that those who seek to understand them objectively variously consider the Vedic seers as polytheistic, monotheistic, pantheistic, henotheistic and even atheistic. The Vedic teacher himself is

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<sup>18</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> *Fragments*, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard's 'God-incognito' image of the teacher may be raised here in contrast to this statement. However, the theistic framework of Kierkegaard does not seem to be as necessary for the Vedic teacher.

satisfied to seek a 'hearing' in the interstices between his own lies and that of the student, to hear in the vacuum left between the 'lie in the word' and the 'lie in the soul' the sound *aum*; to 'remember what has been done, remember what has been done' (*aum krato smara, kṛtam smara*).<sup>22</sup>

### III

If what the teacher does is not the passing on of heard texts, and if what the learner does is not a learning by rote the words heard from the teacher, in what sense can we call him a hermeneut of faith? The teacher here is a messenger without a message, he is a Hermes without a Zeus who has sent him, and he is not equipped with 'the herald's staff with white ribbons, a round hat to protect him against the rain, and winged sandals which carry him about with the swiftness of the word'.<sup>23</sup> He is a hermeneut of faith only in the sense that he is the herald of his own presence.

The teacher does not seek to resolve either the God-question or the man-question; he only initiates the question of the truth of the existing Self. And he does it with his own presence, poetically but confessionally (and as a methodologist), without having to affirm or deny God. He does it through art, religion and literature, but perhaps in a way that we are not used to. Today, if we require a radical reorientation of our psyche in order to understand the self-validating dynamic of 'hearing' and 'recollecting' for the existing Self, it may be due to a radical disjunction we make between poetry and reality, a heritage which apparently the West traces back to Aristotle.<sup>24</sup>

But William Wordsworth in paying tribute to the tradition of Aristotle could say of poetry that:

... its object is truth, not individual and local but general and *operative* (emphasis added); not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives competence to the tribunal to which it appeals and receives them from the same tribunal.<sup>25</sup>

The teacher's vocation at the threshold of Indian literature stands on a similar footing. The 'hearing' which the teacher brings is a truth that is *operative*, it works—with or without God. When there is no God in our lives, there is no need to be orthodox

<sup>22</sup> *Isa.*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> 'Hermes and Hermeneutics', an Essay by Richard A. Underwood.

<sup>24</sup> Note: Whether poetry is essentially ideal or real is outside the immediate scope of this essay, but it is crucial to understanding the vocation of 'hearing' and 'recollecting'. How far Aristotle's description of literature as *MIMESIS* (imitation) (*On the Art of Fiction*, I, 6-9) has contributed to an objectification of the word, and to a consequent rationality and dogmatism might be interesting to pursue, especially in the context of the 'death of God' and the experience of meaninglessness.

<sup>25</sup> Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, second edition, 1800.

liars for the glory of God. Truth, which the teacher brings through his presence, does not stand upon the 'external testimony' of words and gods. It is the human teacher who carries it 'alive into the heart' by its own passion. When existentially appropriated, truth is its own testimony, especially since it has no need to be dogmatic.

There is another important aspect to the presence which the voice of the teacher brings in the conversion and conversation of mankind. It is the very ineffability of the presence which refuses to be dogmatic and cannot be grasped by logic or method. This may be illustrated through a story of Chuang Tzu:

Duke Huan of Ch'i was reading a book at the upper end of the hall; the wheelwright was making a wheel at the lower end. Putting aside his mallet and chisel, he called to the duke and asked him what book he was reading. 'One that records the words of the Sages,' answered the Duke. 'Are those Sages alive?' asked the wheelwright. 'Oh, no,' said the Duke, 'they are dead.' 'In that case,' said the wheelwright, 'what you are reading can be nothing but the lees and scum of bygone men.' 'How dare you, a wheelwright, find fault with the book I am reading? If you can explain your statement, I shall let it pass. If not, you shall die.' 'Speaking as a wheelwright,' he replied, 'I look at the matter in this way; when I am making a wheel, if my stroke is too slow, then it bites deep but is not steady; if my stroke is too fast, then it is steady, but it does not go deep. The right pace, neither slow nor fast, cannot get into the hand unless it comes from the heart. It is a thing that cannot be put into words (rules); there is an art in it that I cannot explain to my son. This is why it is impossible for me to let him take over my work, and here I am at the age of seventy still making wheels. In my opinion, it must have been the same with the men of old. All that was worth handing on, died with them; the rest, they put in their books. That is why I said that what you were reading was the lees and scum of bygone men.'<sup>26</sup>

Just as the wheelwright's art is not something that could be put into words (rules) and thus communicated to his son, the teacher is a hermeneut of faith precisely in the ineffability of the presence he brings. That, which he brings he cannot claim, but what he brings is the presence of a vacuity which is the summation of all 'hearing'—the *aum*. The teacher is a hermeneut of faith simply because he is the catalyst of self-discovery. Through a self-annulling 'recollection' the teacher brings an elusive self-actualization that transforms. He exposes the delusion of the snake as well as the reality of the rope (which has no life) even

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<sup>26</sup> q.f. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 9-10.

while one is in the grip of *māyā* (that which appears to be). It is here that the learner learns to distinguish between that which is abiding (*nitya*) and that which is transitory (*anitya*).

In an era of the 'death of God' and at the 'end of ideology' perhaps the Vedic teacher invokes a 'hearing' that 'the vital nerve of the hermeneutical problem' is not so much a 'failure of language' as Robert Funk suggests.<sup>27</sup> It is rather a failure to testify to the lie that we speak and a refusal to acknowledge the lie that we live, placing in question the relevance of a theodicy and an anthropodicy that we proclaim. And perhaps the 'recollection' that the teacher elicits is a confession of our lack of wisdom (*avidyā*), a confession that liberates us from the need to be orthodox liars.

When the truth is neither in the teacher nor in the learner, the most objective and methodological questing for God must end in a failure. As in the 'magical mystery' of Paul McCartney: 'Alive or dead or just a hoax, the truth we will never hear.'

But following the intimations at the threshold of Indian Literature the teacher could still be the hermeneut of faith since he brings an eliding truth that is 'blowing in the wind'. This is a truth that cannot be fixated in words since every 'fixation crucifies'. While words cannot contain what the 'primal hearing' brings, one may not be able to deny a truth that transforms.

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<sup>27</sup> *Language, Hermeneutic and Word of God*, p. 10.

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