

Tension as a Bridge towards Release: Agyeya's Poem "Nāc"¹

Dr Nicola Pozza, University of Lausanne (Switzerland)

सच्चा सम्पूर्ण निश्चयाय कालातीत शुद्ध क्षण वही होगा
जिस में न स्मृति का संस्पर्श, न आकांक्षा का, और न तनाव का
– ऐसा ही क्षण (मिले तो) जीवन्मुक्ति का क्षण होगा...

(Agyeya, *Bhavantī*, Rajpal & Sons, 1989 [1971]: 146-47)

"The true, complete, shadowless, timeless, pure instant
will be one which is untouched by memory, by expectation
and by tension – only such an instant (if attainable) could be
the instant of liberation-in-life (*jīvanmukti*)"

(Agyeya, *Truculent Clay*, Clarion Books, 1982: 123)

Introduction

As a teacher of Hindi grammar and literature, I always take pleasure using the poem "Nāc" as a challenging grammatical exercise for beginners as well as a source for limitless interpretations for more advanced students. Moreover, the charming appeal of its enchanting iterative melody and its amazing capacity to epitomize in very few words some of the fundamental themes of Agyeya's

¹ This title is a reference to the English title of an essay by S. H. Vatsyayan: "Conflict as a Bridge" (VATSYAYAN 1964).

writings makes this poem a jewel-like piece of work if not a masterpiece of modern Hindi poetry.

Among the many possible interpretations that can result from an analysis of this poem — a funambulist whose comings and goings on a tightrope are admired by the audience as a dance — the present contribution offers a reading that leads to the following three conclusions, themselves summarizing some of the most distinctive aspects of Agyeya's literary career.

First, the continuous to-ings and fro-ings of the dancer on the tightrope between the two poles undoubtedly evokes the cultural *bridges* Agyeya built and repetitively crossed in both directions between India and other cultures on the one hand, and between Sanskrit tradition and the avant-garde literary movements he led on the other hand. Second, the tension, which is actually the propellant source of this incessant movement and which encourages the artist to obtain release, epitomizes the writer's lifelong quest for *freedom*. Third, the fact that the several constitutive facets of the show – including the dancer-funambulist – are ignored by the spectators, to the exclusive benefit of the dance and its specious bewitchery, symbolizes the *veil of mystery* that surrounds the poet's writings as well as his continuous questioning of the habits with which people look at life.

These themes are dealt with in this essay through a three-level study, starting with a syntactic analysis, followed by a semantic one, and ending with questions of epistemic and social nature. This last part will also place into

perspective the poem alongside other works of the writer belonging to the second half of the twentieth century. Making these levels interact with each other will help to provide the necessary information for the above-stated conclusions.

The figure “3” appears to be a recurrent number of the poem through this analysis. Linked to the number of conclusions and approaches, it is also based on the three main sections (A, B, and C) that divide the poem when the type of textual sequence — descriptive and explanatory — is considered as the determining factor of analysis.² In section A, the speaker — who gives his voice to the dancer and main “character” of the poem — uses a descriptive sequence, progressively introducing the constituents of the show.³ This informative mode changes to an explanatory approach in section B, where the dancer discloses to the reader the real motives of his act — it is in this section that the internal focalization of the poem is most evident. The poem

² The poem — which itself contains 33 lines! — is reproduced in Appendix A the way it has been printed in the second edition of *Mahāvṛkṣ ke nīce* (AGYEYA 1980), although I have increased the spacing before a line that introduces a new division. The reproduced text is completed by letters and numerals figuring the way I divide the poem according to the various following readings: letters A, B, and C correspond to the three main parts of the poem in terms of the type of narration; the sentence-based divisions are marked by the roman numerals (I°, II°, etc.); the rhymic parts by the Arabic numerals (1°, 2°, etc.); and the semantic divisions by the small numerals i, ii, etc.

³ The entire poem is narrated according to an internal focalization identified with the “dancer”.

ends with section C, in which a new descriptive sequence is this time used by the speaker as a kind of conclusion. Although the attention of the dancer is again drawn on the audience, which steadily looks at the dance, the reader, however, now knows that the fundamental reasons of this show, i.e. the tension and the release, are ignored by the audience.

If this division of the poem into three main sections is the fruit of a personal analysis, it nevertheless corresponds to the typographical marks of the published text, which draw the attention of the reader by introducing indentations at the beginning of both sections B and C.

1) The syntactic level

At the syntactic level, the poem “Nāc” can be divided in various ways, depending on which aspect of the clauses is privileged for the analysis.

a) Sentence-based division

If the *grammatical sentence* is to be taken into account, the poem has to be divided into nine parts (I to IX) of unequal lengths, although regularly progressing during the first two thirds of the poem. The first six sentences (up to line 19) are based on the grammatical use of relative and correlative clauses. Somehow, by the spinning effect of this constant use of relatives, the reader is himself drawn into the restless dance of the show and is mistaken or bewildered by the delusive impression given by the speaker in the first half of

the poem.

Together with the sixth sentence (VI), the next two grammatical divisions (VII and VIII), which may also be united into one long sentence, correspond to the “explanatory” section of the poem (B). The ending sentence (IX), which corresponds to the section C, sums up the antagonism between the personal reality of the dancer and the external point of view of the audience. It expresses the position of the dancer, who disapproves of the interpretation made by the public, exclusively focusing on the dance.

b) Rhymic division

The sentence-based division corresponds almost exactly to the division that can be made when the *ending sound* of a line is considered as the central criteria of analysis — it can also be called a “rhymic” division, as long as one does not think of it according to the classical criteria of prosody. The correspondence fits perfectly up to the sentence-based division VII (line 22); later in the text, rhymic part 9 starts a line after the sentence IX, and a tenth rhymic part can be attributed to the last line of the poem. For a better intelligibility, each ending syllable is schematically reproduced below according to the rhymic division (the numerals correspond to the parts of the poem, the letters to the categories of the ending sounds):

- 1° (a) *hūm*
- 2° (ab) *hūm, hai*

3°	(ab)	<i>hūṁ, hai</i>
4°	(abc)	<i>hūṁ, hai, haiṁ</i>
5°	(babbc)	<i>hai, hūṁ, hai, hai, haiṁ</i>
6°	(aabbda)	<i>hūṁ, hūṁ, hai, hai, par, hūṁ</i>
7°	(aa ₁ b ₁)	<i>hūṁ, dūṁ, ye</i>
8°	(eabbc)	<i>hīṁ, hūṁ, hai, hai, haiṁ</i>
9°	(eeeeee)	<i>hīṁ, hīṁ, hīṁ, hīṁ, hīṁ</i>
10°	(f)	<i>nāc</i>

We can see that up until part 4° there is a regular, almost perfectly progressive, use of rhymes. In these parts, the speaker builds up the exposition by introducing at every step one or two new elements: the “dancer” (the “I” of the internal focalization) and the rope, then the pillars, then the light and the audience. The poem can be read up to that point as a kind of realistic description of a circus act.

Although following this mode, the fifth part, however, introduces a slight change: its first line does not end with the present auxiliary *hūṁ* of the first singular person, like in all the previous parts, but with the present auxiliary *hai* of the third singular person. Even if this line still speaks of him, the dancer has now become, through the use of the third person pronoun, an *object* of the act; he is no more its actor. We can interpret this alteration as a way for the speaker to make the reader realize the effect of the interpretation by the audience of the autonomy of the dancer, and how a realistic, or objective, approach can objectify the observed actor. The speaker’s voice has thus momentarily been subdued by the audience’s focus on the dance.

At the beginning of the sixth part — which also opens the section B — the speaker once again uses the basic sequence of rhymes ‘aabb’, while grammatically attributing to the dancer the role of the subject. Thus, the dancer seems to have been able to get over the audience’s point of view of the previous part by re-appropriating his first person identity. This part then continues according to the basic scheme of the poem, i.e. ‘ab’, giving the impression that the first, realistic approach was the correct one. However, in the fifth line of this part, a new ending sound is introduced — the word *par*. It shows that something has changed, that a new interpretation might be possible. This term, which is used here as the postposition “on”, can however also be considered as expressing its second meaning, i.e. the conjunction “but”, thus breaking the “naive” reading resulting from the first, purely descriptive sequence (A). Furthermore, this ending sound echoes the word *par*, which starts this part itself and which is used in its oppositional meaning of “but”.

Therefore, part 6° clearly shows a transition in the poem. Whereas it still makes use of the pattern of lines intertwining one another by the way of relative and correlative pronouns, it nevertheless differs from the five previous parts as it introduces a counterargument through the oppositional conjunction *par*, also used as an oppositional conjunction and as a new rhyme. The oppositional aspect of this part, with regard to the starting descriptive sequence, also gains in persuasiveness because of the expression “in reality”

(*asal mem*) that opens the last line, while bringing back to the forefront the first person narrator.

In the seventh part, the first two rhymes of the poem (*hūm* and *hai*) are reiterated, but now with a slight difference, which illustrates the new point of view of the dancer. Instead of ‘aab’ (*hūm*, *hūm*, *hai*) denoting the indicative mode, we have now a sequence that can be noted ‘aa₁b₁’, corresponding to *hūm*, *dūm* and *ye*, with the presence of the subjunctive mode in the last two lines. This “alteration” introduces a “dissonance”, which awakes the attention of the reader and reminds him of the idea that things and facts are rarely as they appear. The grammatical usage of the subjunctive mode conveys the idea that the poem has now left the objective — but artificial and delusive — world of appearances to enter into the more subjective world of the dancer, which is however ultimately closer to his reality than the previous mode. Epistemologically, it calls into question the validity of the realistic approach — an approach the poet started disapproving of several decades before.

The next part (8°) takes up again the sequence of the rhymes of the fifth part but for the first line which ends with a new rhyme: the sound ‘*hīm*’ from the adverb *nahīm*, “not”. Even if this sound also consists in a nasalized vowel, like for the first person singular auxiliary ‘*hūm*’, it is now the mark of a *negative* statement, introducing a new sensibility. Thus, after the four initial parts of the poem, which staged the dancer in a semblance of reality, and after his objectification in line 9 (by the use of the third singular person

auxiliary), introducing the idea that the realistic point of view denies the individuality of the dancer by making him an object, the beginning of part 8 clearly puts forward the critical interpretation of the speaker by negating the delusive perception so far prevalent in the poem.

This break is reiterated and reinforced in the next part (9°), in which every line ends with the negation “*nahīm*”, emphasizing the fact that each component of the spectacle remains ignored and unseen by the audience. The audience indeed perceives a single aspect: the *dance*, i.e. the manifest but delusive “reality” of the show (“they look at... the dance!”) This line, which closes the poem, forms its last rhymic part (10°), giving therefore a special importance to the interpretation made by the audience, although its inappropriateness is underlined by the use of the exclamation mark.

c) Division based on the first word of each line

If it is less common to base an analysis on the first word of each line of a poem, such an approach will however prove to be useful in our case. The resulting division happens to follow the above pattern, reinforcing thus the effect of the rhymic division.⁴

The first four parts (1° to 4°) once more display a unity in regard to the exposition of the elements of the show, making even more explicit its

⁴ Therefore, the numerical division (1° to 10°) used in the previous section is kept here.

progression thanks to the numerals “one” (*ek*) and “two” (*do*) starting the lines 1 and 6 of the poem.⁵ Moreover, in the fourth part, each word opening one of its three lines respectively echoes one of the initial words of the first three parts (“*us*” and “*vah*” being the oblique and direct correlatives of “*jis*”):

do → *ek* (1°); *us* → *jis* (2°); *jis* → *vah* (3°).

The fifth part introduces a change in tone in the poem, the same way it was observed above in the rhymic analysis. From an objective description, the poem suddenly turns into a succession of clauses starting with the negation “*na*” (neither). This radical and iterated change only ceases with the last line of this part, which starts with the words “the people” (or “the audience”, “*log*”). This device (a succession of negations followed by the word “*log*”) highlights the fact that even more operative than an objective description is the biased perception and interpretation by the audience. Even if the latter may be wrong in looking at one specific aspect of the show to the detriment of the others, it nonetheless imposes its own interpretation at this stage. If we already perceived that change in the previous analysis, it becomes even more evident in the present one.

The sixth part represents the opening to the second main section (B). Starting with the oppositional conjunction *par*, it first consists of five lines

⁵ The sequence develops as follows (the first word of each line is quoted here, while the digits correspond to the parts of the poem): 1° *Ek*. 2° *Jis*, *yah*. 3° *Rassī*, *vah*. 4° *Do*, *us*, *jis*.

summarizing what has been perceived so far. Then comes a sixth line that rejects the validity of the audience's interpretation by asserting in the first voice that "in reality I do *not* dance" (*asal meṁ maim nāctā nahīm hūm*) — the negative statement being stressed by the fact that the present auxiliary is kept, contrary to the general usage in negative clauses expressed in the present tense.

The next line (20), which starts the seventh part, begins with the word "I" (*maim*). The use of the direct first person pronoun clearly marks a change of perspective: the dance is no more at the core of the picture; it is now the dancer's inner voice that speaks. This part takes the form of an *explanation*: the dancer says what he is really doing and *why* ("ki") he is doing it. Nevertheless, this short but fundamental part is soon attenuated by the next part (8°), where the individual voice of the dancer gradually fades and disappears to the benefit, first of the tension (*tanāv*), which becomes the "actor" of the show, and second of the audience's point of view.

The five lines of the eighth part (lines 23-27) can actually be subdivided into three smaller parts, according to the grammatical subject of the sentence and to the degree of importance of the first person perspective. It starts with the oppositional conjunction "but" (*par*), thus introducing resistance about what has been postulated in the previous part. It results, in the second line of this sub-part (lines 23-24), in the shift of position of the first person pronoun from the initial place in the sentence (part 7°, line 20) to the second one, after

the coordinating conjunction “and” (*aur*). The second sub-part (lines 25-26) also starts with “*par*” and makes the “tension” (*tanāv*) become the grammatical subject of the sentence, while the first person disappears behind the indefinite pronoun “everything” (*sab kuch*), which begins the next line. The third sub-part (line 27), starting once more with the word “and”, brings back to the foreground the coupled dance-audience (literally “all”, *sab*), completing thus the process of alteration, from the first person explanation to its objectification by an indefinite third plural person.

The poem ends by the list of the components of the show, with the addition of the “tension”; a way for the speaker to remind us of their importance in the overall picture, although the audience prefers to ignore them to the benefit of the delusive dance.

A last aspect should retain our attention at this level: the place and role of the *pronouns and substantives* figuring the “characters,” i.e. the dancer and the “people” (*log*) – or the audience – also named towards the end “everyone” (*sab*). The voice of the speaker is equated with the “I” of the dancer, providing an internal focalization. In front of him stands the audience, which can also be viewed, according to the pragmatic-discourse approach, as the poet’s readers and critics. Both “characters” illustrate the contrastive, if not opposite, points of view and understandings of the show together with its fundamental polarity: the tension vs. the dance.

In the first seven lines (semantic part i) introducing the exposition,

although the “I” (*mair̄m*) appears four times as the direct subject of the sentence, it is however always set in a *relative* clause; it is the rope, the dance, or the light that are used as the subjects of the main clause.⁶ This gives the impression that the dancer, even if he speaks as the first person, is actually only one of the several *components* of “his” act.

In contrast to this introductory sequence, the next semantic part (ii), which runs from line 8 to line 13, displays the audience as the main subject of the sentence. Two other observations should be made accordingly. First, the direct “I” of the previous part has now become an object, a patient: “people look at my dance” (*log merā nāc dekhte hair̄m*, line 8), and “they do not look at me, who *is* dancing” (*na mujhe dekhte hair̄m jo nāctā hai*, line 9).⁷ Even if the dancer still wants to say “I dance”, the speaker now uses the third singular person to speak of him (*jo nāctā hai*). His status is now limited to that of an object, exactly like the other components. It can be added in this regard that the dancer has disappeared in the span of a few lines: while at the beginning of this part he is still perceived as the *actor* of his dance (*merā nāc*, line 8), by the end he has disappeared, and people “only see the dance” (*sirf nāc dekhte hair̄m*, line 13). The second observation worth mentioning is the strong link existing between the audience and the dance. The audience is systematically

⁶ In this poem, all lines possess one or two verbs, except for the line 18 and for the five enumerative lines at the end, which have none.

⁷ My emphasis.

associated with the dance, thus linking the objective point of view with the delusive aspect of the dance.

In the next part (iii), which consists of lines 14 to 19, the “I” now represents the true voice of the internal focalization. Starting with the strong oppositional conjunction “but” (*par*), this part puts the first person voice of the dancer at the forefront, trying to invalidate the mistaken perception of the audience: “in reality I do *not* dance” (*asal merṁ mairṁ nāctā nahīṁ hūṁ*, line 19). In this part, as well as in the next, the audience is completely absent, no longer interfering with the voice of the dancer. And besides the affirmative signification of the adverbial locution “*asal merṁ*”, which adds to the veracity of the dancer’s voice in this part, the fact that the “I” is, in this sentence, the subject of the main clause, and not only of the relative, like in the first part, reinforces the claim of this first personal voice.

If the next division (iv, lines 20 to 26) could be linked, in regard to the grammatical subject, to the previous part, it is however more meaningful to take it as a distinct entity. Although the first two lines (20 and 21), together with line 24, maintain the first person voice as the subject of the clause, there is another “character” that appears in the show: the *tension* (*tanāv*). The tension, which makes the dancer continuously run from one pole to the other, is actually the main agent of the whole act. And if, in the first sub-division of this part (lines 20-22), it remains used as the grammatical subject of a relative clause and “only” as an opponent that should be stopped, in the second sub-

division (lines 23-26) it becomes the main subject of the sentence and plays the role of an unavoidable helper of the show. In reverse to the ascendant importance of that tension, the personal voice of the dancer becomes the passive beneficiary of a goal he cannot master, i.e. release (*chuttī*). Confirming the loss of the predominance of the “I”, the second sub-division inserts the “I” between two clauses, while the tension takes the main role. Whereas the conjunction “but” (*par*), which twice precedes the word *tanāv*, reinforces the effect of the tension, the enclosed position of the “I”, which is itself preceded by the conjunction “and” (*aur*), diminishes the importance of the personal voice. The dancer’s voice fades for the second time in the poem, this time to the “benefit” of the tension, which is the real subject of the show.

The last part (v, lines 27 to 33) reintroduces the audience — in its indefiniteness: “everyone” (*sab*) — as the grammatical subject and as the concluding perception of the show: everyone focuses their attention on the dance and nothing else. We have already seen that this point of view does not seem appropriate for the dancer. The contrast between the personal voice of the dancer in part iii and the indefinite third person of this last part is sustained in a twofold manner: typographically by the indentation of parts iii and v, which gives to these two parts a special semantic weight, and grammatically by the iterative use of the negation after each element in part v, as well as by the exclamation mark that closes the poem after the word “dance” (*nāc*), strengthening the inappropriateness of the audience’s point of

view.

A last observation has to be made here. When the “I” is used as the main subject of the clause, or when the speaker explains what the dancer is effectively doing — and not just making a description, like in the beginning — this “I” is tied to the idea of “tension” — and to some extent also to the poles producing the tension. Whereas the affirmative “I” is linked to the notion of “tension”, the audience is systematically closely associated with the “dance”, while its link to the other components is always mediated by a negation.

2) The semantic level

In order to see whether the above results can be corroborated, or even improved, by another approach, we will now use a semantic analysis, focusing on the meaning of the keywords of the poem. We can divide the terms retaining our attention for this purpose into two categories: 1) the components of the show; and 2) the concepts representing the motives and the issue of the poem.

a) The components of the show

Belonging to the first category are the three concrete elements that form the show: the rope, the two poles, and the spotlight. Among them, the *poles* play a capital role in the poem. Without their presence the poem would have no meaning, and everything would collapse. *They* sustain the rope and allow the

dancer to move on it, be it dancing or running. *They* create the tension without which the “dancer” would have no reason to run from one pole to the other in order to untie the rope. And last but not least, *they* create the conditions necessary to the possibility of release (*chutti*), which is the ultimate goal of the “dance”.

Transposed to the literary life of Agyeya, these poles symbolize several contrasting areas of interest. One such polarity undoubtedly represents the tension between his “traditional” Sanskritic background and the contemporary trends — of Western and other origins — that attracted him most.⁸ Agyeya never completely left one pole for the other. If sometimes — especially at the beginning of his literary career — he seemed to have radically abandoned his own traditional background — notably if one thinks of the topics and narrative devices of his novels and short stories — he nevertheless never fully dismissed it. In fact, his peculiar language and the way he dealt with issues in

⁸ The overused terms “traditional” and “modern” should by no means be thought of here as exclusively linked, one to India and the other to the West. India, like the Western countries, is everything but a monolithic culture. Modernity — if this term still means anything nowadays — on the one hand was present in India not much later than in Europe and, on the other hand, has not to be reduced to a single, Western, standard. And even if some aspects of Indian cultures remain “traditional”, in the sense that they *claim* to be linked in an uninterrupted way to ancient practices and dogmas, it would be inappropriate to think of them as completely devoid of modern elements and notions. If these terms are kept here, it is because of lack of any better word, and because of the fact that their critical appreciation does not constitute the topic of this paper.

his texts never alienated him from his Sanskritic background — on the contrary.⁹

Another polarity can be seen in the way Agyeya continuously and naturally moved from Indian sources and concepts to Western ones, and vice versa. Even if some readers thought and continue to think that he had rejected his Indian background for Western existentialism and psychology, or for Chinese philosophy and Japanese poetry, Agyeya kept “coming back” to India in order to use and to test his newly acquired interpretative tools in the frame of a context he was familiar with. Instead of thinking of this practice as a blind mimicry or a mere borrowing, it would be wise to read once again what he had to say about his way of writing. For him, these were just useful mediums to be used for contemporary times:

Of course, there could be direct borrowing from writer to writer; but in fact a good writer rarely borrows techniques directly from another in this way. What is more likely to happen, and would lead to more fruitful consequences, is that a writer views other writers’ achievements in the light of the total contemporary possibilities of the particular medium and then naturally uses this richer and more developed medium.¹⁰

In fact, one has to read his works as a perpetual *dialogue* between

⁹ Indeed it would be an error to think that his sympathetic attitude towards the Sanskritic Hindu culture appeared only in the last years of his life, although it kept increasing only at that time.

¹⁰ VATSYAYAN 1981: 52.

several cultures — and not only between “India” and “the West” seen as closed entities. Good instances — among many others — of this “dialogical” process are his short story “Bandom kā Khudā, Khudā ke bande”, his third novel *Apne apne ajnabī*,¹¹ or the references and quotations he uses in *Nadī ke dvīp* together with the way he “translated” them in *Islands in the Stream*.¹²

There could be many other instances of polarities symbolized by the poles of the poem. Let us sum up them by suggesting that Agyeya’s literary and cultural approaches in many ways figured a *bridge* linking these poles: a bridge between ancient and modern times, between Indian and foreign cultures, between social coercions and individual quests, between highly standardized forms of languages and no less highly innovative skills in poetry and other literary genres. But more than the symbol of an inert and rigid bridge, Agyeya’s literary practices materialized the image of the active purveyor of culture and knowledge, who restlessly covered the distance between the “poles”, trying to find some temporary release in one place or the other, just in order to experience its value before leaving it for a new journey.

If the dancer/author of the poem is viewed as a purveyor between poles/cultures, then it is the *rope* that figures the bridge, or the path. Textually,

¹¹ For an analysis of this novel according to a dialogical reading, see MONTAUT 1992.

¹² On the question of translation in India and more particularly in Agyeya’s works, see POZZA 2010.

the rope opens the poem, appears regularly throughout it, and first of all is intrinsically linked to the idea of *tension*. The rope is said to be tight, from which result the continuous to-ings and fro-ings of the dancer in his helpless attempts to loosen it from the poles. It is also a key element as it prefigures the tension, which is central to the meaning of the poem. It represents the perpetual comings and goings of Agyeya during his life-long explorations and experimentations as a writer. We all know that he never definitely settled in any literary movement nor in any political or cultural framework. Actually, to figure the multiple paths he covered, one should rather think of a web of ropes than of a single rope.

Besides the roads (*rāstā*) which it symbolizes, the tight rope (*rassī*) also suggests the idea of a thin edge on which the dancer/writer is always moving, looking for a brief and stable equilibrium, with the ever-present risk of falling from the rope, i.e. deviating from the difficult path he has chosen to follow, and thus missing the target. Although thin and “dangerous”, the rope/road/bridge must be solid and reliable in order to move ahead. How would a loosened rope or, worst, an untied rope, make possible the above quests? In fact, even if the dancer tries to untie the rope at one end or at the other, it is only in order to get some temporary rest. Otherwise, should he not rather cut the rope, so that the tension would definitively end?

As far as I understand Agyeya’s philosophy, life had no real meaning for him unless it was driven by the will to explore new fields of research, new

aesthetic and philosophical experiences, and first of all by exploring new paths leading to fleeting, but nevertheless essential, instants of freedom (*mukti*). Another expression of this movement symbolising a metaphoric bridge linking two distinct worlds, two human conditions, appears in his short story “Kalākār kī mukti” (1954, “The emancipation of the artist”):

There is motion/movement in life, it’s true; but motion/movement can also exist without moving/transfer — rather, *this* is the real motion/movement. The “rhythmicallity” of the art — revolutions and shiftings of a fluent line — that immovable bridge that continuously links the earth to the sky — and on which we can regularly touch the sky for a while before coming back down — *this* is motion/movement.¹³

The lack of lasting quietness is eloquent when we compare the dramatic tension of the poem “Khule merī kharā per”¹⁴ with the blissful experience of the observation of a solitary tree in a park in England, which was the source of inspiration for the poem, and which is described in Vatsyayan’s essay “Merī svādhīnātā: sab kī svādhīnātā”.¹⁵ The different feelings that inhabit these two

¹³ Agyeya 2001: 600 (जीवन में गति है, ठीक है; लेकिन गति स्थानान्तर के बिना भी हो सकती है—बल्कि वही तो सञ्जी गती है। कला की लयमयता—प्रवहमान रेखा का आवर्तन और विवर्तन—वह निश्चल सेतु जो निरन्तर भूमि को अन्तरिक्ष से मिलाता चलता है—जिस पर से हम क्षण में कई बार आकाश को छूकर लौट आ सकते हैं—वही तो गति है!)

¹⁴ MISRA & ŚĀH 1995: 174-175 (see Appendix B for the poem).

¹⁵ AGYEYA 2002. In this essay, the author feels that the tree which lies at the root of his experience is a perfect instance of the definition of freedom and an illustration of the fulfilment of a living thing which has not been obstructed in its growth by any

conflicting versions of a single and same experience raise the question of the interpretation. They illustrate the importance of the point of view and the fact that one event, as significant as it may be, cannot be reduced to a unique interpretation. Actually, no object, no event, no act can be seen and interpreted without some light shed on it. In other terms, it is the light which gives to the object of perception and knowledge its form and colour, i.e. its appearance.

Hence the “light” (*rośnī*) in the poem, which presence can consequently be understood as the interpretative *light* shed on the show. If the light in itself is neutral with regard to its “intention”, it is nonetheless always moved by a lighting engineer who has the ability to choose the way the dancer and his act must be floodlighted, thus giving a specific perspective to the show. In regard to an act and to the goal sought by the actor, the light can play the role either of the helper or of the opponent. As a direct consequence, the light influences the way the audience sees the show.

Which role does it play in “Nāc”? For the dancer, it is clearly an opponent. Instead of shedding light on all the constituents of his show, it projects a specific light on the dancer, which isolates him from the context and which gives to the audience the impression that the centre of interest is the dance itself and not the other components, which are left in the dark. The intense,

obstacle.

bright light (*tīkhī rośnī*) prevents the public from seeing anything else other than the dance, and objectifies the dancer by denying him any possibility to express his own interpretation. At the contrary, the kind of soft evening light that illuminates the isolated tree of the tale appearing inside “*Merī svādhīnātā: sab kī svādhīnātā*” would link the spectators with the core of the show. Their perception would be radically different.

If the “light” syntactically does not play a central role in the poem, it nevertheless becomes extremely important when it is semantically analysed. This is also true in the case of the tension, and to a lesser degree for the other components of the show.

b) The concepts

The second category of keywords deals with the concepts representing the *motives* and the *issue* of the poem. These are the dance, the tension, and the release. We have so far seen that the *dance* is the only aspect of the show that is perceived by the audience. If we have understood that the voice of the dancer disapproves of this attitude, we do not know what this dance actually means for the spectators. Do they perceive it as an attractive entertainment? Are they fascinated by the apparent ease of the dancer? Do they feel that his dance is ridiculous, resembling the dance of a puppet?

The poem actually does not attach much importance to this aspect — or, at least, does not say anything special about it, as the internal focalization is

only linked to the dancer. According to this perspective, the dancer does not seem to care for the exact interpretation of the audience; the latter may laugh at him or be subjugated by his choreography, it ultimately does not matter. What matters for him, and for our understanding of the poem, is the fact that the audience — like many of the readers the poet had — neither listens to his voice nor understands the real motives behind the apparent dance. People disregard his individuality and ignore the complex composition of his act. This is expressed in the poem (in part 5°) by the objectification of the “I”, which is then followed by its disappearance to the only benefit of the dance. The audience prevents the voice of the dancer from speaking and living as an individual.¹⁶

The dance thus hides the *tension*, which is the real catalyst of the dancer and of the show. As was said before, without this tension there would be no show at all. Why then do the people remain blind to it? It may well be because they *do not want* to see it. If they were willing to look at the show in its completeness and its whole complexity, they would be reminded of the tensions that pervade their lives and of the fact that “everything always remains as it is” (*sab kuch vaisā hī banā rahtā hai*, line 26). They prefer instead to ignore this tension, the plurality of contexts and approaches (the poles) which form real life, the paths which link these positions, and the light

¹⁶ Let us remember the way Agyeya was accused of “individualism” by several of his contemporaries to understand the critical and reproachful tone of the poem.

which influences their perception. They paid for a diverting show, not to witness the tenseness and helplessness of the dancer.

But does the dancer himself feel comfortable with this tension? Not really. On the one hand, he knows that this is the main agent of his running, without which he would not look for precious moments of release. On the other hand, he continuously tries to put an end to this tension, even though he has to recognize that it will never completely cease.

Lastly comes the notion of “release” (*chutti*), also a fundamental concept even though it appears only once in the whole poem (line 22). This concept is nevertheless all the more important as it is rare and inaccessible to the dancer. Syntactically, its importance comes from its link to both the words “tension” and “dancer” appearing in the same line. Semantically, it is presented as an aim to be reached. The whole paradox of the situation lies in the fact that the dancer continuously tries to loosen (*dhīnā*) the tension of the rope in order to get some release, whereas there can be no release or freedom without the existing tension. Both are inexorably intertwined.

When the actuality and effect of the tension ceases, the ideal of freedom too ends. When the very possibility of freedom disappears, the tension becomes meaningless: there is no more reason to run from one pole to the other.

Although the poem, and especially its part iv, seems to evoke the impossibility of obtaining this release, with the dancer abandoned in his

solitude, we may ask whether it would be a relevant approach to compare this continuous running to the endless climbing of Sisyphus according to Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd. Can the poem give us a valid clue to this question when it is analysed as an autonomous entity as we have done so far? Or should we say instead that without a comparison with other texts of Agyea and/or without some knowledge of his literary life, any interpretation of it can but prove to be inadequate? Hence, let us see what an analysis based on epistemic and social concerns can bring to our understanding.

3) The epistemic and social level

When one compares "Nāc" to the other poems of Agyea, it becomes clear that the movement back and forth between the two poles, and the notion of a bridge linking these poles, represent a significant aspect in the worldview of the writer. These notions regularly pervade his texts in one way or another and suggest that there is no fixed position where one can stay indefinitely or in isolation. We said at the end of the previous part that a Camusian point of view could well have been suggested by the incessant move of the dancer. However, if we look at other works belonging to the 1950's-1970's, such as "Conflict as a Bridge"¹⁷, "Merī svādhīnātā: sab kī svādhīnātā"¹⁸, "Kalākār kī

¹⁷ VATSYAYAN 1964. This is the original title of an essay in English to which only the French version was accessible to me.

¹⁸ AGYEYA 2002.

mukti”¹⁹, or *Bhavantī*²⁰, it appears that two notions are crucial for Agyeya, which contradict Camus’s interpretation: relationship and renunciation.

Relationship can be dealt with in a twofold manner: epistemologically and socially. In relation to the epistemic issue, Vatsyayan deplors the way art has evolved up to contemporary times. In his essay “Conflict as a Bridge: Some Aspects of the Fiction of Modern India”, he compares the situation of art in “classical” times with the one in the contemporary world. Whereas in classical times the members forming the public were expected to be endowed with the aptitude for identifying themselves with the object of “observation”, being therefore *sahṛday*, things started to change together with the advent of modernity: democratisation of art allowed everybody to become part of the audience, even without being *sahṛday*. Consequently, because of the lack of shared artistic knowledge, the communion between the artist and his/her public was broken:

Tous les hommes, du simple fait qu’ils étaient au monde, avaient le droit de devenir lecteurs, spectateurs, critiques, en un mot de faire partie du public: il n’était plus nécessaire pour cela ‘d’avoir un coeur’. A partir de ce moment, ce fut toujours l’artiste qu’on blâma lorsqu’il n’arrivait pas à imposer son art: ce fut toujours le livre qui parut sonner creux, jamais la tête à laquelle il se heurtait.²¹

¹⁹ AGYEYA 2001.

²⁰ AGYEYA 1989.

²¹ AGYEYA 1964: 57.

The point of view of the writer on the meaning of the artist's performance is clear: the meaning of a performance, such as the dancer's show in the poem, or of any kind of act, is foremost a matter of *relation*:

L'art n'est pas dans la chose, l'objet, l'oeuvre d'art; l'art est plutôt *ce qui se produit entre* l'objet et le public, ou entre l'artiste et son public.²²

As a direct consequence of this approach, the dancer in "Nāc" can do whatever he wills, whichever way he wants; his performance will nevertheless remain "useless" and misunderstood as long as the audience remains deaf to the message of the show. If the audience is not apt to "sympathize" with the message the artist is trying to share, his art is in vain. And if both parties are unable to create together a "harmony", a *resonance*, then what was considered as primordial in classical art is now impossible to realize: "the foundation of a bridge towards the 'core of felicity' inside the experience".²³

We see that even if the symbol of the bridge remains one of the significant themes of Agyeya's writings, its ancient representation as a path leading towards Truth is nowadays no more so easily comprehensible. The bridge, or the rope, maintains the dancer in continuous to-ings and fro-ings instigated by the *inescapable tension* inherent to the modern show. A

²² *Ibid.*: 54 (my emphasis).

²³ *Ibid.* ("l'établissement d'un pont vers 'le noyau de félicité' à l'intérieur de l'expérience").

consequence of modernity and its loss of communion between the public and the “reality” expected to be mediated by the artist, is the fact that now, argues Vatsyayan, the artist and his/her public are positioned in a relation of *conflict*; communion has been replaced by a continuous opposition.

“Nāc” illustrates this situation by emphasizing the conflict of interpretation between the dancer and his audience. While the dancer vainly tries to draw the attention of the public on the tension that makes him run, the audience is naively engrossed in the dance. In this context, the tension not only figures a stimulating force for the poet; it also implies the idea of an epistemic utopia, figuring the illusion that has become the hope of a direct access to “Reality”. The dancer experiences this epistemic change and knows that now nothing remains which would allow him to rest for a while. He knows why he is running from one pole to the other, in contrast with the audience who is still dazzled by the dance — this simulacrum of reality looking attractive in the bright lights of the show.

In connection with the notion of social relationship, Vatsyayan’s philosophy maintains that an individual is really independent (*svādhīn*) and fulfilled only as long as he belongs to a free society, in which he lives as a responsible actor and in which his independence (*svādhīnātā*) is linked to the freedom of all its members.

His independence is not limited to him; on the contrary, he includes within

himself the independence of each and every member of the society of whom he is himself a part/component.²⁴

This standpoint clearly rejects the existentialist and the absurdist philosophies on the fundamental solitude attached to the human condition. The actor in the writer's worldview needs a *witness*, an audience, without whom his act would have no meaning. The last pages of *Apne apne ajnabi*, where Maryam (Yoke) asks Jagannathan to be the witness of her voluntary death, illustrate the need of such a relationship, despite Yoke's obsessive quest for individual freedom.

The second notion linked to the concept of freedom, i.e. *renunciation*, runs through Agyeya's works since the 1950s, although it is not valued the way traditional Hindu culture values it — it is not the behaviour that matters for him (like the ascetical way of life chosen by sannyasins) but the moment of decision and the act of renunciation itself. In *Bhavanti* for instance, the meaning of life is indeed said to depend on the very moment “renunciation” (*utsarg*) is adopted:

The meaning of life too reveals itself not at the time of the meeting with death but in the very moment of liberation — of that liberation that is obtained the moment one renounces life.²⁵

²⁴ AGYEYA 2002: 203 (उस की स्वाधीनता केवल उस की नहीं होती बल्कि जिस समाज का वह अंग होता है उस पूरे समाज के हर सदस्य की स्वाधीनता को भी वह अपने में सम्मिलित करता है).

²⁵ AGYEYA 1989: 137 (जीवन का अर्थ भी, इस लिए, मृत्यु के साक्षात्कार के क्षण में नहीं, मुक्ति के

The same kind of assertion is made in “*Merī svādhīnātā: sab kī svādhīnātā*”:

Several years later, I heard the story of that bodhisattva who had renounced following the path leading to his own liberation for the sake of the liberation of the humanity. And still some years later I also understood that renunciation only is the authentic and sole independent act.²⁶

Renunciation (*utsarg*), looseness (*dhīl*), dispossession; these are all attitudes without which the ego and the dependence on time would always stand as obstacles to the artist in search of freedom. Vatsyayan comments accordingly his short story “*Kalākār kī mukti*” and the choice of Pygmalion to reject the living statue:

[L’artiste] est parvenu à un état de total dépouillement, ayant renoncé à la fois à son ego et à la faveur des dieux, le dépouillement étant la condition préalable de la liberté, et le renoncement ce qui rend l’art indépendant du temps.”²⁷

In conclusion to this part, a last comment should be made regarding the (absence of) contextualization in “*Nāc*”. The poem is indeed illustrative of the absence of any specified cultural background in many of Agyeya’s works.

ही क्षण में दीखता है—उस मुक्ति के जो जीवन के उत्सर्ग के क्षण में मिलती है).

²⁶ AGYEYA 2001: 201 (उस बोधिसत्त्व की कथा कई वर्षों बाद सुनी जिस ने मानव मात्र की मुक्ति के लिए स्वयं अपनी मुक्ति का मार्ग उत्सर्ग कर दिया था । और यह तो इस के भी कुछ वर्ष बाद समझ में आया कि यह उत्सर्ग ही सच्चा और एकमात्र स्वाधीन कर्म है).

²⁷ VATSYAYAN 1964: 65.

Nothing is said about the origin and the social background of the dancer, nor about the audience. The show may be produced in any country, at any time. On the one hand, this method prevents the reader's attention from being diverted from the real issue of the text. On the other hand, it gives to the issue a sense of universal validity. Like for most of Agyeya's short stories written after Indian independence, the lack of specific socio-historical contextualization in "Nāc" allows both the writer and the reader to focus exclusively on the characters, their acts, thoughts and perceptions, and on the essential elements that form the show.

This way of describing the situation emphasizes all the more the misperception of the spectators who concentrate their attention on the dance while they should, according to the speaker, also look at the other components of the show. Then only would they be able to feel the underlying and omnipresent tension — a tension in which lies precisely the possibility of release.

Concluding comments

Seeming at first sight a rather simple poem, "Nāc" proved to be a much more complex text than could be expected. However, to disclose its full complexity was possible mainly because of the multilevel analysis that was adopted in this paper — although several other readings may still be added. Dealing with the poem according to one single approach would have kept unveiled several

of its most important aspects, and our interpretation would certainly have remained unilateral and biased. For instance, it is only through the three levels of analysis that it has become evident that the concept of “tension” is a key element of the poem. At the syntactic level, we saw that this concept is used by the speaker as one of the grammatical subjects of the central parts 7° and 8°, thus receiving as much importance as the “I” of the dancer and as the audience. At the semantic level, it appeared that “tension” is essential to the understanding of the whole poem, either in regard to the apparent result of the show, i.e. the dance, or as the unavoidable counterpart of its real aim, i.e. release. And at the epistemic level, we have seen that tension – together with *mukti* and *svādhīnātā* – was, from the beginning of the writer’s life, a catalyst for his restless quest towards a fulfilled individual life in concord with the social environment.

To sum up, the syntactic analysis has been useful in highlighting the opposition prevailing between the two points of view of the dancer and the audience, their dialogism, and the highly elaborated construction of the poem. The semantic approach has been helpful in explaining the symbolism of the elements of the show, which, otherwise, might well have been seen as mere objects without any special meaning. Finally, the results that were obtained through the epistemic level of analysis have provided a wider understanding of Agyeya’s philosophy and have helped diminish the gap between the interpretations of the dancer and the audience in showing that both

“characters” actually play a significant role with regard to epistemic issues.

More generally, this poem should surely be read as the illustration of Agyeya’s awareness that a veil would always remain between his writing, his acting, and the way we, readers and scholars, would interpret his work. It reminds us of the necessity to look at literary works, and especially poems, as creations whose meanings are never fully independent of our own relative and limited personal and socio-historical backgrounds and preconceptions. “Nāc”, “without doubt”, can be seen as an early specimen of postmodern literature, not so much because of the form of the poem, but because of the way it questions our habits to look at the “reality” of life and at its various shows.

References

- AGYEYA, 1980, *Mahāvṛkṣ ke nīce (kavitāem 1974-76)*, Delhi, Rajpal & Sons.
- AGYEYA, 1989, *Bhavantī*, Delhi, Rajpal & Sons.
- AGYEYA, 2001, “Kalākār kī mukti” (1954), in *Agyeya kī sampūrṇ kahāniyām*, Delhi, Rajpal & Sons, 599-603.
- AGYEYA, 2002, “Meṛī svādhīnātā: sab kī svādhīnātā” (1978), in *Kavi nikaṣ: Gadyakār Agyeya*. New Delhi, Prabhat Prakashan, 198-203.
- MISHRA, Vidyanivas & SHAH, Rameshcandra (eds), 1995, *Agyeya kāvya-stabak*, New Delhi, Sahitya akademi.
- MONTAUT, Annie, 1992, “Western Influence on Hindi Literature: A Dialogical Process (Ajñeya’s *Apne-apne ajnabī*)”, in M. Offredi (ed.) *Literature*,

Language and the Media in India. Proceedings of the 11th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, Amsterdam 1990, Delhi, Manohar, 117-137.

POZZA, Nicola, 2010, "Translating from India and the Moving Space of Translation (Illustrated by the Works of Ajñeya)", in M. Burger & N. Pozza (eds) *India in Translation through Hindi Literature: A Plurality of Voices. Proceedings of the International Symposium on Hindi Literature and Translation, Lausanne, 6-8 November 2008*, Bern, Peter Lang.

VATSYAYAN, S.H., 1964, "Quelques aspects du roman indien contemporain", *Diogene* 12(45), 52-68.

VATSYAYAN, S.H., 1981, *A Sense of Time: An Exploration of Time in Theory, Experience and Art*, Delhi [etc.], Oxford University Press.

Appendix A

नाच

A	I	1°	i	1	एक तनी हुई रस्सी है जिस पर मैं नाचता हूँ।	
		II	2°		2	जिस तनी हुई रस्सी पर मैं नाचता हूँ
					3	वह दो खम्भों के बीच है।
	III	3°		4	रस्सी पर मैं जो नाचता हूँ	
				5	वह एक खम्भे से दूसरे खम्भे तक का नाच है।	
	IV	4°		6	दो खम्भों के बीच जिस तनी हुई रस्सी पर मैं नाचता हूँ	
				7	उस पर तीखी रोशनी पड़ती है	
			ii	8	जिस में लोग मेरा नाच देखते हैं।	
	V	5°		9	न मुझे देखते हैं जो नाचता है	
				10	न रस्सी को जिस पर मैं नाचता हूँ	
				11	न खम्भों को जिस पर रस्सी तनी है	
				12	न रोशनी को ही जिस में नाच दीखता है:	
				13	लोग सिर्फ नाच देखते हैं।	
B	VI	6°	iii	14	पर मैं जो नाचता हूँ	
				15	जो जिस रस्सी पर नाचता हूँ	
				16	जो जिन खम्भों के बीच है	
				17	जिस पर जो रोशनी पड़ती है	
				18	उस रोशनी में उन खम्भों के बीच उस रस्सी पर	
	19	असल में मैं नाचता नहीं हूँ।				
	VII	7°	iv	20	मैं केवल उस खम्भे से इस खम्भे तक दौड़ता हूँ	
				21	कि इस या उस खम्भे से रस्सी खोल दूँ	
				22	कि तनाव चुके और ढील में मुझे छुट्टी हो जाये—	
	VIII	8°		23	पर तनाव ढीलता नहीं	
				24	और मैं इस खम्भे से उस खम्भे तक दौड़ता हूँ	
				25	पर तनाव वैसा ही बना रहता है	
				26	सब कुछ वैसा ही बना रहता है।	
	C	IX	9°	v	27	और वही मेरा नाच है जिसे सब देखते हैं
					28	मुझे नहीं
				29	रस्सी को नहीं	
				30	खम्भे नहीं	
				31	रोशनी नहीं	
				32	तनाव भी नहीं	
33				देखते हैं—नाच!		

Tightrope Dancer²⁸

There is a taut rope
On which I dance. The taut rope
On which I dance stretches between two poles.
What I dance on the rope
Is the dance from one pole to the other.
The taut rope stretched between two poles on which I dance
Is flooded with bright light
In which people see my dance —
Not me who dances
Not the rope on which I dance
Not the poles between which the rope is stretched
Not even the light in which the dance is seen:
People see only the dance.
 But the dance which I dance
 On the rope I dance on
 Between the poles on which it is stretched
 In the light in which it is seen ---
 In that light
 Between those poles
 On that stretch of rope
 In truth I do not dance
I only move from pole to pole, seeking
To loosen the rope
To ease the pull
So I might make my escape.
But the tension does not ease
And I move from that pole to this
The tension continues
Nothing changes.
 And that is the dance which people see
 Not me who dances
 Not the rope
 Not the poles
 Not the flood of light
 Not even the tautness
 They see
 The Dance.

²⁸ Translated by Agyeya (<http://www.geocities.ws/kavitayan/ajneya.html>; last consulted 24.10.2012).

Appendix B

खुले में खड़ा पेड़

भूल कर
सवेरे
देहात की सैर करने गया था ।
वहाँ मैं ने देखा
खुले में खड़ा पेड़ ।

और लौट कर
मैंने घरवाली को डाँटा है,
बच्ची को पीटा है:
दफ़्तर पहुँच कर बास पर कुद्दूंगा
और बड़े बास को
भिंके दाँतों के बीच से सिसकारती गाली दूँगा ।

क्यों मेरी अकल मारी गयी थी कि मैं
देहात में देखने गया
खुले में खड़ा पेड़?

A tree standing in the open

By mistake
this morning
I had gone for a walk in the countryside.
There I saw
a tree standing in the open.

Back home
I scolded my wife,
beat my daughter:
Once at the office I will insult my boss
and to the director
I will speak insultingly hissing between my teeth.

Why the hell did I decided
to go to the countryside and look at
a tree standing in the open?