Abstract

It is not surprising that all forms of human reflective enterprise, such as science, philosophy, literature, music and the fine arts, will display some convergence somewhere in the total reflective spectrum. However, there is a lingering intuition that there is more to the convergence of literature and philosophy than what is captured in the general idea. How do we conceptualise this special bond?

Since both literature and philosophy are ancient, complex and richly varied forms of human thought with indefinite contours often tinged with conflicting cultural expectations, it is unlikely that some ‘essentialist’ answer to the question raised above could be non-trivially reached. So I will refrain from either defining ‘literature’ and ‘philosophy’ or attempt to locate their respective areas of operation via necessarily biased selection of texts. Instead, assuming large areas of convergence, I will ask: is there a penchant for some goal which is not directly open to other forms of reflective endeavour, especially science, but without which the understanding of the human condition remains significantly incomplete? Supposing there to be an answer to this question, does the answer relate to or explain some empirical fact common (perhaps only) to literature and philosophy?

As the title suggests, I will argue that an understanding at once of common life with all its richness and complexity forces a rather specific notion of textuality which governs both literature and philosophy; it does not govern any other reflective form as far as I can see.

1. PREAMBLE: SAVING THE APPEARANCES

The charming thing about the issue of convergence of literature and philosophy is that the issue is embedded in opposing intuitive pulls. On the one hand, there is a clear intuition that literature and philosophy, as forms of human thought, have significant convergence that goes deeper than the historical convergence of any pair of reflective forms of human thought. In other words, the intuition demands that the convergence of literature and philosophy be viewed in terms more intimate than what binds, say, literature and science, or literature and music. On the other hand, there is a strong intuition that literature and philosophy are very distinct forms of human thought which, in their appearances, have
large autonomous areas of discourse and application that have very little to do with each other.

Of course, two entities A and B need to be distinct in order to converge in the first place; I am not missing that logical point. In fact I am going to play on it. For now, I am trying to draw attention just to the methodological point that any interesting account of convergence ought to keep these opposing pulls firmly in view. Otherwise, it is all too easy to trivialize the issue. In our eagerness to locate convergences, we might be uncritically ignoring significant non-converging aspects of the disciplines. An account of convergence ought to leave enough degrees of freedom for the disciplines to diverge. Working with opposing intuitions thus severely constrains the scope of an interesting account. That is where the issue is most challenging. Let me illustrate this point by sketching some possible approaches to the issue that I reject, precisely because they do not obey the methodological constraint just suggested.

For example, it is possible to draw on wide and common notions of literature and philosophy such that a convergence could be seen in almost any instance of human discourse. With such wide notions, no reflective articulation of human thought can fail to display aspects of literature and philosophy wherever they are coming from. I myself have often been struck with the quality and articulation of thought when conversing, say, with a Santhal labourer working in my garden, or with a Bihari rickshaw-puller taking me to the market. One is impressed with the abstract nature of the opinion, subtle interpretation of common experience, rational character of the position defended, creative enumeration of choices at hand, uses of irony, metaphor, imagery, deliberate ambiguity, apt idioms, analogies, and the like. It is difficult to conclude, from such ubiquitous presence of human grandeur (a phrase to which I return), that the disciplines of literature and philosophy have converged. These are not the sort of examples we are looking for when addressing the issue. One can see how the methodological constraint is already working to enable us to set these very general examples aside. The generality of these examples is exactly the trouble; since literature and philosophy converge everywhere, it is hard to see how to keep their appearances distinct.

A more subtle and involved application of the constraint arises as follows. One could approach the issue of convergence by listing some typical areas of convergence, and then
attempt to give a unified account of what makes these areas possible. As a starter, one could suggest three kinds of items where the disciplines converge in appearance.

(A) Items of literature which have a distinct philosophical ‘flavor’, or have a philosophical point to make, or address a philosophical issue, *inter alia*. One could think of some of the novels and plays of Sartre, poetry of Sri Aurobindo, ‘metaphysical’ poetry of Donne, some later poetry of Tagore, some of the fiction by Milan Kundera, Kamal Kumar Majumdar, and the like.

(B) Works of philosophy which have a distinct literary ‘flavor’, which attempt to exhibit some literary style, solve some problems of narration, and so on. Plato’s *Republic* is a popular example in this area. Bertrand Russell’s work could be another. I am told that David Hume’s work is sometimes taught in British Schools as part of the English curriculum. There must be similar examples in other traditions, e.g., French or Italian, as well.2

(C) Some items which typically blur the literature/philosophy distinction – sometimes by design. Two varieties immediately come to mind. One could cite the so-called ‘Essays’, say, by Charles Lamb or Amiel. A more voluminous variety could be the work of the continental thinkers such as Heidegger, Lacan, Derrida, and the like. I will have a bit more to say on this last variety in a moment.

I am not denying that each of these categories require detailed investigation. As we will see later, these categories could be viewed as more *explicit* examples of an underlying unity that binds literature and philosophy in a large variety of cases. The present point is that we should not jump to any conclusions about this underlying unity, if any, from these examples alone. Even if we take a *cumulative* enumeration of the items just listed, the enumeration falls hopelessly short of the vast bodies of literary and philosophical works. In other words, the enumeration excludes what might be taken to be (most of) the paradigmatic examples of the disciplines. For example, where do we place Aristotle, Nagarjuna, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Frege, Wittgenstein, Carnap and Quine from the philosophy side, and Homer, Kalidasa, Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Goethe, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, Jibanananda Das, D. H. Lawrence, Premchand and Manik Bandopadhyay from the literature side in the suggested categories?
Again, I am not suggesting that we aim either for an all-inclusive account, or none. Given the complexity, variety and richness with which these ancient disciplines have unfolded, it is unrealistic to hope for an exhaustive account. Yet, for an account to have at least some semblance of empirical significance, we will expect it to cover a large spectrum of work with indications about how to conceptualise this spectrum. Towards the end, I will return to the issue of what empirical significance might mean for the project at hand. For now, we will at least expect a much wider coverage than what the items listed above promise. In short, following the methodological constraint, we can see that while the first group of examples -- the gardner and the rickshaw-puller -- makes the object of enquiry uninterestingly large, the second group consisting of items (A), (B) and (C) makes it embarrassingly small.

As a notable aside, notice that the preceding line of thinking allows us to attach only limited significance, for the issue at hand, to the body of work generally known as ‘continental thought’. One may doubt either the philosophical or the literary significance of this body of work precisely because much of this work blurs the disciplinary distinctions. One approaches literary and philosophical works with distinct states of mind, expectations, preparations, and the like. When one approaches, say, some of the work of Martin Heidegger with philosophical expectations, one finds some vaguely Aristotelian themes intertwined with socio-cultural observations. When one approaches them with literary expectations, one finds a rather heavy narrative style, laced with metaphors and deliberate ambiguities, which is reminiscent at once of Greek tragedy, classical German poetry and stream-of-consciousness literature.

One wonders, ‘why don’t I read the untarnished originals, say, Aristotle or Sophocles or Goethe or Joyce themselves at separate moments of reflection and enquiry?’ We wonder thus because we find these authors, just mentioned, to be firmly anchored in different reflective origins and discourses which, individually, offer insufficient illumination on Heidegger. In saying all this, I am not ignoring the individual significance of the Heideggerian genre. I am just questioning the significance of the genre for approaching the project at hand, for, I suspect that if this genre is to be viewed as the central example of convergence, the issue will immediately lose much of its interested audience. The audience
will lose interest because the issue of convergence is centred on something which is neither paradigmatic philosophy nor paradigmatic literature.

I am harping on this (what seems to me to be an) obvious point because I suspect that much of the current interest in the convergence issue, as a matter of popular fact, origins from the presence of this genre. There is no doubt that this range of discourse has allowed the more active and significant interaction between literature and philosophy: philosophers reflecting on literary works and authors, literature people reflecting on philosophers. Thus, whenever my literature friends feel interested in matters philosophical, they invariably have in mind something that emanates from Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Lacan or Foucault. The more curious of them may sometimes venture into later Wittgenstein, Thomas Kuhn, or Hilary Putnam. I do not know of any that would actually venture into -- not that they need to -- early Wittgenstein, Rudolph Carnap, Alfred Tarski, Peter Strawson, Donald Davidson, Michael Dummett, Jerry Fodor or Saul Kripke. In fact, to push the point, it is often complained that these last named somehow fail to qualify as 'genuine' philosophers precisely because they fail to submit to expectations of convergence. Interestingly, a roughly similar distribution obtains for Indian philosophy as well. One reads the Vedas, Upanishads, the Geeta, maybe bits of Sankhya and Yogasutras, but not Dharmakirti, Vacaspati, Kumarila Bhatta, Gangesha, or Raghunath. With such choices of convenience, the issue of convergence virtually disappears.

Several moderately surprising consequences seem to follow from these methodological considerations. First, it is unlikely that an interesting account of convergence could be reached by focussing on converging examples alone; thus, the challenge is to find convergence of literature and philosophy for those paradigmatic cases which appear to be non-converging, say, 20th century analytic philosophy and 19th century Russian fiction, something like that.

Second, this conception of the project for diverging visibles suggests that convergence, if any, lies deeply buried in the collective invisibility of literature and philosophy; so perhaps it is not to be found in their textures, shapes and discourses, the properties that define their appearances. The search for convergence is thus a search in the subterranean. It could well be the case that the limited and dispersed examples of convergence cited above
are in fact the more explicit manifestations of this underlying unity, just as natural geysers manifest deep and widespread convulsions in the bowel of the earth.3

2. THE THEME

One of the subterranean themes which I wish to examine in this essay may be brought out with the help of a scene in Henry Miller's novel *Nexus*. In this scene, a hapless unpublished young writer walks into the dingy, foul-smelling office of an ageing lawyer. The writer is a destitute, and is forever looking for some money for his next meal. The lawyer is moderately successful in his profession, but is a failure in everything else in life. These two lost souls occasionally meet to share their grief and hopeless dreams. At some point during the dreary conversation that ensues, the lawyer, *not* the writer, remarks,

> Dostoievsky explored the field in advance, and he found the road blocked at every turn. He was a frontier man, in the profound sense of the word. He took up one position after another, at every dangerous, promising point, and he found that there was no issue for us, such as we are.4

The interest in these remarks for the project at hand is that Miller places them in the mouth of a common lawyer. It is not a professional remark of a literary critic, or of a philosopher drawing on Dostoievsky to make an academic point. It is a remark of a sinking ordinary soul trying to find some grip on life in the company of another equally desperate human. And they both turn to Dostoievsky in their hour of suffering, because they think of Dostoievsky as a "frontier man", in the "profound sense". Dostoievsky is credited with having "explored the field in advance" to cover positions at "dangerous, promising points". By handing over the perplexities of their lives to Dostoievsky thus, the writer and the lawyer find solace in the thought that "there was no issue", after all. As if the dingy confines of the office in a drab block of apartments opened up to allow a larger, clearer vision of life.

Examples like these seem to justify the very common adage that literature provides a deep and sustainable understanding of the human condition in its totality and complexity. There is a widespread belief in Bengal that some words can always be gleaned from the poetry and songs of Tagore to lend clarity to any momentous point in life. It won't be
surprising if a similar view is held of Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and others in the West. Examples can be easily multiplied beyond official literature to include fables, epics, *kathas*, folk songs, and the like. Literature then is commonly seen as a guide, a source of practical wisdom, a master text of the human condition itself. This vintage role of literature as a source of *understanding* is the theme of this essay.

The prevalence of an adage does not necessarily make it true. As societies and cultures change, there is a need for re-examining an adage of such general scope at every turn in history. In fact, certain contemporary developments might suggest that the adage is false, or at least that its significance is nearly obsolete. One recalls the classical oppositions between religion and science where it was held that religions were significant in enabling us to construct convenient world-views as long as insufficient scientific understanding of the cosmos prevailed. As science progressed, religions began losing their ground insofar as the *understanding* of the Universe is concerned. We no longer need to turn to religions to learn about the origins of planets, the beginning of life, and the growth of plants.

Similarly, it could be argued that we leaned on literature for ages due to our profound scientific ignorance of matters concerning humans. Once this state of ignorance begins to disappear, so does the relevance of literature in our common lives. Literature may continue to be a source of titillating entertainment, of technical virtuosity, a platform for display of verbal power; but its use as a source of understanding may not last as the human sciences, especially what is currently labelled "cognitive sciences", grow.

This new opposition is well illustrated in the remarks of the philosopher Daniel Dennett, who is a leading philosopher wedded to current cognitive science. After explaining the truly remarkable phenomenon of virus replication, the exact chemistry of which is known by now, Dennett concludes that "an impersonal, unreflective, robotic, mindless little scrap of molecular machinery is the ultimate basis of all the agency, and hence meaning, and hence consciousness, in the universe" (1995, p.203). Dennett believes that to think that the explanatory scope of "molecular machinery" is limited only to the biophysical nature of humans is to believe in "skyhooks" and in divine mysteries, rather than in the firmly grounded "cranes" of science. In fact the first part of the book, from which the preceding remark was cited, deals at length with the oppositions between religious doctrines and the theory of evolution proposed by Darwin. Any perceived challenge then to the programme...
of understanding humans as scraps of molecular machinery invites the charge of obscurantism.

3. THE LIMITS OF SCIENCE

Given the growing postures of cognitive science, we have to ask afresh: what is the specific need of literature in human life; what does it do for us? As Jurij Lotman has wondered, why does every human community form literature? Moreover, we need to find out if the role we classically ascribe to literature could fall within the scope of cognitive science at all.

At this point, I find it instructive to examine a remark made by Noam Chomsky some years ago. Chomsky suggested that we ought to turn to literature and the arts for deeper and comprehensive understanding of the human condition (Chomsky 1977). The content of Chomsky’s remark, as we saw, is fairly commonplace in that we need not cite any authority to convince us of its value.

However, the context and the authorship of the remark are of some interest for the theme at hand. Noam Chomsky may be thought of as one of the principal architects of cognitive science. According to a very popular survey of the discipline about 20 years ago, cognitive science has, “in a mere handful of years, discovered more about how human beings think than we had previously learned in all of our time on earth” (Hunt 1982:13). As cognitive science promises “the systematic enquiry into our thinking selves”, it establishes the fact that “we are infinitely more intricate and remarkable than we have ever realised”. With these introductory remarks, the book surveys “discoveries” not only regarding “symbol-using ability of the mind”, “visual thinking”, “natural reasoning”, “metacognition and self-awareness”, “problem solving”, and the like, but “cognitive styles”, “aesthetic judgements”, “metaphorical thinking”, “nature of creativity”, and similar things as well. I am not concerned here with the merits and the actual results of cognitive science. Let us agree that cognitive science in fact is a major intellectual achievement unparalleled in the recent history of thought. The current interest is that much of the motivation for this discipline ensues from Chomsky’s own work on language and mind.

Thus Chomsky was asked, a little before the publication of Morton Hunt's book, whether in time cognitive science could possibly unravel the ultimate mystery of being a human.
Chomsky replied as above suggesting that a comprehensive understanding of the human condition could not be the agenda for science at all. In fact, according to Chomsky, that agenda is already classically addressed in the literature and the arts. When we focus on verbal articulation alone and, thus, set music, painting, sculpture and the other arts aside, it follows that literature is the *only* form of thought that pursues the agenda.

No wonder Daniel Dennett is duly upset about this apparent *volte-face* of a fellow cognitive scientist. He writes, "it is a great irony" that "Noam Chomsky, automata theorist and Radio Engineer" "was all along the champion of an attitude towards science that might seem to offer salvation to humanists." "Chomsky has argued", Dennett continues, "that science has limits and, in particular, it stubs its toe on the mind". So Dennett complains that, according to Chomsky, "the only way ... would be the novelist's way – and he much preferred Jane Austin" to, say, Charles Darwin (Dennett 1995:386-7).

What explains Chomsky’s 'revisionist' views in these matters? As far as I can see, the answer to this puzzle lies in Chomsky’s views on the scope of science. “Science”, Chomsky says elsewhere, “is a very strange activity” because

> It only works for simple problems. Even in the hard sciences, when you move beyond the simplest structures, it becomes very descriptive. By the time you get to big molecules, for example, you are mostly describing things. The idea that deep scientific analysis tells you something about problems of human beings and our lives and our interrelations with one another and so on is mostly pretence in my opinion -- self-serving pretence, which is itself a technique of domination and exploitation.” (Chomsky 2000:2)

So the rough image is that, physics basically ends with free electrons, chemistry with simple proteins, biology with a few dozen cells, and so on. The rest of the massive scientific-technological enterprise is a mixture of heuristics, common sense, tradition, local ingenuity, as well as a fair amount of propaganda and handwaving.

To see what could be at stake here, let us ask whether current research on cognition is able to tell a scientific story of behaviour at all, even if we set *human* behaviour aside. Consider, for example, the research on nematodes, a very simple organism with a few hundred neurones in all; so people have been able to chart out their wiring diagrams and
developmental patterns fairly accurately. Yet, Chomsky reports that an entire research group at MIT devoted to the study of “the stupid little worm”, just a few years ago, could not figure out why the “worm does the things it does” (Chomsky 1994).

There are several lessons, some bordering on the political, to be learned here which I will not pursue. In particular, I am not questioning either the validity, or the supreme significance of science. I am only anxious to draw attention to the curious fact that the deepest scientific understanding is inversely proportional to the complexity of the systems studied. It seems that, even if we set aside the understanding of “true exercise of the creative imagination” which involves “a mixture of madness”, the study even of the “lower form lies beyond the reach of theoretical understanding”. This is not necessarily an “unhappy” outcome, Chomsky concludes. In that sense, science, like music, is best when it is essentially useless.5

4. COGNITIVE AGENCY AND TACIT MASTERY

Yet the profound fact is that, even though we cannot have scientific-theoretical understanding of anything beyond the simplest ones, we do have genuine understanding of all that matters, including that of “human beings and our lives and our interrelations with one another”, where ‘scientific’ understanding, as Chomsky told us, can only amount to self-serving pretence. In fact, we cannot fail to have such massive understanding if we are to function as humans at all. This is because of the obvious fact that humans are cognitive agents. Barring the so-called modular ‘reflexes’, almost every human act is an interpretive act, not just a response to stimuli. Hence understanding accompanies humans at every step. This ranges from the perceptions of a tree and a loved one to conceptions of future society and death. Experiments suggest that children, as young as six years, form fairly accurate conceptions of other minds, of things that are alive, and of systems that are ‘natural’ rather than artificial (Carey 1986, Keil 1989).

Beyond the domain of laboratories, I myself have often been struck with the quality and articulation of thought, as noted earlier, when conversing with simple common people in the street. Such ubiquitous presence of human grandeur – "Cartesian common sense", as Chomsky calls it – clearly displays parts of the totality of the complex and largely successful understanding that humans routinely achieve. Is there some original connection
then between our cognitive agency and the classical availability of literature and philosophy? Is it possible to construct a need for literature and philosophy beginning with the structure of cognitive agents?

Notice that the facts about human understanding noted above surprise us only when they are presented in objective, descriptive terms; that is, when they are brought to the fore, so to speak. In common life, we routinely behave with children assuming that they possess abstract knowledge of themselves, of others and of the world; in fact, we are worried when they don’t. There is considerable current interest in the fact that autistic children seem to lack what may be called a 'theory of mind' (Frith and Happe 1999); that is, these children cannot ascribe minds to others and, therefore, they fail to display much of cognitive behaviour that flows from such ascriptions. The case is particularly interesting for the project in hand, since it is well-known that over a millenium of philosophical discussions, and at least a century of scientific discussion, has led nowhere regarding a theoretical understanding of mind; yet, normal children seem to accomplish the task effortlessly at a very early age. This understanding then is largely manifest in our practical mastery of human conduct, not necessarily in a theoretical formulation of the conduct. This is one telling feature of the complex understanding embedded in common life which I am anxious to press here.

In formulating his conception of the philosopher, Peter Strawson suggests that “the philosopher labours to produce a systematic account of the general conceptual structure of which our daily practice shows us to have a tacit and unconscious mastery” (emphasis added)7. I wish to focus on the notion of tacit mastery displayed in our daily practice. Philosophers, in this view, cannot even begin to produce a "systematic account" unless the daily practices of common life have attained the vast mastery sketched above. Where does that mastery come from for philosophers to furnish an account of?

At this point, it is instructive to look at the structure of common life as it shows in our daily practices. Now even a glance at this vast system is beyond the scope of a single paper, not to speak of this one. Yet, I wish to highlight some of the key features of the system to relate this part of the discussion to the issues at hand. The edifice is generally needed, of course, for us to be able to interpret and find our way through the overwhelming flow of experiences, feelings, desires, motivations, anxieties, and realisations -- collective
and individual. It seems that the structures so attained need to have at least the inter-related features of \textit{connectedness, transcendence} and \textit{locality} in order for us to be able to use the edifice in varying contexts.

Connectedness is required for us to form a coherent view of our immediate condition: conception of familiar objects, their relations with people’s feelings including one’s own, expectations and goals that form from there, the actions that flow with the resultant anxieties, frustrations and the ultimate broadening of horizons. Transcendence creates these horizons from the connected stock we already possess so that we can form conceptions of alternative choices, construct the past and the future, relate to other humans in terms of \textit{their} choices and goals, so as to find a grip on the transitory and the ephemeral. Locality is required because we need to bring each of the unfolding perspectives to bear on the present and the finite space in which all our actions are necessarily located, viz., the domain of daily practices. Needless to say that these, and a lot more, are not \textit{separable} aspects of our lives; we function as we do because these are in operation at once, and all the time.

This rather breathless exercise, nevertheless, brings out two points. First, the features of connectedness and transcendence together constitute an \textit{open-ended} enterprise both in terms of reflections on the past and anticipations of the future. In other words, we could roughly identify this enterprise with \textit{imagination} that helps us branch out beyond the present.8 The crucial point here is that there is \textit{an element of reflection} involved in the very exercise of imagination so conceived. The blanket term “imagination” as in, say, “she displayed great imagination” signals two things: an object that is the product of imagination \textit{and} an act that leads to the production of the object. To use contemporary jargon, we may view connectivity and transcendence as algorithms that, when implemented, generate the (novel) object; but implementation is an act that must be available to activate the algorithms in the first place.

I am calling this implementing part “reflection” which must be a fundamental feature of the human condition for the exercise of imagination, i.e., the ability to go beyond the present. So the ‘mastery’ we display in our daily practices cannot wholly be tacit in the sense of being unreflective. We saw earlier that this reflection, in general, cannot be of a scientific-theoretical kind, yet it fills every possible space of our daily practices. I am
claiming that this ubiquitous feature of non-scientific reflection on the human condition is the essential source of all that is literary and philosophical in human thought. It is no wonder then that we find aspects of literature and philosophy wherever we look.

Nevertheless, the second point that emerges here is that the feature of locality, i.e., the ability to harness the effects of imagination to our daily practices, severely restricts the scope of imagination. The constant pressure of daily practices – getting along with common life, so to speak – allows only so much room for imagination as needs to be harnessed for the task at hand. Let me stress that locality is not a limitation; it is in fact part of an efficient design that enables us to minimize reflective attention to maximize the efficiency of practice. The most efficient system, of course, is the reflexive one which involves no reflections at all. But then all actions become mandatory and no choices ever arise. Strawson is right then if we take the “tacitness of mastery” to mean that, ordinarily, reflections do not dominate daily practices.9 The fine edge we just supplied to support the notion of tacitness suggests that the interplay between reflections and tacitness is one of grades for cognitive agents like us. The image is that reflection and tacitness blend into each other with uneven effects throughout the system.

5. TEXTUALITY AND THE DIVISION OF UNDERSTANDING

Let me gather some of the key points reached so far to lend some clarity to the issues raised. The vast and intricate web of common life, we saw, is not open to scientific-theoretical understanding. Yet, as cognitive agents, we cannot fail to reach some form of understanding of common life in its totality in order to lead it. In some sense, thus, the common life awaits our grasp of it. The reflective part of human imagination is the crucial ingredient for this achievement. However, given the hectic character of daily practices, reflection plays a limited locality-driven role in such practice. There is a paradox in this picture whose solution, in my view, comes from literary and philosophical traditions.

The paradox arises as follows. Given that reflection plays a limited role in our daily practices, and, that reflection is the crucial element for grasping common life, it follows that common life is typically led without being fully grasped. We are beginning to confront a situation in which even tacit mastery must have severe limits if large parts of common
life are beyond reflective grasp. But that would mean, in effect, that we lead much of our common lives without tacit mastery -- by dint of ‘instinct’, so to speak.

Morals aside, the basic problem with any instinct-based picture is that it simply does not square with the idea of cognitive agency. Centuries of philosophical and psychological speculations could not untie the knot that gets formed once we foster even a limited instinct-based story to explain our daily practices. There is something to be learned from the fact that even human sexual practice, to mention just one of them, is an elaborate reflective enterprise. In short, it is simply incoherent that we are at once cognitive agents in some respects and not cognitive agents in other respects, wherever we draw the line across our common lives. So the paradox is that although, by the nature of daily practices, we are pushed towards an instinct-based picture, the picture can not be true even in part insofar as daily practices are concerned.

The tension between imagination and locality, sketched above, thus assumes an alarming character, and it puts great strain on the very notion of cognitive agency. The open-endedness of human imagination abruptly faces closure in view of the absence of reflection in much of cognitive life. I hope it is clear that the problem is not so much the absence of reflection, but the lack of access to a comprehensive understanding of common life. The absence of reflection seemingly denies the only route to that understanding. How then do we retain the full-blooded notion of cognitive agency, and avoid an instinct-based picture of our daily practices?

The only solution I can think of is that we must have access to reflective resources other than what we individually exhaust in conducting our common lives. The thin edge on which these resources must be placed requires that two opposing conditions are simultaneously satisfied: given that the daily practices are our only cognitive arena, so to speak, these resources must arise from daily practices themselves. Yet, given the general absence of non-local reflection in ordinary daily practices, they cannot arise from our ubiquitous daily practices. The only way this can happen is that there be non-ubiquitous daily practices geared to a comprehensive understanding of common life itself.

What I have in mind is a sweeping generalisation of a very special case once studied by Hilary Putnam (Putnam 1975). Putnam’s problem was that we routinely use different terms like “elm” and “beech” without being able to tell the difference between elms and beeches.
The trouble is that our use (= daily practices) suggests that we know that “elm” and “beech” differ in meaning, yet we cannot tell what the difference is. Putnam’s solution is that although we commonly do not know the difference, we know who knows the difference, viz., the botanist, to whom we can turn when required. There is thus a ‘social division of linguistic labour’ that distributes knowledge of language across layers of language-users. I am not suggesting that Putnam’s insight works for theory of meaning. My hope is that some version of it works analogically for the project at hand.

Notice that Putnam’s solution requires that it is a part of the botanist’s daily practice that he has comprehensive understanding of flora. The availability of that understanding in the botanist’s shelves is assurance enough for us to carry on with our diffused uses of “elm” and “beech”. Similarly, I am suggesting that the paradox of common life sketched above is solved because there is a social division of reflective understanding of common life. The experts whose business it is to come to terms with the complexity of common life as part of their daily practices are the authors of literature and philosophy. The presence of literature and philosophy thus solve a fundamental dilemma for cognitive agents.

Notice as well that Putnam’s solution requires that we make reference to the cumulative practice of botany when we refer to a given botanist. The reference thus is to the discipline of botany which a botanist represents by virtue of belonging to the tradition of botany. This enables a cumulative record of expertise to be available for common reference. What enables a botanist to belong to his discipline includes acquisition of specialised skills, rearrangement of daily practices such as spending more time in the library or the laboratory, access to the existing body of knowledge that one gains when those skills are mastered, and, most importantly, an ability to create new knowledge in continuity with the tradition. The presence of a disciplinary tradition then is an inevitable consequence of specialised reflective practices. Insofar as bodies of literature and philosophy represent the cumulative record of the specialised practice of coming to term with the totality of common life, they are disciplinary traditions as well with all the features of a tradition just noted.

However, this specialised practice is markedly different from the practice of botany in at least one significant dimension. Kuhnian stories of science aside, the continuity of the tradition of botany is a (more or less) linear one in that one stage of the tradition gets
absorbed in the next without a trace. This is because the domain of botany can be studied in isolation from the rest of our practices; the botanist views flora as if ‘from nowhere’, to use a phrase popularised by Thomas Nagel.

The traditions of literature and philosophy that concern us here, however, have the entire common life as the domain, the exploration of "one position after another, at every dangerous, promising point". Further, the entirety of common life has to be grasped somehow from within one or other of the daily practices that locate the author. So every attempt at the total grasp of common life is from a point of view; in principle, there cannot be a view from nowhere. Thus, as the locations of authors change significantly, the points of view change accordingly generating, in turn, alternative conceptions of human life.

It seems to me that these requirements lead to a fairly accurate notion of a literary or a philosophical text in the standard sense. A body of work becomes a *textbook* in botany precisely because botany does not have alternative standpoints in the sense outlined. The discipline of botany does not have texts, although it typically has textbooks. Literary traditions do not have textbooks; they just have texts. This asymmetry between texts and textbooks seems to me to be a pleasing result since it is empirically significant. We have been able to extract an explanation, from more or less first principles, of the puzzling fact that the disciplines of literature and philosophy are critically marked by texts. In time, the presence of textual traditions outline entire cultures that seep into common life at various points to invigorate and change the character of daily practices themselves.

This picture of literature and philosophy with textuality at its centre requires closer scrutiny with respect to other forms of thought. I have no space here for the task. But notice, before we begin to suggest counter-examples to the idea that if we find the relevant sense of textuality in, say, sociology, we have to make sure that (i) the suggested textuality is not due to the literary and philosophical aspects of the discipline, and (ii) textuality is a necessary feature of the discipline, i.e., the discipline retains its textual character even in its advanced forms, preventing thus the appearance of textbooks. Once we apply these tests, it seems to me that only literature and philosophy pass them.12

I have argued that textuality, geared to a reflective but non-scientific understanding of common life, is the more explicit form of the diffused understanding that guides common life in any case. Since the common life of cognitive agents is itself marked by sustained
reflection, albeit constrained by locality, literature and philosophy, not unlike the radical activist, is firmly entrenched in common life; thus nourishing it, nudging it, and getting enriched in turn. The marking out of this textual territory has been an exercise in the subterranean, as expected at the outset.

Nevertheless, the picture leaves enough degrees of freedom in the choice of daily practices, in the selection of focus and concern, and in the skills that accompany them, to allow marked differences in how literature and philosophy appear on the surface. I will briefly describe just one dimension along which literature and philosophy classically differ, for, I believe that most of the other dimensions — for example, literary works are works of art, philosophical works typically are not — can be traced to this fundamental dimension. As far as I can see, there are exactly two ways of coming to a comprehensive understanding of common life.

Recall that Strawson viewed philosophers as engaged in “producing a general systematic account of the conceptual structures” displayed in our daily practices. Thus, philosophy is concerned with the conceptual basis of common life. This enquiry is essentially abstract in that it can only be conducted at a certain remove from common experience. Hence it lacks the colour and the tone of felt experiences that animate the common life. In that sense, the comprehensiveness of a philosophical account of common life is more like an aerial view of common life – mistakenly thought of as a view from nowhere. That is one way to understand common life.

Another could be to produce a more detailed account of the emotional and existential structures displayed in our daily practices. In this form, we confront the complexity of common life head-on, as it were. We start at any point and keep digging through as much ground as we can until we reach a coherent perspective, narrating the view that unfolds from that angle. As long as these activities differ, the character of the texts will differ as well.
NOTES

1 What follows is a preliminary sketch of a cluster of ideas that I hope to develop further in subsequent work. The first version was presented under the title ‘Literature and Cognitive Agency’ in a seminar organized by the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages, University of Delhi. A draft of the current version was presented in a seminar on Literature and Philosophy at Jadavpur University. I am grateful to the lively audience on both occasions for vigorous discussion.

2 Use of philosophical texts, e.g. Vedantin and Nyaya texts, as part of standard programmes in Sanskrit literature won’t be a good example. These are explicitly used as Darsana (i.e., philosophical) texts, not as Sahitya (i.e., literature). It is an interesting example which needs further examination.

3 In what follows, I will be concerned only with first-order examples of literature and philosophy. That is, I will not be concerned with disciplines such as literary criticism, philosophy of literature and aesthetic theory.

4 Henry Miller, 1966, pp.32, from one of the speeches by John Stymer.

5 In sketching the preceding picture, I have taken “science” to mean essentially post-Newtonian modern science. Again, one could object to this “euro-centric” conception of science, and decide to use the concept of science widely to characterise any reflective conception of the world (See Nandy 1980). With this conception, it will be difficult to characterise any form of human thought to be non-scientific or prescientific. I, for one, fail to see what is achieved by this extended conception, except to miss the appearance of uselessness we just saw. The narrower conception of science seems to me to be at once harmless, empirically significant and endowed with explanatory power as long as we do not attach primacy to the concept.

6 There is some evidence (McNamara 1984) that children are not able to distinguish between definite and indefinite articles in their language until they have developed a theory of mind. Empirical evidence suggests that children routinely achieve a near-certain level of success by age three.

7 Strawson (1992, p.7), and elsewhere.

8 The concept of imagination employed here has close connections with Jaspers’ notion of “transcendence” and Tagore’s notion of “surplus”. See Karl Jaspers (1955); Rabindranath
Tagore (1931). In a more analytical vein, the concept is close to the contemporary notion of “possible worlds”; see Stalnaker (1984). However, my contention that the logical theory of possible worlds is really a theory of imagination is something that analytic philosophers will find hard to swallow. I can only point out that possible worlds are, in effect, networks of thoughts which are constructed from a factual basis. This applies to both the accessibility interpretation and the counterfactual interpretation.


This is not to deny that there are reflexes elsewhere in the system; yawning when feeling sleepy isn’t a daily practice in the Strawsonian sense under discussion here.

Moreover, it is quite possible that some disciplines, say, music or the other arts, have a ‘textual’ culture because of the skill-part of the discipline, viz., you copy or practice traditional forms. It is not clear to me that there are different points of view in music or in painting that have to do with differing conceptions of common life.

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