

Originality and plagiarism are the zenith and nadir of a wide range of authorial approaches found in writings. But how do such categories apply to past authors who shared sets of values quite different from the present ones? Alessandro Graheli argues that careful adjustments are required for a sensible evaluation and interpretation of pre-modern works in the West and, even more, of most Sanskrit texts.

# In praise of repetition

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Academic acceptance and individual recognition are two primary needs of writers within the scientific community. The former prompts conformism to predecessors' works while the latter stimulates creativity and invention.

In average academic writing, the drive toward academic acceptance is manifestly expressed by the amount of bibliographic references or credits to other authors. Specifically, most authors belong to a school or tradition which inspires their method and ideas. More generally, every writer is consciously or unconsciously indebted to others due to the very nature of the linguistic phenomenon. Communication is a process that requires a platform of syntactical rules, lexical familiarity, conventional stylemes, and so forth, shared by the writer and his reader. It is a matter of common linguistic games or, in a diachronic perspective, of tradition in the sense of inherited linguistic habits.

The second need – individual recognition – implies the idea of some subjective, creative role on the writer's side. The yardstick of originality is often used to label authors on a scale of values ranging from the literary genius to the shameless plagiariser. One should keep in mind, however, that both tendencies – conformism to one's tradition and individual originality – are culturally and historically specific. Particularly, the modern notion of intellectual property is laden with the post-cartesian transformations of the concepts of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity', which have met with alternate fortunes in the last centuries. To mention just a few late developments, Western thought has experienced the existentialist's primacy of the subject, the structuralist's focus on the object, and the post-modernist's destabilisation of both. Yet, despite the efforts of many philosophers who have to a great extent exposed the delusion of originality, it seems that we cannot do, in fact we never did, without the magic of spontaneity, creativity and novelty as marks of literary excellence, while the phantom of uncredited repetition lurks behind each of ours and others' words and sentences. In art, but also in academic and scientific papers, plagiarism is dreaded as a major violation, so much so that the craft of quotation and bibliographical information, and the length and quality of our bibliographies and databases, have long become mandatory assets. In this predicament one may notice a schizophrenic attitude, with interesting epistemological outcomes, involving the polar urges for compulsive repetition and for idealised novelty.

The two extremes have their counterparts in two distinct logical domains, deduction and induction. In deductive inferences the piece of knowledge contained in the conclusion is comfortably narrower than that implied in the premises, resulting in certain but tautological knowledge: due to formal requirements, the conclusion cannot yield any new information (this is sometimes dubbed as 'the paradox of deduction'). The inductive process, conversely, has a stronger heuristic potential but also the unavoidable uncertainty of the knowledge produced. In classical India inferential processes were eminently inductive, and most schools of thought included the appeal to authority among valid epistemic tools, exactly to counterbalance the weakness of sense perception and the uncertainty of induction.

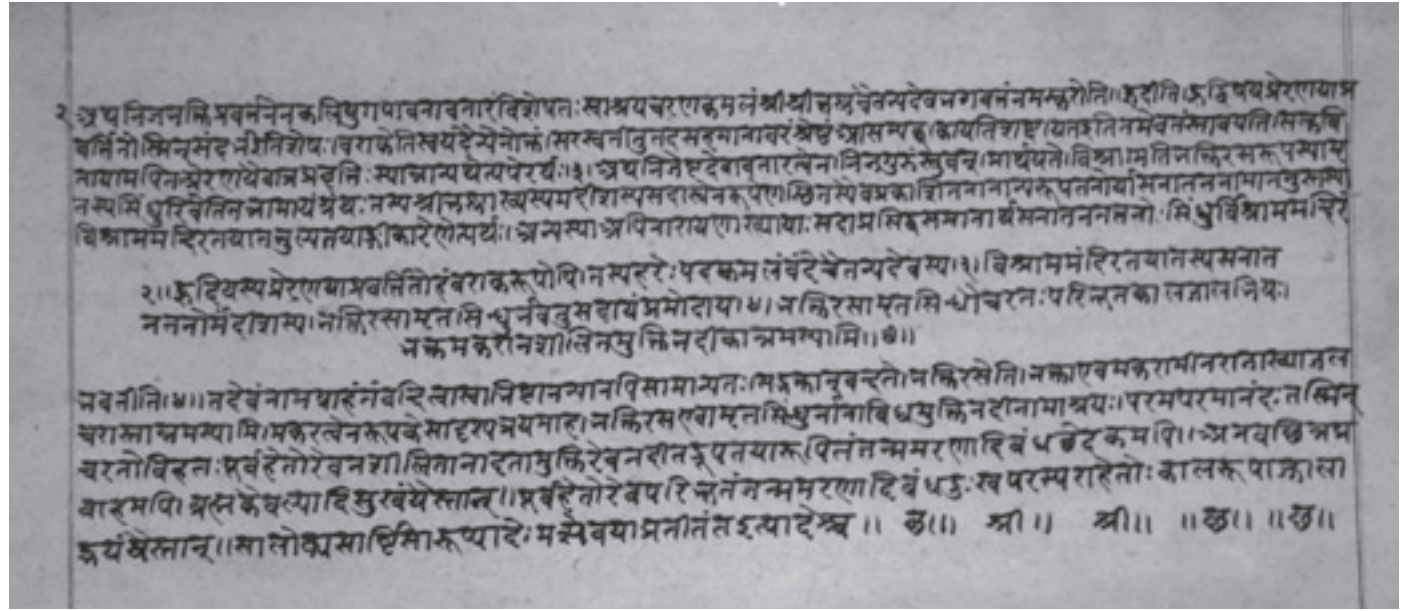
I will give here a sample of the stance of three important Sanskrit writers, who have set a landmark in their respective disciplines and traditions, on the issue of repetition and invention. These three stalwarts were all prolific and eclectic authors who wrote in many capacities. Simplifying, however, Jayanta Bhaṭṭa (9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> c. CE) was eminently a logician, Abhinava Gupta (10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> c. CE) a literary theorist, and Jīva Gosvāmin (16<sup>th</sup> c. CE) a theologian, at least in the context of the works quoted here. Furthermore, in relation to creativity, I should add that they also wrote poetry, or at least displayed a poetical penchant in their writings.

## The apology of invention

Jayanta's *Nyāyamañjarī* is an encyclopaedic work on logic and epistemology which presents with remarkable efficacy and honesty most rival theories in these fields. In the proemium, Jayanta describes his achievement and his deference to the tradition as follows:

*How could I ever be capable of inventing anything new? Here readers may rather judge the beautiful arrangement of statements. Garlands manufactured in the past generate new curiosity if strung again with those very flowers on a brand-new thread (Nyāyamañjarī 1.7–8).*

In his commentary to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, an ancient work on dramaturgy, Abhinava surveys and criticises previous aesthetic theories and justifies



Tripāṭha layout, with root-text in the centre. Jīva Gosvāmin, *Durgamasaṅgamanī ad Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, f. 3 recto, copy dated 1711-1712 CE.

Courtesy of Oriental Institute, Vadodara, India.

their ruthless dissection with the following statements, which sound almost as an apology for his sharp analysis of his predecessors' arguments:

*How can this be anything new, if it was established by tradition? It is just the apprehension of something already known, albeit within an expanded awareness. Isn't because of such a conflict, between something readily available and something of great value, that people find faults? Climbing higher and higher, the restless intellect observes reality, which is the fruit of many theories conceived by former thinkers on the ladder of discrimination. Indeed, what I find strange is that the first approach in the ascertainment of the object of knowledge can be groundless, while to build bridges and cities – once the right path has been determined – is not a reason of surprise. Therefore, here the opinions of wise people have not been censured, but rather improved, because they pass down a fruit whose support is rooted in formerly supported theories (Abhinavabharati ad NAsyaPastra 6.33).*

In the beginning of his opus magnum on *kṛṣṇaite* theology, the *Bhāgavatasaṅgama*, Jīva acknowledges a two-tiered debt to former authors: his task, he writes, was that of a mere reorganiser of material written by his predecessor Gopālabhaṭṭa, who was in turn indebted to prior theologians:

*This tiny soul [Jīva here refers to himself in the third person] writes after studying and rearranging the work of Gopālabhaṭṭa, which was somewhere structured, somewhere unstructured, and somewhere incomplete. This Gopālabhaṭṭa, who belongs to a lineage of Southern brahmalas, wrote after a thorough examination of senior masters' writings.*

In his own elaboration on this very passage, he explicitly says that the purpose of this statement is to clear the ground from suspects of original, self-made ideas in his work. Such an uncompromised reliance on the principle of authority – and conversely the minimisation of the author's subjective, creative role – are hardly surprising in the case of a theologian, as Jīva mainly is. Theological arguments, in fact, derive most strength from the appeal to authority. But one should keep in mind that behind such credits to tradition and disclaimers of novelty there is an epistemological stance which is shared by most Sanskrit authors: knowledge does not come only from perception and inferential processes. Verbal knowledge, or, better, knowledge which is linguistically-acquired from genuine or traditional sources, plays a major role in everyone's life.

The defence of the epistemological value of tradition is a leitmotif in the South Asian history of ideas. 'Tradition' has in this context at least three intersecting meanings, diversely relating or clashing with the concept of novelty. Firstly, mainstream schools of thought such as Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā defended the validity of scriptures (the Veda) as autonomous sources of information about religious matters (tradition in the sense of holy text). Secondly, they did so in a social context which widely accepted the value of such scriptures (tradition in the sense of a shared set of values). Thirdly, their basic assumption was that linguistic transmission is the foundation of knowledge (tradition as verbal transmission).

## Authors and commentators

A general feature of Sanskrit literature is that even in original works, where one expects an implication of novelty and creativity, writers more or less explicitly express a debt with tradition. But it is in commentaries, which more naturally tend to minimise originality, that we are more likely to find a thematisation of the novelty-vs-repetition issue, if not because of the very nature of the meta-linguistic analyses and the explicit role of commentators as interpreters of their authors of reference.

Despite their different approaches, in the above passages Jayanta, Abhinava and Jīva share a common trait: they all claim a role of commentators or reorganisers of ancient root-works (the *Nyāyasūtra*, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and

the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, respectively) or of their predecessors' commentaries upon such works; moreover, they all try to avoid the 'stigma' of creative writers and claim a role of editors, rather than authors.

All three ultimately refer to ancient root-texts whose authors (Gautama, Bharata and Vyāsa, respectively) did not leave any historical information about themselves. nor did Abhinava, Jayanta or Jīva have any, apparently. The individuals called Gautama, Bharata and Vyāsa seem to be remembered only in a mythical time. This can be considered as another evidence of the predominance of a de-individualised tradition over the single personalities constituting it. There is another way these Sanskrit commentators relate to their predecessors. Most philosophical treatises are crafty fabrics of interwoven rival theories, presented in a dialogical form of objections and counter-objections. The complex architecture of such arguments and counter-arguments is generally sealed by a final verdict, representing the tradition of the writer. Opponent schools, in turn, structured their own theories in a specular fashion. Several such treatises are still extant in some form and are witnesses of a gradual and increasing refinement of ideas which took place over centuries of proposals and rebuttals. In retrospect, we can safely say that the incorporation of one's opponent's views was hardly a rare phenomenon, although generally not openly acknowledged, and that there is a mutual debt for intellectual growth among traditions such as Buddhism, Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, Vedānta etc.

Such treatises are in the overwhelming majority commentaries on previous works. As such, commentaries constitute in the literary landscape of South Asia a genre with sub-genres, with a peculiar structure, style, lexicon and even manuscript layout. Root texts are generally composed in metrical verses or in aphorisms, while the commentaries are often in prose or verses and prose. When reproduced along with the commented works, some of these commentaries are laid out in a three-blocks (*tripāṭha*) format, with the indented root-text in the middle of the page, often in larger characters, and the related portion of commentary framing the root-text above and below, thus giving a visual effect of hierarchy. As with the scholia of Greek and Latin classics, due to relevance and circulation reasons some of these commentaries acquired a status of independent treatises and begin to be transmitted independently, to be in turn commented upon later on.

## Innovation within the tradition

In sum, the rough material used by Sanskrit writers can be largely traced back to former works. Theirs, however, is the framework and the organisation of the material. Theirs is also the assessment of the relative strength of the sources' arguments and hence the critical evaluation. Most unoriginal writers can be thus said to have been critical compilers, rather than mere copyists or plagiarisers, who freely used their traditions' works and ideas.

The great proliferation of commentarial works in South Asia is further evidence of a widespread inclination to depend on the authority-principle rather than one's own creativity. Scholars who approach these classics are advised to keep this principle in mind, try to divest themselves of post-cartesian prejudices on the author's subjectivity, and use with great care labels such as 'creative author', 'shrewd plagiariser', 'brilliant reinterpreter', or any other epithet which presupposes the notion of intellectual property. In Sanskrit literature, in fact, the property seems to relate to the tradition rather than the individual. The room left for the author's own innovations is explicitly denied, implicitly allowed with specific limitations and regulated by epistemological and deontological assumptions which require a close examination.

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