Frontier’s Virgule/Virgule’s Frontier

K. Narayana Chandran

1/
24 April 2007. 10.15 am. Examination Hall. Room 42, New Humanities Building. The University of Hyderabad. Twenty-seven fourth-semester graduate students write a four-hour examination for a six-credit course titled ‘EN 540: New Literatures in English’. A small group in absolute captivity, whose forbearance could make angels weep. Isn’t there a respectable word for what I am supposed to be doing – invigilate/proctor/mind an exam? I turn a virgule/solidus among students bending over answer-books, writing essays on politics/history, the native/other, nature/culture, Ariel/Prospero... I look over a pair of diligently hunched shoulders and read a sentence beginning: “While her looks are scanned by powerful computer graphic [sic], an electronic validation of reality/presence...” Nearly every examinee in this room has been busy scoring lines between roots and stems, concepts aseptically distanced from what they might mean, involving an either and or. Virgules all over the place.

2/
Knowledge can be terribly isolating. Nothing like Common Knowledge. The more you know, the more isolated you become. There may be fewer people to talk to. Inside an exam hall there is absolutely no talking. Another frontier for students, perhaps the ultimate one for the most studious, where Pass/Fail, Entrance/Exit, Knowledge/Ignorance, Ease/Tension often obtain, paired and virguled. There you wish you could pass through mirrors. No one passes the same exam twice, a Herakleitosian thought that neither depresses nor elevates. For the same questions, the evaluators prize different answers. Hence the paper-setters’ unyielding imperatives that precede the text of the questions: Consider/Argue/Elaborate/Explain/Discuss/Adumbrate... Consider, I learn from an unabridged Dictionary at hand, really means “see stars together as constellations, in relation to one another”. Consider using that word again in a question paper. Are our students here seeing stars?
What is a virgule? Why does it surface at lines and thresholds, the frontiers it makes and
guards? The New Frontier Thesis appears in nearly all contemporary Style Manuals. I quote
from *Oxford Guide to Style* by R. M. Ritter (OUP, 2002):

5.12.1 Solidus
This symbol (/) is known by many terms, such as the *slash, stroke, oblique, virgule,*
diagonal, and *shilling mark.* [Mr. Ritter missed here a big opportunity in showing his
clientele how the virgule works: slash/stroke/oblique/virgule/diagonal/shilling
mark.] Although, like the bracket not a true mark of punctuation, it is in general used
like a dash to express a relationship between two or more things, and similarly is
set close up to the matter it relates to on either side. The most common use of the
solidus is as a shorthand to denote alternatives, as in *either/or, his/her, on/off,
masculine/feminine/neutral; consequently the New York/New Jersey/Connecticut
area signifies the area of either New York, New Jersey, or Connecticut, rather than
their combined area. Solidi are much abused, however, and are sometimes misused
for *and* rather than *or; hence it is normally best in text to spell out the alternatives
explicitly (his or her, the New York, New Jersey, or Connecticut area).

The hyphen used to be good enough some 30 years ago. To divide, at least, was not to
take away. Contrasts, distinctions and exclusions were as circumspectly made then as they
apparently are today. The only virgules I recall from those days belonged to datelines
(11/5/1973 or some such). Quite frankly, we hadn't heard of ‘binaries’ *manqué.*
Postmodern discourses discovered the beauty of the virgule when it helped hold at bay the
modernist threat of inadvertent mergers and flows. In strict discursive terms, when
either...or claims cannot be settled amicably at/ across frontiers, the virgule offers a for-
the-nonsense, inexpensive, out-of-court settlement. Contested spaces are ever on the increase:
Israel-Palestine, Kashmir, Bosnia, Cyprus, Sri Lanka – and within India, several regions and
rivers, districts, towns, villages, even families. We are not free from the passions we assail.

A Theo Angelopoulos masterstroke of such unsettled frontiers is *The Suspended Step of
the Stork* (1991, colour, 126 min.). A young reporter stationed at a border village populated
by refugees meets a Greek politician. It's nobody's village. Frontiers, one fancies, must be
like that. Two countries are evidently at war, but unlike our Kashmir, there are no proprietary
claims by either country, or the inhabitants there. The politician, who lives among them
*incognito,* has made a home of his unknown whereabouts. No one cares, either. He loves
to imagine himself as a stork, standing with one leg suspended in air (a virgule par
excellence) on the border, perched between life and death.
Preferences are often virguled: coffee/tea; 2-/3-bedroomed apartments; 4-/5-star hotels… You could choose, if you have the resources. Frontiers are there for you to cross. You could make or unmake them, once or many times. Reversibility is the equivalent of choice. So is the return. From the inside to the outside. The virgule lets you imagine the frontier as adjacency – that is adjacent to this. The horizontal dash used to suggest this, perhaps, but the virgule could mark the vertical plane better. At the frontier, ups and downs had better be known as such. The right-leaning forward virgule mimes the onward march more comfortably for the reader than dashes that break the flow parenthetically – as here – and suggest back-and-forth movement: <––>. The virgule, like the resolute staff gripped by the Mahatma on the march to Dandi, always fares forward, and promises a determined stride across textual frontiers.

At a little height of thought, is the virgule a divider absolute? Not really. Look at how smart poets outsource metaphors to do the work of words they routinely underpay. When worked into prose, lines from poems are marked by virgules, but in poems virgules don’t appear – they hover unseen between/among line-endings, eternally open frontiers that let lines run on/off to a finish. Samuel Menashe calls this poem Eyes for no other reason:

_Eyes have their day_
_Before the tongue_
_That slips to say_
_What they see at once_
_Without word play,_
_Betraying no one_

_Be deaf, dumb, a dunce_
_With cleft palate_
_Bereft of speech –_
_Open eyes possess_
_That wilderness_
_No tongue can breach._

The tongue is preempted from being the virgule it is, for the eyes have already spliced words and images, shared essences that bespeak the fatuousness of all speech at frontiers, tying the virgule-tongue to order. Since borders order disorder, the eyes are privileged with information the tongue can’t process that readily. (The exercise in our classes is another matter: Read Eyes aloud. Reading aloud/reading allowed, thanks to the tongue.). Maybe there aren’t frontiers, any at all, in ocular metaphors. An enabling thought Janet Lewis provides by writing _Early Morning_, a splendid frontier poem to my mind:
The path
The spider makes through the air,
Invisible,
Until the light touches it.

The path
The light takes through the air,
Invisible,
Until it finds the spider's web.

Before such mutuality, all frontiers bow in absolute reverence. Who might stand athwart this light for life?

Unwarily, writers sometimes get in the way of this light, and rue for life. Gertrude Stein, for one, was indefatigably pushing of the frontiers of her self to see which life was indeed hers. Averse to writing her life/autobiography, she wrote *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932), a classic and unique instance in literary history of frontier-barging in which a friend's territorial life and manners were so brazenly invaded and colonised. Alice Toklas, Stein's spouse for the many years they lived in Paris, was also her stenographer/social secretary/housekeeper/cook/gardener/and sometimes a veterinarian for Stein's dogs. Now Stein believed, and famously said: "You are you because your little dog knows you..."

If that were so, why did Stein have to draw upon Alice Toklas's life in order to write her own? For someone who cared more than most writers of her generation about self/identity, the conclusion of *The Autobiography* sounds puckishly disingenuous: "About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were going to write autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you". And that became Stein's life, with some Toklas in it. Stein/Toklas is a classic literal and textual coupling whose propositional virgule first declared the death of the author/authorised biography/autobiography.

The next in line, again famously, was Jorge Luis Borges. The public/private frontier in the case of his short story *Borges y Yo/Borges and I* (English trans. 1969) is the hardest to cross because Borges insists on splitting the lark and listening to its song.

*The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to... I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me... I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him. Little by little, I am giving over everything to him... It is*
no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition. Besides, years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things. Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him...

The I of Borges and I is a classic virgule – forward-sluating/backward looking, and forging toward a new confusion of his understanding, and a new understanding of our confusion; the text concludes: “I cannot tell which one of us is writing this page”. From Borges, however, we learn that a frontier is always provisional, implying futurity (pro-vision = looking ahead) as well as tentativeness. Who isn’t provisional at crossings? Paul Giamatti playing Harvey Pekar in American Splendor (2003) walks the crisscrossing frontier lines of Cleveland, assuring no one that he is playing a part or living a life. Those who learn nothing from crossing are condemned to repeat it. Pretty much like the apocryphal painter who used to leave his paintings unsigned, and eventually composed a painting made up entirely of his signatures.

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“Man-woman relationship”, a mournful banality in submitted term papers, got no better through the year, despite a teacher telling a class of 27 students, two of them married before their postgraduate prime, that there are more things to coupled relationships than meets the early adult eye. They feel a loss, as the teacher surely had felt, from “knowledge and experience”, as if words fell out of language, intimacy, private grace. But that’s no real help when students quote endless scenes from texts in which relationships just begin to bloom and promise to be ar fruit. And then, on a day otherwise unremarkable for anything half as brilliant, a smart 21-year-old discovered the virgule: Man/Woman relationship. The teacher suddenly sat up to appreciate this entelechic move. The commonplace now elevated to the nobility of a new-world thought reverberates like footfalls in a great space. Muriel Rukeyser’s Myth (1935) retells how:

Long after, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads. He smelled a familiar smell. It was the Sphinx.

Oedipus said, “I want to ask one question. Why didn’t I recognise my mother?”

“You gave the wrong answer”, said the Sphinx.

“But that was what made everything possible”, said Oedipus.

“No”, she said. “When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered, Man. You didn’t say anything about woman”.


“When you say Man”, said Oedipus, “you include women too. Everyone knows that”.
She said, “That’s what you think”.

Would it please the Sphinx to see a virgule in the answer to its riddle about the legs?
It’s odd to have got so far, says the student, and not know.

/11/
Anything thrown into Rushdie becomes Rushdiean; and so has the old fable of the Simurgh or divine phoenix, a Sufi symbol of the death of the old self and resurrection of the new, immortalised in Fariduddin Attar’s Mantiq at-Tayr/ The Conference of the Birds, published in 1177. Rushdie’s Tanner Lecture on Human Values, delivered at Yale in 2002, was titled “Step Across This Line” – his longest piece thus far on frontiers, what they are, how and why one must cross them, and what great stories still await telling. While most birds decline the Simurgh’s invitation to a gathering on Mount Qáf, some 30 birds brave various hazards and reach the peak, only to discover that there was no one there, no conference, no welcome. “The Simurgh wasn’t there. After all they had endured, this was a displeasing discovery. They made their feelings known to the hoopoe who had started the whole thing off; whereupon the hoopoe explained to them the punning etymology which revealed their journey’s secret meaning. The name of the god broke down into two parts: ‘si’, meaning ‘thirty’ and ‘murgh’, which is to say, ‘birds’. By crossing those frontiers, conquering those terrors and reaching their goal, they themselves were now what they were looking for. They had become the god they sought”. Rushdie was standing before a distinguished audience who needed hardly any assurance at all that no virgule (si/murgh) was necessary to participate in the experience of unity within the domain of parable, unlike our current mode of transmission and reception, fragmented in the manner of mobile text messages across a million potholes of incomprehension. That small lesson in etymology nevertheless is for life. At frontiers, lessons are no shame. Everyone learns, everyone has a decent backlog.

/12/
1.45 pm. Style accommodated to subject, means to ends, idiom to intention, answers fill pages, the scripts secured by twine pile up one by one on my desk. The hall is now practically empty. Three diehards remain. (I announce the last 15 minutes.) The last three examinees aren’t so much writing as scribbling up corrections, straightening things out... The last frontier reached, nearly crossed, they’re giving a once-over to what has been crossed/out – might as well, for what they will turn away from for good is a past, no buy-back policy. A good respite, for now, from all metaphorics/allegorics, codings/decodings... who knows, perhaps for all life to come? Amid the hall’s mild clatter and thud, the flicking, push-back screeches of chairs, deep breaths, the slow shuffling of feet, and the rising flurry
of the corridor, I recall Mark Strand’s *Keeping Things Whole* (1980) a poem on/of moment/movement (both from Latin *moveo*, ‘to move’):

*In a field
I am the absence
Of field.*

*This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.*

*When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body’s been.*

*We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.*

Let’s rename this *A Song of the Virgule*. Strange, isn’t it, that Strand echoes the Gita, apparently standing before a U-Haul truck? But then, did not the Gita make the first binaries popular – the slayer/slain, foretelling the rule of the virgule in the coloniser/colonised? You cannot keep things whole by punctuating yourself so inexorably. You have reasons for moving. But first let I/the ego pass. Look at it again. Sanskrit, first person, singular: *Aham*. Incredible. We should have done well to shed *that* virgule right at the frontier.

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No one slips by or through the frontier of *aham*/I. The self-deluded are the first to learn this, unless mechanisms of denial overpower them. For the self believes in its gifts, enormous in the reckonings of imagination, against every piece of real and reasonable evidence that it has none.