



**SECOND THOUGHTS**  
by  
Syed  
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**N**IRAD C. CHAUDHURI HAS ALWAYS intrigued me by his impatient rejection of the quintessential Bengalee-ism and his unabashed championing of western value system. I had read -- or tried to read -- his autobiography and *Atmaghati Bangali* (Self-annihilating Bengalee) as well as his other books with an open mind, not allowing my reading to be coloured by my earlier perception of him as a rabid anti-Bangladeshi (he took sides with Pakistan during our war of liberation, if you recall). What I found in these books was a mindset that had not only nurtured itself on the western value system, but has also happily announced its adherence to a by now familiar orientalist project. This project places the east under a rigid grid of western humanism, and meticulously maps the terrain for any divergences or differences. These differences are then identified as unfortunate gaps and lacunae in the evolution of the eastern mind which are in need of being filled up by the superior western values. In *Atmaghati Bangali* Nirad Chaudhuri appeared in the role of an iconoclast, hacking away at all the images that the Bengalee mind had fondly preserved over the ages, oblivious of the fact that adherence to western humanistic tradition cannot be the only virtue (or indeed a preoccupation) of any civilization -- least of all the Bengalee civilization. Nirad Chaudhuri has his reasons, however, for believing so, but these seem rather unconvincing to anyone with some knowledge of the history of civilizations.

If I thought Nirad Chaudhuri's *Atmaghati* criticism of the Bengali civilization and culture was intriguing enough, I was obviously in need of further education. For, Nirad Chaudhuri is a kind of writer who never ceases to interest and engage his readers. On a visit to Oxford in 1988, I met Chaudhuri in his quiet 'English' town house, and was amazed to see the Bengalee side of his character which he took no pains to hide. He appeared to be a warm, kind hearted man -- hospitable, talkative, nostalgic, and 'grand-fatherly' (he was worried that my friend, a Nepalese professor of English, would catch a cold) -- like any average Bengalee. I was ready to grill him on the *Atmaghati Bangali* (I was even carrying a copy). Well, I did, in a manner of speaking, but he was not ready to have an argument, least of all to defend himself. These were not idle thoughts, he announced, but his belief. Period. He then picked up my copy of *Atmaghati Bangali*, turned to the blank page inside, and scribbled a few words in a trembling hand (to the effect that he was happy to see him 'accepted into another house') that took my breath away. The disarming simplicity of Nirad Chaudhuri the nonagenarian was every bit reminiscent of the celebrated Bengali *bhadramanushi*.

Nirad Chaudhuri will turn 100 next year. Most people living to be that old turn senile and sink into a vegetable existence. Not he -- the indomitable little man who, by his own accounts, was born small to achieve great heights. He is still writing, still agile in his mind, still maintaining a public stance that borders on the cynical whenever the quintessential Bengalee-ism is concerned, and at the same time, I believe, persistently maintaining the private life of a quiet Bengalee at home, although I wonder how he is taking his wife's absence. He was obviously very fond of his wife. I remember how he ran upstairs with a copy of *Desh* -- which had been just out with a cover story on him, and which I was also carrying with me, hoping to quote from the cover story in support of my arguments. Chaudhuri was pleased to see his face on the cover of *Desh* and wanted to share his happiness with his wife. My nearly four hours with him did not substantially change my perception about him, but it certainly helped me to see him and his orientation in a new light. I also came away with a better understanding of the nature of his expatriation.

Nirad Chaudhuri took it as a mission early on in his life to prepare and project himself as a renaissance man trudging along the road from scholasticism to eternity. The end limit, for him, however seemed more likely to be modernity than eternity, and he soon became a votary of high modernism. In his writings, he valorizes universality, order, reason, and a centred approach to experience. But once again, these cannot be considered absolute or unchangeable, since Nirad Chaudhuri would not hesitate to trick the reader or the critic into believing that he had shifted his position, if such a shift ensures another intellectual fight. Only recently, in this year's *Puja number of Desh*, in his 'last writing in Bengali' -- a post-script to his earlier 'Last Writing' -- he attacks the 'seriousness' of the Bengali culture. Not quite post-modernistic, not yet -- but enough to upset many critics' apple-carts, who have concluded that Chaudhuri is against the comic and the light-hearted. In the post-script, he seems to be having great fun at the expense of poor patriarchs of his childhood, whose faces, to him, looked like those of serious monkeys, especially after the patriarchs had woken up from their sleep.

Is there a hint here of how problematic serious writing can be -- even in Nirad Chaudhuri's own case -- since obviously, he, too, goes to sleep every night?

## INTERVIEW

# Poetry Sets Out with No Mission

by Chandra Shekhar Das

**H**IS identity often suffers from confusion caused by pluralised presence in identical name and craft. Freelancing and a proven talent for sports skeltonics have brought him reknown in a particular circle but on the whole recognition and adulation befitting an avowed poet have not haloed him yet. He is no rookie though. Almost 50. Sanaul Huq Khan has been ceaselessly creating poems since the sixties. His first poem was published in 1967 but it was not before 1980 that his first book *Andha Karatali* came out. His critically acclaimed second book *Janma Grahani Chandra Grahani* appeared in the market four years later. *Duksha Noy Dirgha Parinaam* followed by *Lubdha Prarthana* were published next in successive years. After a two year lull, *Dukhi Bangla Bethlehemey* reached the readers in 1989. This year saw his latest publication *Tomar Niyam Aamar Niyati*. His seventh book *Amar Bhramar Shawbda* is in its final stage and is expected to be available shortly. Among these stands out his Chhandey *Chhandey Khelar Anandey* the only publication of rhymes on sports in Bengali Literature.

Sanaul Huq Khan was born in Munsiganj in 1947. While growing up in the interesting milieu of the older section of Dhaka, he developed an early fascination for sports. Euterpe became his paramour at the dawn of his youth, at about the time necessity of a profession introduced him to the world of life insurance. Life since then has been a kaleidoscope of steadily accumulating experiences; countless births, deaths, arrivals and departure both premature and overdue. His promise as a painter got quietly buried on the way but nothing has been able to dilute his passion for poetry. Warm, sentimental Sanaul Huq Khan recently engaged in a tete-a-tete with Chandra Shekhar Das at the head office of Jiban Bima Corporation, his place of work.

**DS: How would you define poetry?**  
SHK: It is difficult to phrase a definition for poetry although a vast repository of definition has grown from the always inadequate attempts made from time to time. I would rather try to give an idea about my understanding of poetry. (Takes a piece of paper and with a few brisk touches reminiscent of the unurtured potential of a painter, draws a tree and a human face side by side). Radiating a strange absorption through a glowing pair of eyes behind the specs, he dwells. "This is a tree. Whether you add a new bough to it or take one away, it remains quintessentially a tree. On the other hand, the sketch of a human face will stop short of looking what it is now at the slightest distortion. To me poetry

is the sketch of the countenance; an assembly of things in right proportions. It is not the steadfast adherence to any visible or mechanically traceable component. There is poetry in verses that look like prose. A sweet resonance or music in the seeming pieces of prose qualifies them as poetry.

**DS: When do you write?**

SHK: I have no particular time for writing. Normally, I try to arrest a line in black and white the moment it shapes up. For that matter, I have no definite poetic process. There have been occasions when an incident as old as ten years sparked off poetic effusion in me. On other times the poet in me responded almost instantaneously. But I feel, I am almost always in a trance, under a spell.

**DS: How did it all begin?**

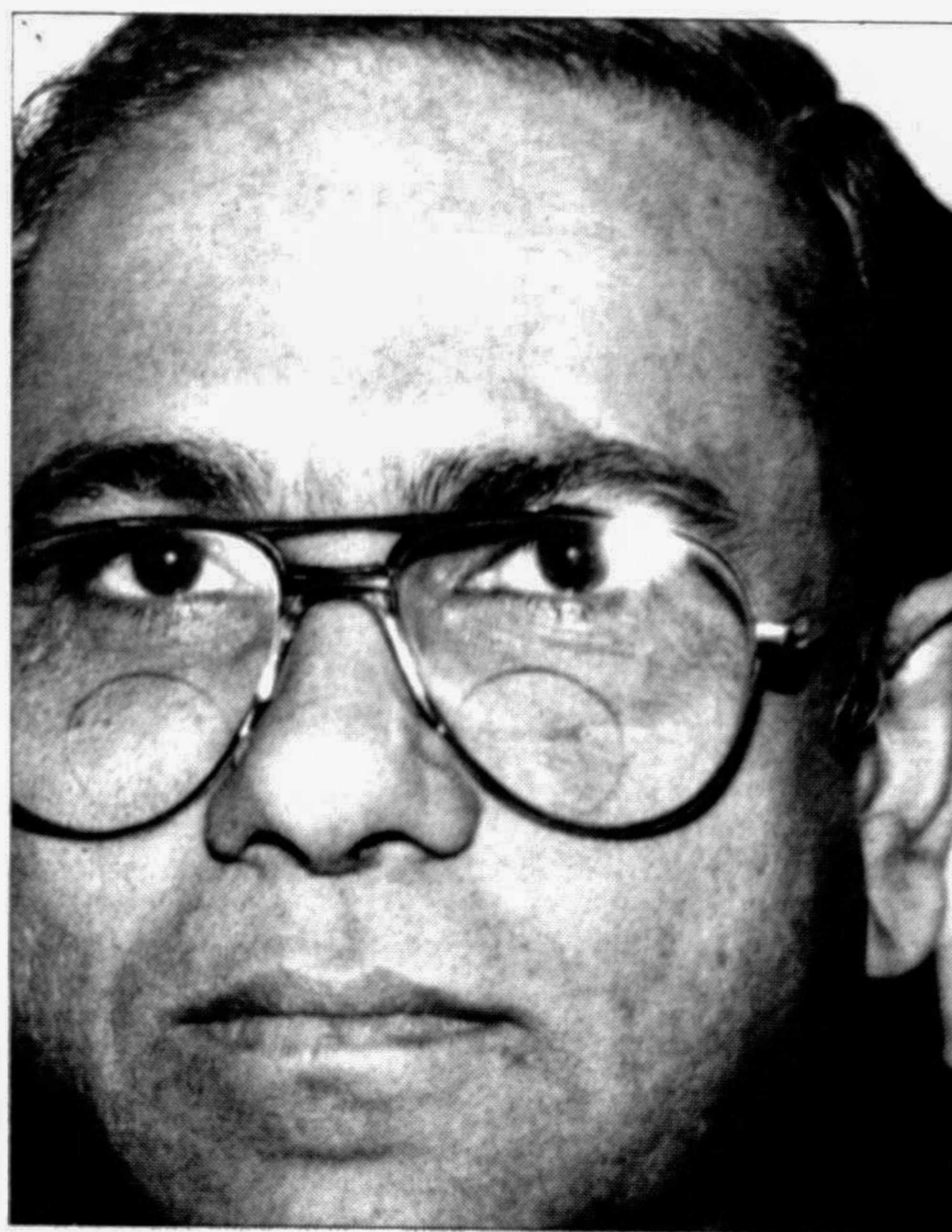
SHK: Well, this spell, trance whatever you call it, is difficult to trace in time. But the beginning of my poetic career, if one can speak like that, is still very fresh in my memory. It was 1966. I used to maintain diary regularly in those days. One night I dreamt a vast mustard field awash with bright, beautiful yellow colour. There was a hut in its centre. A black catholic girl was watering the field. The dream ended as soon as I hugged her. This I put in the diary and one day my senior colleague Rafiqul Haider Chowdhury who used to write in the daily *Sangbad* under the pen name *Irshika*, saw it and said 'Kabita tobita lekhen naki?' (Do you write poems?). 'No', I was being honest. But within a few days, I wrote one, titled 'Ekti Bishuddha Atmar Mrittyu'. Rafiq Bhai who after being taken away by the collaborators some years later, never returned, had made me direct this poem to Aziz Mistr, Editor literary section of the *Daily Azad*. I had forgotten about it when Rafiq Bhai presented me a paper cutting of that poem. It was accompanied with Sukanta Bhattacharya's *Ghoom Nei* and *Rupasi Bangla* by Jibonanda Das. The scream of an ineffable joy that came out of me still rings in my ears.

**DS: Since the names have come up, who is your favourite poet?**

SHK: 'Who are' I like the works of many poets. Jibonanda will definitely come first. Then there are Sudhindranath Dutta, Baudelaire, Rilke and Neruda. At home, I have great admiration for Al Mahmud and Shamsur Rahman.

**DS: How these poets have influenced you?**

Well, an unconscious stream of tradition devolved down to him from his predecessors is a reality in every poet's case. But this must not be confused with imitation. Tradition is inescapable but individuality has a way of making its



Sanaul Huq Khan: "A person sans rhyme sense should not aspire to be a poet"

room even in this atmosphere of unconscious conformity. Tradition does not limit the freedom of a poet. I broke away from conventional poetry when I wrote 'Interview', a conversational poem. I did not hear of anyone trying his or her hand in that form in Bangla at that time. Like that, every poet relates himself to novelty despite being rooted to his tradition.

**DS: What attracts you most in poetry?**

I like the question. From man's sense of unfulfilment even after apparently

being in possession of everything to the misfortune of man struggling all his life, attract me greatly. If anybody asks me about my favourite topic, favourite word, I would say 'you'. It has a whole gamut of symbolic associations -- I, my love, God, grief, sufferings, motherland, sentimentalism, anger, desire, rose, river, hills, the harvesting woman village and many other realities and ideas.

But superseding all of them reigns my search; the quest for the sight beyond the sight, the dream within a dream. But contrary to the general impression it

may all give rise to, I am not a pessimist. I believe, it is a poet's responsibility to strike a balance between pain and joy; sadness and happiness. I hope, my life will one day come to end in the quest for stringing the various contrary aspects of life: war and peace, silence of grave and the din of a stadium; union and separation.

**DS: Can you cull any one of your poem as favourite?**

SHK: I am sorry, I have to disappoint you. From mid sixties until now, I have composed about 2500 to 3000 poems. It is a mixed bag. Some of them are good some of them bad. But they are all my children. Like parents who cannot disown their children, be they handsome, flawless or be they impaired one or way or the other, I too cannot disown or discriminate. They are all mine, all very dear to me.

It is often heard that contemporary poetry does not have what it takes to attract the readers. What do you think? I do not think so. I am reasonably happy with the evolutionary reality of poetical trend here. Bengali poetry is going through a transitional phase but certainly not a drought from any point of view you may like to consider. I feel, the worst part in the history of our poetry was the eighties. Besides, one thing has to be kept in mind while indulging in such a generalisation. The oft quoted phrase not every one is poet applies in the case of readers. Poetry is not for every reader. It involves a slow process of maturation and appreciation. This is not to rule out the existence of bad or substandard element in the domain of our poet and poetry. Patience is a very important factor. If one forsakes the religion of spending sleepless nights through a week for the appropriate word in the event of a necessity, pure poetry will always be beyond his reach. I have doubts in this regard about myself. But I have the honesty to admit that. While dwelling on popular judgement on poetry, one should not forget that poetry has no particular responsibility to abide by any time hallowed norm or objective. I believe poetry sets out with no mission.

**DS: What is your ambition?**

SHK: Ambition? Ambitionlessness perhaps. Well, I do have a silent, last prayer to my time.

"Shorter chakra khoshiey niley jao, khotti nei

Amake du chaartey smarontyo pongkti diyo

Aamar Shontaan jeno bolte paarey ekdin

El line goolo aamar babar lekha."

(Strip my skin if you like

But leave me a few memorable lines.

So that my son can one day say  
These lines belong to my father.)

## ways of seeing Virtual Firsts, Virtual Thirds

by James R. Killingsworth

**N**AJMUL -- on his grandmother's porch on a Mymensingh afternoon near an eternal, flowing river that has centered the universe. At this very moment we will make a photo. Later I will hold it between my thumb and finger -- to look at. It will be your photograph, Najmul. You will be quizzical-faced on the paper. For this photograph to be made, you will cradle in your hands an old picture of a maturing boy who looks with an anticipation that has no back to it -- another Najmul, the same Najmul.

My photo of Najmul holding his own expectant, older new-boy version will be a momento from home to home, a transport. "Why so genuine?" comes off the paper that will be and off the one that was and the one that is here now. Was it fast-forward when you were all fronts? Did you feel the lure of fortune and machinery more from there? Were you inserted by fixer and developer and stop-bath into an agreement or a nagging disagreement with the river's lessons?

There's but one pace. You cannot separate your piece of eternity.

A river, wild or tame. A river, pictured or not.

**Version II**

Once, I took a photograph of my friend Najmul at his grandmother's home. He is standing on the front porch, gazing into the camera with a smile and holding a hazy photo of himself in his late teens. He is not in his teens today, nor was he when we took the photo. His photo reminds me of a curiously puzzling quotation -- one of my favourites: "On a map of an island laid down upon the soil of that island there must, under all ordinary circumstances, be some position, some point marked or not, that represents *qua* place on the map, the very same point *qua* place on the island." (Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*). That would probably be enough about points laid down on objects that must represent objects they are laid down upon (and that have specific points on themselves) were it not for the force of such points. More than math puzzles, these are signs of our place in life -- a



Togetherness

place where the signs increasingly point to still other signs.

Where the signs are from a specific history of some human beings who long have lived in Mymensingh or elsewhere together, the riddles feel more comfortable. But they are still disturbing since we feel almost compelled to follow the instructions that come with their appearance -- that is, to the signs they call into play and the points on still other signs lying in the neighborhood of the first signs. My same friend Najmul-of-the-photo recently told me about how he made his sons eat a food they found distasteful because it was traditional for Bengali families to take this particular dish. "That's the Bengali in me -- my determination to pass on the culture," he confided.

As signs of distance within the present moment, photos have the power to throw us about. As precise instances of technology, they quietly disturb our comfort within the easy swim of tradition -- the place from where there are

pleasures and pains. They do so much more than we think. If I hold in my hand a materialized sign of my past that is also a sign of how my past can materialize, I am holding a nearly living dead thing. All the distances from my past and the isolating distances that stream from a technological power beyond the reach of anyone are there in my palm, reminding me at one and the same time that it is to me that all this occurs, regrettable or not.

But, positioned as omnivoyant seers, what do we see? For me, I see how little I see: my omnivoyance has few privileges, leaving me privileged in the way of one who absolutely remembers having a memory without remembering anything more. Inside the softly coercive signs of a tradition, of a culture, of a language trundling its significance along with it through time, there are to be found the comforts of obligation, of right and wrong, of unencumbered joy, calamity, fear, anger, bathos, pathos, peripety, and chiasmus. But armed with the technology I hold in my hand, I am privileged to see what I have almost nothing to do with. It is a dense and thickened form of seeing -- more the vision of reflection than the vista of the riverbank.

**Version III**

Yes, that's it. On my postcard, there is a top-half and a bottom-half. The top-half is a nearly greyscale black-and-white photo of a fairly corpulent man lying in the shade of an insufficient beach umbrella. The bottom-half says, "Der Geist ist ein Bestandteil des Lebens -- nicht sein Gegensatz" Ignaz Wrobel, 1931. Roughly: "The spirit is a part of life -- not its opposite." Since Ignaz Wrobel was one of the four pseudonyms used by the German poet Kurt Tucholsky when he needed separate articles from various authors to fill the publication he edited and since the back of the postcard says, "Kurt Tucholsky in der Normandie, 1927," the man in the photograph on the front must be either Kurt Tucholsky or Kaspar Hauser or Ignaz Wrobel or Theobald Tiger or Peter Panter. Unless it's someone else.

But you, Najmul, are surely the Naj-

mul of the Mymensingh front porch and the Najmul of years back and the Najmul in my photograph from the house so well-centered by the river beyond. And even technique piled on top of technique and filtered to magic by technology only thickens the plot. It is not the absolutely immediate paper "this" or "that" in my hand; it is not the merciless necessity of its being "there"; it is not all the work involved in making "this" the same "this" as before. Really, it's the river and the return trip from Mymensingh:

Mother, the blue clouds are streaming before the moon. They are *pagla*. Some brutal thumb has smeared them. Hardly time to waste -- horses running high upon

the backs of broken ponies in their way. They are blue beyond belief. Mother --

crushed and terrified. Tonight the moon waits offshore, half submerged in cloud, half

itself submerged. It sways the buried anchor of earth and circles its own dependency

like a hanger.

**Version IV**

By 1913 we all took a turn and didn't pay it any attention. If extra-terrestrials had invaded or if a virus had invaded, we'd have noticed. When "talking pictures" and the cinema and photography arrived, we certainly noticed them. When we took this turn, we, yes all of us everywhere, finally became absolutely sure about what is just there: something there directly, just as much as my paper, my picture, Najmul's life, and his this or his that. Put "the" picture in brackets; just reduce it to "this very picture itself." I get Najmul as through exactly "this" very "this." I have some contact with this photo of Najmul or, for that matter, this cream coloured wall. So, the source of knowledge and all the intuition I will ever have is this cream coloured wall itself and this very image, itself.

Don't fool yourself. Your seeing reduces to here, to this, to nature really close. This very paper with grays and blacks all there right now is it -- a seeing and something seen. The distance to

the past and the distance to the river are signs pointing to how the world is not about us. We are about the world now and we can't help but know it. For better or worse, we all took the turn together back there.

And it is oh so complicated here, now. And it is unfortunate that it isn't the slightest bit arbitrary how it comes. Like it or not, it works into the skin. What is necessary is now inside. All the comfort of how it was before 1913 has dropped not out, but in. Which sign can point from this paper -- Najmul to Najmul and from that Najmul to that other one? Indeed, these signs and their distances are all in here too. Only some ultimate identifying, connecting, objectifying separation lets us see around in here at all.

Such responsibility. We cannot just wash the politics of these obligations off our hands by going down to the river. Now we know what are our experiences and we toy and toy and toy and toy -- not with our experiences because they are they -- but with what we have to know. Because it is the "this" or "that" in my hand all the work involved in making this paper-Najmul stay still and be the same paper-Najmul -- his work, my work, our work -- that keeps the Kurt Tucholsky in here from being Kaspar Hauser or Ignaz Wrobel or Theobald Tiger or Peter Panter in here, even if the photograph is of someone else.

What a nice likeness, Najmul! It caught your best side, Najmul! The actual and the inactual Najmul. The focal and the marginal Najmul. The river at the margins of Najmul. The inactual house in Mymensingh. The focal Mymensingh, the marginally remembered Mymensingh, and the actual Mymensingh that we can never see -- even from an earth satellite. The likeness is in here because we took the turn together. The river is here. The house and the afternoon were here, too. So very complicated it is in this river.

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