

The Aesthetic through and beyond Capital: Speculations on Martin Wickramasinghe's *Gamperaliya* and *Virāgaya*

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Introduction

Fredric Jameson's famous dictum "Always Historicize!" (*The Political Unconscious* ix) has much significance for theory coming from regions and contexts such as those from which I write, for which the seemingly passé problems and paradoxes of History—Nation, nationalism, labor, etc.—remain pertinent in spite of Western assertions of the end of History. This is not to say that History has indeed ended for the West while continuing to weigh down the rest, but to note that hasty proclamations of death, be it that of History, the author, criticism, the subject, etc., fail to have the *same* currency for what has—not without respective controversy—been called the "third-world," the "postcolonial world," the "global South," or the "periphery." The putative lateness of the periphery in relation to the center in the context of literary and theoretical production, far from being an effect of lack, nonetheless hints at the inequalities of the critical and political landscape of today's world system. Literary theory coming from the Left—that is, theory committed to a demystification of the act of literary production in light of more total political and economic realities—calls for a critique of the now unfashionable issues of Nation/nationalism and History/historicism. These larger questions and paradoxes, in this article, serve to foreground a primarily literary discussion on how one may historically explain the aesthetic modes of two Sinhala novels, *Gamperaliya* (1944) and *Virāgaya* (1956) by Martin Wickramasinghe. This, needless to say, is a broader theoretical pursuit supplemented by the analysis of the two texts at hand.

The method I propose here involves dialectically reading the aesthetic modes of the two texts through two levels of interpretation, which follow the contours of Dipesh Chakrabarty's categories of History 1 and History 2, or history posited by capital, and histories outside the life processes of capital. My reading of *Gamperaliya* and *Virāgaya* is in service of a theoretical point that threatens at times to efface the specificity or relative autonomy of the particular texts. There is thus a tension inherent in this enterprise, an absence of a readily available synthesis for the dialectic between cultural specificity and capital's universalizability, autonomy and history, alterity and singularity. My analysis then, by way of self-criticism, falls short of

“conveying” the narrative pleasure offered by *Gamperāliya* or the melancholic philosophy inherent in *Virāgaya*, both of which are particularly pertinent to the aesthetics of those texts, especially when they are read in Sinhala. In order to foreground this aesthetic surplus and absent specificity, however, a brief explication of Martin Wickramasinghe and these novels is necessary at the onset.

Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976) was the most prolific Sinhala writer of the 20th century, having produced not only an unparalleled plethora of work ranging from fiction to philosophy, history and anthropology, but having been a watershed in the aesthetic trajectory of Sinhala novelistic writing. Not only was Wickramasinghe a figure closely affiliated with the emergence of the realist Sinhala novel and a new reading public (See, Dissanayake [2009]), but also one whose oeuvre spanned across the 20th century, bearing witness to what could provisionally be termed a “modernist” turn in Sinhala literature. Wickramasinghe’s legacy as a writer is closely intertwined with the dominant narrative of Sri Lanka’s (formerly Ceylon) modern history, bearing witness to anticolonial nationalism, 1948 Independence, as well as the growing hegemony of Sinhala nationalist politics, especially after 1956.

The two novels discussed here, *Gamperāliya* and *Virāgaya* have oft been regarded as the first realist and modernist novels in Sinhala, and feature two contrasting aesthetic modes. *Gamperāliya*, the first part of a trilogy which includes *Yugāntaya* (1949) and *Kaliyugaya* (1957), while narrating the urbanization and capitalist transformation of rural South-Western Sri Lanka, is characterized by greater attention to plot, narrative, allegory and characters representing social “types.” In contrast, *Virāgaya* features a subjective, affective, melancholic and deeply philosophical aesthetic mode which does not share a similar commitment to plot, allegory, history, or society. In light of this difference, Marxist critic, A.V. Suraweera, for example, upholds the standard realist/modernist classification, all the while repudiating *Virāgaya*’s purported modernism (15) based on critical standards that somewhat dogmatically adhere to Lukács’s preference of (realist) narration over (modernist) description. While the value of the terms “realism” and “modernism” as descriptors should not be undermined, a complication or critique that helps resist the reification of these terms is also warranted. Moreover, the complex interplay between the aesthetic modes of the specific texts, the novel form and history, should not be diluted in favor of the categorical restraints imposed by such terms. Indeed, to do so would also ignore the specific “peripheral” traditions—Sanskrit, Buddhism, etc.—which inform and nourish Wickramasinghe’s aesthetics, making them difficult to readily classify in generic terms. This article, then, attempts to grapple with the issue of the aesthetic shift between *Gamperāliya* and *Virāgaya*, while avoiding a categorical or generic “explaining away” that strips the novels of their cultural specificity. I also avoid mystifying explanations such as Wickramasinghe’s “genius” or an emergent nativist “authenticity.” In the sections that follow, I provide some necessary background to the ideas of novel and nation so as to

delineate what I imply by the term “aesthetic,” after which the two texts will be read through History 1 and History 2.

Nation, Novel and the Aesthetic

In a discussion of the novel and the postcolonial nation, Neil Larsen provides a substantial defense of Marxist-historicist criticism, lauding its capabilities in moving beyond the antinomies of the national problem. For Larsen, nationalism’s “fallacy of essentialism” in conceptualizing the nation as an organic essence-bearing entity is not superseded but replicated in much postcolonial theory as a “fallacy of textuality” through the myth of the subject who “‘narrates’ or ‘imagines’ [the nation as text] from a locus of evidently absolute, ahistorical contingency” (Larsen 85). It is questionable as to exactly which postcolonial theorists take such a radically ahistoricist stance of *absolute* contingency, and Larsen’s critique runs the risk of unfairly generalizing the thought of a variety of different and disparate thinkers. Thus, Larsen’s setting up of a “straw-man,” or a hypothetical critic, who in critiquing historical absolutism resorts to textual absolutism, should be seen as a personification of a liberal theoretical *tendency* that sees the nation as *essentially* hybrid. Only an understanding of the dialectical relationship between the stances of the “nationalist” and the “postcolonial theorist” enables a transcending of the paradoxical structure of the national problem, or, in Larsen’s words, a “grasp[ing] of such an antinomy as *itself* the product of historical forces” (85). Therefore, while theory centered on the nation, either as an organic or hybrid entity, must center essence either to uphold or deconstruct it, more totalizing, historicist theory is capable of moving towards a resolution of this antinomy.

Larsen schematizes the nationalist, romanticist conception of the nation as “ $N=C \rightarrow F$,” where in a broadly Hegelian sense the nation (N) is thought of as that which emerges through giving “concrete form [(F)] to a content [(C)]—language, culture, manners and customs, etc—that historically antecedes it” (85). Anti-colonial political praxis, however, provided the colonies with a representational challenge—a task that demanded the creation of *organic* content out of an inorganic, externally imposed form, which Larsen depicts as “ $N=F \rightarrow C$ ” (85). The formula is merely reversed in face of the daunting representational challenge of postcolonial nationhood, and what is precisely disallowed is a broader historical understanding of how these schemata emerge relationally, unequally and as a product of historical forces.

What is further interesting, and what has more relevance for the current discussion, is that “N” in the above formula can, and has been, used to talk about the novel instead of the nation, or rather, the novel as a form of national allegory. This is precisely what Fredric Jameson attempts in his much repudiated though often misunderstood essay “Third-World Literature in an Era of Multinational Capitalism,” in which he writes that “[a]ll third-world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical, and [...] are to be read as [...] national allegories, [...]

particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel” (“Third-World Literature” 69). Jameson’s explanation should be given due credit in terms of spatiality insofar as throughout the essay he locates the third world and its novels in a necessary relation with those of the first world, stressing their dependency and critiquing any moralistic celebration of the Western canon as literature *par excellence*. In fact, national allegory and the ability to narrate social totalities are seen rather positively by Jameson, who following the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic, attributes the third world novel this aesthetic quality in necessary relation to the first world (Master’s) novel’s epistemological crippling (“Third-World Literature” 85). However, his conception in this essay is insufficient for two main reasons: (1) it does not live up to his own mandate of historicism, and possibly robs the third world of history, and (2) it does not transcend the paradox of $N=C \rightarrow F/N=F \rightarrow C$, on account of being caught up in myths of origins and organicity. These two reasons are further discussed below:

(1) A more radical historicism should be suspicious of temporally fixing the third world novel in the *longue durée* as that which should *necessarily* allegorize the nation. This criticism was one among many levelled against Jameson by Aijaz Ahmed in his seminal critique of the “Third-World Literature” essay, where he bemoans what he apprehends as an outright condemnation of the “third-world” to forever be slave to nation and nationalism (Ahmed 102). Indeed, it is possible that under certain contingent formations, the novel would (as Jameson’s examples show us) function as national allegory, but declaring *a priori* that the third-world novel would do so under *all* formations within the modern world system merely calls for a treasure hunt for national allegories in third-world texts that are located differently within more localized structures and histories. This is indeed what we see in the two novels at hand, *Gamperaliya* and *Virāgaya*, where *Gamperaliya*, on account of its socially totalizing narrative mode can easily be read as a national allegory, whereas it would require a fair amount of theoretical bulldozing to read the more subjective, affective and philosophical *Virāgaya* through a similar lens.

(2) Jameson’s tendency to recourse to myths of origin and organicity is problematic not so much because I wish to dispute the fact that the novel chronologically emerged in the West, but because the fixation on origin has, in itself, scant descriptive value for a discussion on third-world, peripheral or postcolonial literatures, howsoever one may wish to categorize them. While I by no means wish to suggest that this is a *pervasive* feature of Jameson’s otherwise erudite, painstaking and encyclopedic writing, a continued assertion of the novel’s Western origins on his part can be found in several essays apart from the one discussed above—even in much more recent work, such as the essay “The Antinomies of the Realism-Modernism Debate” (2012), where he contends that “the Third World is a [...] modernizing place, and the imported form which is the novel is fully as much a component of modernization as the importation of automobiles” (476). Here, if Jameson’s analogy invites a reading of a machine-like utility

the novel may not have, it also neglects the aesthetic mediation between the abstract form “automobile” and the specific stylistic aspects of locally produced cars—for the third-world also *produces* cars; it does not merely import them. If at all, a more relational analogy could have been drawn based on the international divisions of labor in automobile production. Nevertheless, in the composite object that is a car, there is no objectively presentable Western essence that has *unmediated* access to “form,” which acts as an unsurpassable inorganic barrier to the content of non-Western automobile designs.



Fig. 1. 1967 Ford Mustang Coupe



Fig. 2. 2009 Tata Nano

(Source: *Wikimedia Commons*)

While the hegemony of the West enables it to produce ideas and forms in ways in which the rest of the world cannot, form itself is constantly reconfigured as an abstract singularity which can only concretize itself through aesthetic mediation between itself and specific content. In other words, the West has hegemony over form, but it is not granted that it can definitively reify it. The novel form today, therefore, is no more “Western” than it is “postcolonial” or “third-world.” This conception of the singularity of form—noting the possibility for (and even inevitability of) contestation *within* such singularity—is derived from the conception of the singularity of modernity, a term expounded by Jameson himself. Here modernity is thought of as a system of global capitalism which is singular,

universal, and fundamentally impersonal (*A Singular Modernity* 12). Jameson is dismissive of the concept of multiple modernities—Indian, African, or Latin-American modernities, for instance—as being a reassuring notion (*A Singular Modernity* 12) which in fact mystifies the antinomies of modernity as such, or modernity as a formal category. If modernity itself is thought of through the impersonal, totalizing thrust of capital, the novel form should be read in a similar manner, focusing on form as such, and not essence or origin.

In light of what has been said about the singularity of modernity, let us return to the question of the novel. While it was said that Jameson’s conception of the third-world novel does not transcend the schema of $N=C \rightarrow F/N=F \rightarrow C$, and that I would propose an aesthetic mediation between the novel form and the specific contents that are shaped into the novel, it is also worth conceding that I do not posit any schema as absolute. The category of the aesthetic is indeed produced *within* history, and certainly as Terry Eagleton says, emerges as part of a bourgeois project (4), the earliest articulations of which served to posit it as a mediatory category which interceded the generalities of reason and the particulars of sense (15). The schema of aesthetic mediation is therefore specifically used here in a narrowly Sri Lankan and broadly South Asian context, in the context of anti-colonial bourgeois nationalism, of which Martin Wickramasinghe was an important cultural figure. It is therefore historically *possible* (although to say specifically *where* is an empirical matter beyond the scope of my study) that schemata such as $N=C \rightarrow F$ and $N=F \rightarrow C$ reflect the actualities of certain instances of novelistic production. However, the schema that I would like to propose is also, I believe, particularly relevant to a context in which a nationalist bourgeoisie did in fact have an impact on shaping specific contents into a national form, howsoever “successful” such projects have been. In such contexts, myths of origin (“the novel is of Western origin, the nation is of Western origin”) do not have much to offer in theory or in practice for the analysis of specific local forms of expression, experimentation, hegemony or domination. Schematically, such a conception could be represented as $N=F \overset{A}{\leftrightarrow} C$, where “A” represents the aesthetic as a category that mediates between the generalities of form and the specificities of content. The term “aesthetic mediation” as is used in the following discussion generally implies a movement between the general/singular and the specific/particular, although when the term “aesthetic” is used by itself without the term “mediation” I generally allude to a kind of stylistic or generic mode that affects readers of texts in particular ways.

The efficacy of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s categories of History 1 and History 2 in *Provincializing Europe*, which he derives from a “selective but close reading of Marx” (47), lies in opening up avenues for straddling both sides of the above equation: that of abstract singularity and universality through History 1, and that of particularity and difference through History 2. Chakrabarty defines History 1 as “the universal and necessary history we associate with capital” which “forms the backbone of the usual narratives of [...] the capitalist mode of production” (63)—or, in Marx’s own terms, “[capital’s] *antecedent*

posited by itself” (Marx, *Theories* 491). Chakrabarty’s own position on History 1 as a *necessary* history of capital suggests that if modernity is conceptualized as a singularity which is totalizable because of capital’s universalization, this level of reading should indeed precede that of History 2. Indeed, *Provincializing Europe* itself is structured in such a way that corresponds to History 1 logically preceding History 2; the section titled “Histories of Belonging” (chapters 5-8) logically depends upon the prior establishing of a code against which it could be written—that is, the history of (and through) capital. The interpretive level of History 1 is thus admittedly reductionist, and invariably forms a metanarrative. Nonetheless, rather than dismissing metanarratives *tout court*, it is pertinent to view certain metanarratives as necessary reductions which, in fact, allow for further interpretive levels (*The Political Unconscious* 15) able to shed light on the contradictions and generalizations of the metanarrative itself. This is indeed the case with the interpretive level that results from reading along the lines of History 2. For Chakrabarty, History 2s, in contrast with the abstractness and analyticity of History 1, offer insight into “more affective narratives of human belonging” (71), of ways of being in the world in a more lived, bodily sense, antithetical but not incompatible with the spectral rationality of History 1. In a certain sense, however, my use of Chakrabarty’s two Histories features a deviation that Chakrabarty himself would not approve. He writes, “History 2s do not constitute a dialectical Other of the necessary logic of History 1. To think thus would be to subsume History 2 to History 1. History 2 is better thought of as a category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1” (66). Dialecticizing the relationship between the two Histories by means of asserting History 1’s necessity and precedence is, however, something that I am admittedly “guilty” of. In other words, by subsuming History 2 into History 1, I *re*-totalize History—the necessary “price” that ought to be paid (if it is a price at all!) for a theory committed to historicization, totalization and demystification.

This subsumption or dialecticization is not without its consequences for literary analysis. For example, my reading of Wickramasinghe’s novels cannot “celebrate” (not to say “romanticize”) the aesthetic fashioning and creative re-imagining of modernity to the same degree that Chakrabarty’s reading of the pioneers of Bengali fiction—Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay—accomplishes. However, this celebration of alterity or difference in Chakrabarty proves to be problematic in several respects, especially for more Marxian theory, as Vasant Kaiwar polemically puts it:

[Political and economic] concerns are replaced [in *Provincializing Europe*] by the more familiar trope of “Indian exceptionalism”. The endless spinning around on the notions of “difference” and “excess” seem mainly designed to spirit economic and social inequalities, injustice and oppression out of sight... Indeed, Chakrabarty’s positive reading of hierarchy, images of worship, the thoroughgoing relativisation of patriarchy—all contribute to making modern city life in Bengal part of an exotic moral economy and the site of an apolitical difference and excess (176).

The only way in which a somewhat sympathetic or “intimate” reading of figures such as Wickramasinghe may be accomplished while not giving in to relativism or exoticism is to acknowledge the potency of the category of History 2, but to dialectically subsume it into History 1 in a double motion wherein the elements organized under both interpretive levels are understood *historically*. This results in the enlargement of a narrowly political economic thesis on literary activity being determined by an economic base, so as to acknowledge relative autonomy and specificity, while historicizing and demystifying difference and alterity themselves.

The efficacy of History 2 thus lies in its enabling of a certain bracketing whereby we can suspend our judgments on the truth value of Wickramasinghe’s own national-historical claims, and pay attention to the aesthetic mediation at play. For example, we can hereby note Wickramasinghe’s relatively “progressive” nationalism that does not naïvely posit cultural essences as fixed and eternal, but actively authenticated; origins, for Wickramasinghe, need to be *created*, and culture *achieved*, as inferable from his claims that “originality in cultural invention is nothing but the change, partial or complete, of a borrowed element in readaptation” (“Sinhalese Culture” 46). A *dialectical* History 2 allows us to construct a Marxist-postcolonialist critical apparatus which, unlike the strands of theory that insist on the ahistorical imagining of modern national forms, grants that authenticated contents are by no means “unreal” on account of their constructedness. Within such a framework, precolonial social formations can be speculated on, thought of as having ideological structures and forms of collective consciousness—such as those which Gananath Obeyesekere terms a Buddhist “whatever” (197)—implying that *something* did positively exist as formalized content that lent itself to be reimagined and refashioned by the nationalist bourgeoisie. Such mediation, especially in terms of how it plays into literary aesthetics, will be discussed in the subsequent sections of this essay—first through History 1, and then through History 2.

History 1: Aesthetics, Value, and Historicism

In light of the two-level method of interpretation highlighted above, where a text is read first through History 1, and second through History 2, after which the latter is dialectically subsumed into the former under the sign of singular modernity, it is necessary to first propose the reductive or general thesis: that the aesthetic shift from *Gamperaliya* to *Virāgaya* (categorically, that from realism to modernism) can be explained through political economy. In keeping with Jameson’s theoretical trajectory, such a thesis is a step back from his more recent work on realism/modernism in *The Antinomies of Realism* (2015), where he claims to dialectically approach realism as a historical object that contains within itself positive and negative elements that cause its “inevitable undoing” (6), to his older work in *The Political*

Unconscious (1981) in which his approach is more total, viewing texts as located only within the total structure at any given synchronic moment in history. The risks of reading aesthetic modes (realism, modernism, etc) through an *internal* dialectic may result in a Eurocentric teleology that envisions the third-world novel as still-born in light of the novel's allegedly Western origins, positing that its predominant form already contains within itself its potential end: it remains crippled and stunted, for its own death has been marked at its already-late birth. If, however, we acknowledge that "[n]ew styles, new ways of representing reality, though always linked to old forms and styles, never arise from any immanent dialectic within artistic forms" and that "every new style is socially and historically determined and is the product of a social development" (Lukács 119), it is possible to produce new generic, spatial and temporal mappings capable of including disparate writers across the world system, living in different "times" under one rubric. For example, this may make it possible for us to think of the aesthetic similarities between Balzac and the early Wickramasinghe (of the *Gamperaliya* era), and Flaubert and the late Wickramasinghe (of the *Virāgaya* era) not in terms of Wickramasinghe's lateness, but as a product of determinate politico-economic realities. Lateness in terms of such a politico-economic, infrastructural reality (or History 1) is marked less by cultural lack than by the inequalities and relations produced by the capitalist world system.

Although we need not subscribe to Jameson's internal dialectic, he offers us two aesthetic possibilities present within realism which are useful for the current discussion: *récit*, and affect, *récit* being the narrative impulse—the "telling of a tale as such" (*Antinomies* 10)—and affect being something of a negation of *récit*, a moment of narrative suspension, a perpetual present accessed through bodily feelings devoid of linguistic mediation (*Antinomies* 27-32). What can be said as a preliminary remark about *Gamperaliya* and *Virāgaya* is that while the former's aesthetic mode is predominantly one of *récit*, the latter's is marked by affect. See for instance the following passage from *Gamperaliya*:

The horse carriage that took Tissa to the station is one that the Muhandiram used occasionally for his travels. Although he used to travel frequently by horse carriage, he now went only rarely, because the carriage was rickety and the horse had aged prematurely. The horse, with its protruding hip-bones, was not one that could be sold, so feeding it and paying the horse-keeper his salary were useless expenses. (52; my translation)

What is seen here is that objects in the text are constituted allegorically. While the horse carriage and the horse, as signifiers, are symbolic of the nobility, their gradual decay acts as an allegory for the narrative of aristocratic dispossession. *Gamperaliya* ("Gam" + "peraliya"), which literally means "village upheaval" or "village transformation," is full of such symbols which allegorically narrate the growing deprivation of the rural aristocracy and the ascension of the capitalist class.

Let us contrast this narrative aesthetic mode with that of *Virāgaya*:

Upon entering the room, the first smells that reached my nose were those that aroused feelings about a shrine-room or an exorcism. From under that smell and the smell of dust, I sensed also a smell like that of a temple's library. The evening light that entered the room from the window that Siridasa opened, lit up the corners of the room. I breathed with greater ease now that the warm breeze lightened the heavy air inside the room. The spider that was sitting in the middle of the spider-web that extended from the top of a bookshelf up to the ceiling now scuttled away and hid, causing the web to shake. (8; my translation)

The sensorium presented in this scene stands in stark contrast with *Gamperāliya*. Although the very first sensory experience presented still *signifies* (“feelings about a shrine-room...”), and therefore is subject to linguistic coding as “emotion” rather than pure affect—with Jameson drawing a clear distinction between affect’s immediacy as opposed to emotion’s linguistic mediation (*Antinomies* 32)—the subsequent influx of olfactory and visual data are by no means narrative. Through the description of bodily experience which, unlike in *Gamperāliya*, is divorced from social totality in an allegorical sense, it is the *body* of the first-person narrator that is centered. This tendency is present throughout *Virāgaya*, marking its aesthetic as a primarily affective and subjective one, more immediate in its sensateness than that of *Gamperāliya*.

Historicizing through History 1, or history posited by capital, requires an allegorical mode of thinking whereby certain structures or functions of the text are mapped against certain categories posited by capital that are *outside* the given text. Following Jameson’s conceptions of History as an absent cause (derived from Althusser) in *The Political Unconscious*, it is necessary to maintain that the act of writing history is, after all, narrative and allegorical, even though History itself remains referentially Real:

What Althusser’s own insistence on history as an absent cause makes clear, [...] is that he does not at all draw the fashionable conclusion that because history is a text, the ‘referent’ does not exist... [O]ur approach to [history] and to the Real itself necessarily passes through [...] prior [...] narrativization in the political unconscious. (20)

Historical interpretation, even that which operates through History 1, can be total, but cannot naïvely circumvent the issue of representation; it can tend towards the Real, but it must do so in abstract, allegorical form. The method that I propose here is to read the two aesthetic modes of *Gamperāliya* and *Virāgaya* through the logical movement of the “value form,” an abstract category posited by capital and its universalization. It does not imply that any aesthetic mode, narrative or affective, is *expressive* of a certain type of value, but rather, implies that the various types of value existing within a social formation may bear specific *structural* relations to specific aesthetic modes.

Marx distinguishes between two types of values operative within the capitalist mode of production: “exchange-value”—the quantitative, relative, and essentially *abstract* value ascribed to a commodity, which

allows it to be exchanged in the market; and “use-value”—a value which is only realized at the moment of consumption/use, which is qualitative in nature, and concrete to a certain degree insofar as it cannot exist without the material body, the affective being, of the consumer herself (*Capital* 126-131). I avoid making the popular distinction between an “abstract” exchange-value and “concrete” use-value, for as Gayatri Spivak argues, to put anything into value form is to essentially engage in abstraction (191). However, as opposed to exchange-value, which enables a commodity to rationally exist in-itself and for-itself in the market, use-value can only arise as a subjective relation between the consumer and the commodity, or the laborer and the commodity. Thus, use-value is imbued with an affective dimension beyond the language of abstraction used in the designation of the value form as such.

In order to draw a clearer correlation between the narrative and affective aesthetic modes and the two types of value, it is useful to make note of the analogy between the economic exchange-system of commodities and the semiotic exchange-system of signs. Saussure provides two perspectives on the exchange of language based on the above analogy: (1) the structural perspective: that a sign (or, an exchange-value) can be placed in relationship to all other signs (or, exchange-values); and, (2) the functional perspective: that a sign (or, an exchange-value) can be exchanged against a referent (or, “real” commodity) (Baudrillard 124). Moreover, the logical motion of value, wherein use-value functions as the logical end of the system of exchange-value in being a “concrete operation of the commodity in the act of consumption,” parallels the logical motion of the sign towards designation (Baudrillard 125). Rather than being teleological, the two logical ends of the value form, that of exchange and that of use, are structurally correlational to the aesthetic possibilities of *récit* and affect, and insofar as the value form is universalized through capital, so can global parallels be drawn between the two aesthetic modes.

In *Gamperaliya*, both the referential text (the story of a coastal village undergoing rapid capitalist transformation at the start of the 20th century), and the “written” text (published in 1944, four years before Sri Lanka’s Independence, still bearing the legacy of nationalism and active national re-imagining) lend themselves to embody a particular exchange relation. In a manner similar to the exchange between value and “real” commodity, the aesthetic mode depends on the exchange of signs to supposedly “real” referents, or referents that have been authenticated as “real.” For example, in his 1944 Preface to *Gamperaliya*, Wickramasinghe writes that the characters of the (fictional) village Koggala accurately (and typically) represent those who lived in the “real” Koggala around thirty years ago (*Gamperaliya* 5). The narratives thus wrought around such characters are valued based on their potential exchangeability with the idea of the Real: the upheaval of a *real* village at the turn of the century. What is of key significance here is that congruous to the adaptation of a realist aesthetic, a certain idea about the referent is *authenticated* as real within the larger framework of anticolonial nationalism. This is in

keeping with nationalism's poetics of authenticity, recently studied in depth by Harshana Rambukwella, who notes that Wickramasinghe "was central to the cultural articulation of an authentic imaginary in Sinhala literature" (105), whereby "real" referents—the village and its supposed values, for instance—were considered authentic and transmittable through language. In terms of the genealogy of nationalism, *Gamperaliya* can be thought of as still bearing the mark of early nationalist novelistic writing by those of the likes of Piyadasa Sirisena and W.A. Silva, tied closely with print capitalism and the emergence of a new Sinhala reading public (See: Dissanayake [2009]).

At the level of a commonsensical narrative of Sri Lankan history, it is apparent that much seems to have changed between the publication of *Gamperaliya* in 1944 and the publication of *Virāgaya* in 1956. The most obvious change is, of course, the colonial regime being replaced by a nationalist elite with the country's independence in 1948, and the replacement of English by Sinhala (much to the detriment of Tamil) as the sole official language in 1956, the same year *Virāgaya* was published. A more "nuanced" understanding of history, however, persuades us to question the degree of structural change between the 40s and 50s, especially given the case that Sri Lanka's independence can be viewed—even more so than the Indian case which was marked by higher levels of anticolonial agitation as well as brutal partition violence—as a relatively smooth transfer of power from the colonialists to the nationalist elite. Although I agree that there is no clear cut rupture between pre- and post-independence Sri Lanka, neither in terms of a purported resurrection of an authenticity or organicity after 1948, nor in terms of the nationalist bourgeoisie successfully hegemonizing the nation, it is necessary to see that the locus from which *Gamperaliya* was written had fundamentally shifted by the 1950s.

Whereas it can be said that *Gamperaliya* was written from within a growing public sphere which had not yet gained dominance or formal self-determination, *Virāgaya* was written from a locus of relative power. The elite, educated segment of Sinhala society had achieved dominance, and literary production in Sinhala had gained institutional support even by the 1940s, laying the foundations for the institutionalization of the Sinhala language (de Silva 217), of which the culmination was the 1956 turn to "Sinhala Only." Such institutionalization and specialization (influenced, for example, by Wickramasinghe's association with playwright, novelist and academic, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, and the Peradeniya School) along with the further development and consolidation of capitalism was precisely what led to a reification of social and literary life in the formation from which *Virāgaya* is written. History in the sense of social struggle—even as a bourgeois struggle for national independence—seems to have already "slowed down" by the time of the writing of *Virāgaya*, given the increased prestige, canonicity, and reification within academic and literary institutions. Aesthetically, this translates into a loss of totality, a turn to "fragmented subjectivity", to "dying individual bodies"—precisely the features Jameson identifies as typical of

epistemologically crippled Western literature (“Third-World Literature” 85). It is this historical context that enables us to speculate as to where *Virāgaya* may have parted ways with *récit*.

History 2: Decolonizing the Body

A close reading of Wickramasinghe’s critical works alongside his literary works from the 1930s to the 1950s demands that attention also be paid to cultural factors which may have caused an aesthetic shift from *Gamperāliya* to *Virāgaya*. K.N.O Dharmadasa notes that while Wickramasinghe’s critical apparatus in the 1930s and 1940s employs a synthesis between Sanskrit and Western literary criteria, there is a discernible shift in his critical stance in the 1950s where he turns to Buddhist/Pali aesthetics (75); let this be an antithesis of sorts to the more economic thesis of the previous section. We cannot, however, extrapolate from Dharmadasa’s point to definitively conclude that whereas *Gamperāliya* (1944) features an employment of Sanskrit and Western aesthetics, *Virāgaya* (1956) simply utilizes Buddhist aesthetics. Rather, there seems to have been a shift in aesthetic mediation as such, with a growing awareness on Wickramasinghe’s part on the necessities of aesthetic play, possibly as an unconscious reaction to reification and the loss of *récit*. This is not particular merely to Wickramasinghe; Jameson identifies a parallel between the reification of social life and the modernist aesthetic which far from reflecting such reification revolts against it (*The Political Unconscious* 27). Affect is thus posited as a symbolic resolution: a turn to the alienated body in an attempt to recode it within the literary. What is interesting is that in works such as *Virāgaya*, the turn to the body as a form of resistance takes on a distinctly cultural form; in the case of *Virāgaya*, it is a turn to Buddhism. A resistance against capitalist reification is thus overdetermined through a turn to a cultural domain that is perceived as “pure,” while capitalism itself is coded through the dominant language of the colonial experience.

If History 1 demands an abstraction which we accomplished by way of allegorizing aesthetic change by alluding to value—a universal, abstract form located within political economy, *outside* the novel form—History 2 requires a critique of such universalism and totalization. While the impersonal, explicitly political economic nature of the value form allowed for the mapping of a general, singular trajectory of the aesthetic, one should be wary of subscribing to other forms of “violent simplifications and homogenizations externally imposed by capital [or History 1],” such as conceptions of abstract labor and the abstract Enlightenment person (Hartley). History 1, therefore, exerts a degree of violence to the body insofar as the latter is abstracted and replaced with the idea of the “person.” History 2s, on the other hand, which consist “of a multiplicity of practices, ideas, affects and memories that are not part of capital’s self-realization” offer alternative readings of personhood which effectively critique and deconstruct History 1’s ideas about the abstract Enlightenment or

“Western” person (Hartley). History 2, it seems, enables a polemical practice of depersonalization. Wickramasinghe’s turn to History 2 and to affect achieves precisely this. As the very title of the text *Virāgaya* indicates—“*virāga*” being loosely translatable as “without desire”—issues of the body, affect and desire are key thematic concerns which also contextually suggest a cultural turn to Buddhism. The Buddhist aesthetic and philosophical interrogation of the person and the body effectively critiques the Western—and normative—idea of the “person” or “self,” thus establishing *Virāgaya*’s aesthetic as one that thoroughly engages in depersonalization.

It should be noted, of course, that my focus on *Virāgaya* here does not imply that *Gamperaliya* steers clear of overdetermination. In fact, as Dharmadasa notes, during Wickramasinghe’s more realist phase of coupling Western and Sanskrit literary criteria, he seems to have selectively appropriated the Sanskrit aesthetic concepts of *rasa* (“aesthetic relish”), *dhvani* (“suggestion”), and *aucitya* (“appropriateness”) to suit the aesthetic mode of realism (74). Ranajit Guha writes about similar moments of overdetermination in the Indian nationalist project where the Sanskrit (pre-colonial) concepts of “*daṇḍa*,” “*dharma*” and “*bhakti*” overdetermined the Western concepts of “order,” “improvement” and “obedience” which were central to the colonial project (61). However, if one were to think of overdetermination itself as taking place along an axis which allows contingent yet agentive “play,” it might be said of *Gamperaliya* that its aesthetic mode is determined more by structure than by play; the central aesthetic focus still remains unproblematically realist as was discussed in the previous section, with Wickramasinghe’s central focus lying in authenticating the referent against the sign, and narrative against social reality. The resistive nature of *Virāgaya*’s aesthetic, however, is seen precisely in this heightened sense of aesthetic play. Wickramasinghe’s explicit resistance through this axis of overdetermination is seen specifically in his own (self)-critical work on *Virāgaya*, titled *Navakāthanga Hā Virāgaya* (1965), where he takes to task the younger writer and critic, Gunadasa Amarasekara, for misreading the novel on account of his having misinterpreted the term “*rāgaya*” as simply “desire,” or “sexual desire” in a Western sense, while insisting that his own use of the term is informed by Buddhist discourse which does not privilege sex as the ultimate form of desire (75-76).

The concept of *virāga* is, therefore, central to an understanding of Wickramasinghe’s aesthetic of depersonalization, in that it is thought of on the one hand as that which enables the body to expunge itself from character, individuation and personhood, and on the other as a counterpoint to the dominant Western idea of the person. Such a direct engagement with the West and its conceptions of personhood is seen in *Navakāthanga Hā Virāgaya*, where Wickramasinghe writes:

In the West, a new trend in visual art and sculpture that seeks to eradicate all qualities of the human (person) has also influenced its literature... For those writers of prose and verse who are slaves to words, this is an impossible task; it is a revolution... [But] whatever these new trends in the literary arts may be, the

philosophical concepts that provide the basis for them are not new things for Buddhist philosophy. (8; my translation)

The resistive aspect of *Virāgaya*'s aesthetic lies in the configuration of *virāga* as a literary/aesthetic device through which the main character of the text, Aravinda, can no longer hold on to the individuating, personalizing aspects of character itself. Aravinda's lack of desire, or non-attachment, defines him as an oddity not merely within the plot of the text (indeed, his presence slows down the plot of the novel to the extent that the very concept of plot is deconstructed), but also within the social fabric that the novel refers to. What makes this, on Wickramasinghe's part, a deliberative aesthetic or heuristic device is that *virāga* itself is not a "passive" succumbing to the historical impossibility of narrative, but paradoxically an agentive—and *desirous*—pursuit for a resistive aesthetic mode. This impulse is mirrored by Aravinda in the novel when he claims "my desire [*rāgaya*], which attempted to detach itself from my body came close to a lack of desire [*virāgaya*]" (35; my translation). Aravinda's desire, in other words, is a desire *for non-desire*. This lack of desire seeps into the very aesthetic mode of the novel when he not only detaches himself from other characters, but also from us readers. We cannot identify with Aravinda as a protagonist who "holds" the plot together; neither can we escape the sense data which is filtered through Aravinda, linking us momentarily with him in an eternal present of linguistically unmediated affect, yet stripping away in us and in him all vestiges of personalization, self and character. Indeed, at the end of the text, as Aravinda approaches death, he is stripped of his potential identities; Bathi, his former servant girl/ adopted-child/ peculiar love interest, talks to him fondly, but does not refer to him as either "father" or "sir" (*Virāgaya* 206). Like the screaming pope of Francis Bacon's *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953), a good example of the kind of depersonalizing visual art that Wickramasinghe might be referring to in *Navakathānga Hā Virāgaya*, Aravinda's non-attachment leads to a radical expunging of character from the body, a rapid flight of individuality through the open orifice of the mouth leaving behind only a trace, a singularity.



Fig. 3. Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1650)



Fig. 4. Francis Bacon's *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*

(Source: *Wikimedia Commons*)

The gradual expunging of character from body, which I believe is the logical trajectory of affect itself, is also, allegorically, Aravinda's trajectory from life to death. This allegory, however, operates much differently from the allegorical function of the realist mode. In classic

realism, the narrative and its elements are allegorical to a supposedly external referent. Nonetheless, the homology between the logical trajectory of affect and Aravinda's journey from life to death does not *refer* to any supposedly 'real' externality. Rather, Aravinda's journey from life to death, character to body, self to non-self, is inscribed into the very aesthetic of the text; our identification with Aravinda happens at the level of the body and its *singular* affective potentialities—not at the level of identity.

If, therefore, we started off with singularity as an extremely broad, total category—the singularity of modernity, the singularity of the novel form, etc—in order to read the two texts through History 1, we have returned, traversing through difference and alterity, back at singularity itself—the immanent singularity of the body. Difference—particularly cultural difference or particularity—is purged here in favor of singularity in a precisely Deleuzian sense, since the logical movement of affect leads to a linguistic non-mediation. Discussing a scene from Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, which I believe has remarkable parallels with the latter parts of *Virāgaya* which feature Aravinda's dying body, Deleuze points towards a similar reading of singularity:

a disreputable man, a rogue, held in contempt by everyone, is found as he lies dying. Suddenly, those taking care of him manifest an eagerness, respect, even love, for his slightest sign of life... But to the degree that he comes back to life, his saviors turn colder... Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of a life playing with death. The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life... The life of such individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name... (28-29)

In light of the above discussion on *Virāgaya*, what becomes apparent about “affect” as an aesthetic possibility is that, while it emerges as a historically contingent mode, accessed through (and in close relation with) History 2, it motions towards the purging of the very sources that made possible its birth. While it is precisely this purging that *Virāgaya* accomplishes, it is necessary not to lose historical hindsight in being able to locate *Virāgaya* simultaneously within a general History 1 which is able to ultimately recontextualize its aesthetic mode as something that is, after all, historically produced. It should be stressed, however, that this does not amount to a regression from the second thesis (that of cultural specificity) back to the first (that of the narrowly political economic), since the totality that we are now presented with is, in a sense, “larger” than that which we encountered at our starting point. Within this larger totality Wickramasinghe (or generally, the “writer”) can retain his relative autonomy, his cultural and artistic specificity, and so on, but cannot, as an example of mystified “postcolonial authenticity” or “literary genius,” stand outside History.

Concluding Remarks

Taking into account the above discussion that featured a historicization of *Gamperaliya* and *Virāgaya*, let us now return to the schema that was

posited at the beginning of this article: $N=F \overset{A}{\leftrightarrow} C$, where the novel form was thought of in terms of a *historically contingent* aesthetic mediation between form and content. Since the schema is historically contingent, it was mentioned that it does not, on account of its very articulation, negate the possibility of alternative historical schemata such as $N=C \rightarrow F$ or $N=F \rightarrow C$. However, it should be noted, that not only does the aesthetic as a product of bourgeois nationalism emerge historically, but that (as was discussed above through the example of the two texts) the nature of aesthetic mediation itself shifts historically, and always exists in relation with other (non-literary) structures. *Gamperaliya*, therefore, still features an aesthetic mediation of sorts, even as an emergent form of overdetermination. *Virāgaya*, by contrast, features a more critical and experimental form of aesthetic play, which not only highlights its particularity but also problematizes form as such. As was shown above, Dipesh Chakrabarty's categories of History 1 and History 2 offer fresh and interesting possibilities for the historicization of aesthetic, stylistic and generic modes in literary expression, and for the synthesizing of crucial aspects of both Marxist and postcolonial theory, especially when they are—quite contrarily to Chakrabarty himself—used dialectically. If as Marx writes, “Man makes his own history, but does not make it out of the whole cloth: he does not make it out of conditions chosen by himself, but out of such as he finds close at hand” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire* 5), it is prudent to look into the intricate task of stitching—of writing and aestheticizing—while keeping another eye on the whole cloth—on the metanarratives of History—albeit suspiciously, ever willing to re-totalize.

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