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Contents

Editorial	
Jasbir Jain The Dialectics of Faith and Non-Faith: Kierkegaard to Sartre	1
Nisha Indra Guru Bhavatosh Indra Guru The Bhagavadgītā and the Poetry of Robert Browning	7
Aloka Patel Caliban's Curse: M. NourbeSe Philip's "Discourse" as Challenge to White Hegemony	15
Sumana Mehendale Balkrishna Anjana Shashi Deshpande's 'The Duel' : A Critical Perspective	24
Shubha Dwivedi Susheel Sharma's Unwinding Self : A Timeless Testimony to a Poet's Perspective	29
Jaya Chetnani Rooble Verma A Study of Feminine Perspective in the Novel Butterfly Burning	41
Meenakshi Shrivastava Rooble Verma Alice Munro's "Free Radicals": A Tale of Grief, Guilt, and Survival	46
Ritu Saxena Analyzing Sibling Rivalry : Its Prevalence in English Literature	50
Pradip Mandal Overcoming Profanity, Penance, And Piety: Stephen's Journey To Freedom In Joyce's Novel A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man And The Cinematic Adaptation Of The Same By Joseph Strick	54
Book Reviews	61
Ragini Ramachandra K.S. Ram and Uma Ram, Bhulan Kaanda: The Amnesia Tuber (Trs). Chennai: Xpress Publishing, 2020, pp.135, Rs.200/- ISBN 978-1-64983-069-2	61
Ragini Ramachandra An Introduction to the Study of Indian Poetics by M.S. Kushwaha and Sanjay Misra, DK Printworld, New Delhi, 2021, pp.168, Rs.325. ISBN 978-81-246-0959-0 (PB)	63
C. N. Ramachandran Girish Karnad, <i>Rakshasa-Tangadi</i> . Dharwada: Manohara Grantha Mala, 2018	66
Purabi Panwar Interpreting Cinema Adaptations, Intertextualities, Art Movements ; Jasbir jain; Rawat Publications; 2020; pp. xii+286; Rs 1295.	67
Sudhir K. Arora Archana Srinath. The Ecstatic Journey: Chitra Divakaruni's Woman, Child and Immigrant. Chennai: Emerald Publishers, 2020. Pp. 173 Price: Rs. 250/- ISBN: 978-93-89080-47-6	69
Siddhartha Singh Killing Gandhi Living Gandhi, Edited by H. S. Chandalia and Mehzbeen Sadriwala, Yking Books: Jaipur India (2020) Rs. 1495.	70
Basavaraj Naikar Manas Bakshi, Man of the Seventh Hour. Gurgaon (Haryana, INDIA): The Poetry Society of India. 2019. Pp. 160. Rs. 390.	72
Seminar Report by H S Chandalia Pluralism is embedded in the very origin of Human civilization : Prof. Harish Narang	74

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Caliban's Curse: M. NourbeSe Philip's "Discourse" as Challenge to White Hegemony

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ABSTRACT

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African Caribbean writer, M. NourbeSe Philip in her poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language" counters colonial exploitation in the Caribbean by exploding various laws laid down by the European masters. This paper deals with the ways in which Philip looks at discourse as "both an instrument and an effect of power," to use Foucault's words, and then dismantles the established formal structure of a poem as an oppositional strategy to challenge various ideological positions of white colonial masters.

In her poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language" which is a sequence from her 1989 collection *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, M. NourbeSe Philip counters colonial exploitation in the Caribbean by exploding various laws laid down by the European masters. As an African Caribbean writer born and raised in the British colonies of Tobago and Trinidad Philip recognised that these "laws" could be Western ideologies that tried to rationalize the social, cultural and intellectual inferiority of a race and gender, or linguistic laws that affected the speech of the black people who were brought to work as slaves on the islands, and the literary use of a 'standard' language. The poem foregrounds the historical and cultural compulsions of speaking and writing in English as it recalls a history of black slavery and its colonial aftermath, and brings out the tension between the established father tongue (the language of the White European male), and the lost mother tongue (the Black African female). In the poem, Philip makes use of both 'standard' and broken English, and manipulates the form to counter the colonizer's notion of the 'standard' English as "universal" and "objective". Elizabeth Deloughrey notes, "Philip... de-centre[s] the 'uni-verse-all' voice, while calling attention to the politics that underlie assertion of 'universalism' and 'objectivity'" (131). The innovative formal structure of the poem makes use of the standard "rule" governed language to lay bare the exclusionary and oppressive practices of the English masters. While the effects of the imposed language are demonstrated in the jagged language of the black wo/man, one of the narrative voices in the poem, the hybridized culture of the Caribbean is exposed in the way the standard and broken languages are juxtaposed against each other in the same poem, engaged in both a discursive and a counter-discursive act. This paper deals with the ways in which

NourbeSe Philip, in her poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language," dismantles the established formal structure of a poem as an oppositional strategy to challenge various ideological positions of the white colonial masters.

The poem draws the readers' attention to the pain of the loss of a language that is registered through cultural memory. The period from 1496 to 1833 had seen Africans being forcibly brought to the islands as slaves and flogged and tortured to serve the plantation economy. Where possible, slaves had been isolated from their common language groups and transported and sold in "mixed lots," as a deliberate means of limiting the possibilities of rebellion. The result was that within two or three generations the only language available to the Africans was the European language of the master. Bill Ashcroft points out that "language" in these islands has been "the mode of a constant and pervasive extension of cultural dominance—through ideas, attitudes, histories and ways of seeing—that is central to imperial hegemony" (2). Writers from the islands realize that the Caribbean, therefore, cannot be their "motherland," that it is a society born out of forced uprooting and enslavement of Africans, brutality, destructiveness, and rape—not only sexual but also linguistic, and later, an imposed system of imperial education. They recognize that the Caribbean have no mother tongue, but speak the "broken" language of the European colonizer, which takes different forms of pidgin, patois, or creole. This broken language, or Patois for them then becomes a

weapon [that] "wreaks havoc" on the English language, resisting the colonizer's attempt at suppressing African history and language. More importantly, patois as a fusion of English and West African languages, is a creative subversive response to a linguistic system whose brutality mirrored the physical, social, and political situation of enslavement. Trapped within the prison that English built around their experience, African Caribbeans shook its walls by inventing an English that to the colonizer was unintelligible. (Gadsby 149)

The broken rhythmic utterances of the poetic voice "I," the first person speaker in "Discourse on the Logic of Language," painfully suggests the throbbing wound of the loss of a mother tongue and the ability of effortless speech:

lan	lan	lang
language		
languish		
anguish		
english		
is a foreign anguish (30)		

Discourse as a mode of "verbal communication" (Collins Concise Dictionary, 1988) in this case appears to have failed. But in the manner in which the poet goes on to play with the broken words, and then manipulates the formal structure of the poem, she develops a discourse of resistance by defying conventional structures, and formal use of language.

If discourse, as Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short note, "is linguistic communication...as an interpersonal activity whose form is determined by its purpose" (qtd. in Mills 4), the poem as a "Discourse" seems to argue that the master's discourse is that of exploitation and oppression, and the slave's discourse is that of pain, suffering and resistance. Michel Pecheux stresses on this conflictual nature of discourse:

the meaning of a word, expression, proposition, etc., does not exist 'in itself... but is determined by the ideological positions brought into play in the socio-historical process in which words, expressions and propositions are produced (i.e., reproduced)... words, expressions,

propositions, etc., change their meaning according to the position held by those who use them which signifies that they find their meaning by reference to those positions, i.e., by reference to the ideological formations... in which those positions are inscribed" (111)

The poem begins with apparent contradiction as the poet first asserts that "English is my mother tongue," and then falters, "A mother tongue is not/ not a foreign lan lan lang language" (30) to recognize it as "a foreign anguish," (30) and so, as she notes in the second stanza, has the authority of a "father tongue" not "a mother tongue." There is hardly any ambiguity here

Ultimately, Philip is 'laying claim to two heritages—one very accessible [white male] the other hidden [black female]. This dichotomy of the white male versus the black female reader highlights Philip's difficult position in relation to the English language. As a black, female, native English speaker, "English is both a mother tongue and a father tongue" The father tongue carries the history of early imperialism, the African diaspora and the values that are associated with European, logocentric epistemology. (Deloughrey 124)

English as a foreign language belonging to white masters, becomes the language of the father as the law giver, of authority given in the Edicts that appear alongside the poem. It cannot also be ignored that the poet, in referring to the mother tongue and the father tongue is obviously pointing to the contradictions between the powerful and the powerless, the exploiter and the exploited, the master and the slave, with power and authority vested with the white male, while the black/ female is presented as a victim of this authority. Philip draws on these contradictions, which, she later says in an interview with Patricia Saunders, "were what [she] wanted," (216) and explores a unique writerly devise that could point to the different discourses of the powerful and the powerless, to "explode" the restrictions imposed by the white colonial masters: "I think the impulse to mess with form may have to do with our history and how much the colonial powers attempted to restrict us and put us into categories and forms" (Saunders 215). As the language of authority the *Edicts I* and *II* (30-32) lay down the brutal laws by which the powerless slaves are rendered voiceless, and are printed on the right hand side of the poem, pointing to the political correctness of the space that they occupy. The faltering, broken language of the black African Caribbean, on the other hand, is positioned to the left of the edicts.

That the white master takes the place of the Father is also not very surprising, not only because of his 'legal' imperial authority, but also literally as the biological father considering the extent of physical and sexual violence, and rape of black slave women in the Caribbean islands. The story printed in all bold letters on the left margin is strategically placed to boldly narrate the effect of the white master's sexual exploitation of the black woman, and the enforced laws of the edicts that have silenced the native languages. "THE CREAMY WHITE SUBSTANCE" covering the body of the "NEWBORN CHILD" (30) while symbolic of the superficial identity of the Caribbean as a consequence of the corruptive influence of the white master, it is also suggestive of the dehumanization of the black people by the white. The black female body then, like the language that it uses, becomes the site of conflict between the two races. Like an animal cleaning its newborn of the amniotic fluid covering its body the mother in this section licks her child "UNTIL SHE HAD TONGUED IT CLEAN OF THE CREAMY WHITE SUBSTANCE" (30). The suggestion is clear—the dehumanization of the black slave through sexual abuse and physical exploitation. If as a symbol, the tongue refers to "the overseer's whip," (33) as an organ of the human body, a sexual organ and "the principal organ of articulate speech" (33) it becomes a synecdoche for all forms of English "oppression and exploitation" (33). It is only a mother[s] tongue that can help, through metamorphosis of the organ of

exploitation into an organ for fostering through transformation of the “whimper” of the newborn child into “HER WORDS, HER MOTHER'S WORDS, THOSE OF HER MOTHER'S MOTHER” (32), to overcome the oppressor's language. Philip lays claim that “in the absence of any language by which the past may be repossessed, reclaimed and its most painful aspects transcended, English in its broadest spectrum must be made to do the job” (“Absence of Writing” 18). She draws our attention to “Africa as a powerful presence in the Caribbean,” and to the association between a nurturing mother and Africa: “For me, it is a mothering presence, a mother who has been hidden and despised and who has nurtured that effervescent ability to overcome this attempt to erase you and to create something that is living, breathing, and beautiful” (697). Her play on the words ‘mother’ and ‘tongue’ also makes us wonder of an implicit reference to Isaiah XI 15, the drying up the Red Sea to bridge the distance between Europe and Africa as a reminder and reproach to white man's incursions into the African lands, and the Middle Passage. Drawing associations between the land and the violated body, the poet refers to the loss of a mother land/ tongue:

I have no mother
tongue
no mother to tongue
no tongue to mother
to mother
tongue
me

Philip discovered that she could not challenge the history of African displacement and slavery, of plantation economy, and colonisation without challenging the language that she had inherited. Evie Shockley, in her Foreword (2014) to Philip's collection, draws attention to what Philip sees as the “challenge... facing the African Caribbean writer” of “us[ing] the language in such a way that the historical realities... are not erased or obliterated, so that English is revealed as the tainted tongue it truly is” (xii). But the irony, the poet realizes, is that in order to achieve her purpose, she has to use the same English language. Jamaica Kincaid, another Caribbean writer, remarks in her polemical work, *A Small Place*: “Isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?” (44). Like other writers from the Caribbean, such as Merle Hodge, Lorna Goodison, and Grace Nichols, who claim a right to creole forms of the English language in favour of what Kamau Brathwaite calls “nation language,” Philip also claims such a right, but prefers to refer to it as “Caribbean demotic” because “nation,” as she says, “is a male discourse,” (Mahlis 684). She poses this demotic against the British or “Queen's English” as a subversion of what is considered as standard, and claims the broken language, “a dumb tongue,” of silences laced with “another tongue”: “dub-tongued,” (30) as her mother tongue. The demotic as a reminder of European colonial incursions into African space is explained by Philip in her interview with Mahlis:

I'm far more interested in playing with the whole idea of *demotique*, going back to Egypt, to draw a bead—so to speak, on the hidden histories of the people responsible for the richly subversive language of the Caribbean. The demotic was the popular or vulgar form of Egyptian writing and opposed to the hieratic or priestly style. And it was this meaning and the fact that it is specifically related to Egypt that attracted me to this word as a descriptive term for Caribbean languages. Because as you know until recently Western scholarship had been successful in removing Egypt

from Africa. To rename what was traditionally described as “bad English” with a word of Greek origin harking back to Egyptian writing as a nice riposte and subversive of categories (684-85).

The strategy that Philip adopts to go beyond the mere use of language as an instrument to curse, as Caliban did in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, is to boldly experiment with the ‘form’ of a poem. She shares her views regarding the importance of form for her in illustrating black African experience in the Caribbean: “The form of the poem becomes not only a more true reflection of the experience out of which it came, but also as important as the content. The poem as a whole, therefore, becomes a more accurate mirror of the circumstances that underpin it” (“Managing” 298). Shockley makes note of Philip's experimentation in “Discourse on the Logic of Language”:

Though it is technically four pages, I read it as two two-page spreads, each of which contains four ‘voices’ speaking in distinct discourses. One speaks in a recognizably ‘poetic’ discourse: this text, which is lined and centered on the left-hand page, progresses via repetition, with subtle but powerful variations. Another, represented in italics and located in the right margin of the left-hand page, announces ‘edicts’ in a legal discourse. A third, in the left margin of the left-hand page, in all capital letters and landscape orientation, offers a storytelling discourse. And the last ‘voice’ dominates the whole right-hand page: like the first, it is in normal typeface, but its unlined paragraphs communicate through the ‘objective’ discourse of education: the prose of a textbook or reference volume. (xii)

Philip's “Discourse” engages in an intertextual discursive act as a mode of resistance. The several discourses are so positioned in the text that the discursive act becomes more meaningful within the formal structure in which they are laid. Conscious of the presence of a reader on both her right and her left side, the three discourses on the right hand pages of the four page long poem are situated strategically on the left, right, and centre, their position determined by the nature of their discourse. Philip writes, “As a writer, I had been aware for some time of a reader over my right shoulder: white, Oxford-educated, and male. Over my left shoulder...was an old wizened and ‘wisened’ black woman” (Managing 297). In the “Discourse” the effect on the left margin, is explained by the cause on the right in prose. The poetry, which illustrates the subjective experience of dispossession and deformity is situated in the middle, between the two prose narratives. The framing of the three discourses on the same page give to the reader three different voices, which when textually analysed give to us the result in the last page as a set of ‘objective,’ multiple choice type, but rhetorical questions. The text then begins to speak for itself as the different voices confront the reader on the face of the page as a visual image. Dorothy Smith notes, “The notion of discourse displaces the analysis from the text as originating in writer or thinker, to the discourse itself as an ongoing intertextual process” (161). On the right margin are the *Edicts* of white slave holders in unembodied voice, addressed to a second person, and framed to suit the purpose of their formulators in brutal ‘standard’ language of enforced law. On the left margin is the third-person narrative voice in poetic prose as a storytelling device, which uses imageries to illustrate the dehumanizing effect of the law. In the middle, in poetic form is the illustration in broken, spliced language, of the subjective experience of the first-person “I” as it undergoes the pain of being uprooted and dispossessed of mother/tongue, of what is given only in the form of imageries in the third person narrative voice. The writer realizes that narrative representation of the Caribbean experience in a broken/spliced language, in standard forms, whether as history or story, becomes problematic. The residues of the tyrannical history on the cultural memory have such a corrosive effect that rational thinking gets affected, representation, though not untrue, becomes deformed, and speech becomes impossible. Speech fails to express the pain of the loss suffered, and the

narrative voice becomes "dumb-tongued/ dub-tongued" (30). It is then that language stutters, words become utterances, and discourse reversed.

Whereas the master uses logic as a tool of exploitation, the language of the muted race is that of shame, of protest, of enforced loyalty, of withdrawal into the dark recesses of foetal non-existence. Visibly pregnant with the "anguish" that the black African Caribbean was forced to use, the palpitating broken rhythm of the poem makes the reader undergo the pains of a difficult labour, and the birth of a new language. It makes the pain 'speak itself' instead of merely reporting. The form of the poem is so manipulated that it brings about a dialogue between "two modes of discourses" — between the "objectivity" of a narrative "defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator" and the "subjectivity" of the discourse "given by the presence, explicit or implicit, of an ego" to borrow from Hayden White's (3) reading of Benveniste and the distinction between discourse and narrative.

Whereas in conventional poems the ambiguous nature of language is employed to convey several layers of meaning, in Philip's "Discourse" with its different narrative voices — coercive, empirical, prose and poetic — confronting each other on a single platform, the political purpose of the text becomes apparent, communicated to the reader without ambiguity. In the two narratives on the right and the left, where events are recorded as they "appear on the horizon of the story ... no one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves" (White 3). The new "Discourse," the "demotic" now pushes the language of logic to the "horizon," displacing the standard, legal and authoritative language of the powerful English colonizer and slave owner to the margins, and itself taking the central position. The shifting margin between the 'objective' and the 'subjective' narratives reverses the relation between the centre and the periphery. The third person narrative on the left makes the narrative voice ambiguous with implicit reference to the black female identity of the narrator. And if this third person narrative of and about the black mother, uses the standard English which she inherits from her white master, is positioned to the left margin, it is printed in bold letters and is in landscape orientation, so that the reader must turn the page sideways to be able to read, it is as if to underscore boldly the demotic "tongue" of the African Caribbean. As Foucault states

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than sciences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourses can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (100-101).

What emerges in Philip's text, with poetic and non-poetic discourses confronting each other, then may not at all appear as a poem. However, the "Discourse" presents itself as poetry "in which the dominant function is the orientation toward the message" (Waugh 58). The "Discourse" may be seen as the "complex superstructure" of Roman Jakobson's *vers libre* depending on the co-presence of both poetry and prose to serve its end. The poetry in first person in the middle, trapped between the literary and fictional prose on the left, and the legal discourse on the right, best illustrates the Afro-Caribbean cultural and linguistic situation in spatial terms as undergoing a transitional phenomena. Similarly, it is also bound between scientific writing and 'objective' textbook/evaluative discourse. As such, these various texts exemplify Jakobson's notion of prose as "transitional phenomena" (Waugh 59) or an intermediate state in which 'literary prose' "closer to the poetic end," and 'practical prose' "closer to the referential" become intertwined (Waugh 59). Seen as a structural whole, the

"Discourse" calls attention to its autotelic and autoreferential nature, and foregrounds the social and historical dimensions of the Afro Caribbean reality. In a manner, by literally placing the text and the context on the same plane, Philip combats not only literary norms, but also the hierarchy of the several discourses. History, memory and language come together to demonstrate that "even poetry and the way it was brought to, and taught in, the Caribbean was a way of management" ("Managing" 296). The poem is so structured to redefine the 'margins' to which the blacks were pushed as 'frontier' from where, Philip says, "we can empower ourselves" ("Managing" 296).

The different discourses in Philip's poem have also been referred to by other critics, but differently. Naomi Guttman, for example, chooses to look at the other discourses besides the legal discourse as discourses of amnesia, aphasia, and mythical discourse. The mythical discourse, of course, makes reference to the mother-daughter story as illustrated through characters like Ceres and Proserpine in other poems in the collection. While the aphasic and amnesic discourses make obvious reference to scientific discourses on 'linguistic disorders' I go on to elaborate the way the poem cites, only to challenge, nineteenth-century scientific discourses, which used the white man's "knowledge" as instrument to justify and establish the superiority of the white races over women and other races. The prose used in this discourse is that of textbooks to give the 'findings' of two nineteenth-century physicians, Dr Broca and Dr Wernicke. According to these physicians the physiological structure of the brain determined human intelligence:

Dr. Broca believed the size of the brain determined intelligence; he devoted much of his time to 'proving' that white males of the Caucasian race had larger brains than, and were, therefore, superior to, women, Blacks and other people of colour.

Understanding and recognition of the spoken word takes place in Wernicke's area — the frontal lobe, situated next to the auditory cortex; from there relevant information passes to Broca's area — situated next to the left frontal cortex — which then forms the response and passes it on to the motor cortex. The motor cortex controls the muscles of speech. (31)

Pierre Paul Broca, a nineteenth century French physician, anatomist and anthropologist, and Carl Wernicke, a German physician and anatomist in their research identified the cause of aphasia, or "speechlessness"—the inability to comprehend or formulate language—to be damage to the left hemisphere of the brain. Philip's poem, on the other hand, works to demonstrate that the association of the broken language of the Afro-Caribbean with a pathological condition ignores the cultural amnesia, the actual factors responsible for their lack of a mother tongue. Roman Jakobson suggests that even before it can be considered as a neurological or psychological problem it must be realized that "aphasia is first and foremost a disintegration of language" ("On Aphasic Disorders..." 93). The linguistic impact on a mass of people of the tyrannical history of colonization, displacement and slavery, and consequent miscegenation, hybridization and creolization cannot certainly be explained simply as a pathological condition. As if in an answer to the pathologized understanding of language which ignores acquired and spontaneous use of it in many cultures, the poem in broken English is significantly placed between the 'pure' usages. The pure usage, on the other hand, the poem displays, is either imposed, and therefore, oppressive as in the *Edicts*, or acquired as a mother tongue: "THE MOTHER THEN PUT HER FINGERS INTO HER CHILD'S MOUTH—GENTLY FORCING IT OPEN; SHE TOUCHES HER TONGUE TO THE CHILD'S TONGUE" (32). In either case both languages are 'acquired.' Tyrone Williams in her review of *She Tries Her Tongue* notes that all the poems in Philip's collection "argue that all language is acquired and that all languages, therefore, may be regarded as either one's actual or

potential mother tongues. But it's precisely the differences between the actual and the potential that constitute history—here, the history of colonialism” (227).

Philip manipulates the inherited language just so much so as to claim it as her own, in agreement to Kincaid's words:

it didn't bother the Dutch at all to take a flower that didn't grow in their country and just take it on so that now the world thinks of tulips as Dutch. And it adds to the Dutch. But we can't do that; we don't do that. More and more people who look like me cling to their narrow definitions of themselves. They will not take anything that doesn't have some sort of phony or some kind of ancestral image—to Africa or anywhere else. But it is really a sign of defeat when you cling so much. What you ought to do is take back. Not just claim. Take—period. Take anything. Take Shakespeare. Just anything that makes sense. Just take it. That's just fine.” (Ferguson 168)

Philip will not just claim a mother tongue, but she will use it to manipulate the “form” of a standard English poem to put it “in its place”:

by cramping the space traditionally given the poem itself, by forcing it to share its space with something else—an extended image about women, words, language and silence; with the edicts that established the parameters of silence for the African in the New World, by giving more space to descriptions of the physiology of speech, the scientific legacy of racism we have inherited, and by questioning the tongue as organ and concept, poetry is put in its place. (“Managing” 297)

As a “text” that can be visualised, the poem helps the reader to conceptualize the linguistic violation of a race just as the tongue as an “offending organ” of the “slave caught speaking his native language” was to be put on display “so that all may see and tremble” (Edict II, 32). The “Discourse” becomes a graphic image of a collective experience that not only needs to be ‘seen’ but understood as a linguistic object that challenges the rule governed nature of discourse. Philip's poem dismantles a hierarchical structure to arrive at a discourse, not of communication but of confrontation.

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