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Jeet Thayil in conversation with Esterino Adami

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Jeet Thayil is a prolific Indian writer, who has published extensively, moving across different genres and styles, and working with poetry, fiction, and music. He was educated at Island School (Hong Kong), Wilson College (Mumbai), and also obtained a Master of Fine Arts from Sarah Lawrence College (New York). His verses have appeared in the *Anthology of Contemporary Indian Poetry* (2015), and as a poet he has written six collections of lyrics: *Gemini* (1992), *Apocalypso* (1997), *English* (2004), *These Errors are Correct* (2008), which was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award, *Collected Poems* (2015) and *I'll Have it Here* (2024). Thayil has also edited several anthologies such as *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (2008) and *The Penguin Book of Indian Poets* (2022), as well as a collection of essays entitled *Divided Time: India and the End of Diaspora* (2006). He is the author of five novels: *Narcopolis* (2011), shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and The Hindu Literary Prize, and winner of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, *The Book of Chocolate Saints* (2017), *Low* (2019), *Names of the Women* (2021) and *Melanin*, forthcoming this year. Thayil is a musician, a songwriter and a guitarist, and has written a libretto entitled *Babur in London* for the Opera Group. He has also worked as a journalist in India, in the USA and in Hong Kong. This interview was conducted by email in August 2024: we would like to thank Jeet Thayil for his kind and generous participation.

Hello Jeet, it is a great pleasure for us to be in touch with you and hear your opinion on a range of topics. Since this special issue is devoted to the study of the idea of style across various disciplines, I'd like to ask you, first of all, what style is for you, also considering that you have experimented with a series of creative fields and genres, from literature and poetry to music. Is there a univocal definition of

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style? Or can we say that style is a sort of umbrella term? And then, how do writers and artists approach style?

Thanks, Esterino, for your questions. It's a pleasure to be in conversation with you. I started writing poetry and prose around the same time I started to play music, at the age of fourteen. Which means I've been at it now for fifty years. In those decades my practice has rarely been interrupted by theory, so I look forward to considering the theoretical side of the coin.

Let me start by saying that style is more than an umbrella term. I think 'style' is a variant of 'voice', which might be the most elusive and irreplaceable of the components that make up a work of art. It applies across genres. For instance, it's possible to recognize John Coltrane's style even if his improvisation were tabulated and played on a different instrument, say a piano or a guitar. The particular way in which a cascade of notes occurs is something we call Coltranean. Similarly, there are other artists whose style we recognize if we undergo a blind test. The advent of AI is proof, if any were needed, that style is something in the DNA, something irreplaceable. You can prompt AI to write in the style of a poet, or a novelist, but the result is either embarrassing or oddly misbegotten. It is never satisfactory, at least not yet. For artists who work across genres it can be a liberation to imagine that style will survive whatever the formal expectations placed upon it, whatever the mechanics of transition from one form to another. Which leads me to the conclusion that style, far from being a mere umbrella term or a portmanteau expression, is all that remains of us. Even if it's tenuous, it is instantly recognizable. Unlike the role of poetry in Frost's well-known aphorism, style is the thing that is not lost in translation.

A personal question: we know that you were born in Kerala, that you come from a Syrian Christian family, and that you were educated in Jesuit schools in India, Hong Kong and the USA. How do all these phases of your life impact on and cohabit in your identity?

I was educated at Jesuit and Catholic schools until the age of about sixteen, St. Xavier's in Bombay, St. Joseph's in Hong Kong, and St. Agnes in New York. The Jesuits were less forgiving than the Catholics. In terms of punishment, they favoured a ruler's edge brought down hard on the palm of your hand, rather than six Hail Marys, or a confession. But they were scholars, readers, curious about the world made by men, as well as the other world, beyond the reach of men. Interestingly, most of the Jesuit teachers I knew had had genuine struggles

with faith and doubt. They never took faith for granted. It was a hard-won understanding and a kind of daily reckoning. For a time, when we were living in Hong Kong, my father insisted on family Bible readings every evening, possibly in the hope of bringing his wayward son back to the straight and narrow. The result of all this was an early appreciation, on my part, for the Old Testament as an inexhaustible literary text, a living set of parables and metaphors in a language ripe for the unpicking. I was less convinced by the New Testament, which may be why some decades later I retold parts of it in poems and in the novel *Names of the Women*. So much for literary identity. When it comes to identity in general, a fraught word these days, I am still subject to religious belief, bordering on fervour during times of trouble. The understanding that faith, like superstition, is irrational, doesn't change anything. Prayer can be comfort; poetry can be prayer.

Contemporary narratologists often discuss not only the role of the writer, but also that of the reader, arguing that, after a writer has finished their work, this "belongs" to readers and it is up to them to construct the meaning of the text. Do you agree with this view? Many of your works, for example, are complex, plural, at times even obscure, and yet readers all over the world do appreciate your writing. In your opinion, how do they approach and interpret your characters and your stories?

Having been a reader long before I was a writer, I have to agree with this construct. All writing belongs to all readers. Which is why it's better to paint a scene or a character with some ambiguity, even obscurity. That space around the image or idea allows the reader to fill it in with their own imaginative interpretation. The best poets know this. I have no idea how readers interpret my writing. I only know that they do. I am often struck by the unexpected colorations a reader may bring to a story or a poem, the pictures they come up with, the personal stories they invoke. This is the ancient contract between writer and reader. When we hear the Biblical injunction from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 'Whereof thou cannot speak, thereof thou must remain silent,' each of us is struck differently. Each of us is assailed by a unique set of emotions and images. And this is as it should be. You, the writer, have to be controlling beyond reason to expect each reader to respond in the same way, that is, in the way you intended. Contrary to popular belief, lovingly espoused by writers, the writer is not God.

*Your Bombay Trilogy (*Narcopolis*;* The Book of Chocolate Saints*;* Low*) shares a number of stylistic traits, for example in terms of multiple focalisation, metaphors and recurring images. It seems to me that these novels are not just about low life and drugs in Mumbai but rather they try to depict an alternative and complex dimension of India, distant from the usual stereotypes that sometimes are attributed to contemporary Indian English fiction. Your texts show various bizarre characters like unreliable poets, decadent drunkards and visionary hijras (i.e. transgender persons in India), the shift from the 1970s-1980s to the present-day time, and baffle the reader. How would you describe them?*

The baffled reader is a familiar figure in my imaginative life. I've been one myself on several occasions. If the Bombay Trilogy has unsettled or baffled readers, it has succeeded in one of its intentions. I think bafflement helps you recast mistaken ideas that may have been preconceived. For instance, the idea that India is a place of spiritual growth and mystic solace peopled by gurus and godmen who are not charlatans, that the Indian family is a nurturing ecosystem run by loving elders, that the statisticians must be wrong when they tell us India has alarming rates of child abuse and most of these incidents occur within the family, that rural India is peopled with happy well-fed villagers eager to welcome you into their homes with a hot meal and rosewater, that the caste system has been eradicated or subdued and all citizens receive an equal chance at happiness, that child marriage and the shunning of widows are things of the past, that Indians are comedically preoccupied with mangoes, pickles, assorted spices, the gentlemanly game of cricket and the wearing of saris, that the Indian monsoon is for rain-drenched lovers to pirouette along a gently heaving shoreline, that middle-class protagonists spend their days reading Chekhov and their nights reading Gogol, that proper names are an opportunity for the delicate weighing of nuance, that violence is a distant drum far removed from the well-appointed drawing rooms of the inspirational classes and the genteel if shabby rooms of the aspirational classes, that horror is an apparition created for the movie screen and not something your next-door neighbour is fomenting, that weddings are endearing three-day celebrations in which family honour is vindicated and every guest has a wonderful time, that Hindus, Muslims and Christians live together in perfect harmony, that Indians prefer to say yes rather than no. I could go on, but let me stop here. The India I have known is far removed from these literary and societal stereotypes. And if the Indian writers who say yes have had their say, then perhaps the time has come for the Indian writer who says no.

To some extent, in your novels, Bombay (now named Mumbai) appears as a sort of character and this is a homage to a lively, dynamic and perhaps contradictory city. What is the real identity and nature of this incredible city, also considering that it keeps growing and changing? For example, now people are not even aware that originally it was an island city. Moving to fiction, there are many novels about Bombay, but your stories reverse the usual perspective and unveil some marginal corners, characters and events. Would you like to expand this point? And how about the relation between Bombay and the rest of India? Is it still possible for Bombay to keep its unique nature against the backdrop of the huge transformations that are reshaping India?

Originally seven islands, Bombay was a 16th-century Portuguese colonial possession acquired by the British as a royal dowry. It was so little prized that the Portuguese were happy to give it away. In 1668, Charles II leased it, for ten pounds a year, to the East India Company, the rapacious entity that became the world's first and most brutal drug cartel. Only in the middle of the 19th century did it become one land mass through successive land reclamation projects. As you point out, not very many Bombayites are aware of this tumultuous history. And you can't blame them. There's not enough time to develop a historical consciousness when you are running to stand still. There have been any number of ferocious changes in the three decades since the reforms and economic liberalisation of the early 1990s. But it hasn't been a uniform change. In some parts of the city the visitor will be reminded of Berlin or Queens, but in other parts you will find only institutionalised regression, tribal solidarity, barely-repressed violence. The city's true nature is a mix of these opposed forces that meet daily on the roads during traffic jams and everywhere else during times of upheaval and natural calamity, for instance the religious riots of 1992 and the floods of 2005. After each of these upheavals, some columnist or pundit will write about 'the spirit of Bombay' and how resilient the people are, how unstoppable is the city's will to succeed. Another false stereotype. The reason Mumbaikars get up the next day and go to work is because they have no choice. The city is a beast that eats its weak and victimises its young. You have to work to survive. This has always been the case and it won't change anytime soon. What makes Bombay different from the rest of India is the fact that talent, or beauty, or hard work, or luck, can change your life. It's addictive and self-devouring, and difficult to exit.

Before you turned to fiction, you extensively worked with poetry and authored six collections of poems. What is the power of poetry, and what is the role of poetry in a world that seems to ignore it, being overwhelmed by the speed of modernity, online communication and consumable culture?

As I said in a previous answer, poetry has a quality of consolation or solace that works in the way prayer does. You cannot say this about other kinds of writing. I think it's a question of trust. You trust poetry because you know it hasn't been tainted, or not as much. There's a reason for this, for its supremacy among the various forms of writing: poetry is the only vocation of which it emphatically can be said that its practitioners are not engaged in the pursuit of money. There is no money in poetry, or very little compared to the labour and sacrifice it entails. Philosophy may be another such profession, with one great difference. Poetry is not the exclusive domain of the upper classes and those with family money. There are working class poets, and poets without publishers or teaching gigs or stipends or grants. The ancient quarrel between philosophers and poets exists, to this day, because each group thinks of itself as the unacknowledged legislators of the race. It's an age-old rivalry, the secret reason poets are not welcome in Plato's Republic, the reason he derided the influence of Homer, the reason he placed poets among the accusers of Socrates, the reason he dismissed poets as mere imitators of reality. In Plato's time, poetry was sung or recited and it was more influential than philosophy. The times have most decidedly changed. In today's fractured world – where attention spans have shrunk and screens are worshipped like idols – poets and philosophers are equally marginalized. I won't speak for philosophers, but I think it's fair to say that a society that ignores its poets is a society in peril.

How do you manipulate language to create verses that speak to readers? We know you were somehow influenced by the Bombay School of Poets, Dom Moraes in primis*, as well as other western writers, but can you tell us if other authors or works had some impact on your creativity?*

Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, and Dylan Thomas's *Collected Poems*. I discovered these books at the age of thirteen, thanks to my father, whose library included a lot of poetry, and thanks also to my uncle, who was obsessed with Baudelaire and the French Symbolists. Decadent poets aren't the most beneficial or optimistic of influences for an impressionable thirteen-year-old, but there you have it. As with other poets who came of age at that time

and place, Anglophone Bombay in the Eighties and Nineties, I was influenced by the British poets of the mid-twentieth century and the Americans of the mid- and late-twentieth century. Here's a short list: Auden, Hopkins, Hughes, Hill, Teasdale, Moore, Bishop, Berryman, Lowell, Roethke, Crane, Plath, Sexton, Wright (father and son), Notley, Berrigan, O'Hara, Ricard, Spicer, Knott, Orr, Gilbert, Gregg, Kumunyakaa, the list goes on. I still read and am influenced by a number of more contemporary poets, Les Murray, Derek Walcott, Frederick Seidel, Glyn Maxwell, Pascale Petit, Imtiaz Dharker, Terrance Hayes, Megan Fernandes, to name a few. Some of my teachers left an impression that remains: Gerald Stern, Thomas Lux, Vijay Seshadri. Then there are the poets who exist as personal talismans: Dante, Keats, Osip Mandelstam, Joseph Brodsky, Celan. Cesare Pavese's *Disaffections*, in the Geoffrey Brock translation, profoundly affected or disaffected me.

Let me return to your fictional prose, and ask you about Names of the Women *(2021), a novel that reveals and discusses some female characters from the Gospel, from Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany to Herodias and her daughter Salome. Where did you find the inspiration for this novel? Readers who are not familiar with your interests might wonder why an Indian author should write a fictional text about female characters from the Bible. Does this text concern the condition of womanhood at large? Or does its subtext refer to gender issues in India today? Could you please tell us about the stylistic characteristics of this form of retelling?*

I've been reading the Bible from a fairly young age and I was always struck by the language. I thought of it as a kind of secret/sacred literary text. I loved the cadence, the ominous grandeur of it. On rereading the New Testament some years ago, I was struck for the first time by something I hadn't noticed earlier, that the women are peripheral characters even if they are responsible for pivotal events in the story of Christ. For instance, his resurrection is discovered by women, he is accompanied on his final journey by women, it is the women who stay with him through the lonely vigil on the cross. Some of the parables are set in motion by women. Even when the story is ostensibly about a man, Lazarus, for instance, it is the women who play central roles. I understood why this had come to be. The stories were written by men at a time when women were not given credit for anything. I thought there was a way to remedy this by retelling the story from the perspective of the women. I am a Kerala Christian, born into one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, more than two thousand years old, and I think of the Bible as a kind of birthright. All of it belongs to

me, as much as the mystic poems of the Bhakti saint Mirabai belong to me. And I've never subscribed to the dictum beloved of Master of Fine Arts programs that you must 'write what you know'. What an intolerable world it would be if writers only wrote what they knew. We would be subject to an infinite stream of autofiction. I can't imagine anything duller. There's a reason we were endowed with the gift of imagination: it is to widen our world, to inhabit other lives, to know other times. *Names of the Women* certainly refers to the kind of patriarchal society I am only too familiar with. India has never outgrown the wound of misogyny. The story of a woman being stoned to death for an imagined infraction is not out of place in modern India. This country's institutionalized culture of rape is a clear indicator of its institutionalized misogyny. I think the novel grew out of outrage. There are women who would insist that as a man I have no right to outrage, being a member of the gender that perpetrates crimes against women. I would beg to differ. As a human and as a writer, I have the right. It might even be a duty. The stylistic approach in this novel had one overriding model. I wanted to use that Biblical cadence, that sense of an apocalyptic poetic utterance, and I wanted to temper it with modern syntax. The monologues of Christ on the cross are probably the most overtly Biblical in style. Otherwise, *Names of the Women* is told in the third person, though it still retains the form of direct address.

A large part of your artistic life has to do with music since you are a songwriter and a guitarist. How did you first approach music? I've read that you started some thirty or forty years ago, in a band called Atomic Forest, and that you were also part of an electro-pop duo (Sridhar/Thayil) that experimented with various genres, mixing jazz, blues, and Indian classical music. Some videos of your performances are available on YouTube, but please tell us more about your music experiences.

I started to write and play music around the same time, at the age of fourteen, that is to say, a half-century ago. When I'm writing a song I don't obsess about the words as much as I do when I'm writing a poem. There are so many other factors at work in music, the chordal structure, the melody, the rhythm, other musicians and the qualities they bring. For some reason, I allow myself to be looser, more relaxed when it comes to writing and performing music. I've been in a number of bands in Hong Kong, in Bombay, in Delhi, in Berlin and in New York. A listing of the names of these bands is a partial history of those decades, of the non-linear progression from psychedelia to post-punk to electronica: Fuge, Atomic Forest, Feedback, Cosmic Junk, Krossroads, The Toys, Breeze,

Bombay Down, Baja, the Chronic Blues Band, Still Dirty, HMT (named after a defunct Indian watch company), Cost of Living Crisis, ISSAI, as well as other collectives too short-lived to mention.

I've seen that some ten years ago you were commissioned to write the libretto for Babur in London*, a production organised by the Opera Group, which pivots around the figure of the founder of the Mughal empire in northern India, Babur (1483-1530), to discuss issues such as contemporary London's multiculturalism and the ideas of religion and fanaticism. How did you have to adjust your style and writing for that task?*

When writing libretti, I take as a guide Mozart's rule that in traditional opera 'poetry has to be the obedient daughter of music'. What this means is that poetry must be stripped to its essence. What you can get rid of, you must get rid of. I mean most prepositions and conjunctions can and should be jettisoned. Nouns and verbs must be retained. Pronouns, adjectives and adverbs may be retained only when necessary. When a line of verse is sung, wordiness becomes a drawback. Compression is key. Time is malleable when a soprano embodies a word and stretches it for seconds and minutes. It changes your approach to the writing, you think constantly of compression, and this can be a good thing. Poetry *is* compression. I thought of *Babur in London* as a kind of *opera magica*. Supernatural events are in play, ghosts walk and talk, ghosts sing, time travels; and all of this occurs in a completely modern setting.

Talking about style also means considering imagination, creativity and originality, but in our futuristic age we have to think about the role of Artificial Intelligence and similar software programmes. You are a writer, a poet, a musician, an editor, all roles that to some extent have to come to terms with this new world. What is your position about it? Will creative works be affected or even replaced by non-human entities in the future? Can an AI write a 'good novel'?

This is the beginning of AI, the very earliest stage. At this point AI can write a novel but it cannot write a good novel. This is likely to change as it becomes better and learns a more accomplished form of mimicry. The next generation of the technology may be able to copy and paste the quick burn of the imagination and the mystery of a firing neuron. If you've heard music produced by AI you'll notice the anodyne formulaic conception, how serviceable it is, and how dull. I have no doubt that there is a segment of people who don't mind art

produced by AI, as it's likely to be cheaper and more palatable. But there will always be those among us who prefer their art to be flawed and dishevelled and vulnerable, in short, human.

One final question, before thanking you once again for your contribution to this issue of our Journal. Currently, are you involved in some new project? Do you plan to write a new novel, or a new collection of poems? Please, say yes ;-)

I'm happy to say yes on both counts. I have a new novel, *Melanin*, out in July. And I have a new book of poems, *I'll Have it Here*, my first in sixteen years, which was published by HarperCollins India late last year. Here's a poem from that book:

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Shams al-Din the Tangerine is twenty-one
when he sets off on pilgrimage.
A year or two, he imagines, then back home
to practise law like his father and his father's father.
Introducing himself as Ibn Battuta, he visits
two hundred and eleven towns and cities
in forty countries across three continents.
It isn't the pilgrimage that interests him now
but the vagaries of the travelling life.
To ride into a town and look for somewhere to stay.
To hear of a coastal city to the south and find berth on a ship,
the ship boarded by pirates,
wrecked against the rocks of a giant coast.
To be kidnapped, to escape, to fall sick
with an ailment that seems to originate in the bones.
Slowly, over days and weeks in a dim room,
over countless cups of bone broth, he is nursed back to health.
On an island in the Maldives, whose inhabitants depend
on a diet of aphrodisiacal coconuts and fish,
he takes four wives, the legal limit,
spending "the night with the wife whose turn it was,
and this I continued to do the whole year and a half I was there."
In all he marries ten times, keeps concubines and lets them go,

has five or a dozen children, survives a plague,
becomes a scholar, a judge, the writer
of the Rihla, or A Masterpiece to Those Who Contemplate
the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling.
For three decades he travels. He never wants to go home.
That year the Aztecs build Tenochtitlan over marshland,
using a system of aqueducts, artificial islands and drainage.
They like to bathe two or three times a day.
In Europe, rather than bathe, they are using perfume.
Rather than plumbing, chamber pots and thunderboxes.
What they enjoy is a good war.
It's the beginning of the Little Ice Age.
What are the poets of the world doing?
Already adept at time travel,
they are futurists one day, nostalgists the next.
They are fluent in mathematics.
They know they're necessary for the progress of the race.
They don't know they'll be flattened by the meaning of money.