BEYOND CONTRARIES

Eastern philosophy—vast and diverse as it is—is replete with references to the paradoxical nature of reality. Peter Elbow’s play with paradox as a way to shatter oppositional thinking and truly “embrace contraries,” specifically, his work with “contraries” as a vital dialectic (such as “doubt” and “belief”), resembles Taoist concepts of yin and yang and Hindu concepts of pan and apan (meditation on the “contraries” of inhalation and exhalation of breath). For Elbow, as with Eastern meditative traditions, embracing contraries yields a consciousness nonattached to either pole of an apparent contradiction but, rather, a deepening attentiveness to their reciprocal interaction.

One’s initial impression of Elbow’s contraries might be that they are an extension of the dichotomous thinking found in Descartes and other positivists. Let me be specific: this, indeed, was the case with me in first reading him. Thus, Elbow has presented me with an essential challenge in light of what can appear to be his dualistic framework, one incompatible with Eastern practices that continually challenge dichotomies in order to embrace a consciousness that is reciprocal rather than oppositional.

To be sure, Elbow’s prose is packed with contraries. A mere glance at the table of contents in Embracing Contraries yields such seeming binaries as “two roots of real learning,” “the interaction of conflicting elements [in ‘cooking’],” “two kinds of thinking by teaching writing,” “contraries in responding,” and “the value of dialectic,” to name a few. These contraries at surface appear to extend Elbow’s seeming dichotomy of “doubt and belief” presented in Writing Without Teachers and perhaps to reinforce the kind of dualistic thinking our most generous feminist and postmodern thinkers have rightly argued against. In piece after piece, Elbow seems to struggle between two poles of thought, finding value, strangely, in each, yet also, more importantly, within their seemingly contrary interaction.

At the same time, it is important not to read Elbow too narrowly. Interpreting his “contraries” through primarily Western rhetoric alone may very well yield a vision of a writer embattled by and caught within a dichotomous vision. But
what happens if we shift the focus to the East? What vision of Elbow’s contraries emerges? It wasn’t until I was bold enough to subject Elbow’s contraries to the same rigor as my own meditative practices (rooted in Eastern philosophy, particularly the Hindu-yogic tradition), that a more generous understanding of his paradoxes emerged. Furthermore—and a bit unexpectedly—examining Elbow in the light of Eastern philosophy has enabled me to make a critical turn in my own thinking about Eastern traditions themselves and their relevance to Western discourse theory.

Here, I want to be sure not to sound dichotomous myself, pitting, say, East against West. Rather, I’d like to argue that reading Elbow within the perspective of Eastern philosophy is illuminating, given the paradoxes at play within his theories, and that not doing so does him a grave injustice by excluding a more generous view of “opposites” that his writings suggest. Furthermore, given the interactive element of Elbow’s opposites, what could be more apropos than utilizing a further apparent contrary (East and West) to flesh out an interpretation of the value of his work? Finally, it is important to emphasize that the terms Eastern and Western are indeed not monolithic, nor are they separate, or, for that matter, contrary. However, some Eastern meditative theory presents a more complex understanding of contradiction that often gets displaced within the confines of Western logic; as to the issue of a monolithic rendering of both East and West, in examining the East I will limit my discussion to three key wisdom traditions. I will focus on their commonality regarding paradox and reciprocity—the complementary rather than conflictive nature of “contradiction”—rather than nuances of their differences, which might be more appropriate in a study of comparative religion.

Before proceeding further with reading Elbow through this nondualist framework, though, let me first claim as my philosophical ground the Advaita Vedanta tradition—radical (or absolute) nondualism—the dominant school of Hinduism, and within it, the philosophy and practices of yogic meditation. Yoga, comprised of a variety of specific psychospiritual practices, has as its goal the joining or “yoking” of the individual “self” (atman) with the larger, more expansive “Self” (brahman). (The etymology of the word, yoga, itself means “to join, to yoke.”) Therefore, focusing on certain nondual yogic aspects of the Advaita Vedanta tradition can deepen our understanding of the reciprocal nature of Elbow’s contraries.

Self-realization, the Hindu scriptures repeatedly describe, is experiential, and the actual practice of yoga (asanas, or postures, and meditation) is the central method of attaining the nondual state of enlightenment described philosophically. In other words, the study and practice of yoga is a site of metaphysical “praxis,” a true praxis in which theories and practices inform one another in reciprocal, nonhierarchical ways.
Eastern wisdom traditions focus on paradox as a generative rather than debilitating condition (indeed, mystics often describe the meditative experience itself in paradoxical terms as a “full emptiness”); understanding this aspect is key to understanding the reciprocal nature of Elbow’s contraries. For the meditator, attention to apparent contradiction enables the critical transformation of consciousness from oppositional to reciprocal perception—an attentiveness that ultimately allows one to break free of binary constructs altogether. Meditative practices that focus on paradoxical elements often encourage this transformation, particularly by cultivating attentiveness to paradox. This is an attentiveness that Elbow shares—secularly and not necessarily metaphysically—as a means of transforming his contraries into something more reciprocal.

One practice in Hindu-yogic and Zen sitting, for instance, of “watching the breath,” ultimately moves beyond the apparent contradictions of inhalation and exhalation, yielding an awareness in which the perceiving subject is “inside the breath”—so to speak—and is a psychic participant in a reciprocal process rather than an outside observer of dualistic principles. Hindu-yogic emphasis on “mind-body” further attests to the fluidity of apparent contradiction and the fostering of paradox as generative; what the yogi discovers is that mind and body are not separate (but that each influences the other), and he practices attentiveness to this intimate connection, utilizing the interaction of mind and body as a vehicle for liberation from dualistic thinking. Taoism’s *yin* and *yang* (feminine and masculine principles), furthermore, are also complementary rather than contradictory, and Taoism encourages a similar attention to the interplay of opposites as reciprocal, nonhierarchical, and nondualistic (with the *yin* and *yang* visually depicted as a swirl of black and white, respectively, each containing a dot of the other’s color to illustrate their interdependence). Even the practice of Zen *koans* (nonsensical questions such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”) are similarly designed to utilize paradox to shatter one’s concept of both question and answer, reorienting the practitioner to the discursive situation in a more intimate, less binary way.

For Elbow, a similar practice of attentiveness to paradox occurs as a means of attaining—what we might call—“discursive liberation,” in which focus on contraries becomes complementary rather than dichotomous, an attentiveness to apparent contradictions (such as doubt and belief or even the “two elements” of cooking), that renders each as fluid, instable, and negociable. A Peter Elbow “contrary” automatically calls forth its “opposite,” not so much in the Aristotelian tradition of antagonistic dialectics but, rather, in ways more closely aligned in intent with Eastern meditative paradigms where apparent contradictions are complementary and reciprocal, that is, more truly “dialogical.”
Attentiveness to the dialogical interplay of opposites is often the catalyst for “liberation,” what for Elbow might be “insight” or textual luminosity or—for that matter—even just the ability to generate more writing and further thinking.

Consider, for example, Elbow’s ground-breaking work with doubt and belief. His description of each is well-enough known not to warrant detail here; however, for my purposes, it is important to emphasize that Elbow argues that both doubt and belief are present and necessary to some degree in everyone. Furthermore, he makes explicit the crucial apparatus of his investigation, which ultimately becomes metadiscursive—namely, to use one of the poles (doubt) to argue against itself, first, to “grant legitimacy” to the other pole (belief) and, second, to dramatize in a metadiscursive way the importance of remaining attentive to the interaction of what might on the surface be considered contradictory. This is similar to the use of Zen Buddhist koans (such as “What is your face before your parents were born?” [emphasis added]), whose paradoxical structure serves to sever the question from the answer (and, paradoxically, even from the questioner), reorienting one to a fresh experience of reality. That is, Elbow ultimately uses doubt to doubt the doubting game, demonstrating—paradoxically—both its necessity and hindrance:

In a sense this essay is an extended attack on the doubting game. But I make this attack as someone who himself values the doubting game and is committed to it.

My goal is to make the doubting game move over and grant legitimacy to the believing game. (Writing Without Teachers 149–50)

Elbow forcefully depicts the importance of each while arguing (at least on the surface) for one and against the other, as a Buddhist might come to doubt the efficacy of the actual question (as opposed to the discursive structure) of her koan for achieving the experience of the unspeakable. By using doubt against itself, so to speak, Elbow grants it a legitimacy along with belief (even as he states the latter as his goal), posing problems with doubt yet simultaneously placing it into reciprocal alignment with belief.

As I already discussed, Elbow argues that both doubt and belief are present and necessary in everyone. This is not to suggest a benign relativism in Elbow. We clearly see that he has strong commitments to playing the believing game, for instance, and, through implication, to the doubting game. A further paradox that enhances Elbow’s work with contraries, therefore, is not an abandonment of goals but, rather, a reorientation of one’s relationship to those goals in ways that do not privilege them over the process of remaining attentive to the interplay of apparent contradiction, that is, to a deeper understanding of the reciprocal nature of contraries. A similar reorientation occurs in Eastern wisdom traditions. For the contemplative, there is no “transcendent” reality to
speak of, only the liberation of realizing that transcendence and immanence are, first, the same, and second, only constructs to name a nonconceptual reality that one learns to immerse oneself in by not striving after it but by remaining attentive to the paradox. In other words, the mystic has no goal per se, save for the “goal” of achieving heightened awareness (a goal that can remain elusive, ironically, if focused on directly as a goal, placing one outside the experience of heightened attention). The mystic may desire peace, joy, and greater well-being (by-products of remaining attentive to paradox) but can, paradoxically, experience these in their fullest capacity only by relinquishing desire for them. The *Bhagavad Gita* of Hinduism, for instance, is clear about the importance of performing action in the world—even meditating—without desire for the “fruits” of that action.

Elbow has goals for college writing instruction, to be sure (perhaps his *professional* version of peace and well-being), as can be seen throughout his work and in particular in his relationship to academic discourse (see, as some of several examples, *Writing with Power*, *A Community of Writers*, and “Being a Writer”). Even his *Writing Without Teachers* (perhaps the guidebook to “freewriting” and other seemingly process-dominant approaches) begins with an injunction to “improve your writing” through the practice of freewriting (3). Even when Elbow tries to stave off focus on an “immediate product,” he nonetheless still designs his approaches for “their gradual effect on future writing” (11).

In the midst of these goals, however, the overriding principle Elbow reiterates, the one that acts as a constant ground of being for him, is to “cook,” to “keep writing,” to “[l]earn to stand out of the way and provide the energy or force the words need to find their growth process” (*Writing Without Teachers* 48, 24–25). These processes may certainly lead to results that Elbow acknowledges and even aims for. At the same time, it is clear from Elbow’s contraries that he is a writer first and foremost (see *Writing Without Teachers* and “Being a Writer”). Even when he learns the most about writing from his teaching—a pedagogical approach in which the teacher increasingly becomes less dominant as authority and more present as facilitator—it is the process of writing and the practice of *remaining attentive* to its flow, shifts, and paradoxical play (as with the mystic’s focus on the endless play of the universe) that is both the ultimate guide and, if you will, reward.

Thus, rather than wrongly dichotomize the goals issue, we’d do better to read Elbow through the lens of Eastern wisdom traditions and interpret “goals” in the context of the paradoxical processes Elbow advocates. We might therefore fold goals into this paradoxical play as a desirable, even—as is obvious in Elbow’s case—sought-after, by-product of attentiveness to contraries.
This is, then, to assign greater value to the process of negotiation of opposites than to any product these contraries in themselves may yield, suggesting a dialogical strain in Elbow. Here I am thinking, for example, of Bakhtin’s discussion of the dynamic and interdependent aspect of discourses, what he refers to as their “interanimate” and “interilluminating” characteristics (47). This is perhaps most apparent in Elbow’s depiction of what he calls “cooking,” the “interaction of conflicting elements” (Embracing Contraries 40). “Cooking,” he tells us,

consists of the process of one piece of material (or one process) being transformed by interacting with another: one piece of material being seen through the lens of another, being dragged through the guts of another, being reoriented or reorganized in terms of the other, being mapped onto the other. (Embracing Contraries 40–41)

Hence, the dichotomy between one pole and its “other” diminishes. Otherness ultimately becomes less other if “reoriented or reorganized” in relation to, “dragged through,” its counterpoint. Dialogically, contraries “interanimate” and “interilluminate” one another. It is true that Elbow’s social orientation remains less obvious at times than Bakhtin’s (Berlin, “Rhetoric and Reality” with regard to Elbow and Freire, 486), and there are many instances where Elbow’s expressionism predominates (see Berlin’s powerful critique of Elbow, for example); thus, I am not arguing that Elbow is a disciple of Bakhtin. At the same time, when interpreted through the lens of the Eastern wisdom traditions, Elbow’s contraries emerge as dialogical, his dialogic manifesting primarily in his trust in the endless play of discourses as language events that shape and are shaped by other language events, not as a kind of relativistic process to which Elbow remains uncommitted to outcomes. The writerly “self” encounters the textual “other,” while textual features interanimate or “cook” until both text and self are reoriented in terms of its other.

This is similar to the understandings of yogis and other Eastern mystics who have been wrongly critiqued as seeking transcendence. For the yogi, the primary paradox of the individual self and the more expansive Self increasingly wanes through practices of attention that serve to bring the meditator into a state of nonconceptual awareness in which contraries reciprocally reside. As I have argued elsewhere, when understood from inside the nonconceptual meditative sensibility (rather than from conceptual awareness alone), it becomes clear that the contemplative is not trying to “get out” of anything, since there is nothing, ultimately, to get out of—only the eternal play of reciprocal conditions to which the yogi strives to remain attentive and, thus, merge with in ways that cast self as other and other as self (Kalamaras
186–87). To put this less paradoxically, there is no transcendence without immanence, and the “transcendence” to which Eastern texts sometimes refer is actually a misnomer for a paradoxical condition language has difficulty expressing, in which the perceiving subject becomes so intimate with the object of attention that all division between seer and seen dissolves. As Zen mystic D. T. Suzuki notes, “The doctrine of sunyata [the Void of meditative consciousness] is neither an immanentism nor a transcendentalism. . . . ‘Knowing and seeing’ sunyata is sunyata knowing and seeing itself; there is no outside knower or spectator; it is its own knower and seer” (261–62).

Liberation is therefore “liberating” because the yogi’s paradoxical practices enable him not to seek transcendental experiences but to go deeply into the dynamic interplay of the practices themselves, dissolving (in the process) a separate sense of self and other. When Whitman, echoing Wordsworth, says, “There was a child went forth every day, / And the first object he looked upon . . . that object he became” (138), he echoes this yogic understanding of a consciousness becoming completely identified with itself and, thus, with that which it had previously perceived as “opposite.”

Elbow is certainly no mystic, nor does he claim mystical predilections. In this regard, however, his “opposites” approach the paradoxes of the mystic, and we can better understand the process of his “contraries” through such a reciprocal framework. Elbow demonstrates by virtue of attentiveness that certain contraries are really complements—similar, say, to Taoist concepts of yin and yang, which continuously change, shape, and reorient one another not only by moving in relation to but through the other, or to Hindu-yogic practices of observing the pan and apan (inhalation and exhalation of breath) “pouring through one another,” as the Bhagavad Gita describes. In these traditions neither virtue is superior. Each pole simply “exists” and, indeed, changes through its interplay with its complementary other.

Elbow’s contraries “interanimate” each other, similarly to the manner in which the pan pours through the apan. How many subatomic particles of one’s exhalation return with the inhalation? How much of ourselves are we, really, without those with whom we interact? If one longs for deeper peace, psychic integration, and well-being, one would do well, Taoism and Hinduism both argue, to mirror this eternal interplay of apparent contradiction and remain attentive to its ever changing complementary nature. If one longs for a deeper experience of the mutability of the writing enterprise and the integration that emerges with involving oneself intimately with the composing process, one would do well. Elbow might similarly argue, to echo in theory and practice the endless paradoxicality within language and focus on the reciprocal process of praxis as complementary rather than contradictory.
Earlier I noted that the nondual aspects of yoga, which emphasize the experiential aspect of “Self-realization,” illustrate a metaphysical praxis. I also argued, by implication, that (although not metaphysical) Elbow’s contraries enact a similar praxis, in which theory and practice inform one another in reciprocal, nonhierarchical ways. Now, I want to briefly revisit this notion.

Paradoxically, the critical yet generous quality of Elbow’s theories strangely allows—even invites—one to examine and interact with his theories in ways that ultimately transform them into an increasingly reciprocal vision. The generative nature of his paradoxes invites interaction, in large part because the paradoxes are themselves interactive. His paradoxes are therefore themselves not only dialogical; their framework encourages one to engage it. In this sense, Elbow’s theories embody a sense of Hindu and Buddhist nonattachment, as his contraries invite the reader to work within and against them, demonstrating Elbow’s nonattachment to either pole of his supposed binary framework. That is, what happens when we doubt Elbow? In some strange sense we, therefore, enact his principles.

I’m thinking, as one example, of Berlin’s critique of Elbow’s “expressionism,” that for Elbow, “political change can only be considered by individuals and in individual terms” (“Rhetoric and Reality” 486), and of the ways a reader might interact with this critique in coming to her own position. In the context of interpreting Elbow’s contraries through the lens of Eastern wisdom traditions, a reader might rightfully ask whether an “individual” within the framework of a nonoppositional “other” is really an individual at all, as we have come to define that perspective in the West, and therefore whether Elbow’s individual response to political and social impositions is indeed, as Berlin argues, only a “resistance that is always construed in individual terms” and, thus, easily co-opted by the very capitalist forces it opposes” (487). Berlin’s argument is rich and complex, and arguing for or against it (in terms of Elbow) is beyond the scope of this essay. However, my point is twofold: (1) Berlin’s construction of Elbow’s “individual” may not be the same as the individual that emerges from a reciprocal, nonoppositional framework; and, perhaps more importantly, (2) that in doubting Elbow, we enact his principle of contraries that its nonoppositional structure invites, with the result that each apparently separate pole (in this case, perhaps, “individual” and “social”) inhabits the other more fully, becoming more soundly dialogical.

Similarly, we could consider Bartholomae’s arguments regarding Elbow’s position on academic discourse (see “Writing With Teachers”). Without rehearsing them here, our focus should be on the dialogic Elbow’s contraries engender. What ultimately occurs in such an exchange as that between
Bartholomae and Elbow is that the exchange itself yields something greater and more complex than either position in isolation. Elbow’s theory of “cooking” lays the ground for this realization, illuminating the process:

Two heads are better than one because two heads can make conflicting material interact better than one head usually can. It’s why brainstorming works. I say something. You give a response and it constitutes some restructuring or reorienting of what I said. Then I see something new on the basis of your restructuring and so I, in turn, can restructure what I first said. The process provides a continual leverage or mechanical advantage: we each successively climb upon the shoulders of the other’s restructuring, so that at each climbing up, we can see a little further. (Embracing Contraries 41)

In this way, Elbow is truly dialogical, presenting a theory whose very constructs allow for its own critical reflection and transformation. As C. H. Knoblauch discusses in “Rhetorical Constructions: Dialogue and Commitment,” a dialogical sensibility—if it is to be truly dialogical—must indeed present opportunities for critical examination of its own position (138). One no doubt can cite numerous dialogical reflections that appear less open to including this mechanism (privileging, perhaps a bit ironically, their own dialogical position over other arguments). How dialogical are these thinkers really? Interestingly—expressionist or not—Elbow’s contraries prod us to consider such issues, facilitating, I would argue, the practice of dialogics in ways that keep them more dialogical and truer to their radical intent. First, within Elbow’s position, his contraries present a critical framework in which each pole must confront (and shape, change, and enhance) its “other” in a noncombative, reciprocal relationship. Second, the reciprocal nature of his contraries presents a position in itself that generously interacts with arguments from outside that critical framework (as with Elbow’s dialogue with Bartholomae). That is, he points the way for Western dialogics to become more reciprocal than binary.

As nearly all Eastern philosophical texts agree, reading about meditation is not the same as taking it up as a practice. One limitation that yogis and other meditators have faced for centuries, for instance, is how to depict within an inherently binary discourse the experiences of undifferentiated consciousness encountered in nonconceptual (meditative) awareness. This has led to misinterpretations of meditative philosophy and practice as hierarchical, inherently dualistic, transcendental, and mystifying. However, as Western anthropologist, Indo-specialist, and Hindu Swami, Agehananda Bharati, has described in The Light at the Center: Context and Pretext of Modern Mysticism, the one aspect that remains after an individual has an experience of nonconceptualization or unitary consciousness and reemerges into the realm of conceptualization “is
the code of speech” (48). That is, as Bharati argues, mystics, in describing their experience, never use language outside their own social, cultural, and linguistic context (48–49). It should not be surprising, then, that Eastern meditative treatises sometimes sound inherently dualistic to the nonpractitioner. These texts may also represent their nondualism in ways which, at the other extreme, are so paradoxical as to appear completely relativistic or, perhaps more deplorable, intentionally mystifying.

However, in the spirit of true reciprocity, Elbow’s “Western” theories can contribute to our understanding of Eastern texts—when read, that is, through the lens of his complementary contraries. Critical reflection upon the reciprocal character of Elbow’s contraries may reorient Western readers’ interpretations of Eastern practices, clarifying (in light of, one might say, a more complex “code of speech”) meditative understandings in ways that more fully account for their generous and complex rendering of reality. That is, given a fresh understanding of the complementary nature of contraries in Elbow, one can bring that insight to bear upon the apparent contradictions within Eastern philosophy. Furthermore, beyond generating understanding of Elbow and the Eastern wisdom traditions, one might even rely upon each to critically examine the other, dialogically that is, in a manner similar to that which Elbow describes as “cooking.”

This, indeed, has been the case with my own grasp of Elbow and Eastern meditative traditions. The complementary nature of Elbow’s contraries has deepened my understanding of the dynamic interplay within Eastern meditative practices. I recall a story that James Moffett once related as respondent to a 1992 CCC session on “Spiritual Sites of Composing,” in which he echoed a similar reorientation of both Eastern and Western perspectives in light of one another, regarding the relationship between meditation and writing. In warning against an emphasis on only one side of a “contrary”—seeing meditation as a means of making better writing—he described one of his earliest meetings with his spiritual teacher, the yogic master Swami Sivalingam. When his teacher asked him what he spent most of his time doing, Moffett replied, “writing.” “That’s good,” Swami Sivalingam responded, adding something to the effect of, “It will help deepen your concentration for meditation.”

In this way, Moffett “turned the sock inside out,” so to speak, demonstrating a radical reorientation of each perspective of writing and meditation in terms of its cultural other. Interestingly, both Elbow and the Eastern wisdom traditions also encourage this kind of dialogue and reorientation in terms of its “other.” Years ago in first reading Elbow—in doubting and believing him—I grappled with his contraries, which dynamically sent me more deeply into my practice of yogic meditation in ways that have helped me understand an even
richer rendering of the nonoppositional nature of that practice. Similarly to Elbow’s depiction of “cooking,” in which “one piece of material . . . [is] seen through the lens of another, . . . dragged through the guts of another, . . . [and] reoriented or reorganized in terms of the other” (Embracing Contraries 40–41), this understanding took me, in turn, back to Elbow, enhancing my understanding of reciprocity within his contraries, and then back again to test this perspective within the context of the Eastern wisdom traditions, and so on in a kind of Bakhtinian “mutual cause-and-effect and interillumination” (12).

As a result, I have considered each apparent contradiction in terms of its “other,” crossing important philosophical, theoretical, and cultural borders to practice the theory that each encourages. This dialogical praxis has helped me reimagine both Elbow and my own meditative practice through the radical reorientation for which each ultimately calls, shaping each perspective in terms of its “other.” Contrary or complement? Or contrary and complement? The dialogical interplay between Elbow’s contraries and those of the Eastern wisdom traditions might very well suggest that neither term, in the final analysis, is sufficient to capture the complexity of this highly fluid, reciprocal “embrace.” It is an embrace that can hold onto everything, while at the same time—in light of the generative paradox of meditation’s “full emptiness” and the cultivation of an experience of “nonattachment”—hold onto nothing at all.