KAVYA BHARATI

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Kavya Bharati is a review of Indian Poetry.

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Edited by R. P. Nair

FOREWORD

Again the material for this instalment of *Kavya Bharati* seems to divide into three sections. For some months we have planned that this issue should honour, in part, the work of Jayanta Mahapatra, who has been such a close friend and helper to *Kavya Bharati* and the Study Centre which produces it. The final section of *Kavya Bharati 5* thus presents Jayanta Mahapatra from several different perspectives. Four of his new poems are here, as well as reviews of his latest two published volumes of poetry. Another review looks at his own fascinating autobiographical account. A shorter notice reviews his prose essay on his home state of Orissa. And a selection of poems written by students under his guidance gives a glimpse of Jayanta Mahapatra as teacher.

Long after this section of *Kavya Bharati 5* was planned, word came of the tragic death of A. K. Ramanujan, who was also a friend of our journal and of SCILET, our Study Centre. The opening pages of this issue give brief tribute to him in two different ways, both of which we hope will remember him appropriately.

In between these two sections we present *Kavya Bharati's* usual mix of poetry and reviews. We continue through this section to take note of important work that is being done to translate poetry from our regional languages into English verse. We present not only new translations, but also lengthy and shorter review articles of published volumes of translation : four volumes of Urdu poetry and one of Tamil. For the next issue review articles are planned for several other books of translation, including three volumes that bring important Oriya poetry into English. We will be grateful for reader suggestions that enable us to enhance still further *Kavya Bharati's* attention to the important work of poetry translation.

The Editorial Board gratefully acknowledges the contributions of M. Sundararajan, N. Poovalingam and Latha Rengachari, whose skill and patience in a variety of supporting work has made possible this issue of *Kavya Bharati.*

KAVYA BHARATI

a review of Indian Poetry

Number 5, 1993

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In Memoriam

A. K. Ramanujan

HOSHANG MERCHANT

LIGHT

In Memoriam : A. K. Ramanujan (d. 13 July 1993)

"When elated think of darkness
When depressed think of light"

—Buddhist Precept

1

I think of light
in my darkened room
this morning at seven

2

The House of light!
Light flooded it from the valley
We could barely see
The house floated on the afternoon
We kept our bearings
Seeing this way
And that way at sea.

3

"The beauty of her two eyes
slayeth me
Its power none may sustayne".

4

Beauty too is light. And birth :
Some dark room opens a crack
A beam of light dances out
It whirls in space a while
Then is put out
Our going is a blowing out; as of a lamp

5

This morning
My head
My bed
Float out
on a sea of light.
The body is bound
The spirit travels like Jesus on the waves.

Sharjah College
UAE
27 July 1993

BIBHAS DE

A VISIT

This evening a light sits softly
On the Manaslu, scintillates,
Yellow on gold and orange on gold,
Then the rainbow scanned on gold,
To gold flowing on gold
Into the heaven river of gold.

So it was with the early light
That caught a bashful Kanchenjunga,
Only different, only more at red,
The woman blushing upon a stolen kiss,
A color of light become a color of time,
The luminous time of a self-lit past.

By these lights things once grew,
We grew, grew the valley, the holy
Things at the confluence of rivers;
By these lights some few have left.
Gentle Ganges, hold them well.
In Kartik the air was crisp,
Spryly riding the bamboo barges
Of the Barak, now nearly claiming
The old temple from my childhood;
Or skimmed down the impassive face
Of an expansive Brahmaputra.
A chill black night the lone trees
On the Jaintia Hills seemed strangely
Enlarged, shown in envelopes of a
Darker dark, saying as though
That'd have to do for light.

And who shall close these record books
On the sorrows deferred by the Ganges,
The tears deferred on the Ganges?
Past all meanderings, in all my doubts,
Good Himalaya, be true.
By you I measure this rationed time :
A fresh cap of ice, a gain in height
Will inexorably change the peak,
A new stroke of brush on a Manaslu night,
The light the others will see.

MOOSE MEADOWS BY WINTER MOON

These silent fields are seldom seen,
Not as elk flats by stark light, nor
More remote nor higher : a glitch on
The line of time, the detour a rectilinear walker
Oddly makes — the past behind, future-bound —
To turn at right angles from the Present;
And if the light should strike just so right,
The snow such grainy white, there it is,
The holographic gathering place.
Then who's to say that past real,
This isn't a projection from within out?

What of the idea of a last silence
In this winterscene of the dead,
Dead rivers and dead winds where
Nothing rustles in the dry twigs?
Under the pale dead light there are
No shapes but that the mind shapes
And what the mind shapes is also dead.
Would that there could lift a word,
The word of ours we've lived for,
Up from the deadscape, out of the silence,
Before it is too final for words.

No, it isn't about time after all.
In some unexplored dimension nightly
The spirit herd gathers in a spirit rite,
These hair-drooping hairy things
Cast in indistinct if jagged profiles.
Conversation seems sparse, long-paused,
More at grunts that punctuate the digging
Of unearthly tubers from beneath the snow.

Moose meadows by winter moon;
In sultry nights of Cabo San Lucas
And beneath the calm of the temple goddess
On the lake island of Pokhara,
A yet unframed scene lingers as a refrain.

P. MURUGESAN

ARCTIC RUMBLINGS

How could a wind so cold
Have so much fury
To freeze the soil
With a mere stare?

Without that touch of arctic desolation
You might have fooled us
With your verve of a wave-riding wind
Crackling grass under your feet
Like pining sea shells.
A manic rush for contact.

Safely in bed beyond your grasp
Courting wayward dreams
I hear a car door somewhere
Slam shut
The paper reach the porch with a
Canon ball hit
And a lost spaniel scream
A holy fit.

But it is a lonely door
Tossing about at your command
That scorches my dream.
I spring up to her rescue
To see through the window
Only you
Howling and shivering
At your own making.

P. Murugesan

ECLIPSE 1991

You danced your way past
The Sun
Sly, but sure.
You might suspect
That the applause you heard
Was for your nimble-footed
Leap into the void.

We have waited for this moment
Braving the pacific wind
Howling across the Baja
And the crackle of drought-brown
Palms like a flute gone wild
And ignoring the plight
Of baby turtles startled
By a pelican flare.

We wanted to witness
The scorcher
Hide his face in shame
Over your black-faced mime
And betray his
Coronal glare.

–July 11, 1991, Baja, California

ZAI WHITAKER

FAX ME

Purring soft electronic trings
Red light blinking dire knowledge
Some multinational motor brings
The message, down the plastic threshold.

And somewhere
Down there
An irrevocable duplicating
Is successfully accomplished

No snatching back now; a twinkling tweet
In the mass produced bowels
Announces receipt....
A thousand miles away.

No airmail sheets/exotic stamp
Break the sad rasp of sharp regret
No blotches, made by writer's cramp
As the message lunges on

Smelling faintly of disinfectant

KYNPHAM SINGH NONGKYNRIH

LEASED HOMES IN SHILLONG

These clotted tenements
are Shillong's happy homes.
The bugs passing from rented rooms
to rented rooms,
light up the sickening closeness
where unwanted secrets
murmured in softest tones,
smash like a wave of Cherra's storm,
pounding the gramophone-mouths in the head.

Munching jaws speak glibly
of bones being stripped of beef.
Quickened breaths
tell of the heat of Khasi dwarf-chillies.
Shrill calls of children
meeting mothers' subdued admonitions,
instructions on adversity,
harsh reminders of poor liberty.

Belches echo and smell.
Mumblings and grumblings
pay rent to odious landlords,
Malicious plots and drunken abuse,
a slice of neighbourly dealings,
sift in through thin partitions
imposing an uneasy union.

Whispered endearments
and the rhythmic movements of double beds,
screeching loud in the dead of night,
are a signal for Angelo's images
in the heated brain.

Morbid, morbid this sickening closeness...
O for a fistful of deafness!

WRITER, PEDDLER, LOVER, DOG

A writer lives like a peddler,
always at strange doors
baiting clever inmates
with his goods.
Or like a lover,
growing small as he sighs
for acceptance.
And most of all,
like a dog, sidling back
after the initial kicks —
its happiness
being locked
in others' hearts.

RAJEEV S. PATKE

ONCE MORE UNTO THE CANON, OR REBOTTLING INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH

Review Article

Vilas Sarang (ed), *Indian English Poetry since 1950 : An Anthology*. Hyderabad : Disha Books, 1990, 161 pp., Rs. 35/-.

Kaiser Haq (ed), *Contemporary Indian Poetry*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990, 187 pp., US $ 12.95.

K. Ayyappa Paniker (ed), *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi : Sahitya Akademi, 1991, 177 pp., Rs. 65/-.

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (ed), *The Oxford Indian Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*. New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1992, 182 pp., Rs. 100/-.

Makarand Paranjape (ed), *Indian Poetry in English*. Madras : Macmillan India, 1993, 253 pp., Rs. 90/-.

Clearly, redundancy is the order of the day. Here is testimony, not necessarily to any increase in the health and wealth of Indian poetry in English, but certainly to the publishing industry's faith in superfluity. And to the critics' prediliction for consensus. No doubt some good shall accrue from all this unanimity. A lot of libraries will automatically add a few more items to their shopping lists. Some more departments of English will perhaps think of lacing their doses of Raja Rao or Rushdie with slighter reading, now that we have so much unction applied to the effort. And some more ambitious young souls from wherever in India will (ignoring Mallarme's ultimate preference) apply ink to paper or finger to keyboard, and rush off – no longer just to *The Writer's Workshop*, but also to *Rupa*, or *Disha*, or OUP. What is more to the point, a few relatively unfamiliar poems and poets will perhaps manage to arrest the reader undeflected by re-encountering so many others already familiar from compilations by the predecessors to this importunate clutch of sales-persons.

Chief among those predecessors were Saleem Peeradina (1972), R. Parthasarathy (1976), and Keki Daruwalla (1980). What their anthologies had legislated was a contemporary canon according to the poets. In this connection, it is surprising, and not a little disingenuous (not to say ungenerous) of Mehrotra to claim that "none of them made any difference to the accepted shape of Indian verse in English" (pg. 8). (The degree to which his own "shape" follows on that cut by those to whom he would deny acknowledgement gives the lie to his hype.) The canon of the 1970s comprised eight or nine principal poets : Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Keki Daruwalla, A. K. Mehrotra, Gieve Patel, R. Parthasarathy, and Arun Kolatkar; with Jayanta Mahapatra close behind in critical acceptance, followed somewhat at a distance by Adil Jussawalla, Shiv Kumar, Kersy Katrak, and G. Sharat Chandra. It should come as no great surprise to notice that the overall contours or constituents of the Indian poetic canon in English have altered little in the intervening decade and more. That is, the present set of anthologies tacitly accepts the 70s canon in its essentials, only daring to venture a little at the edges, absorbing Mahapatra into the "big league", but leaving the rest of that additional group hovering pretty much where they were. For the reader and prospective buyer then, a matter of some disappointment or at least caution.

Given the unanimity of choice, the reader is virtually compelled into speaking in terms of a company of The Elect, of those who appear in all five of the anthologies under review here. There are six such poets: Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Ramanujan, Mahapatra, Daruwalla, Kolatkar. This set (excluding Moraes) may be described as the highest or simply as the common factor uniting both sets of anthologies, covering the two decades from 1972 to 1993. Moraes is a special case: he came back into the limelight after the long silence between his *Beldam and Others*, 1967, and *Collected Poems 1957-87*. He had been kept out by the anthologists of the 1970s because of this silence and because at that period he seemed to belong more appropriately to the expatriate condition, having only just returned to India in 1974. That others (like Ramanujan) have lived outside India for long periods but always retained a place in the Indian canon is

explicable on the grounds that their *poems* have never left India behind, whereas the early poems of Moraes were entirely successful at eliding all Indian traces from their modish Oxford manner.

Two features of the present consensus deserve commendation. The rehabilitation of Moraes into the scene of contemporary Indian poetry appears complete; and Kolatkar's maverick style and peripheral vision now look assimilated nearer towards the centre. We may presume then that what is now more fully recognized is the unique way in which his poems combine a sense of the dereliction and degradation of belief, feeling, thought and certainty that lies at the back of his kind of *insouciance* with a full sense of (Bakhtinian, carnivalesque) participation in that *insouciance*; that what has gained wider appreciation is how the hollow despair behind the grin still enables us to participate in the grinning. Oddly enough, a couplet from Wallace Stevens seems apposite to this very Indian catachresis :

> Natives of poverty, children of malheur,
> The gaiety of language is our seigneur.

For the rest, what the tamely consensual nature of these anthologies suggests is that the canonical contours of Indian poetry in English for the latter part of this century appear, for better or worse, more or less settled. It would not be churlish to say that the "new" talents these anthologies put on display is much the lesser part of their contribution.

Now for a quick check on how our contemporary poets have fared, in the manner of armchair fans keeping seasonal account of who's in and who's out of the Indian cricket eleven. Had it not been for Mehrotra, the highest common factor of the current Indian canon would stand augmented at nine. His omission of his own poems shows a commendable modesty (of a kind Sarang clearly did not feel compelled to exercise in including his own poems in *his* anthology). But Mehrotra's self-effacement prevails against better judgement. He is also the only one to omit Parthasarathy and Das. Ostensibly, this provides "an opportunity to revise the literary map, bring neglected works back in circulation, and shift the emphasis from certain poets to others" (pg. 8). But in the absence of arguments which the

anthologist is loath to rehearse, his omissions appear wilfully tendentious or lamely capricious, especially since he has no really "neglected works" to promote (unlike Paranjape, who promotes four relatively – and one is almost tempted to add, deservedly – neglected poets, even if in so doing he displays more enthusiasm than discrimination with his quaint motley of Sri Ananda Acharya, Puran Singh, J. Krishnamurti, and Humayun Kabir).

In the case of Mehrotra, Oxford University Press has lent its name to an anthology far less authoritative and far more temperamental than Parthasarathy's judicious and balanced compilation of 1976. I suppose it does display a curious sort of consistency on the part of a publishing firm to entrust canonizing to poets with a penchant for the provocative – the more whimsical the better : remember Larkin? and Yeats before him? In any case, the title attached to Mehrotra's effort, "The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets", is misleading. It implies that the field of choice is *all* of modern Indian poetry (that is, in all the Indian languages, as it actually *is*, for example, in the far more interesting selection by Nissim Ezekiel and Meenakshi Mukherjee, from their *Vagarth: Another India: An anthology of contemporary Indian fiction and poetry*, Penguin, 1990, or Anantha Murthy's *Vibhava*, 1992). Instead, of course, Mehrotra's choice is restricted to the sparser pastures of Indian poetry in *English*.

What we might describe as the second team figures in four out of the five anthologies under review. It comprises Das, Mehrotra, Patel, and Vikram Seth. The criteria underlying the constitution of the first or the second team are nowhere very cogently explicit. The general quality of the editorial matter in all these anthologies is likely to be more useful on matters of fact than criticism. Mehrotra, in particular, offers much that is both quirky and lively in what he has to say about the poets he includes. For instance, with his very first choice, where a reader could be forgiven for assuming that the anthologist has culled only what he likes and will give reasons for why you should read whoever is in the book, it is disconcerting frankness which greets us : "My own appreciation of Ezekiel's poetry has been slow in coming, and even now I cannot always read

it without reservation. Often the writing seems purposeless...." (pg. 9). Rather an ominous beginning. This note of apology or qualification is echoed by all our anthologists – lest we suppose them uncritical in their task or unaware of the less than satisfactory fare they have on offer.

The others are simply more predictable and banal, with Sarang offering what looks like potted lecture notes mixed with little jottings in classroom practical criticism on individual poems. That his selection has a manifest Bombay bias, or that Haq is more solicitous of the expatriate, or that Paniker doodles over truisms may be noted without further comment. The introductions by Paniker, Sarang and Paranjape are either perfunctory or pedestrian, whether as literary criticism, literary history, or simply as introductions, managing to make heavy weather of almost any judgement or generalization. What, for instance, should we make of such portentous solecisms as these: "there might have been a fall of man in the West, but there is nothing of that magnitude in India: we have no equivalent of the original sin" (Paranjape, pg. 21)!? and of *non sequiturs* like these: "The question of Indianness looks suspiciously like a red herring, but one has to go after it nevertheless" (Sarang, pg. 6)!? Paniker excels in rehearsing truisms to the point of fatuousness: "That nothing can exist without a past should be obvious to any but the really shortsighted readers" (pg. 14); "we cannot overlook the fact that the language employed by a poet has an intrinsic value to the poet as well as his readers" (pg. 15); "The first half of the twentieth century provides a mixed bag of assortments which both positively and negatively betoken tendencies which manifest themselves in the poetry of the post-independence period" (pg. 16); to all of which one can only say, in exasperation, "Yes, and isn't it too obvious to have to put it that way, so why say it at all, and so what anyway"!?

Haq is more polished, but some of his generalizations read better as pious exercises in divination rather than as *post facto* inductions : "Generally speaking, Indo-Anglian poets strive to adapt standard English in an individual, "Indian," way, in forms of free verse that are sensitive to the rhythms of Indian speech" (pg. xxiii). But here is matter to make us interrupt :

the "rhythms of Indian speech"? Which Indian speech – in one of the "native" languages or in English? If one may allow oneself a certain severity of scrutiny here, does Indian English have anything so individuated yet as to merit the appellation of rhythm except of the sardonic and bathetic Ezekiel Indian-poem-in-English kind, the kind parodied so devastatingly by Peter Sellers (in *The Party*, a film once banned in India), and thereafter in so many television serials in the UK and the USA? And hard though the poets strive, it would be more accurate to stop at saying that they strive for rhythm than to imply that they achieve it. In any case, most of the striving faces all the problems inherent to writing so called "free" verse. What rhythm can the striving achieve under the stilted and stultifying conditions in which English is generally spoken in India, even in the metropolis? And as for free verse, it would be salutary to remind ourselves of the cautionary pronouncements on free verse by one of its principal modern exponents, made as early as 1917: "*Vers libre* has not even the excuse of a polemic; it is a battle cry of a freedom, and there is no freedom in art....Or, freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation....there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos".

Further, Haq's claim, that "The sixties brought crucial change, largely due to the impact of the new American poetry" (pg. xxiii), may be gratifying to American readers, but hardly finds justification outside Mehrotra's early poems, or Pritish Nandy's effusions. Notwithstanding the confessional elements in Das (who need not be patronized by supposing that she needed American models before she could be frank about sex), the claim that "the overall impact of contemporary American poetry... has been lasting" needs to be counterbalanced by the implications of one of Haq's own anecdotes, in which Orlovsky is reported having said, when part of a group of American poets visiting India, that "if the Americans were gangster poets they would have shot down the Indians" (pg. xxiv) – in other words, testimony that the American poet does not find the work of Indian poets in English at all American or acceptable (because they are not at all American in their handling of rhythm and other matters of style and technique).

As a tiny extenuating factor, all the anthologists promote at least one poet not offered by the others. The only exception to this is Mehrotra. He prefers giving the reader more poems but from fewer poets. Compared to the skimpy average representation from Paniker and Sarang, there is a point to this policy, for to represent a poet but to give him little room is a self-defeating form of timidity. At any rate, the poets promoted each by only one anthologist are Imtiaz Dharker from Paranjape, Srinivasa Iyengar from Paniker, Darius Cooper and Santan Rodriguez (in a minimalist way) from Sarang, and Shanta Acharya and J. Birjepatil from Haq. It is only in this small measure that these anthologists venture anywhere remotely close to the relatively unfamiliar or the "new" or the non-consensual.

Apropos the second team, the newest entry is that of Vikram Seth. Such quick and widespread acceptance should occasion little more than mild surprise (or a wild surmise). Seth the versifier exhibits an alarming facility at metre and rhyme which veers close to doggerel much of the time. Only a scattering of "sonnets" from *The Golden Gate* manage to transcend this facility. Amusing or charming in short doses, his efforts in a more serious or emotive strain are perilously close to *kitsch*. So his prompt and respectful inclusion in so many of the anthologies– cause for gratification withal – may also be taken for a deferential and grateful Indian bow in the direction of his very visible international success as a novelist. Das and Mehrotra, however, or at least Das, may more readily be recognized as having done enough of interest, over a long period of time, to merit inclusion in anyone's anthology; while Patel's recent work, collected in *Mirrored, Mirroring* (1991), enhances his claims to canonical retention by adding dimensions subdued or fugitive in his earlier poems.

The third team, of those who make it to at least three anthologies, consists of Jussawalla, Kumar, Dilip Chitre, Manohar Shetty, Meena Alexander, and Eunice de Souza. We are here on the outskirts of current canonical territory, which now has room for greater feminine variety since the days of Das, if indeed de Souza is not to be seen as a kind of latter-day Das, more gnomic but no less corrosive, rather more circumspect or

wary, and far less vulnerable or innocent in what is risked than was Das at her most hurtful. While it would almost appear as if Kumar began writing poems only after retiring from full-time academia, Chitre is represented by poems written in the 1960s and 70s; as also Jussawalla. The same applies to Kolatkar as well, and also to Parthasarathy, whose last represented revision of *Rough Passage* is no more recent than 1980.

A simple question thus seems inescapable: Have these poets not written anything more recent that is worth including which would go along better with the scenario of anthologists uncovering "new" talent or injecting "new" blood into the literary scene or at least offering relatively "new" or unfamiliar poems by familiar poets, and thus justifying themselves somewhat? Perhaps Chitre has reverted to, or more accurately, continued writing in, and translating from Marathi (consider his provocative Tukaram selection for Penguin); and also Kolatkar. Do they not, in any case, (as Sarang reminds us) write better, and less infrequently, and more spontaneously, and do they not fit even better into the map of poetry in Marathi rather than English? Plurality and polyglotism is welcome, of course, but what is the novelty of purveying yet again work done almost two decades ago? Of course, the answer is as simple as it is disappointing. Our anthologists go after the much less venturesome plum of the definitive and the compendious rather than take a chance with the thorny enterprise of defining a new canon. They aim at the librarian and the student and the reader who wants to have a predigested meal of contemporary poetry. They have no stomach for contention or for identifying the new. The enterprise (or its lack) should remind every Indian reader of how every sugar cane is always pushed into the rollers even one more time than you would have thought necessary or desirable or possible in your local sugar-cane shop. Or to switch analogies, think of a herd of bull-dozers ceremoniously and with much aplomb flattening a piece of territory already quite sufficiently flat.

I suppose the one welcome novelty in the thrice-elect is Meena Alexander, who certainly comes off sounding no less sensitive and rather less academic or tied down to semi-auto-biographical writing than in her fiction; whereas the over-adjectival

Shetty's popularity with as many as three anthologists is perhaps explicable on account of his having voiced fluently all the *de rigueur* sentiments and themes so favoured by Indian (post-) modernity. These are conveniently rehearsed for us by Mehrotra: malaise, boredom, ennui, enclosed spaces, loneliness (pg. 161).

The fourth group, which makes it into two anthologies, represents the canonical edge. It includes the relatively new voice of Aga Shahid Ali; with Saleem Peeradina, P. Lal and Pritish Nandy present (especially the latter two) as if for old-times-sake, called up from the Valhalla for older anthologists. It is a pity that Peeradina's latest and quite interesting work was collected too recently to be available to most of these anthologists, so that only "Transition" and the title poem from *Group Portrait* (OUP, 1992) get represented. We are glad too to have Aga Shahid Ali join the group of Indian expatriates who return again and again to Indian themes, but reading his poems also serves to draw home the realization that his *translations* read rather better than his own poems (Faiz Ahmed Faiz, reprinted recently by OUP).

Finally, in the no-man's-land where canonicity has yet to prevail, stand those who appear in only one anthology : Acharya, Birjepatil, Sharat Chandra, Sarang, Cooper, Dharker, Rodriguez, Gauri Deshpande, Katrak, and Iyengar. This then is the pool drawn upon by our anthologists of contemporary poetry. I suppose we should be grateful that it has grown more selective than in the wildly catholic days of Lal and Nandy; in other words, that anthologies are more effective when the editors go for the poet rather than the poem in presenting a canon. But on the flip side of the coin, the canon we are given is also fairly conformist, conservative and tamely consensual. It is all the more discouraging to have to concede that this deficiency is not necessarily forced upon the anthologists because of the limited talent that has been published in recent decades. Rather, the fact of the matter is, they prefer to pick "safe" choices, poets who have been around for long enough, or have published more than one volume in English (except in the case of Chitre and Kolatkar, and from Sarang, Rodriguez and Cooper). Paranjape shows far

greater enterprise and a willingness to take risks with a second anthology of all the newer talents "waiting in the wings", but that is matter for another review.

Yet another common denominator is worth examining in some detail: virtually all the anthologists subscribe to the view that the only canon worth presenting is that of contemporary (though not really contemporaneous) poetry. Only Paranjape nurses historicist ambitions, and essays back all the way to the beginning of the nineteenth century. This may be a good move in seeking to fill a gap in the current academic market-potential for just this kind of coverage, suitably dressed up with pre-processed introductions, tiny biographies and lengthy bibliographies. For the rest, the current crop of anthologies does little more than vary its selection of only a few recently published poets with a mix from new poems by the same old poets.

In this puddle of repetition, the intransigent issues remain, obdurate as stone, asking to be named and exorcized. Looking at all this poetry, it would still appear that Indian poetry in English has never entirely shed the appearance of being derivative. Its history still looks like a continual and not always very successful struggle to moult off the feeling of being an act of imitation. What seems to be picked up for imitation is attitude or manner, with a corresponding repertoire of styles and vocabularies. The nineteenth and the earlier part of the twentieth centuries modelled themselves in a post-Romantic or post-Edwardian vein. In recent times, the models for mimicry have changed to Movement and post-Movement (or Beat, if you believe Haq) options. The anthologists reflect this double or dual derivativeness with a curious doubleness. Haq (like all the others except Paranjape) goes along with the view that the Indian poetry of the last century exhibits little more than the art of the *pasticheur*, and accepts Homi Bhabha's reading of it as Orientalist (pg. xviii). But presumably he does not find this applicable to the post-Ezekiel era which supplies him and the others with their canon.

This raises a question : Has the principle of mimicry really ceased? Have the newer or later voices transcended mimicry? Or does an echo of Buddhadev Bose's dismissal still haunt the alley of Indian poetry in English? Have the once-colonized found

themselves in what some like Michael Jameson have called the era of post-colonial capitalism (while others like Aijaz Ahmed would question the entire fiction of a "third world" compulsion to find forms of the "national allegory")? Remember, that in the remote past, a bastard or hybrid progeny flourished well enough in due course of time after the Aryan rape and then the Mughal ones: the indigenization of Sanskrit, then of Persian and Urdu, did eventually lead to viable possibilities for linguistic creativity, and many forms of cultural assimilation and eclectic syncretism. Hindustani classical music is perhaps the best example of this involuntary symbiosis. But have the poets in English grown out of the Longfellow phase and do they now stand forth as the Whitmans and Dickinsons of Indian poetry in English?

A Caribbean poet like David Dabydeen, for instance, offers corroboration of a similar problem confronting any and every contemporary poet writing in English from the historical and geographical context of post-coloniality. I might add that the manner and success of Dabydeen's solution (*Slave Song*, 1984; *Coolie Odyssey*, 1988) offers, for the most part, a striking contrast to anything achieved by Indian poets in English. "Ban Caliban" is how Braithwaite put it for an older generation. The problem is: how to escape from the trap of involuntary ventriloquism. Unfortunately, it is still difficult to shake off the suspicion that the Indian poet in English, even in his current dyspeptic neo-Modernist garb, does little more than identify, project, or figure out and then figure forth projections which are — whether this is realized or not — largely post-Orientalist (to re-echo the currently fashionable but no less valid term). Each of the anthologists except Paranjape goes along with the explicit or tacit supposition that the India imaged by the nineteenth century poet is an English fiction uttered through Indian mouths. The exoticism, the hothouse mysticism, the vague and oracular philosophizing, the fulsome or orotund phrasing are all rejected as forms of playing up to an expectation or hypothesis or conjecture or fantasy about what the Orient should or might be like.

And certainly, it is difficult not to think of syruped-Shelley in reading the Sarojini Naidu that Paranjape has to offer. And

can we ever rinse our palates of candied Keats after tasting his offering of "The Garden Passion" of Manmohan Ghose? But then aren't the morose or sardonic metropolitan ironies and circumspect derisions of the post-Ezekiel era the utterance of individuals so thoroughly colonized by the literary imagination of Western Modernism and Postmodernism, so thoroughly disenfranchised from a sense of community with their own local histories and traditions, as to be unable to look at their own individual and generic circumstances in place and time, in India, in any other way except that of alienated disenchantment or self-disgust? It is a curious feature of this passivity that the poets think of the sensibilities with which they greet or treat malaise as reflections or symptoms of malaise, in other words, as part of an effect, instead of considering the other possibility, that they are or could be themselves seen as part of a cause, the cause of cultural malaise. One wonders if the whole poetics of malaise, and all its ironicized containments, sardonic losses, absences, and abandonments, this fashionable falling in line with powerful moods and modes that dominate in and from the West, is essential in any way for the situations that are or might be India?

If this is recognized, as Paranjape evidently does, what kind of a canon are we left with, except that of imitation? (The riddling predicament of the expatriate or the immigrant is hardly more comfortable, but it is the fiction writers, whether Rushdie or Bharati Mukherjee, who speak more adequately for that spectrum of experience.) The Indian poet in English brings to his/her materials and craft a mind-set that is still colonized. S/He belongs to the West in terms of aspirations, expectations and role models. Remember that one of the myriad associations of the experience of *Shame* in Rushdie is identified and given a name thus:

> This word : shame. No, I must write it in its original form, not in this peculiar language tainted by wrong concepts and the accumulated detritus of its owners' unrepented past, this Angrezi in which I am forced to write, and so for ever alter what is written....
>
> *Sharam*, that's the word. For which this paltry 'shame' is a wholly inadequate translation.

And so on. We return yet again to the question, have our writers achieved adequacy in translation? I mean a translation of the self in terms of how one's choice of language conditions and defines the limits of possibility for a poetic invention of selfhood; and I mean the kind of translation which is also a discovery of the adequacy of expressive means as these define and are themselves defined by the contingencies of the need to find self-expression and self-hood. And if the experiences which the poet writes about, the materials s/he struggles with (as conditioned by and conditioning the expressive resources in which "adequacy" seeks to find self-definition), are resistant to this assimilation, the poetry is nothing other than the bitter (or cloying) residue of this struggle to accept or to change without having redeemed either the invented self or the choice of expressive means. While the typical nineteenth century poet wrote rather like a Californian acolyte initiated into the Rajneesh ashram of Oriental India, the Kolatkar of the twentieth century writes like a Dadaist engagingly disengaged from the sterile anarchy of contemporary India. Neither is so obviously a healthily viable long-term alternative for Indian poetry that we should sit by and let the mere weight of anthologists' consensus imply that it is.

It makes no difference that the two forms of ventriloquism appear dissimilar. Their stylistic variance is superficial in comparison to their basic bondage to a mind-set that is whorish. A whore's body is scarcely her own in comparison to the claims a paying customer has on it. It might well be argued that we continue to loan ourselves to variously desirable (and paying) inhabitations. Somewhere along the line we have to dispossess the ghosts we keep inviting in, and repossess ourselves. The burden of this imperative is the only true common factor to the entire history of Indian poetry in English, or indeed, of any postcolonial poetry. We recollect how Parthasarathy had almost given up writing, as if that were an answer to having whored after English Gods. (And if Ngugi is to be believed, his own recent solution to the problem is to give up English altogether, leaving it to the translator of his "native" language. But what if English is one of our "native" languages, perhaps even the only one? What if we have been "nativized" into English or have "nativized" ourselves to it, willy nilly?)

If the nineteenth century can be as readily abandoned as Haq and Mehrotra indicate and Sarang and Paniker imply, what rescues their cherished three or four recent decades from homologous defects and thus from canonical exclusion? The only anthologist to engage this issue, howsoever disappointingly, is Paranjape. In his self-appointed role as the redeemer of the nineteenth century he forcefully accuses the contemporary poet of being no less derivative than his predecessors. Fair enough. But then, somewhat pathetically, all that he and we are left with is a lowest common denominator of derivativeness. Aurobindo is for the nth time wheeled out as "the greatest Indian poet in English", but little by way of argument or analysis is offered to shore up the asseveration. Tagore in translation is to be admired, because he "bestrides the world of Indian culture like a colossus" (pg. 15). Proof of his greatness, we are told, lies in the length of the list of books on him. Thus statistics makes converts of us all, with scarcely a thought for suasion by analysis or argument. Sarojini Naidu's "anti-intellectual aesthetics of ephemeral beauty" (so much the worse for poor Pater!) is damned with faint praise : "They are songs meant to be heard rather than read or studied." Then why, pray, are they included to be *read* and *studied*!? At this rate, an anthology of Indian poetry in English free from the stigma of apology for derivativeness would consist of blank pages.

The anthologist scarcely reckons with the problem that the assumptions and attitudes which value either one of the two mind-sets that this general scene of derivativeness exhibits (Freudian but contra-Bloomian for having abandoned the anxiety which should attend influence) should be mutually exclusive. You can scarcely uphold Tagore *and* Ezekiel, or Aurobindo *and* Kolatkar as exemplars of your canon without stretching pluralism or eclecticism beyond credible limit. How shall we assent to the voice of Sarojini Naidu as well as that of Kamala Das without recognizing that the poetics bespoken by these dissimilar poetries can only be reconciled by abandoning the mutually repugnant implications of either one of the two? It is not enough to remind ourselves that the English canon has room for an Alexander Pope and also for a Wordsworth who rejects the poetics of Pope; or for a Petrarchan and also for a Donne who nalf-

parodies and half-mocks such Petrarchanism. Each establishes its own poetics. They may be mutually oppugnant, but each is, on its own terms viable. That is true pluralism: for the reader to be invited to accept both kinds of poet and poetics, or at least to grant equal if opposed viability, without such duality creating a hiatus within the reading sensibility. What Paranjape leaves us with is merely a kind of oxymoron in the sociology or politics of taste, a footnote to the history of the successive colonizations that is India.

At least Haq and Mehrotra and Sarang, and even Paniker tacitly recognize the problem of dual affiliation. However, there is a huge cost. This they pay willingly: the abandonment of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. That is a pity, because howsoever grudgingly, a point has to be granted the Opposition, manned currently by the solitary Paranjape: some part of the legacy of Tagore and his anaphoric rhetoric, or of the studied but restrained Tennysonianism of *Savitri* (at least the kind of stylized poetry excerpted by Paranjape), or even the somewhat faded and enervated mysticism of Sri Ananda Acharya deserves more than mere antiquarian interest. We needn't, in Larkin's phrase, be compulsive ruin-bibbers, "randy for antique", in order to resuscitate Derozio or Dutt.

But all this our Parliamentary Majority rules out of court. The gain is adherence to a single set of poetic norms. Paranjape, in contrast, tries to have it both ways. The result has difficulty avoiding the effect of seeming cross-eyed. His unconcealed unease at the current canon, and his discomfiture at having to let it in (if he has to have a saleable anthology at all), is oddly reconciled with the kind of poetry he so obviously approves and feels more comfortable with. But the only solution to the dilemma he straddles with such manifest discomfort is a more sophisticated historicism than he has recourse to. Also, diachrony is perhaps not, for India, as meaningful or energizing an axis as the synchronic one. The poetries being currently written in India are far richer and far more varied and far less riddled by the consequences of postcoloniality than the English language has news of. It is this diversity and plurality that needs to be tapped. What we need is more translations, from and into as

many of our national languages as there are poets who will commit themselves to this cross-pollination.

That so many of our canonical poets translate is all to the good. But what is particularly worth drawing attention to, in the present context, is the vast qualitative difference between their own poetic world and that of their translations. The latter display positives which tend to be submerged in their own work. The sum of experience handled in translation leaves a potitive outcome, whereas the residue of their own poetic experience is generally negative. Ramanujan is perhaps the best instance of this duality. As Sarang points out, costive though he may appear as a poet in English, he has been prolific as a translator. His translations celebrate symbiotic harmonies between mindscape and landscape, they participate in traditional, hieratic associations between the individual and his communal culture, which are quite alien to the bleak world of deprivation that is his poetry in English. The point to be made is that the worlds being translated bespeak a hard-earned health which is antithetical and antidotal to a poetics of malaise.

That is why what we need now, if we must have that parasitic pest the canon, is a very different kind of anthology. The English canon needs to be placed adjacent to the other Indian canons. Such a collection should do for the poetries of India, synchronically (rather than just diachronically for English in estranged isolation), what Ezekiel and Meenakshi Mukherjee's *Another India* (1990) does, on a modest scale, for contemporary fiction combined with poetry. We need to juxtapose Indian poems in English adjacent to poems in all the other Indian languages, in translation, as well as in the original (for whoever can read across languages). That would be a far more worthwhile enterprise than the tiny undertaking that this set of books amounts to.

JOHN ALTER

BRIGHT-ANKLED GANGES, STAIRCASE TO HEAVEN

1. "Bright staircase to heaven"

Ice-cold
between steep rocks
you plunge

from Siva's flowing locks,
bright staircase to heaven

2. Monsoon

Dancing peacock, you scratch tne dry ground.
The hungry river waits. Heavily your tail drags.
Only the dust dances: his hot dry eyes.

Wnere can we hide? The heat will find us.
Not a breeze blows: the fountain runs dry.
Where will the gods hide? Silence on Mount Kailasa.

Who climbs the bright staircase?

In their dry pools fish dream. World withers.
Only the dust will dance....

Listen!

A whisper, the rustle of a skirt,
a dancing foot. There! A cloud?

The river slowly turns,
in her rocky bed she turns,
burning with fever.

Listen!

The musician is tuning his strings.
On Mount Kailasa Siva smiles,

at high Gangotri the sages smile.
Yes! peacock raises his tail.
Parched earth turns. It is the monsoon
again.

Gladly the peacock dances,
the dry earth is dancing, the mango tree
stretching its arms.

Our sorrow is over,
lightning dances
on high Himalaya.

He looks from his window,
hears the distant music. In the throat of orchards, dancing,
the honey bee. A sweet and hidden music, from cave and melon heart.

The lover leaps. Yes! All the dancers come,
elephant and partridge,
the river tossing her dry hair.

Put on your dancing shoes, my sister.
I can hear rocks dance, the boulders leap,
glacier and mountain goat.

In the sage's heart, in his old secret heart,
a maiden giggles, her eyes flashing:
lightning above Gangotri.

Only the fool will not dance,
only the proud fool,
only the arrogant stranger—

3. Bright-ankled Ganges

The cave of my heart echoes with your music, Ganga.
I climb your bright stairs. It is the ladder of dreams.
Spray washes my face. It is moonlight and nectar,

it flows from Siva.
He dances, you the necklace, you the garland of bright flowers,
Ganga, mother and lover.

I throw my bones
into your water.
I look in your face: you are the mirror which cleanses.

River of dreams, dream river,
daughter of the mountain of snow, beloved of Siva,
dreams woven into healing water.

I dance on your bank,
your singing stones,
I fling my dry impoverished bones.

DANCING IN THE REAL MOUNTAINS

The mountain I see
is real. As your body, beyond my hands,
is not an idea

only, of grace.
The river I see, is real enough for your
naked feet to enter.

Your naked face.
As, in your distance, you slip off the dress
and move within

another room.
Your entrance into the country of granite,
the hard land,

leaving behind
our comfort. As, in the dream I have, we meet
at an otherwise

impossible angle —

2

As I misunderstand.
As the ridge I chose becomes another ridge
to climb
of similar granite.
I move through this world. Of which you are also
the passenger,
the host. Our coming
together, as of travellers who meet beside
a place neither will own
tomorrow. Beneath
a strong tree neither will turn into paper.
As two translate
the common text
of this country they share, into their separate
versions.
The particular mountain
on which they come together. She with a garland.
He laughing beside her.
As the tree completes
the amorous river —

3

As you enter the river
up stream, entering from rock to this variable
matter. I move to touch
your back. Your fluency. As you
assume language from the common sun. The common
sense of feet
moving in dance; deliberate
passage. I move to the angle of your going
through our mutual
dominion. Like a house
we share with its architect, today becomes
together; a dwelling.
An evident place.

SUKRITA PAUL KUMAR

UNTITLED

Through
the sea
of
blue,
I
spin
to a
stillness
in the
centre
of
the
sky

POLARITIES

Twilight
churns
a million
whites
and blacks
into
night
and
day
...
A few whites
and
a few blacks
make
the grey zone
of
silence
between
anxious lovers

IN-BETWEEN

God and I
share
a secret
that
reveals itself
bit by bit
each sunrise,
the fact of
you and you
and I,
the idea of
all-time
moment by moment;
the overlapping
of
creation and recreation,
vocations of
both
God and I.

K. V. SUBBARAM

A BOAT RIDE

No amount of rowing on the muddy bank
moved the heart; some soft paddling
with words then did the job. The boat,
loaded with sweaty bodies like sardines
in a vessel, was later let off the moorings.
A thrust in Archimedean terms into the river
by the navigator with hands of commerce
created a jingling sound of coins.
He jumped in himself, sitting on the edge
of the boat, circled his shoulders
in a canonical manner for a linear drive
to reach the far side. Half-way through

the wind developed a knack of blowing
the hair on the head. A conscious bid
to rearrange the dishevelled mop: he
looked down at the sheeny waters, and
identified the sinuous shadow of death.
Here now, gone the next moment: hairsbreadth.
A slight shift of an arse like that of
a word in a poem would have made
all the difference; the bloody boat
would have surely 'reached' that bank,
and forgotten the ride. But... a relief!

FOR A NEW BRIDE

In the curvature of the morning sun
I inspected the world – bathed and
spread over some virgin shoulders.
Ventured to search for my 'self'
In those umpteen insouciant strands
that hung, in slackened patterns,
casting away the customary pleats.
The vermillion dot on the forehead
eyed at me as though warning sternly.
The dimples – two curved braces
on either side of a moist mouth –
guarding passion in a mysterious manner
deflected my gaze onto the belly button,
an oasis to quench the thirst on an
otherwise deserted midriff, challenging.
Two turmeric toned palms with red graphics
folded together and greeted, the stack
of glass bangles sliding from the forearms
down to the elbows, the music crawling
over my middle-aged earlobes to awaken
a primitive instinct that signals chemistry.
A furtive glance at the floor revealed
silver ringlets, secure on the small toes
of both feet, producing a new symmetry.
I instantly realized that I had failed
as I was searching for my 'self' in a
forbidden zone – a world already inhabited
by blessed symbols that would not brook.
Yet I felt a certain warmth on my left palm
that transferred itself to my right arm, and
the words of this verse delineate that truth.
An impish response to greetings from
a knotted being whom I considered quaint !

JOEL V. DAVID

PHILOCOSMIA OR THE CHORUS

We could search for you in myths,
Or in the local folk-lore, or better still
Invite you to play with us our games,
To know you through those devious means.

Beyond this welcome we have no choice really.
The silences of our past wake up.
They press us for answers,
Expect us to fill in the blanks.

One among us, much perturbed, spoke thus:
"I've lived searching for life and found only death.
The folds on my neck have become a hangman's noose:
My feelings, blood for this ritual, lie small and
trembling."

A million voices take up the echo:
It is as if this whole land lies waiting,
Sold out over and again to the one night glories
Of sawdust messiahs as light as their words.

And the grave awaits us all. Our blessings
Lie within easy reach, only a life or two away.
Where we go, we shall return
Such promise, such solace through our gods!

ARVIND MACWAN

TRENDS IN INDIAN ENGLISH CRITICISM

Review Article

John Oliver Perry, *Absent Authority: Issues in Contemporary Indian Criticism.* New Delhi: Sterling, 1992. pp. 422, Rs. 395/-.

"Why erect mental theories and suit your poetry to them?"

—*Sri Aurobindo*

"Responsible criticism isn't there" – *C. D. Narasimhaiah*

"There is a common pattern of achievements and failures."

—*S. K. Desai and G. N. Devy*

By now Indian English poetry has established itself as a field of considerable importance. There has been a corresponding increase in the criticism of this body of literature. The number of reviews, articles, dissertations and books on Indian English poetry has certainly increased; however the discussion of the basic principles seems to lack clarity and fervour. Problematizing and theorizing this very special and peculiar poetic process and evolving a specific system of theory to deal with the whole of Indian English poetry has perhaps not been given due thought.

Some critics have made attempts to apply and occasionally adapt theories from the West, while others have made passionate appeals to draw upon ancient Sanskrit poetics. Some have tried to point out parallels between ancient Indian poetics and Western aesthetics. While some lament the post-colonial intellectual inertia, others emphasize the inapplicability of traditional concepts. There has been no collective effort at evolving an indigenous theory system, a 'modern Indian tradition' taking into account the unique nature of Indian English literature and language, and

the relationship of Indian English literature with other literatures—European, Anglo-American, Commonwealth as well as ancient Indian literature and that written in modern Indian languages. In general, it has been a groping in the dark.

The recent anthology of critical essays edited by Charu Sheel Singh (*Confederate Gestures : Search for Method in Indian Literature Studies,* Associated Publisning House, Delhi, 1993) indicates that criticism of Indian English Literature is beginning to acquire a theoretical thrust. John Oliver Perry's *Absent Authority* demands serious attention as a pioneering work in this direction. The volume takes up for discussion "several persistent theoretical and practical issues in Indian English criticism" which in effect looks like an "informative, analytical and critical discussion of a large mass of written material." For this the author relies on "participation of the collective Indian critical establishment" as well as works by individual critics. He claims to have attempted to "trace out a common pattern of achievements and failures" in Indian English poetry and its criticism. The metacritical study, as the author calls it, in a well-argued plea, a well documented and presented case for taking Indian English writing more seriously and for evolving an indigenous system of its criticism.

Here is an honest effort to emphasize the relevance of Indian English to Indian culture, a sincere attempt to find a pattern underlying the seemingly disorderly, almost chaotic essays at Indian English criticism, and to probe further and find out the reasons for the present state.

Quoting from well-known senior critics (C.D. Narasimhaiah and others) as well as those who have recently made notable contribution to criticism (G. N. Devy and others), he establishes the fact that there is a lack of responsible criticism.

Indian English poetry has perhaps received a raw deal. Respectable scholars like Narasimhaiah, Srinivasa Iyengar and Amrik Singh have been apprehensive about it. They have

maintained that Indian English poetry is metropolitan, not grounded in culture. The little that can be considered recognition of this poetry is found in magazines such as *The Illustrated Weekly of India, The Sunday Observer, India Today, Debonair, Imprint* and *Focus.* Certain university departments of English also prescribe Indian English writing along with translation from regional literary works for their M.A. programmes. This has definitely helped the sale of Indian English poetry books. It has also encouraged some study and criticism of this poetry.

Prof. Perry laments the case Prof. Amiya Dev and his group taking a passionate interest in comparative literature but dealing with only regional literatures and not Indian English literature. At time critics are "commissioned" to write convenient reviews. Many critics tend to seek values and make judgements derived from English or American Studies.

The "shifting instability of critical attitude" seems obvious when one recognizes the lack of a clear understanding of poetic aesthetics.

Naming the present state a crisis Prof. Perry stresses the need for "evolving some appropriately open and fluid kind of contemporary literary esthetic" with a "well based inclusive perspective" which will assure that "the narrower poetics and criticisms of Western thinkers, of Sanskrit scholars and of parochial regionalists (do) not run rampant and destructively in this important literary vineyard."

One of the many factors responsible for the crisis is the competition that poetry has to face with cinema, video, photo journalism and popular journalism which have become the most common means of entertainment for the educated middle class.

The lack of English speaking population, literary tradition in English, local critical tradition, cultural recognition, authority in time, energy and psychic focus and respected local models has

also contributed to the crisis. Older authorities (Vedic sacred traditional texts) are far too distant and so absent, unlike in the regional literatures.

Pointing at the basic ideological difference between the Western-Christian aesthetics (Literature as a liberating force) and the African-American aesthetics (Literature as a coping force), he stresses the need to arrive at some such basic understanding of the "place of writing" in the Indian psyche and suggests that the Indian aesthetics is what he calls "Absent Authority which makes literature stand in for laws or truths not present elsewhere and, at the same time, ensures that literature lacks full authority, is absent (without) authority, one at a distance, thus a power that cannot be confronted, questioned, bargained with, changed".

In the last two chapters, Prof. Perry goes on to mention and discuss some institutional and academic constraints which include the badly managed university departments of English, the slow process of syllabus reform, the role of institutions such as U.G.C., CIEFL, JNU, The British Council, USIS, the causes for the failure of review magazines and the tradition bound Indian psyche.

This rather enthusiastic attempt at understanding the socio-political aspects of Indian English poetry also takes into account the "unconscious indirect and overt censorship due to the authorities in Amero-British — Commonwealth — European literatures", the potential market for poetry books, the rising price and importation of paper and the unwillingness on the part of publishers and editors due to the fear of social impact, i.e., the worsening of social and political problems.

This study, carried out with great concern, may not reveal any great secrets, does not make any significant discoveries, and does not offer any magical solutions or suggestions. Yet on reading the book one is made acutely aware of the problem, a problem one has "learned to live with", a problem one has stopped thinking about or conveniently forgotten.

After Bruce King, Prof. Perry is perhaps the only foreigner, certainly the only American to have taken such a keen interest in Indian English criticism. Being an outsider has its advantages and disadvantages. It allows the author to observe the entire situation with a certain amount of detachment and objectivity. On the other hand, he faces the danger of not being taken seriously, of his sincerity being suspected and his credentials being questioned to comment on this very Indian problem.

Prof. Perry is able to look at old and established critics as well as the new stars on the horizon of Indian English criticism with equal openness, which makes him give what may seem undue importance to these new critics. G.N. Devy for example has been mentioned and quoted much more often than seniors like C.D. Narasimhaiah and Srinivasa Iyengar.

By confining his study to the field of poetry only, Prof. Perry has been able to handle the problem rather well, a problem which would have been unmanageable had he ventured to deal with fiction and other prose writing too.

The content of the book is extremely informative and useful, the research extensive, the language and presentation simple and lucid, which makes the book abundantly readable. If the book seems to lack organisation in parts, it is perhaps the reflection of the confusion in the development of Indian English criticism and in its present state.

In spite of all its limitations, 'Absent Authority' will be an important source, in fact an essential source of information for any serious student of Indian English poetry and criticism.

PRIYADARSHI PATNAIK

TODAY

Your today is different
indifferent
to mine.

It lies somewhere between the
greying hair of your husband
and the growing hair of your child.

And my today is like a cloud
neutral coloured
lost
a little muddle headed
breaking
like waves upon a sea.

Anyway today belongs neither to you nor to me.

THE TEMPLE AT ALARNATH

I

Why do I start again
Upon my bicycle,
perhaps it is too late to start again
to see a temple I have never seen,
to begin again
when perhaps it is
wrong to think of a beginning
and pedal along an unknown path
where the paddy is still green
on both sides,
the breeze a stranger,
and try to see things.

II

The temple is almost alone,
only the sound of the wind in trees
and the stillness of rocks.

The gods are silent too
without devotees.

Did I come for this?

But really,
you are not live enough
intense enough to know.

You can only walk around
quietly
trying to listen, to see,

to feel your
ignorance

for knowing is only knowing
that you are ignorant
and that only can you
rise, go
and know all that you can
through ignorance.

III

Perhaps
by trying to say all I have said
I have failed to say anything

for words are without
colours, smell, space
of that bamboo ladder
resting against the stone wall
or of that still streak of sunlight
upon the dappled grass
with a quiet leisure among them
of perhaps a couple centuries

and it is that which I must learn
which even the birds here know
without knowing

where seconds and hours
turn fluid in a
leisurely complacence
and grow just a little
timeless.

BHUPINDER PARIHAR

VISTAS

I and a crowd of strangers
gaze at the skies.
A voice echoes
"I see nothing
Earth is slipping
from under my feet.
why the skies at all?
why?
Mop your brows and retreat".

The crowd slowly
meanders away.
The skies open up
sounds subside,
I hear nothing.
Alone, with feet aground
I explore the skies.

SUSANTHA GOONATILAKE

THE VEILS OF EMPTINESS, OF SUNYA

Why is it then that the clearest thoughts come
When one is besotted.
When the grids and iron bars
That imprisoned one's view
Have melted away
Into an alcoholic, truer picture?
Why is it that I see clearly
The softness of your metaphors
The gentleness of your approach
The cadences in your eyes
An the nimbleness of your mind
Once again?
Why is it
That as my head turns dizzy
In the merry-go-round of my brain,
I trade my fears for your joys,
And I slither down the ski slopes
Of your feelings?

RABINDRA K. SWAIN

BACK IN THE VILLAGE

Once back in your village
you smell her dung and sleep
and snorkel around it.

Move your drowsy hands —
the contentious doors of dream
will surface like a full moon.

That village of sleep
smelling of sandalwood and smoke
of incense sticks

where your old stout father
chanting the hymns of morning
buds a feeling of cotyledon.

Drawn out of the log of sleep
your hand habituated in tuning
the uneasy memory to play at dawn

retreats
at the sight of a hibiscus
lying by your pillow

fallen from the picture of the Goddess Durga
hanging on the wall;
chanting grows louder.

RAJNEESH DHAM

SELF PORTRAIT II

I have buried my mirage,
destroyed every castle of fantasy
and having kissed the migratory dunes goodbye,
I hanker for a rooting.

Once I wanted to be the broken brick
that had never made it to the wall.

Today, I greet the familiar slingbag
that has lasted 3 cities and 4 houses.

R. VISWANATHAN

MONSOON EVENING

After a long torrent
On a monsoon evening
It is often an interlude of regrets
As though there was a breach
Of sacred codes, some violence,
An overflow of passions.
The leaves shed the lingering drops
With heavy guilt.
The frogs croak remorse.
The chorus of crickets
Haunts memories.
The mind, heavy and alone,
Bends low and, resting on window bars,
Watches the overlapping circles
Drawn on puddles by the last trickles,
Each falling drop sinks into the mind's abyss;
Each circle fades into oblivion.

BHUPINDER PARIHAR

CUTTING ACROSS CULTURAL BARRIERS

Review Article

Balraj Komal, *A Sky Full of Birds*, translated by the author. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992. pp.93, Rs.45/-.

Agha Shahid Ali, *The Beloved Witness*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 1992. pp.72, Rs.100/-.

The Golden Tradition: An Anthology of Urdu Poetry, edited and translated by Ahmed Ali. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. pp. 274, Rs.150/-.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, *The Rebel's Silhouette*, translated by Agha Shahid Ali. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. pp. 101, Rs.90/-.

AN ACT OF FAITH

Balraj Komal's reputation as a poet was established in 1948 with a short poem 'Akeli' (A Girl Alone). The poem movingly captures the agony of a little homeless girl who has lost her parents in the post-partition riots. The orphaned girl begs to be adopted by the stranger — the silent poet. Komal's keen social awareness and rare sensitivity form the very essence of his humanity.

Nearly fifteen years later, Komal wrote "Kaghaz ki Na'o" (A Paper Boat) with a child at its centre. The poet and his young son are floating paper boats in the rain. While the child sleeps through the night, the poet writes a new poem and goes to sleep. The child is up before the poet. He makes a new paper boat from the paper on which the poet had put down his

poem so painstakingly. The poem ends with the child declaring, "He who doesn't clap his hands today is a fool". More than any other poet, Balraj Komal has shown a keen awareness of a child's world.

This year Balraj Komal (b. 1928) completes nearly fifty years of creative writing in Urdu. During this period, he wrote nine volumes of poetry and a volume each of short stories and literary criticism. His works have been translated into several Indian languages and German. *Parindon Bhara Aasman (A Sky Full of Birds)* won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985.

A true heir to Miraji (1912-1949), Balraj Komal suggests more than he states. He uses images and symbols "not to point a moral or adorn a tale but to depict a picture, allude to a mood and refer to a feeling", as the eminent Urdu critic, Ale Ahmed Saroor puts it. In Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's words, "Balraj Komal is a difficult and rewarding poet". He is complex. The act of decoding his poem is gradual, though not frustrating. The centrality of his poem lies somewhere submerged within the text that is, in the structuralist parlance, "unwritten".

To the first-time reader of Balraj Komal, *A Sky Full of Birds* might be of immense value and delight. The book contains 67 poems — poems about a world where hope of nearness is an eluding dream, poems about innocence, collective desensitized human psyche, inner crises and fears. Most of the poems are meditative lyrics full of intensity and tenderness. Komal's poems project an unsentimental world-view; sentimentality seldom scores over pathos. The fierce intensity with which Komal writes is available in translation. Here is an extract from the poem "Lust Celebration":

> The reptiles, scores of them,
> crept out
> this evening
> from resounding thick forests.
> All pouting, lusting
> and stripped to the bone,
> All ferociously penetrated her
> and wrote in her blood

the tale of their exploits;
they themselves the nightmare
and the nightmarish consequence.

Like E.E. Cummings, Komal does seem to throw out a challenge; it is easy to blow up the world; it is difficult to make a poem. His poem is a zen act, an internalised discipline where the perfect and the facile are near neighbours:

I had no right
to ask you to stay,
But couldn't by any chance
send you away.

In themes, Balraj Komal is one with his contemporaries, yet he is different in modes of perception, and in the use of irony. His narrative mode shows his remarkable awareness of instinctive rhythms, speed, movement and the intonation patterns.

The translator in this case is not the receiver who is excited and inspired by the work of another writer. Though the language is new, the content is familiar to the translator. It is his own creation. The original Urdu poem which the poet-translator encodes in a new language is well-structured. It is transcreated. Translation for Komal is not a mere verbal activity. It is an act of faith. The semblable structures he creates retain the uniqueness and mystery of the original poem, which yields its essence making the end-product authentic. This is how the poem "Woh Shakhs Qatl Ho Gaya" (He was Assassinated) reads in translation:

Tonight
Even this was over—
Your duty to weigh
the crime
the sentence.

The man was assassinated
He sliced his tongue—
He thought, perhaps, in perpetual stream
He would flow in being—

The radiant touch
would make his heart
dream of murmuring dews,
and bestow on him
an affectionate warmth.
A blossom of a prayer—
The man is no more
among crowds of lamps
He bowed his head,
in deference to doom;
He hugged his cross
and merged himself
with wayside dust—
A captive of hope
He joined today
the lifeless stones—
He gave himself up
to a waiting legend.

The beauty and strength of Komal's poetry lie in the fact that it starts "communicating before it is understood". Aijaz Ahmed feels that Balraj Komal is much in vogue in the more uncompromising sectors of the modernists.

Translation is, at its best, an attempt to communicate on behalf of a culture and a tradition, a literature and an author. In the present case, the book points to a compelling need to know a very significant poet of one's native culture. The enlargement of readership from a single language group to a plurality of receiving minds functioning by varied cultural and linguistic imperatives has a special benefit. The poet is tested in such cases for his excellence by people who may judge him by an altogether different set of assumptions. I believe the reader will enjoy the many excellences of the book.

MANIFESTO OF DEATH AND DESPAIR

Agha Shahid Ali, a bilingual and a bicultural, made an assertion when he was twenty:

> call me a poet
> dear editor
> they call this my alien language
> i am a dealer in words
> that mix cultures
> and leave me rootless

Today, he does not feel rootless anymore. He has arrived. A poet "revealed in refuge", Shahid has outgrown that "inherent dominative mode".

Shahid at his best is a personal poet who does not differentiate between "the man who suffers" and "the mind which creates". The voice is unmistakably that of the poet himself. An appreciation of this kind of poetry needs a constant feed-back of the poet's personal life to enforce meaning.

The Beloved Witness contains 27 poems selected from the poet's already published books of poetry — *Bone-Sculpture, In Memory of Begum Akhter, The Half-Inch Himalayas, A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* and *A Nostalgist's Map of America.*

Shahid concentrates on the themes of death and loneliness with confessional urgency. He is under a psychoanalytical compulsion to exorcise the mind of the ghost of the past. The persons and places appear as ominous figures leaving him with a sense of void and futility. The tendency towards self-indulgence proves menacing. The problem with this kind of poetry is that of extension—how to extend a personal experience into a principle of creative and artistic realisation.

In most of the poems, the poet finds himself testing out his own death and vulnerability on himself. He is bold as he seems determined to confront the "intimations of mortality". "Death filled the years"

("Bones"), "I had died long ago" ("Notes for the Unabandoned Stranger"). The idea of dying is irresistible to the poet. He is a death-monger who is left alone to probe the realities of the private world. As in confessional poetry, emotions and impulses are taken to their uttermost limit. This is the extreme point. The speaker in the poem "In Memory of Begum Akhter" wishes to talk of the end of the world when he sees the news of Begum's death in every paper. He is pushed to the periphery of his consciousness where his sense of belongingness is severed;

> Exiling to cold mud,
> Your coffin, stupid and white,
> astounds by its ignorance.
>
> ... life, once again closes in,
> reasserting this earth where the air
> meets in a season of grief.

The basic tension of extreme art originates out of "the conflict between the movement towards psychic wholeness and the yearning for disintegration". Like most of the extremist poets, Shahid too resorts to self-questionings and self-assertions that mingle to form a dominant confessional tone:

> how can one complain to bones? ("Bones")
> is death worth dying? ("Another Death")
> One cannot cross-examine the dead.
> ("In Memory of Begum Akhter")
>
> And the huntsman:
> Was I sleeping while he snipped
> my thick black fur
> and filled me with garbage and stones?
> ("The Wolf's Postcript to 'Little Red Riding Hood' ")
>
> Is God a Muslim? ("Note Autobiographical")

Extreme poetry is beset with certain inherent dangers; one such danger is that "the poetic development of a poet, extreme and confessional,

cannot be predicted in terms of acquiring craftmanship. The poet's experiences act as the determining factor in his or her development". *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* [New York: Oxford, 1967]. Robert Lowell observed that a confessional poet does not always present autobiographical facts as case histories: "he tinkers with facts". He makes use of a persona. In Shahid's case, it is always an intensely personal tone; the "self" of the poet is employed as a medium to communicate personal history.

Both Sylvia Plath and Shahid are good at the art of dying. Their approaches are different. In the poem "A Birthday Present" Sylvia Plath imagines her own death:

> If it were death
> I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes
>
> .....
>
> There would be a nobility then,
> there would be a birthday
> Pure and clean as the cry of a baby.
> And the universe slide from my side.

Plath's final longing is for unity with the other world. She looks forward to death anticipating an after-life. Death for her is not the end; it is followed by resurrection. After death she will be pure and clean as the cry of the baby. Body for her is a barrier which refuses to yield (we know it yielded one day).

Shahid's obsession with death reminds me of Shelley's sad conclusion— "Life is a mere dream and death is the only reality... life has been despite emotional involvements as ineffectual as writing on moving waters". Shahid's images of death, his nightmarish outbursts, present him as a helpless mourner:

> waiting for death
> here
> in this mosaic of graves
> i design my tomb

and beat a prayer
on the stone:
my hands carving
the stillness
of dead leaves ("Autumn in Srinagar")

He was dead having lived
in a city of stones:
it was easy to strip him
of his mute ghost:
I had died long ago
("Notes for the Unabandoned Stranger")

Then I mailed my bones
wrapped in bare dreams.
.....
Before I run out of change,
I must report:
The cremations aren't working,
someone's left the bones off their hooks
("Bell Telephone Hour")

The self of the poet, with all its dreams and memories, spans the extremities of life. The language is totally subsuming of divisions between the poet and personal. The allusions are cultivated to accommodate a solipsistic point of view. The allusion of Majnoon (a celebrated lover of ancient Arabia, meaning insane) presents the poet as a survivor "longing for wings":

Friend, speak of the sky
when that hour comes.

The basic limitation of a confessional "I" is that it fails to expand beyond the self of the poet, an expansion that equips Whitman ("this is no book/who touches this book touches a man") and Yeats ("a poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of his tragedy, whatever it be") to have a pantheistic and harmonious view of life.

The violence and discordance of the imagery of Shahid's poems is a deliberate shock-treatment. The images accomodate a personal response to life. The poet's memories, obsessions, private nightmares allow him little scope to comprehend the varieties of life. The images embody a vision of the breakdown of the world leading to the breakdown of the poet. Thus, they record inner tremors and determine the poet's range. "Death punctuated all my poems", "I see the day burn to ash (o strangled sun) in the sky's funeral pyre", "Bury the bones of dreams in a river", "in the house of the dead", "my hands carving the stillness of dead leaves", "the buried shadow of time that passed to nowhere", "Ghazal— that death sustaining widow", "mute corpse", "dead leaves arouse a sense of loss and despair". They exhaust the poet's experience and blacken his canvas. The immortality of this kind of poetry, in Lowell's words, is "life's disintegration".

Urdu has an unusually mellowing influence on the poet. "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz" is perhaps one of the most beautiful poems in the whole gamut of Indo-Anglian poetry. The poet rises above the level of personal sorrow and looks at Faiz with immense warmth and clarity of vision:

> .... You had redefined the cruel
> beloved, that figure who already
> was Friend, Woman, God? In your hands
>
> she was Revolution. You gave
> her silver hands, her lips were red.
> .....
> And because you waited,
> I listen as you pass with some song
> a memory of musk, the rebel face of hope.

The poet, no doubt, changes the centre now and then, but the circumference remains fatalistically the same.

MESSAGE OF GOLD IN WORDS OF SILVER

The ghost of Fitzgerald does not bedevil Ahmed Ali, as it does almost every oriental translator of poetry. In his Note on the Translations, the translator writes, "If I had allowed my interpretations to enter, the translated poems would not have remained Ghalib, as Fitzgerald's translations are not Omar Khayyam. So, I have left the translations, like the originals, unexplained, so that each reader can interpret the poet in accordance with his own sensibility, as he does the poetry of T.S. Eliot."

Fitzgerald not only retained and conveyed the spirit of the original Persian quatrains of Khayyam, he turned the message of silver into words of gold. Arthur Waley has done the same for Chinese poetry. To judge an effort at the translation of poetry of an oriental language into a modern western tongue by the genius of the poet translated is perhaps not the right criterion. Translation of poetry is a brave act- an act of industry and inspiration. The range and intensity of this act is determined by the translator's notions and values of the poetics of translation. Ahmed Ali "could have followed the spirit, the feeling and mood, and not the word as is being done in America after the example of Ezra Pound. But that would have led to mistranslation and a false impression, such as has been perpetrated by American poets in their translations of Ghalib" (Asia Society, N.Y.).

Ahmed Ali's note on the translations shows him to be a purist. He has a well-defined strategy. Without being brilliant, the translation is correct, competent and lucid. The quality of renderings is good particularly where the epigrammatical style is suitable:

> Where are they? Some have appeared
> As tulips and the rose.
> What faces must have decked the earth
> That under it repose. Ghalib (p. 233)

> Even though you are
> In everything, there is
> Nothing however like you. Ghalib (p. 245)

Words cannot capture the "unsaid" element in Ghalib's poetry. With the help of an image, the poet generates a mood which proves to be a happening, a dynamic evolution. It will be interesting to see how different translators of a she'r of Ghalib tackle it. The she'r chosen here is:

neend uski hai, dimagh uska hai, raten uski hain
teri zulfen jiske bazoo par parishan ho gaeen

Ahmed Ali renders it as

To him alone belong the nights,
Sleep, and happiness,
On whose arms your locks of hair
Have spread in wantonness.

Aijaz Ahmed tackled it as

Sleep comes to him
peace belongs to him
the night is his
over whose arms you spread
your hair

Adrienne Rich's rendering is

Sleep is his, and peace of
mind, and the nights belong
to him
across whose arms you spread
the veils of your hair

This is William Stafford:

Sleep comes, peace, quiet of
rest,
for one who holds an arm
under your hair

Merwin made another attempt to capture the nuance:

He is the lord of sleep
lord of peace

lord of night
on whose arm your hair is lying

Each attempt has its own merit, its own beauty. Ghalib never aimed at the absolute. Why should a translator? David Ray's adaptations are wonderful:

The wind took her because I could not.
(Quoted from memory)

Ghalib had no particular philosophy in the technical sense of the word. He had a fascinating vision of life. As a master of Persianized Urdu, he expressed everyday thoughts in terse and musical language.

The Golden Tradition is a monumental work in its range and scope. Selections of Urdu poetry from the fourteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century cover a wide range. The book is highly readable. It provides a historical perspective that speaks of the translator's thorough scholarship and his passionate involvement with the Urdu language and its literature.

The introductory part of the book is illuminating. While tracing the origin and growth of Urdu language, the writer observers "Modern scholarship has upheld the view that Amir Khusro was not the first Urdu poet, nor was Urdu developed in the Deccan. Other poets writing before him, and those of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, have as much claim on our attention as the early poets of the Deccan. There has been a continuous line of distinguished poets between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries in North India, as distinguished from the Deccan, among them Kabir Das, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak, Malik Mohammad Jaisi, and others, both Hindu and Muslim, up to and after Abdul Rahim Khan Khanan. Although their works are found in the devanagari script, their language is basically the same as Urdu". The book is interspersed with insightful observations, particularly where the learned writer discusses various Urdu literary genres, and the lives and times of the poets. His observations are condensed and have amazing clarity. The book makes an important contribution to the study of comparative literatures. Such books are rare. This is perhaps the rarest.

A MODEST TRIBUTE TO FAIZ'S HUMANITY

Agha Shahid Ali's first exposure to Faiz's poetry was through Begum Akhter whose soulful singing of Faiz thrilled Shahid. Before 1947, Faiz had once stayed in Shahid's house in Srinagar. At home, his father would often recite Faiz. Such musical and personal encounters helped Shahid in internalising Faiz. He grew up with English, not Urdu. Understandably, he is loyal to both. When he went to the United States in 1976, he discovered to his utter dismay that it was a terrible insult to his culture to have to introduce Faiz. It was at this point the desire to translate Faiz into English started taking shape.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984) had socialistic leanings from the beginning and remained an active member of the Progressive Writers' Association during the nineteen-thirties and forties. Faiz, in spite of his leftist leanings, was not a rebel poet in the real sense of the word.

Intensely lyrical, Faiz's poetry reflects at once the heritage of the past and the quest and the revolutionary hope of the present. Faiz took all the key-words from the repertoire of classical poetry and thus with amazing classical application conveyed a contemporary social and political idea. The images of 'chain and gibbet', 'rejoicing', 'noose', 'net', 'garden', 'wind', 'rose', 'spring', 'nightingale' etc., are basically classical, but are charged with contemporary meanings. Gopi Chand Narang, the renowned Urdu critic feels that "Faiz is deeply concerned with purely personal themes as he is with the nationalistic and socialistic. Frequently, the two emerge as poles, pulling the poet in two different directions. To Faiz, both are dear. This cleavage between human passions and socialistic obligation runs its contradictory course in the poetry of Faiz".

The tension between the self and society is nothing new. Faiz's first English translator Victor Kiernan aptly remarked, "It is the common fate of the progressive movements all over the world."

Faiz's strength as a poet lies in this duality. Faiz did not indulge in rhetoric as most of the progressive writers did. Today, the great literary

movement has reached its logical end. It has dramatically dwindled away. The utopian idealism has vanished. The ideology is dead but the poetry it inspired in Faiz lives. Its glory and magic are intact. After all, Faiz was the product of the English romantic tradition. Shahid has tried to capture this magic of Faiz in his translations. In his insightful Preface to *The Rebel' s Silhouette*, the translator observes that the book is not for purists. At times, the translator had no choice but to adjust, especially in the ghazals. The translator is well aware that translating a ghazal is just about impossible. He adopts loose, free verse stanzas to suggest the elliptical complexities and power of Faiz's couplets:

> It was me
> It was my shirt
> that was printed
>
> with blood on the streets
> darkened there with inks of accusation
>
> I declared these strains a new fashion
> and went to mingle with the guests
> at my lover's home.

(yeh hamin the jin ke libas par sare rah siahi likhi gai
yahi dagh the jo saja ke ham sare bazme yaar chale gaye)

Shahid's translation of Faiz's poems leaves much to be desired. In his effort to depict the nuances of the poet's thoughts and feelings in a new idiom, the translator has distorted and dislocated the original poetic syntax. I wish the translator had violated and ravished the original structures to create a unique aesthetic order. What the translator has done only annihilates the metaphorical expressions which constitute the very essence of Faiz's aesthetics. The rendering of the famous quatrain of Faiz, given at the beginning of this volume, bears testimony to my assertion that the translator changes the very texture of the expressions by dealing with them in a matter-of-fact manner. The first line, "At night my lost memory of you returned", plummets into bathos when, instead of keeping the similes intact, the translator introduces the tone of first

person singular in the beginning of the following three lines: "I was like...". The beauty of Faiz's poetic expression lies in the varieties of similes that convey the atmosphere of the mind.

Moreover, the rendering of Faiz's famous poem, "Mujh se pehli si mohabbat meri mehboob na maang", is puerile, to say the least. The first line itself is a poor specimen of the half-hearted attempt to introduce a good poem to new readers:

> That which then was ours, my love
> don't ask me for that love again.

The repetition of the word 'love' is jarring, besides creating a sort of confusion in the reader's mind. The tone of the poet is that of a person feeling apologetic and in a way, unwilling to part company with his beloved, but the translator's "don't" smacks of admonition or reproof. The next line, "Main yeh samjha tha ke tu hai to drakhshan hai hyaat", has been clothed in the tattered raiments of words:

> The world then was gold, burnished with light
> and only because of you.

The word "gold" does not serve any purpose here and, instead of making it glitter, the translator has taken undue pains to make it burnish with light. And then, "only because of you", is like killing the goose for the sake of the golden egg. This volume sourly disappoints the reader conversent with Faiz's poetry in original. The adjustments to which the translator has referred to in the preface is rather a mild word to cover up arbitrary ramblings. A discerning reader would definitely look back to the earlier English versions of Faiz's poetry for its proper understanding.

The Rebel's Silhouette is the translator's "modest tribute to Faiz's humanity". What redeems the translator is his loving concern for Faiz, a poet of international status, a rich heritage of the sub-continent. Translation, I believe, is the second most imporant function of creative English in India. Such an attempt gives a wider focus to poetry and literature. Agha Shahid Ali deserves our admiration as he has tried to preserve the universal heritage of poetry.

TĀYUMĀṈAVAR

(Tāyumāṉavar (1704-1742), though not included among the sixtyfour canonized Saiva saints, is nevertheless counted as one of the foremost Tamil Saiva poets. Tāyumāṉavar's parents were devotees of Siva in his incarnation as the midwife who came to attend the labor and delivery of a pious young woman whose real mother had been stranded by the flood waters of the Kaveri River. This is the deity— Tāyumāṉavar, literally "the one who became the mother also" — enshrined in the rock temple at Trichinopoly; the poet was named after him.

As a youth Tāyumāṉavar must have received thorough training in Tamil and Sanskrit philosophical and devotional literature, for his poems show his mastery of these traditions. Popular lore has it that he succeeded his father in the king's service at Trichinopoly and soon rose to a high rank. Later Tāyumāṉavar quit the court and took up the life of a mendicant. He spent his last days in Ramnad, living in a small garden hut where he wrote out his poems on palm leaves. Subsequently these poems were copied and disseminated by his disciples).

HARD TO KNOW

As that which is hard to know,
as the self of the self,
as the supreme space filling everywhere,
as the undiminishing nectar,
as the shining lamp,
You merged with me.

Without my knowing, you were there.

O lord,
Won't you now at least
Think of bestowing the state of grace on me.
So that I can embrace you?

(*Translated from Tamil,* Tannai Oruvar 1, *by Swami Sevananda*)

BEYOND COMING AND GOING

Being of a single nature,
Beyond coming and going,
You merge with me,
Sweet as sugar cane, honey, and the three ripe fruits.

But I do not think of you
And dissolve, mind melting.

O great wealth which grants goodness!

Is my heart iron, stone, or wood?
Which is it?
I don't know.

(*Translated from Tamil*, Tannai Oruvar 3, *by Swami Sevananda*)

OCEAN OF BLISS

So that I enter the ocean of bliss.

Will I,

not knowing if it's night or day,
dissolving, dissolving and melting in love,
screaming "O father," "O lord,"
like a crying baby following its mother
with tears overflowing,
go mad.

And escape from the sea of sorrow?

O self-effulgent flame of bliss!

(*Translated from Tamil*, Collarku Ariya 4, *by Swami Sevananda*)

COME GOOD KNOWLEDGE

Come good knowledge so we find
The greatness filling every mind,
And see that soul which stands in every soul as light,
And shines in every eye as sight.

Come good knowledge so that we,
Who call the body "you" or "me,"
Will see we're consciousness, and be
United with reality.

Come good knowledge so we know
The wondrous omnipresent beauty,
And like the bee inside the flower,
We drink its nectar rich and fruity.

Come good knowledge so that
This worldly life for us falls flat
And seems like vomited-up rice
When you appear in paradise.

(*Translated from Tamil,* Nallarive Enkanni, *by Swami Sevananda*)

GREAT LORD

O great lord,
beginning, middle and end,
without limit,
the light filling within and without,
pure bliss.

Abandoning me, your slave,
Not giving instruction so that I remain in bliss:
Is it right?

What will this miserable fellow do?

On one side the mind torments me.
On the other, the senses are more cruel than fire.

(*Translated from Tamil*, Civan Ceyal 4, *by Swami Sevananda*)

THE FIVE SENSES

The five senses came as hunters,
dragged me off,
cooked me in the flames of cruel lust,
and ate me alive.

Mind frayed and melting,
Forgetting myself,
Wandering around like a motherless child,
I suffered.

Lustrous gem.
Foremost in the great hall.
More compassionate than one's own mother.

O lord.
O ocean of knowledge.

(*Translated from Tamil*, Civan Ceyal 5, *by Swami Sevananda*)

WHAT GOOD FORTUNE

What good fortune did I earn

for you to come into this world
as the silent master

and make me your slave

and show the smile
which says,

"If you know
'the feet' and 'grace,'
it is indescribable.

"If you say
'the head,' 'perfection,' 'essence,'
it is bliss.

"And if you want
to root out the maya mind,
then no more selfish action."

(*Translated from Tamil*, Aranam 7, *by Swami Sevananda*)

NAKULAN

('Nakulan' is the pen-name of T.K. Doraiswamy (1992). Retired as Professor of English from Mar Ivanious College, Trivandrum. Primarily a Tamil writer, he writes in English too. His publications in Tamil include seven novels, five collections of poetry and an edition of an anthology of New Writing in Tamil. Six collections of poetry and a novel by him have appeared in English. Some of Bharati's poems translated by him have been published under the title "The Little Sparrow". His contributions in English have appeared in journals like *Indian Literature, Youth Times, The Illustrated Weekly of India, Thought, The Journal of Literature and Aesthetics* and *Strand Magazine*, and in *New Writing in India* (Penguin). He was awarded the Asan Prize for Tamil poetry 1982 and the Santhome Award for the best Tamil writer 1991).

THIS INDIA

There
In the assembly
Out go the questions
Back come the answers
There
The world
Is a great market
It is the cash
That counts here
Then
What have you not?
From here you can go there
A rise in the status
In your profession
Success in business
Cash again
Can procure
A seat

In the House of Learning
Also a place
To bed with
The fact is
Cash you have
Then
Justice will
Be at your
Beck and call
All this is legal
And is
Right as
Right can be
From the past
To the present
As it is today
So it is tomorrow
"The pot-holes and the pitfalls
Down the road of History".

*

There
It is
A cockfight
Of the great powers
And the third world
Speaks of
Dharma
To them
And yet
Like the parched earth
Eager for
A downpour
Looks up
To them
To be
And

The Powers that be
Say
"What a laugh"
As the poet said
"Here
In our state
Something is rotten
Somewhere"

*

There
Man will say
"Glory to be man"
And declare
"God is dead"
There
What is love
But sex
– That is that

*

Life is but
The need
To eat
To get dressed
To copulate
What else is it?
If you speak of
The Rule of Law
They will shout
"Down with it"
If you speak of
Discipline
They will say
"Damn it"

*

Out there
Everywhere
It is but
'Sales-talk'
Everywhere
Where
Work is to be done
They will
Shout the slogan
"The strike is on"
"We are the ones
That rule the world"
So they will say.

*

Even so
Out there
You are
And there
The ministers
One and all
Are quite well-off
And so too
Are the bureaucrats
Those who belong
To the middle class
And those who are employed
And also the Class Four
— All of them
Are not that badly off
Even so
As ever
Out there
There is no dearth of
Beggars
and street dogs

*

There
Words have
Lost their pristine purity
(They are what
Prostitutes are)
As you walk along
The streets
You see the corruption of
Language
Thanks to politics
It has been castrated
Language
Has become
Meaningless sounds

*

The narrow
Domestic walls
Out there
The lure of the world
Like me
Like you
I am not
Nor are you
Even then
Each and everyone of us
Are two in one
So we are
As we know
It is flesh
It is sex and sex

*

When I write
When I think
When I do something
When I sit still
When I see what I see
When I don't see what I see
When I eat
When I sleep
When I excrete
When I breathe
When I wag my tongue
I am not there
All the same
When I see
I am that I am
Then
Whatever I do, know, feel
What comes through all of them
At intervals
On and on
It is this stillness
That saves us still.

(*Translated from Tamil by M. S. Ramaswami*)

R. MEENAKSHI

R. Meenakshi has taught at Fatima College, Madurai and at the Madurai Institute of Social Work. She has participated actively in movements for women's liberation and for the adoption of Tamil as the medium of instruction. She now is based at Auroville where she is involved actively in several welfare projects. Meenakshi's first collection of poems Nerunji was published in 1970. Her second collection was Sudupookal. The poem translated here is from yet another collection called Deepavalippagal. Her poems voice consistently her opinions on varied contemporary issues in language that is at once highly evocative and deceptively simple.

STAINED BORDERS

Who Knows?

Who thinks,
On looking through glass
at the glossy mannequin
draped in a new sari,
of him who wrote
this exquisite beauty
in handloom?

Yarn, spun into tender-green thread
by a tender girl child
starch, from rice gruel
supplied eagerly
by a pre-adolescent eldest boy,
- while the stomach starved

Inter-woven threads born of
a father's salty sweat
and a mother's hot tears
Borders filled with flaming flowers.

In city rooms, darkened in daylight,
Under bright fluorescent lamps
A green sari with red borders
is being sold.

Those that saw the borders
failed to recognise
the stains of sorrow beneath.

(*Translated from Tamil by Latha Rengachari*)

E. ANNAMALAI

A TAMIL FESTSCHRIFT

Review Notice

A Gift of Tamil: Translations From Tamil Literature,
ed. Norman Cutler and Paula Richman. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1992. 151 pp., Rs. 150.

This Gift of Tamil was made by his American students, colleagues and friends for Professor K. Paramasivan of the American Institute of Indian Studies, who lived long enough only to accept this book when it was presented to him. This set of translations from Tamil literature is a fitting tribute to him, who spent his productive life of 60 years interpreting Tamil literature, culture and language to the Tamils and to the Americans. He was thus rewarded by the fruits of his teaching Tamil language and literature to American students. The translators belong to different disciplines professionally, but it is the love for and skill in Tamil which Paramasivan developed in them which motivated them to do the translations.

The book is also a gift of Tamil to the world, being selections from Tamil literature spanning over two millenia. It, perhaps for the first time, covers the whole spectrum of Tamil literature in one volume, though it is not a *Golden Treasury* giving the best in it, as the translators made their choices according to their likes. It has specimens of classical, medieval, modern and folk literature, of Sangam, ethical, bhakti, epic and minor poetry, as well as fiction.

The volume can be said to represent the "Chicago school" of translation, not because all the translators were associated with the University of Chicago, but because the translations are inspired by the new style and craft of translation introduced by A. K. Ramanujan. According to his view, the translation should be true to the reader; a modern reader of classical poetry of another culture should be able to respond to the translated poem as original. In this view, the notion of

fidelity in translation gets a new meaning. The translation requires notes or postword to aid the reader. The translations in this book generally subscribe to this view.

There is no space to comment on individual translations or translators. The translations, in general, read well. This book is a welcome addition to the growing literature for the course of Indian literature in translation.

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA : IN APPRECIATION

The following section honours Jayanta Mahaptra, the founding Editor of *Kavya Bharati*, and one of India's most highly regarded poets writing in English.

This section contains four recent poems which Jayanta Mahapatra has written, four review articles of books which he has recently published, eleven poems from students at the 1992 Kodaikanal Workshop which he guided and directed, and a poem from each of the Workshop's two resident advisers.

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

WISHFUL THINKING

When faraway time understands
that restlessness, turning over this arrogance
to a shameful debasement, the stairs
are difficult to mount. Suddenly
the safety catch of strength gives way.
I am stopped by an obscure fear.
God is embarrassing, my wife is watching
television, the dead egret lies
in the yard among wet leaves, and the morning
is mixed up in a dream that pushes for something
that might change our lives.
Perhaps it is the last poems of Tagore,
freed of devotional martyrdoms and wishful thinking,
or the day standing at some invisible boundary
that makes one forget the music of the heart,
or the friend I seek, ready to perform before me:
what laws are logical, lying like sunday
on a weekful of days that won't hold together?
There's nothing very strange in poetic scuffles
or in a God who is the continuation
of the dream. Time has these outbursts
of impatience and boredom.
Dimensions of India that had previously been
a fairyland and have become earth that flames.
The tricolor is alone again. Fissures water.
What do I see in an egret's death? Or in God
who is constantly losing weight?
The stairs have become part of my life.
I can just manage to see frail smoke
lift from the chimneys into the air,
but like a stranger, it does not enter.

OCTAVE

It's those accidents you cannot avoid.
The slip of your foot on the mossed stones
when you were picking a fern in a mountain brook,
the stranger passing by
who makes obscure the shape of human experience,
even the country's fate after independence,
the pain that allows you to survive,
moving neither forwards nor backwards,
those tears of Odysseus that echo those cries
to his own heart to endure his homelessness.
How the world cherishes its apparitions.
Why am I watching you, as you watch me,
who imposes his plans upon you?
You fly past deserted cities, the illusions of men.
But it's your sorrow that stumbles
on abandoned letters, a room full of things
you cannot name, the stupid dead, glow worms,
and the parody of your other self.
Like those girls, who keep saving *it*, for their
husbands. Just as the river, flowing past the city,
is an accident. As your walking down the road,
that has no chance and no choice,
the excuse for life, the still centre of your octave.
So from the thréat to your life, you will not sleep.
You make attempts to help others, heroism
in your ordeal. And this attempt to walk on water,
does it separate you from defeat?
What makes you try to find out
the accident which made you use those first words
for the poem? Or for that death
that pulls you up, all weightlessness, defying gravity?

THE DANCE

It seems a heap of time
has already dressed and is ready for me.
But who can awaken the clock,
hoping something would happen?
Can unhappiness with the world be just an idea?
Do I see the flecks on the lips
of the daughter I never had?
Beauty can never reassure one,
if it wakes enough to be sincere at all.
I loved the stories my father told me,
even though he avoided (I cannot say why)
answering my questions.
It is a piece of that time
that continues in hope, part that wanders
through the late evening streets of my city,
through headlights and streetlamps
and the silence after we have paid
each other off with conventional words.
Also in the man taming the lions in his cage;
it too comes back from where I had hidden it,
in my old house, the dimlight and the sameness,
in the floors and mirrors,
and the loneliness keeping it alive.
And that other bit, that did not know
how to cope with one's griefs, the feeling
the meaning of the world hadn't prepared one for,
when one begins to move through life
without hope or fear, and time becomes
the impotent rage in that primal dance
of Siva where silence lives,
something like the heat
stored in ice in an arctic igloo.

STREET

So much light here
that upsets the silence,
yellow, malignant.
Some on the lookout
for the street of their childhood
like an old myth
they are trying to believe.
And so many who are already dead
before they cross the street.
A pretty woman with laughter in her hair,
the secret pride in her footsteps,
gold rings of sunlight in her ears.
Here time has the hands of a child :
they can bark so fiercely
and strangely can be quiet the next minute.
The hot heartless metal of midday light.
And the old, dumb voice of Man
limping through life into the great cry.
Today we simply repeat : We understand.
Just the blind windows in faces
which make the afternoon in the street uneasy.
Just the dark night of weeping
tidied up by six red roses delivered by the florist.
Just a tender cheekbone
ripped open by the sick edge of revenge.
And the sunlight shaken
by another gust of wind.

From butchers' shops
the morning's leftover goat-heads
hold the smiles of poor buyers
high in the air.
An ambulance smacks its lips
as it gathers speed.
Time looks on
into the old man's tea cup at the corner stall.
The young woman at the shop window

makes careful circles round the glittering dress
with her covetousness.
And the young socialist's resolve
suddenly swallowed up by the malicious light.
And the oriole's song, from the treetops.
And the confidence of the people.
And the look of silence.

JOHN OLIVER PERRY

BUILDING STRENGTH ON STRENGTH

Review Article

A Whiteness of Bone by Jayanta Mahapatra.
New Delhi: Viking-Penguin, 1992. 70 pp., Rs. 100/-.

This is Jayanta Mahapatra's strongest, most solidly achieved book of poems to date, and there are indications here and elsewhere that further extensions of his poetic powers may be coming. A stultifying tradition in India accords its cultural leaders a certain VIP status on some conventionally established basis or another, and there they can rest for the remainder of their days. For the respectful public will maintain an unquestioned veneration for a socially established figure into perpetuity, without any additional effort or achievement either by the very important person continuing to be creatively effective or, indeed, by the community examining its earlier judgements and reinterpreting the VIP's supposed cultural contribution. Having come to writing poetry late in life (age forty), Mahapatra seems too driven, whether by a kind of ambivalent ambition or by scientific training, to rest on his laurels. Evidently so, for this is his twelfth book of new poems in twenty-two years, not counting *Selected Poems* (OUP-India, 1987) and three books of translations, nor his as yet uncollected prose, which, besides commentaries on the making of poetry, includes the very poetic evocations of *Orissa* (with photographs by Jean-Louis Nou, Lustre Press, New Delhi, 1986) and of his own life (in the Gale Research Series of *Contemporary Authors' Autobiographies,* 1989).

Despite the difficulties he met in finding a publisher for what he has considered his most important work, the book-length *Temple* (Dangaroo Press, Adelaide, 1989) — difficulties reflected now in the new Viking-Penguin poetry series joining the eighteen or so different Indian and foreign publishers for his books! — the many prior publications have placed Jayanta Mahapatra at the top of his field, at least since 1981, when he received the first Sahitya Akademi award for Indian

English poetry on the basis of the long poem, *Relationship*. Another sign of critical acclaim came in 1986 when, without knowledge even of *Temple,* much less the present volume, a book of nineteen essays attempted to survey and evaluate his achievement (edited by Madhusudan Prasad, Sterling Publishers). And more recently, in his inexpensive, relatively full-bodied, student-oriented anthology, likely to be the standard university text, *Indian English Poetry Since 1950* (Orient-Longman, 1989), Professor Vilas Sarang unequivocally stated :

> Mahapatra's poetry is a phenomenon of special
> significance, for it seems to point toward
> the direction that Indian English poetry will
> take most fruitfully.... Mahapatra effortlessly
> 'translates' a profoundly Indian spirit into
> English ... an advance over Kolatkar's *Jejuri,*
> where a deeply Indian locale is still observed
> by a comparatively alienated sensibility.

Such a judgement must not, however, be taken to suggest that Mahapatra feels at all comfortable in his heritage — Christian, adoptive-Hindu, Cuttack-Orissa-Indian consciousness. His poetry embodies its own particular, very personal sense of alienation and even of ironic distancing from his surroundings, but the poetic feelings are, nevertheless, always in immediate sensory contact with their world, transcendent and surrealistic as that imaginatively created world usually is :

> All the Poetry There Is
> All the poetry there is in the world
> appears to rise out of the ashes;
> The ash sits between us
> and puts its arms across our shoulders.
> It makes the world so emptily quiet.
> For there is nothing like the ashes
> to remind us how little there is to say
>
> Because poetry does not have to raise its voice.

Yet again and again it does; sometimes, and more often in this volume than before, Mahapatra's poetry breaks from silence before the all-too-evident ashenness of life as well as death in order to register readily recognizable oppressions, such as those recorded in these lines immediately following the above cautions about poetry:

> Like the death of my father
> it lies only a year down the road,
> supporting the days too heavy for us.
> No matter what game the ashes play,
> poetry simply wants to know what sort of thing
> war was, or a sunset, even a bizarre crime.
>
> Poetry, I whisper, seeing a picture
> of twenty persons gunned down without reason:
> their crime that they were merely in the way.
> I could easily understand the crime of passion . . . .

A peculiarly inept and imperceptive reviewer of *Whiteness* has chided Mahapatra for here only asserting (not showing) a compassionate understanding of passion, as if such merely humanitarian understandings were the point; rather, what is projected here is the deeper, more inclusive, cosmic understanding that "poetry" provides. Mahapatra's transcendentally distanced poetic perspective sees all and judges none of the games the world plays, for their meaning and ending inevitably are simply "ashes." The compassion, the anger, the fear for all sorts of killings and deaths and losses — in the next lines he adds "that distant fire" and "the reign (surely also 'the rain') of terrors" — those dreaded and desirable human feelings, make themselves directly manifest insofar as they become substantial phenomenal puzzlements in the deliberating consciousness. And it is those emotional conundrums that move this and most other of Mahapatra's best poems towards their inconclusive all-inclusive ultimate awareness :

> And the ashes turn and wheel through the dance
> Like birds of prey in awesome grace in the skies.

Characteristically Mahapatra draws the poem along with and toward a heap of contrasts, dilemmas, paradoxes and contradictions where alone and only it can rest. In the less successful poems scattered through earlier volumes that movement may be rushed or crushed by the additive pile up of the, paradoxically, quite simple concrete images—birds, ashes, sky, dance; rain, stones, river, dawn; temples, priests, roadways, rice-fields; trees, girls, cows, wind. For these basic, often repeated elements are sometimes perplexingly amassed by an intricately concatenated syntax that, consistent with Mahapatra's vision, goes nowhere, while the effort of retardation can get to seem labored, over-extended both in the common feelings—of weariness, self-pity, frustration of desire and lack of desire—and in the poet's logical, syntactic and linguistic improvisations. An example is the first stanza from "Talking of Death" in *Burden of Waves and Fruit :*

> Because everyone believes that it moves us,
> and yet no one believes it until we find ourselves.
> In the raw maw of innocence of mirrors
> who can remember his past?
> And who can remember
> in the Sunday marketplace of enchanted fruit
> when the fragrance of freshly cooked molasses
> floats on the wild laughter of youth
> into the dimmed eyes of an old man
> living on one foot on charity?

Surely the reader, if not the poem and the poet, get lost in this tortuous labyrinth not "beyond confusion," as Frost hoped, but in it.

It is the mark of Mahapatra's growing strength and self-confidence that in this volume his complex, physically and metaphysically contradictory vision achieves fullness and solidity with a minimum of syntactic and imagistic technological display. About one poem in five, as a whole or predominantly, carries on its concerns and discoveries with an almost unprecedented firm note; without simplifying the mysteries and uncertainties of the imaginative world Mahapatra experiences, he yet is there employing an exceptional economy of poetic

means. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, in forging the Oxford India Anthology of *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) to accord with his narrow Poundian search for "the sharp-edged quality of Indian verse," dubiously dubbed Mahapatra as "the master of the superfluous word"— dubiously because of the implied contradiction, or at least irony, in such a "mastery", and even more dubiously because the one superfluity he later notes—the girl's "wormy legs" in "Hunger"—derives from his own ignorance/ ignoring of the precise pertinent meanings—skinny and wriggly as well as marred by the coin-sized red scars of poverty-induced ringworms.

But "Hunger" is an early and very uncharacteristic poem, a direct dramatic narrative; lack of superfluity, a stringently achieved economy of means, would be more clearly exemplified by examining a poem from the present volume. (Being so impressed by these achievements, by the way, I am quite concerned for the premature selection of "The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra," lately announced as forthcoming by P.P. Raveendran after his modestly useful collection of *The Best of Kamala Das,* Bodhi Press, Kozhikode, Kerala, 1991.) A poem of special interest in *Whiteness* because of its larger historical consciousness (very rare in Indian English poetry and, indeed, not in the common run of Mahapatra's work) is "At the Summer Palace of Tipu Sultan, Seringapatam." It is a characteristically Mahapatran meditation beside a river, the situation, in this volume, for "Another Autumn," "Afternoon," and "In the Autumn Valleys of the Mahanadi," among several others; but in "At the Summer Palace..." there is also a slight narrative movement as the meditating figure moves through the scene "of heat and pain... the musty, wooden walls," ending with a confusing profusion of concrete images that, again characteristically, avoids summary historical or metaphysical moralizing or even very emphatic poetic closure :

> Walking back, I cannot forget the robe,
> faded and mildewed, over Tipu's seated effigy,
> like a slack spiritless drum holding its sounds
> just as night condemned to hold on to its dream.

Or perhaps "A Dark Wind" offers a better example, because it seems so much like earlier darkly meditative poems with again that

profusion of imagery and extension of syntax and the resulting uncertainty about ultimate meanings, yet moment by moment, line by line, the movement here can, after all, be quite firmly defined, and though the closure is also unusually firm, reaching ambitiously to include the great mythos of "India" in a single, complex horrendous image, it is a still sufficiently "bewildering" Mahapatran vision. (As a non-Indian I am reluctant to disagree with the first critic to signal Mahapatra's poetic promise, Professor K. Ayyappa Paniker, who has questioned Mahapatra's poetic use of the concept "India," but poets have repeatedly given solidity, even personality to all kinds of abstractions, and I would argue that this fairly new geopolitical impersonation should not be ostracized merely because its peerage is questionable. See Ayyappa Paniker, *Indian Literature in English*, Anu Chitra Publications, Madras, 1989; 50, et passim.)

A DARK WIND

The hour's dark wind grows. And only the heart's
silence on its nest of blood, indifferent witness
to greying tongues of ash, to a jungle of births.
What were hard times have long since
stopped inspiring painful comparisons; even
the iron trees in the park blur in the blush of light
from circles of human order, of sullen endurance.
Stones stand here, erect, flaming red, spreading
blood to the buds that solemnly tip themselves up,
waiting for time in the sun. In the presence
of dead souls the weathering rivers sand and scatter
the grains of the living about the pale malarial light
where only tired women appear to answer one another,
to the wind's dark pull. And here to move on like rain,
to its flaunting flight, flitting over
the caged grass of the heart to the river,
in the hope of easing the spirit's weariness –
but come back again, somewhat older, my brooding
just destined to serve the hour, a spectre of wind and ash;
and with the pasts of my lives hear someone's call:

India like the decapitated old temple by the river,
its mouth open, and staring,
all its bewildering hunger born into sorrow.

As complex as this poem is, it can succeed at an acceptable rate on first acquaintance, even in a single knowledgeable oral reading. It may not be immediately clear what the heart's "nest of blood" is (or whether the bloody nest belongs rather to the heart's *silence*), but a moderate familiarity with Mahapatra's imagery in other poems should help one catch the sense of the "blurring" of "the iron trees" because of the (embarrassed?) rosy flickering light from mankind's ordering and "sullen" enduring of existence. Then the erotic, indeed quite specifically phallic, stones rise up as positive images, waiting, and thus succeeded by the life-wearing-down movement of time, the river, again in a sickly light revealing humankind in the figures of tired women responding to each other and to "the hour's dark/wind's dark pull." With "And here to move on like rain," the poem, the persona, the poet again revives, deriving new energy from a movement "like rain" that very alliteratively, repetitively, is flaunting and flitting in its flight—but is it the wind or the women or the voice/persona that makes or joins with this movement? Presumably the last as the broken syntax asserts: "the hope of easing the spirit's weariness" has been too easily gratified. For, quite possibly, "come back again" is a wish, an imperative addressed to "my brooding," with its realistic limits well recognized but, like the tired women, still able (apparently because of karmic inheritances—how else do we know others and escape solipsism?) to "hear someone's call," that of not all humanity, but of a corporate body sufficiently encompassing and needy: "India, . . . all its bewildering hunger born into sorrow."

A poem like "Bone of Time"—a better title for the whole book, I would suggest, than the rather shop-worn and awkward "A Whiteness of Bone"—reminds us of Mahapatra's more elusive style, intricately suggestive, allusive, dreamlike in the general mood and in the immediate moment captured, revelling in the illusion of some determinable sense that arises again from thick sensory imagery, presumably all highly

symbolic—but symbolic of what we cannot be exactly sure. The bone of time soon turns out to be, *inter alia*, a very descriptive name for the moon (in its diminishing crescent forms), "to whom we owe/the tempests of light among the shadows,/ [opposites, but chiaroscuro, not paradox—] seeking refuge/in a narrow window of our wakefullness." Who is seeking refuge—the moon, the light, the shadows, or we? In composite dream symbolism all those senses easily bundle together. Then, apparently echoing the conventional address to the moon by the loony clown Pierrot from Italian-French mime-drama, the speaker complains about the distance between them, but praises the supposedly thin, bare and barren moon still further: "Your window looks so warm from here,/ and [i.e., whereas] the wind drifts away noiselessly/ across the comfortless river:... through it/ [the bone-of-time moon-window, we— you moon and I poet— "each one,"] enter the kingdom where Orion turns,/ calm and certain, into neither darkness nor light." Thus the conclusion of this poem reiterates that general theme we have noted, of calm, non-judgmental acceptance, here with distinctly transcendental overtones. Surprisingly perhaps, this type of poem built out of a conventional symbol—no matter how uniquely the moon is conceived/perceived here as "the bone of time"— can still be more readily interpreted than some of the poems employing more direct statement for emotionally or cognitively more complex poetic insights.

After consideration of "Bone of Time" along with "A Dark Wind" and "At the Summer Palace of Tipu Sultan, Seringapatam" and "All the Poetry There Is," it may be that rather than pointing to a shifting emphasis in Mahapatra's technique in this book—toward a more confident, less evasive way of denominating feelings, while still avoiding simplistic labelling—we should be noting how the vision has become less nearly despairing, more merely accepting. For *Relationship* (1980) posited as its closure a mystic new "birth" from the dark dancing devi daughters at the Konarka Sun Temple, but by the end of *Temple* (completed 1986), under the aegis of the octogenarian suicide Chelammal, these female spirits have been scrupulously turned into "six rape cases and five murders of women... reported in the Khagaria district." Less constrained by a single life, the poetry of *A Whiteness of Bone* with relative self-confidence and directness establishes a tone and a perspective—not just a vaguely suggestive mood—of

utterly clear eyed, non-judgmental acceptance. In "A Death," for example, initially "hunched and trembling, hope survives," for it is not easy to give up "uttering words/ my death urges at the wrong time," but he asks, rhetorically: "Which is the wisdom I could use?" and amidst "The silenced shout of a child/ [which] drifts into its mother's arms,/ ... I learn to let fall/those words with casual indifference." One of the most sustained and persuasive presentations of this hard-word stoicisism is "Light."

Not just another morning, but a root
that stirs the light of things,
a somewhere to place the foot upon
and look. Why think of lost steps,
or of the need to know what one is after
the plain solicitude for life?
Why crowd the logical order of things,
to suffer pain like a tendon lamed,
perhaps played out?
Let not the morning remain behind
as a poem, to be questioned
like a misdeed or some trophy
to be understood. There,
the kestrel is just another still leaf
on a branch, hope in its eye,
fully dressed and waiting,
but not for some light or meaning
to come. Just another morning,
and my neighbour's wave of greeting
is a gift, entering
my body without reason or belief.
The light stirs the leaves of March,
a truckful of newly-made bricks
pulls up nearby.
Love : let me not try to defend myself.
If this love of mine is light, a grace,
let it be unimportant and uninteresting
to inspire me through the long way
into nowhere, to tell them I am *here*.

"Not just another morning," so "Let not the morning remain behind/ as a poem, to be questioned/. . . ./ to be understood"; yet, after all, "Just another morning, ..." We are not amazed or puzzled by this apparent contradiction, for whatever needs saying for both observations to be true has been said or even shown in "a root ... to place the foot upon/ and look" and in "my neighbour's wave of greeting ... entering/ my body without reason or belief." The simplicity of statement achieved throughout—even with the double or triple syntax of "the need to know what one is after/ the plain solicitude for life?" and the surrealism of the "fully dressed" kestrel as "just another still leaf . . ., hope in its eye" — and the directness especially of the last five lines, has almost no precedent in Mahapatra's prior poetry. Perhaps one or two instances could be found in curtly enigmatic poems in *A False Start* or *Life Signs*, but I suspect that the contexts created by surrounding poems there would modify, indeed complicate quite considerably, any possible striving for simplicity and directness of tone; and I dare say that there is nothing of this sort in the poems from the early 1980s in *Burden of Waves and Fruit*..

To anticipate that this will be a continuing mode, we can look at the six poems in the *Toronto South Asian Review* for Summer 1992: "Denials" begins self-assuredly, "Always, someone somewhere/ is denying someone else his dignity./ Someone's porcelain face is always laughing./ Someone makes the dead walk in the night.// The laughter in the world/ is always on the lookout for grief./ And standing at the grave of my father/ I too deny myself a bit of my life." Despite the apparent clarity, however, the feeling and thought are ultimately so complicated in the remaining two stanzas as to evade simple recognition; the Mahapatran mystery prevails. (Throughout *Whiteness* the death or dying of the father—drawing in this instance on biographical fact—frequently coincides with the also much repeated motifs of childhood and children; the initial poem begins "The world is full with toys, many of them unused.") In "The Fear" from the same journal the movement toward imagistic association and syntactic economy is palpable: "Those rocks we see that haven't moved/ through the years make us afraid. The cold plucked chickens/ in trays. The seas' salt./ And that single drop of rain

from the sky/ that no hands can catch." That is the second of four equal-lenghth stanzas, and the last one is

> Earth's seasonal spring or summer
> lives closer to the truth. Above our heads we have lived.
> Among the grass, the circle of wind and rain,
> among the seeds of things about to be born.
> Unnoticed they've been sapping our blood so they can live.

The syntax is broken by the implied criticism of our way of life (earlier lines complained, "We sit on the knowledge of our bones"), yet somehow that has ennabled more earthly life (through Dracula-like blood-sapping!) to go on—does that thought repulse or give joy? What happened to the fear? Emotionally unsure we are turned back into the poem, and find no answers, only further questions.

As a conclusion, to whet the reader's appetite for savoring more fully the volume, here are the opening (and one terminal) evocative statements from several more poems. They may also help to indicate the range here. I tried assigning poems according to varied (and overlapping) types of meditation: at a specific time; at a specific place (and time); on memories, loose feelings, dreams; on abstractions (e.g., "it," "awful spirit," "truth" in "When you Need to Play-Act"); on poetry (often rather negative); on social issues (Bhopal, Kalahandi/Orissa, Punjab and just everyday economic and social disasters); on personal relationships (with father especially, with son, wife, family, Tagore, a young girl, Krishna? a spiritual 'It'—). But readers will design their own categories, according to what they see and hear.

> Something stands at the back of my day:
> I wait for it to betray its presence,
> but it is crafty, quiet .... ("Behind")

> There is a photograph still hanging
> on the wall in my father's house .... ("The Dispossessed")

> December, and the slow dawn-mist lingers
> in the forgotten old *pipals* by the river,
> scatters over the crumbling tombstones
> of the white Englishman's cemetery. ("December")

A sullen wind stalks out
even the restful dead in this country
like the bleat of a metal detector. ("A Sullen Balance")

Here the fruit hangs simply in my mind,
Nothing to fall back upon. (end of "Consolations")

Last year on the bend of the Debi River
the rape of a young girl
shocked us like ripe mangoes
dropping from bare trees in winter. ("Learning for Ourselves")

In God's night you do not know
what comes next. ("In God's Night.")

Because of the variety of strong poems, not just strong openings, every reader should find particular strengths here to entice and satisfy the most demanding taste for a powerful personal poetry arising from the multicultural realities of India.

DHARANIDHAR SAHU

THE PILGRIM AND THE WAY

Review Article

Temple by Jayanta Mahapatra. Sydney, Dangaroo Press, 1989. pp.58., 5.

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic journey from *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* to *Temple,* like a spiritual pilgrimage, shows a steady rise on the graph of consciousness: from austere practising to a state of relaxed perfection, from the simplicity of mathematical prolegomena to a spiritual realization of human suffering. The journey is symbolic. In this volume of poetry he seems to have mastered a poetic idiom which would allow the free-play of the realistic and the unrealistic, the everyday world and the dream-world. "To all accounts," the poet's post-script hints, "*Temple* represents a dream narrative; and perhaps Chelammal is a character in some one else's dream — unaware too that this dream might restore her to the world of reality." An unconditional surrender such as this to the suzerainty of the subconscious is in character with any achievement in poetry, because dreams usually, and ultimately, become the building blocks of an alternative reality. The dream narrative has an advantage in that it frees the poet's expression from the conventional, though unwritten, rules of time, space and syntax. Mahapatra makes full use of this advantage in his poems.

Lighting upon some newspaper reports on the suicide of an aged couple, and a minor girl being gang-raped and killed, Mahapatra turns them to account and maps out a landscape, simultaneously real and surreal. His language operates on the border-line of dream and awakening, and accomodates the wide fluctations of this "dream narrative." He transforms these tell-tale instances of everyday Indian life into catalysts of his poetic reaction and figments of a universal nightmare. The poet's imagination exhibits trapeze feats and dares the depths, with natural grace and precision, but readers are always assured about his adroit professionalism which will not commit any

faux pas. Each instance of seeming digression ultimately becomes an embellishment of the central thought. Such assurances sustain readerly interest which might flounder when "the real and imagined calmly coalesce" (18), and "when, deep inside, acceptance of time turns lies to truths" (14).

Underneath the mass of allegories, there is a concrete, enduring tenderness, and a shy willingness to accept the world with all its horror and evil. The world, after all, is full of Chelammals and unnamed 12-year old girls, victims who are always condemned to die or live in their own skin-cubicles. "There is no woman," the poet writes, "who is not alone,/ no woman who is sure/ she has found her way" (30). The tendency to recoil into an intellectual or linguistic illusion when the reality *per se* is harsh, may explain the excessive use of allusion, mystifications and subterfuges in this book. The poet, however, does not try to conceal, or justify, this tendency. He rather uses this as a means to grapple with an unmanageable, heterogeneous reality. He writes:

> In the hour of tearless grief
> what can lead one to the truth? (44)

The habit of "sleep closed off in its melancholy" can build a world of dreams and myths to encapsulate the chaste victim of many lusts and rituals and thus to transport her to "something greater than faith" (44). This recourse to dream or illusion, both in philosophical and poetic senses, is not a wishful digression, nor is it an attempt to give life the slip. It is only a distancing mechanism of the mind, essential for any creative comprehension of the many contradictions, confusions and diversities of life.

The 80-year–old Chelammal and the 12-year-old girl have been transmuted into a sense of suffering. It is not necessary that the sufferers should be conscious of the implications of their own suffering, nor should they be aware of their transformation into ingredients of a poetic catalyst. The poet speaks through Chelammal's voice:

> "These are my words, my very own.
> Certainly I wouldn't want him to know
> how I feel." (37)

But the simplicity of this suffering humanity has its radiance and poignancy, which scorches the poet, and troubles him greatly. He cannot shrug it off with a cynical remark — "It's the same story. The same one/we've heard a thousand times" (31) — nor can he treat it as an old newspaper and thrust it into the gunny sack of Vedantic "illusion" and the inexorable karmic laws, and relax. This extraordinary poem of 46 pages (its subdivisions one can ignore) is a testament of the poet's faith in the uniqueness and ultimate meaning of human suffering. Evocation of the terrifying image of Goddess Kali "with her garland/of severed heads" and "her girdle of severed hands," may be a wishful conjuring of the Shakti-aspect of these victims as the destroyer of evil. But he soon recovers from such reveries, "leaning back from the finished image/ in the ritualized glass/ignoring the tourniquet of the vow's tightening/on the temples of fate" (54).

That the poet cites the plight of women in Indian society in particular through Chelammal and the 12-year girl does not make him a champion of radical feminism. Also, evocation of the mythical, destructive image of woman through the goddess Chāmundā and the ogress Pūtanā does not cancel out the empathy he intends to consecrate. Such recasting of familiar archetypes, both ancient and contemporary, of woman as a source of strength *(Shakti)* and as the perennial object of male lust, has its point elsewhere: that life has been lived, has to be lived amidst all sorts of deceits, cruelties, camouflages, contradictions, and hopes; that illusion, be it mystical or earthy, is both a vantage-point and a protective colouring, which might save a sensitive man from ultimate despair.

Nature is always there as a mute, but active, replenishing presence; as an inexhaustible repertoire of metaphors. The woman "with life enough for death to pass through/lonely as an acre of farmland," is endowed with "the tiny trapped rainbows of her mind." She inhabits a world where "blood-red hibiscuses" raise "their heads" and "emerald parakeets" catch "the darkness of smoke/on the tormented horizon of the times" (47) and "the sun at noon" is "an unction of light" (44). The local colour of Southern India is made to pass through the prismatic phantasmagoria of the poet's mind, and fills the arena with a surrealistic

profusion of light. But it turns out to be a search-light which reveals the horror, sordidness, and evil of the midnight world. The gloom is never relieved. Its background music is a long expressionistic shriek. Each new page takes the reader deeper into the labyrinth of human folly and evil. But the gloom has a sobering effect; and the darkness is visible. The temple, perhaps, belongs to the goddess Chāmundā or Kāli whose naked, blue body is partly covered with the severed limbs of slaughtered demons.

Particularly in the last section of the book, fancy overtakes imagination; the sheer exultation of a man possessed mocks at customary caution and restraint; run-on lines, metaphors melting into metaphors, a super-abundance of unexpected, but truly appropriate adjectives, transferred epithets and synaesthesia (the concurrent appeal to more than one sense) may show an impatient desire to speak everything out all at once. But one thanks God, and the poet too, that these elements are finally orchestrated effectively. Mahapatra's poetic vision which works upon the slipshod, the lonely and the contemporary trivia, weaving them into tapestries of poetry, approximates, more than any one else's, Baudelaire's profound preoccupation with the many facets of evil in *The Paris Spleen* and *The Flowers of Evil (Les Fleurs du Mal)*. Nothing is so repugnant, so slight, as not to be transformed into a warm, finely woven nest to accommodate a winged metaphor, a seeking, aching heart.

"Temple" is a loaded title. It may stand for the heart's sanctuary to which the human soul has to repair when driven by the world's evils. It may also suggest the spiritual nature of life's journey, poetic or actual.

LATHA RENGACHARI

THE POET AND THE POETRY : AN EXERCISE IN EXORCISM

Review Article

"Jayanta Mahapatra". *Contemporary Authors: Autobiography Series*, ed. Mark Zadrozny. Vol. 9. Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A.: Gale Research, 1989. pp. 137-150, US $ 85.

> There is invariably a lot of pain in childhood.
> I remember mine and all of it seems so long ago;
> and yet the pain, or whatever I choose to call
> it today, paces quietly behind the breastbone.

These opening lines of Jayanta Mahapatra's autobiographical account in the *Contemporary Authors: Autobiography Series* (p.137) reveal the pain that is the fountainhead of Mahapatra's poetic talent and output. This pain is what impels him to write, a pain that refuses to be forgotten, forcing him to write poetry in a bid to exorcise it from his mind. This pain we see, remains Mahapatra's constant companion, changing from the pangs of childhood to the unnameable pains of loneliness and terror and insecurity that accompany growing up in a difficult world. In extremely evocative prose, Mahapatra makes a serious quest for self-understanding — a journey into his own tortured soul — in a bid to understand and explicate the transformation from the agonised boy of half-century ago to the eloquent, accomplished poet of the present. The piece is the history of the artist and the man that Mahapatra is — a history that is at once analytical and introspective, subdued and triumphant.

Mahapatra's poetry is intensely personal, driven as he is by an almost desperate need to communicate his fears and misgivings. That he chose to write rather than to communicate otherwise is hardly surprising, as the autobiography talks of a withdrawn child, friendless and lonely. Circumstances too, made it difficult for the young Jayanta to participate in the fun of children of his own age group. Burdened as he was, as the

eldest son with the task of looking after the family while his father was constantly away, the naturally withdrawn boy withdrew further into the self. Mahapatra's autobiography is markedly devoid of accounts of the writer with his friends and peers. There are no games, no friends, no joys and almost no laughter. There are instead bleak images of a very young boy brooding over his predicament sitting alone, horrifying images of a child being stripped by older classmates, leaving him scarred permanently. We are also given pictures of the lonely boy without a sibling or companion, unable to communicate his fears — understandable youthful fears of the dark and the shadows.

The poet effectively recreates the total alienation from the rest of the world that his feeeling of inferiority caused him. He writes also of the constant tension that he laboured under because of his unending conflict with his mother. If the dark, frightening family house caused him unhappiness, the world outside gave him no solace either. The squalid Oriyan town with its poor and diseased, during the World War II years, was not the escape that a sensitive boy could seek comfort in. Mahapatra remembers with affection his relationship with his father whose infrequent trips home spelt magic to the forlorn boy. The bond between father and son was to continue till the time of his father's death and has figured prominently in his writing in poems like "The Hour Before Dawn" or "Father". He confesses

> Voices both of the wind and of my father have
> made the words of many of my poems. It has
> never been easy for me to write. The women I
> have known and not known, the whores in their
> noiseless hearts, the fields of loss and light,
> and the room where I feel I can grind my pain
> down to an amorphous mass — maybe all these
> were the dark mound from which my poetry sprang.
> (pp. 144-145)

Mahapatra's alienation as an individual was further accentuated by the fact that he grew up Christian in a Hindu world — an alienation which he sought to forget and cover up by using his Hindu name. His

grandfather had been converted to Christianity at the time of the great famine and Mahapatra constantly seeks in his poetry to rationalise this conversion and to reconcile his Hindu past and Hindu surroundings with his own Christian upbringing. In one of his favourite poems, "Grandfather", he asks

> How old were you? Hunted, you turned coward and ran,
> the real animal in you plunging through your bone.
> You left your family behind, the buried things,
> the precious clod that praised the quality of a god.
>
> The imperishable that swung your broken body,
> turned it inside out? What did faith matter?
> What Hindu world so ancient and true for you to hold?

Mahapatra describes, in accents devoid of self pity, his attempts at writing poetry at a relatively late age. He confesses that images from earlier life haunt him till he is forced to put them on paper in an attempt to exorcise them. The making of the poet Mahapatra is explained succinctly:

> It would be right to say that the situation chose me to write about it; therefore one could generalize that situations force the writer to express his feelings and his ideas. The process of living perhaps becomes a story in conspiracy; it is this series of trivial happenings which makes its firm demand in time, bringing about a sort of surrender. (p.140).

He admits that he was surprised by his poetic talent: because he was unversed in the ways of poetry and because he had been trained in science. Mahapatra's poetry is poetry of past experiences which are crystallised in his mind to find an outlet in powerful imagery. Thus his poetry is a painful journey, into the past and towards self understanding. It is thus intensely personal, arising from the poet's genuine emotion, and seldom moving beyond personal experience.

The autobiography is more a chronicle of the artist's development than a history of Mahapatra's life. It is very succinct, for example, in

tracing the events which led up to the marriage with his wife Runu. It expresses in many ways Mahapatra's evaluation and assessment of his art and his analysis of his motives for writing what he does.

> Why? What is it that pushes me to write?
> Runu, lying awake perhaps in the next room;
> the fruit bats littering seeds on the
> veranda; the sounds of bicycle bells and a bull
> bellowing across the road. And I want to ask
> myself: Is my writing for the life I lead? Or
> for the years gone by? It is hard to tell ....
> I wish I could not resist the time of dying.
> I look at the leaves and feel weaker than them.
> (p.144)

He talks of his poetry being an attempt "to beat back the fear of living" and a reflection of his fear of death.

The autobiography has a simplicity and charm that endears the poet to the reader and leaves him wishing that Mahapatra would write more prose. It recreates for the reader the simple and nice human being that the poet actually is. He mentions his fanatical drive to write of himself and his dead city, unable as he is to communiate otherwise. He describes his early embarrassment in his attempts at getting his poems published and his disappointment about unfavourable reviews. In his sixties now, the poet realises the inevitablity of death and is better reconciled to his predicament. His poetry today, though it still analyses what is known and understood and that which is beyond his comprehension, has moved away from himself and encompasses the world without.

With the development of the poet and with increased self understanding, the themes of Mahapatra's poetry have shifted from the bleakness of personal experience to a keener, humane understanding of life around him. *A Whiteness of Bone*, his latest collection of poems, expresses best this shift from the extremely personal to more objective musings. With poetic maturity has come to Mahapatra a wider vision and an intense awareness of the sorrow and pain that mark all things in an

essentially transcient existence. Poetry for Mahapatra is "vaak" or voice, "a voice forged from those elements which constitute the world both within and without: a voice which carries with it its unusual power of survival." (p.148).

The journey of the man from the frightened withdrawn boy of decades ago to the irrepressible poetic voice of today is nearly complete now. The poetry which had its source in the pain of a sensitive child, is today the poetry of a humane mind finding that his own life and pain are inescapably linked to the world outside. With the moving of the poetry from the intensely personal to the objective, the artist's development has taken a significant forward step. The poetry of Mahapatra which started as an exercise in exorcism is the poetry of discovery— of the self and of the world.

PAUL LOVE

AN ORISSA ODYSSEY

Review Article

Jayanta Mahapatra and Jean-Louis Nou, *Orissa*. New Delhi : Lustre Press, 1987. 40 pages + 62 plates. Rs.240/-.

The book, *Orissa*, is a celebration of that state in word and picture. The "picture" component consists in part of a set of 62 striking coloured illustrations, most of them photographs made by Jean-Louis Nou. These are well annotated, and warmly human, whether their subject is sculpture, architecture, scenery or, supremely, people. They are points of reference to be used repeatedly in conjunction with the text which accompanies them.

But while these photographic plates are an appropriate memorial to an artist whose untimely death is still lamented, they are not the focus of this review. The text is. For in the text Jayanta Mahapatra has shown what can happen when a poet writes nominally in prose, and has himself given an abundance of word pictures which complement the photographs judiciously. The poetic sensuousness of these word pictures makes its impact in the very opening paragraph of the essay.

> Early morning in the middle of June. The rains have come, and clouds gather into a myriad shapes. A thin drizzle wets the parched earth of three long, dry months. And suddenly there is a scent of joy in the air, of exultation and regeneration, a promise of quiet fertility.
>
> (page 7)

But the poetry of this essay is something far deeper than simple exultations in sense. Such descriptions are only one part of the essay's

art, juxtaposed as they are with extensive accounts of Orissa's history, careful explanations of the geography of this vast region, precise descriptions of the myriad temples that have made Orissa famous, and loving sketches of people—individuals, groups and throngs. In fact the rapid, constant shimmering of the essay's attention between one of these focuses or another eventually sets up a kind of counterpoint whose music itself contributes to the poetry of this writing.

Throughout the essay one is aware of Jayanta Mahapatra the scientist (most readers will know that he spent much of his life teaching physics to college students). There is the scientist's precision with which the geography of the region is detailed. There is sound scientific induction by which the history of Orissa is established from hundreds of scraps of evidence whose significance less careful students would overlook. There is the scientist's sharp powers of observation in the details of the word pictures already cited. But each of these scientific talents is brought into play through an alternation with each other—even an impingement upon each other—in a kind of rhythm which helps to produce the more subtle poetry that the prose cannot mask.

In the core of the essay, Jayanta Mahapatra takes the reader on a kind of "conducted tour" through many of Orissa's chief points of interest. Beginning with his own city of Cuttack, he leads us on to Bhubaneswar, the Capital, and thence to Puri, to Konarka, Keonjhar and Rourkela before the systematic plan of the tour is submerged in attention to the more diffuse tribal people of Orissa. But this is no ordinary conducted tour. The whole thing is managed with far more delicacy and care—and scholarship—than one normally associates with a commercial guide. An example is the unforgettable account of the Ratha Jatra festival in Puri. The description is authentically the writer's. Yet at every point he has taken such care to relate it to the details of the photographs of the festival that one constantly thumbs back and forth, beneficially, to check out each element of the narration. Word picture and camera picture mutually reinforce each other. But not only that : the riot of imagery and colour that is the current festival moves us on to the history of Lord Jagannatha whom the festival supremely honours. Jayanta Mahapatra is never satisfied to let our attention sit still for long. And so we are ushered

into the history of the ancient kingdom of Kalinga (a monarchy which thrived centuries ago in what is now Orissa and a vast adjacent region), over which Lord Jagannatha is supposed to have ruled as Supreme Deity. Those of us readers who come from countries with relatively meagre national histories cannot fathom the centuries of story that lie behind such a kingdom. Our proper response to such a past as Orissa/Kalinga's can only be awe. And the respect, the care for evidence and the responsible imagination with which Jayanta Mahapatra verbalises this history evokes this awe quite readily.

His accounts of Orissa's fabled temples are just as remarkable. Consider the following introduction, for example :

> The drive from Puri to Konarka along the looping coastline passes windblown sandy dunes besieged by groves of casuarinas and criss-crossed by rivers snaking down to the sea. The shores along this strip of coast are unspoilt, with long rollers breaking on the warm, buff sand. To know that something as magnificent as the Sun Temple of Konarka awaits you puts you in a kind of trance.
>
> (page 29)

Trance, yes. But the trance has been coyly developed by the description itself. And the magnificence of the details which visualise the temple does nothing to break the trance. The temple itself in the form of an immense chariot; the twelve pairs of gigantic wheels, carved out on ground level, each of them three-metres wide; the fifteen hundred elephants displayed on the unbroken panel which runs along the base of the temple: enough here certainly to sustain the stupor which the introduction anticipated.

Jayanta Mahapatra's accounts of individual people of Orissa are arresting. From the "group of five girls in animated conversation" who begin his story of Orissa, to his "young friend" Bijaya Sahu, symbolising migration from village to city, onward to the nine-year-old on the Puri beach who does "nothing" now, but is certain he will become an expert

fisherman: these people *live*, and they help to *create* Orissa for us readers. Even the circumspection with which the long outmoded tribal practices of human sacrifice are detailed convey almost a tender concern for human motives that prompted such rituals—while acknowledging, of course, the barbarism that lies at the heart of them.

Throughout the essay nature description abounds. The ripening of fruit and flower brought to culmination in the August rains. The "young wind" which anticipates an advancing cyclone that will eventually turn the "postcard sky" into a "stampede of a hundred jungle elephants". The "adolescent light" of the morning after the cyclone has past. The voice of rain, the whirr of bird song, the drone of cricket choruses. On and on the descriptions tumble, one after the other, with breath-taking abundance.

Until one is abruptly startled with the recognition that here is a man who intensely *enjoys* the whole province that he is describing. When Jayanta Mahapatra writes that "it gladdens the heart" to see what he pictures, this is not polite formula. It is statement of fact. When he tells us that travel along mountain roads is exciting, we feel that he intensely means what he says. For clearly Jayanta Mahapatra loves Orissa. When the final page speaks of his "romance with Orissa" we suddenly understand that this romance has been going on throughout the whole essay. The fact that the essay is a kind of love story accounts, in part, for its immense readability.

But the capacity for joy which Jayanta Mahapatra so generously reveals in *Orissa* needs one more moment of attention. For joy is perhaps not the emotion most often associated with this writer. Students of his poetry frequently speak of its unrelieved bleakness, and of a sense almost of despair that seems to arise from many of the poems by which he is known. And if one's acquaintance with him is limited to a fairly narrow range of his better-known verse, one might totally overlook his rare gift of sensing the beauty and the wonder in the everyday sights and happenings. One might even go further and ask whether the somberness and sense of tragedy, which genuinely distinguishes much of his verse, does not, at a deeper level, act as camouflage. Is it possible that the

bleakness and agonising of the poetry masks an almost unmatched perception of the joy and exhilaration potential in human life, but buried and obliterated by our circumstances and by the persons who manipulate them?

Such conjectures aside, one is left with the gem-like accomplishment that *Orissa* represents. If the meek do inherit the earth, then perhaps the gentleness, the deference, and the respect with which Jayanta Mahapatra approaches his state will explain why it so obviously is for him a rich heritage. For Jayanta Mahapatra—to borrow Richard Wilbur's distinction—possesses all of Orissa, while the many others attempt simply to own small parts of it. And it is to our deep enrichment that he shares his possession so graciously.

VAISHALI

MAYBE

Maybe
I am a bubble
shiny,
reflecting the joy in the world.
Floating to the top
of the ice cream soda
held
in the universal glass
Shaped
by the careless,
sweet smelling breath of a
child
Defining with
air
the boundaries of childhood.

Maybe
I am a peach balloon
With a paradox of
Space,
held
in tiny, sweaty hands
on the end of a
string,
'Till the end of a pin.

Maybe
I am a tiny cog in the great wheel,
an individual with the freedom to choose,
a person in my own right,
standing on my own two feet,

Unique, independent,
One of a kind
My face my serial number.

Or maybe
It is distantly possible
that I mean
Something.

D. RAVINDRAN SOLOMON

IMAGES

"The Leaf"

Trembling leaf tremble
with the globe of dew
Fear of dropping it or
is it breaking your spine?

"The Bullet"

The lead drags air,
a thin strand, stitching
body and wall crude
red embroidery.

"Death"

The mist smoothly slides
into the little valley
A white veil to freeze
Shrugging touch-me-nots

ZENDYN MEHTA

NEVERNESS

The stage
The bright lights
The prompters
The crew
All this lights a little flame
That runs in me right through
I can feel the heat of the lights
I can feel the tension rise
Then I look out the window
And I see night in the sky
Then I realize that I'm at home
Tucked up in my bed
So I kiss my dreams away
My dreams of utter bliss
And know that they are far away
Far away in neverness.

I SEEM TO HAVE IT ALL

I have a house
I have a home
I have a lovely room of my own
I have a moon
I have the sun
I have all I want
All I need to have fun
Believe it or not I have all the above
But what I don't have
Is a small thing called Love.

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But what I don't have
Is a small thing called Love.

RUCHI

THE CABIN IN THE WOODS

It was misty and cold
And the curious little cabin
In the middle of the woods
Caught my eye.
It was painted red and green;
I walked in for curiosity's sake,
My forehead wrinkled and keen.
I walked in cautiously,
Yearning to know what it held.
As my eyes rushed around,
All I could see was
A broken tattered old bench.

My eyes turned away,
And my frown smoothed out,
But just as I did so,
It started to rain.
In the cabin I had to stay,
lonely and cold.
I looked all around
Hoping for something warm.
And just as I thought so,
I found a rug on the bench.

I snuggled up to myself;
As my eyelids drooped
And my head dropped,
I saw a hay-filled creche.
I was positive it wasn't there before.
But I didn't argue or investigate.
I accepted it as a Spirit Unseen.

R. SENTHILKUMAR

POEM FOR MOTHER

It looks to me only yesterday
you asked me to kneel down
and beat me;
Of course, I lied to you then.

Today my greater mistakes
go unnoticed, though you know them.
Are you afraid, Mother,
your son wouldn't care for you
when you grow weak and old?
Your cool exterior
and those instant smiles of yours
threaten me.

I know it is hard for you
to see your own son
decay before your eyes.
Each error of mine brings down
a hundred pillars of your castle.

At least you would have been satisfied
if you were given a choice
to say what you didn't like.
But then you did not.

Age
has made you dumb
How are you so mute
when there are a thousand things
struggling in your throat!

Unlike the earth, you don't
let the volcanoes erupt.
Day by day, you build your crest stronger,
keeping the lava of your emotions down.
Don't Mother, don't!
Speak to me, shout at me!

The future terrifies me.
Last night I dreamt
I merely ignited you to explode
into insignificant pieces.

BRINDA SARATHY

JUKEBOX - OUT OF ORDER

I sit there in the circle, aghast. For the first time
I listen to the sounds that have always been there,
squeaking and yapping and perpetually nagging. The
bitching dripping with the venom of malice : "Who cocks?"
he crashed. "Ungrateful bastard...!"

Citizens of hypocrisy! And I, too, am a national. The only
reason I write this is because my Jukebox of Hate has
run out of batteries. Why fool myself by walking away
from it all? Am I really free? Only temporarily.

Batteries are rechargeable, powered by the fuel of cynicism.

MEHER D'MELLO

INSPIRATION

Sunlight
sunshine
rested softly on every leaf.
shimmering now and then
only silently
yet in a blaze of white,
No inspiration.

Resting lightly upon dried grass
my head is weary
with thought,
The whitewashed wall
and hill stretching
down,
The lonely flagpole and
hot traveler
with eyes
narrowed to slits
and sweatdropped brow,
The brown, brown hand
and toiled throat,
No inspiration.

The watered sky,
blue,
unsaturated,
waiting to be drenched
with colour,
Only dripping.
The drone of the bee
around my ears,

shade of a pine tree
and occasional cloud
sweetly stagnant in the heaven,
peaceful
suppression of inspiration,
No inspiration.

Then turn of heel
with head bowed low
and stumble home,
pen in hand,
book in fingers lightly grasping
the Failure.
Twilight draws near the sky:
not purple,
not blue,
A white star.
A million prayers billow upwards
from eagers lips
and
swollen bellies,
The blacklined eye
softly drooping
now softly closing
into sleep.
Now rest my head
far away
from grass
upon scented cloth and crisp,
clean cloth.
Kiss the framed pictures
and fold my hands.
Turn over and curl legs
also into sleep
Gently hear the nightly wind
and dream.

Now inspiration
creeping slowly
creature of the dark,
appearing slightly,
in a new light,
faded and misty.
Creamy skin
and milkwhite thighs,
slender fingers
and sculptured breasts,
flowing hair.
Oh, beautiful creature
of the mind
in whose search I have
traversed the countless
planes of my being,
Come gently,
rest thy head with mine
and carry me to your abode
softly
so gently
and be one with me.

MOIN H.K.

EXILE

Friend, you won't know me;
I am a black man, just like you,
Singing songs of friendship and love
At the highest scale of my throat.
Friend, when their black belts lash your skin
And they laugh out loud, black bruises
Appear on the face of civilisation.

When they kick you with their boot-wrapped legs,
Humanity falls straight on its face
On the ground.
When they throw you to the garbage can
In the street, all tied up with the whips of
Rules and discipline,
There, in the hopeless dark hours of night,
The Future groans and shakes its body,
Struggling to stand on its feet.
I knew a prisoner once who was to hang:
He used to recite Tagore poetry at night.
I knew a teenager who gave his life
To save his lover's dignity during
Our liberation hour.
I used to know an angry rebel leader
Who was imprisoned 'til death;
Who used to break away from his
Nightmares sometimes, desiring
The touch of his little daughter, longing to
Smell the fragrance of her innocent hair
Inundated; inquisitively, he used to
Grab the black bars of the cell.
When my thoughts turn to you, Friend,
I start thinking of you with a new spirit.
When they shed the red blood of your five year old son,
Like pouring coffee onto a plate,
Then, your pregnant wife ran away
From the greedy eyes of those beastly Pak soldiers,
And halfway through her fatal trip, she
Fell on the ground
To taste the ultimate pain.
And when they hanged your best friend to death,
In the milk-like white, shimmering sunlight
Of dawn, the black alphabets in the Bible
Started screaming, suddenly breaking
Away from open mouths:
I can hear the procession of rebels
In the avenue of my mind.

DINA SOBHAN

THE LOSS

A brutal bloody murder of one beautiful affair
Met by false circumstances and forced to succumb
To the evil horrors realized by man in his
Hour of solitude when wrapped in a cloak
Of silence and pain
I shrug off the cold cocoon and crawl out
to meet the night.
Although my body yearns to curl into a ball
and roll into the crevice of your hand,
My mind sees an empty space where you
Once were
Now lost in the misty morning of some other field.
And everything is suddenly lost:
The sky has lost its common hues,
The breeze has forgotten where to play,
The stars are disorientated blinking eyes
Unable to light this dark way this
Cold, blind bitter darkness.
I play with your memory forgetting and
remembering as it suits me.
I can't run away, so I play
hide and seek, and gain
Comfort from forgetting the hurt
the agony now and again.
To forget is bitter pain, yet to
Remember is to go insane
once again as
The sound of folly comes knocking at my door.

PAUL LOVE

GRANDFATHER

You spread gnarled fingers o'er the table top,
Pressing to stand erect,
Like tree-roots crawling nakedly
Across earth's surface.

Your stern, unyielding eyes
Through ancient gold-rimmed spectacles
Invade my weaknesses and innocence
And tell of worlds I have not known
Or comprehended.

You sing of distant rivers, forests, mountains,
Quick in your memory four decades since,
But dormant patchwork in my eyes
Upon the map unfurled in front of me.

You voice the tongue of native Germany
In the warm blanketing of accent rich and firm,
Its cadences rebounding still in ears
Long unaccustomed now to harbour–in
The music of your tales and epigrams.

So I enshrine you:
Lone among my forebearers,
Isolate in genealogies,
As you stand towering over and amongst
The relics of my childhood recollections.

BOB GRANNER

THE COURAGE THAT MY MOTHER HAD

(with apologies to Edna St. Vincent Millay)

The courage that my mother had
was hewn neither from
    New England granite
    nor from Minnesota stone;

It came from stern Norwegian stock
and she settled with it
    bearing two sons
    and a tender strength
Through forty long years
as an Iowa farmer's wife.

The courage that my mother had
was passed along from time to time;
She doled it out like coins
    we used to earn
    shucking garden peas
    for a dime a glass.

Once she lost it
    when my father died;
Then she gained it back
    and saved it up
for twenty years alone.

The more she gave, the more she gained,
and the interest grew and grew.

She died at ninety.
Some of her courage
rests with her still.

But she left enough behind
for me to count on
when there's nothing
in the bank.

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