

A History of
INDIAN POETRY
IN ENGLISH



Edited by
ROSINKA CHAUDHURI

A HISTORY OF INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH

A History of Indian Poetry in English explores the substance and genealogy of Anglophone verse in India from its nineteenth-century origins to the present day. Beginning with an extensive introduction that highlights the character and achievements of the field, this History includes essays that describe, analyze, and reflect on the legacy of Indian poetry written in English. Organized thematically, they survey the poetry of such diverse poets as Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, A. K. Ramanujan, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das, Melanie Silgado, and Jeet Thayil. Written by scholars, critics, and poets, this History devotes special attention to the nineteenth-century forbears of the astonishing efflorescence of Indian poets in English in the twentieth century, while also exploring the role of diaspora and publishing in the constitution of some of this verse. This book is of pivotal importance to the understanding and analysis of Indian poetry in English and will serve as an invaluable reference for specialists and students alike.

ROSINKA CHAUDHURI is Professor of Cultural Studies at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. Her books include *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project*, *Freedom and Beef Steaks: Colonial Calcutta Culture*, and *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry, and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere*.

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CAMBRIDGE
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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107078949

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First published 2016

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Chaudhuri, Rosinka, editor.

A history of Indian poetry in English / edited by Rosinka Chaudhuri.

Indian poetry in English

New York : Cambridge University Press, 2016.

LCCN 2015041398 | ISBN 9781107078949 (hardback)

LCSH: Anglo-Indian poetry – History and criticism. | Indic poetry (English) – History and criticism. | India – In literature.

LCC PR9490.4 .H57 2016 | DDC 821.009/954–dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015041398>

ISBN 978-1-107-07894-9 Hardback

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Contents

<i>Contributors</i>	page ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
Introduction <i>Rosinka Chaudhuri</i>	I
SECTION I THE BROAD NINETEENTH CENTURY: INDIANS IN ENGLISH AND THE ENGLISH IN INDIA	
1 The First Indian Poet in English: Henry Louis Vivian Derozio <i>Manu Samriti Chander</i>	21
2 English Poetry in India: The Early Years <i>Suvir Kaul</i>	32
3 From Albion's Exile to India's Prodigal Son: The English Poetry of Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824–1873) <i>Alexander Riddiford</i>	48
4 Transforming Late Romanticism, Transforming Home: Women Poets in Colonial India <i>Mary Ellis Gibson</i>	64
5 The Locations and Dislocations of Toru and Aru Dutt <i>Tricia Lootens</i>	82
6 Poetry of the Everyday: Comic Verse in the Nineteenth Century <i>Máire ní Fhlathúin</i>	98
7 Toru Dutt and “An Eurasian Poet” <i>Arvind Krishna Mehrotra</i>	114

- 8 Rabindranath Translated to Tagore: *Gitanjali*
Song Offerings (1912) 130
Rosinka Chaudhuri

SECTION II PUBLISHERS, PUBLISHING HOUSES, AND THE
 PERIODICAL PRESS

- 9 “Zig Zag sublimity”: John Grant, the Tank School of Poetry,
 and the *India Gazette* (1822–1829) 147
Daniel E. White
- 10 “The Torch Not the Sceptre”: Writers Workshop, Calcutta 162
Ananda Lal and Rubana Huq
- 11 The Blue Rexine Archive: A Short History of Clearing
 House, a Poets’ Cooperative of the 1970s 176
Jerry Pinto
- 12 “Melted Out of Circulation”: Little Magazines and Bombay
 Poetry in the 1960’s and 1970’s 190
Anjali Nerlekar

SECTION III POETRY: 1950–2000

- 13 Nissim Ezekiel: Poet of a Minor Literature 205
Amit Chaudhuri
- 14 Dom Moraes: A Poet’s Progress 223
Jeet Thayil
- 15 Interpretative Testimony: Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza 235
R. Raj Rao
- 16 Adil Jussawala and the Double Edge of Poetry 251
Laetitia Zecchini
- 17 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and the Interplay of Languages 267
Peter D. McDonald
- 18 Arun Kolatkar: A Singular Poetry in Two Languages 284
Rajeev Patke
- 19 Imagery and Imagination in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra 299
Ashok Bery

20	Modernisms and Modernity: Keki Daruwalla and Gieve Patel <i>Graziano Krätli</i>	313
21	The Third Generation: Melanie Silgado and Manohar Shetty <i>Sharanya</i>	328
SECTION IV POETS OF THE DIASPORA		
22	“My First, and Only, Sight”: A. K. Ramanujan and the Five Senses <i>Nakul Krishna</i>	347
23	U.S.-Based but India-Born: G. S. Sharat Chandra and Vijay Seshadri <i>Ravi Shankar</i>	361
24	“First and Foremost . . . A Poet in the English Language”: Agha Shahid Ali <i>Hena Ahmad</i>	375
25	The Languages of Diaspora: Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, Imtiaz Dharker <i>Lopamudra Basu</i>	389
SECTION V THE NEW MILLENNIUM POETS ON THEMSELVES		
26	From the Language Question to the Question of Language: Three Recent Books of Indian Poetry in English <i>Vivek Narayanan</i>	407
27	Our Speaking English Voice: A Voice That Speaks for Us? <i>Anjum Hasan</i>	423
	<i>Bibliography</i>	438
	<i>Index</i>	465

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Acknowledgments

The original idea for this volume came from Ray Ryan at Cambridge University Press, New York, and he must be thanked first for conceiving and commissioning the volume. Once I had committed myself to editing it, I was astonished at the generosity and goodwill of the contributors to this volume, who all agreed, despite the pressing schedules and demands of their lives and careers, to give the book a chapter each without hope of monetary recompense.

I could not have proceeded for a moment without the help and advice I received from Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who was always within reach of an email or telephone call, putting me in touch with people, helping with the history of the poetry in India that is his life, and attending, without exception, to all the questions I asked. My place of work, the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, was a facilitator, as always, in giving me the space and the time to get the work done. Finally, of course, I would like to thank family, both Amit and Radha – the former for a chapter insisted upon, and the latter for just being her.

Introduction

Rosinka Chaudhuri

English poetry, it might safely be surmised, arrived in India from about the seventeenth century onward in the knapsacks, trunks, bags, and portman-teaus of traders and adventurers intent on making their fortunes in the East. It then proceeded to establish itself among readers in exile and readers new to the English language with astonishing rapidity, fueled in the most part by the newspaper and periodical print culture that had spread through urban and semi-urban settlements in every part of the country. The first newspaper in India, *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*, reserved a section of the pages of its first issue in 1780 for a Poet's Corner, a demarcated space which would carry one or more poem in each issue for the short period of the paper's existence, a practice followed by every nineteenth-century newspaper published subsequently. The poem published in the first issue was called "The Seasons," and described, expectedly, the English seasons; it took a few months for a long poem with the title "A Description of India" to make an appearance here.

Since then to the present day, poetry written in India in the English language has, of course, changed hands and, indeed, changed nationality: what was once written by Englishmen in India – English poetry – is now Indian poetry (and has been since the nineteenth century), and is currently generally called Indian poetry in English to distinguish it from poetry written by Indians in the classical languages in the past and in the many powerful modern Indian regional languages since the mid-nineteenth century.¹ If used in an over-arching sense, any category called "Indian Poetry" is a construct that is still hard to defend; in a 1963 article titled "Bengali Gastronomy," the famous Bengali poet and critic Buddhadeva Bose commented derisively that just as there was no such thing as "Indian food," there was no such thing as "Indian Literature," gesturing elliptically toward the common understanding that every region in India produced its own variant tradition – of poetry or curry – and needed to be marked accordingly. So there was Kannada, Punjabi, or Gujarati literature (or

cuisine), but nothing that could be described as “Indian” curry or “Indian” poetry outside of Indian restaurants and international publishing houses. Besides, in India, Indian writing had never meant, and could never only mean, Indian writing that was done in English; the colonizer’s language was presumed to be a deracinated thing of the elites: unrepresentative, uninviting, and certainly unwanted. Thirty-five years from Bose’s comment, toward the end of the twentieth century (1998), the pendulum had swung so far in the opposite direction that Salman Rushdie was emboldened to declare, in the introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947–97* that he co-edited with Elizabeth West, that not only was there something called “Indian Writing,” as their title indicated, but that on the evidence of the fifty years under consideration in the volume, it was best represented by writing in English alone. Such a remark, of course, was always designed to provoke a backlash from the Indian literate classes, which it did with great success; less remarked upon was the fact that Rushdie’s notion of “writing” did not for a moment include poetry – irrespective of whether it was of the regional or Anglophone variety. Yet Indian poetry in English arguably has a more distinguished lineage than its counterpart, the novel; intrinsically, it has accomplished and achieved as much, if not more, than the celebrated fiction by well-known names that occupies so much shelf space, media space, and literary chatter nowadays, and it has done its work quietly, passionately, and to extraordinarily high standards through all these years. This book is an attempt to elucidate this fact and make a case for it in the wider world of reading.

Indian poetry in English is an indissoluble component of India’s existence in modernity, yet this is a tradition without a proper history, an unclaimed tradition for much of its beleaguered and secret existence. No clear notion of its origins and development exists in the minds of most literate Indians, who have generally been introduced to it through prescribed reading at school, existing side by side with much-anthologized and occasionally syrupy specimens from the English canon proper. The first introduction to poetry in the English language for Indians might go back to pre-school childhood for some and linger in memories of books of English nursery rhymes with colored illustrations (in what can only be described as Eastman color) of blackbirds coming out of pies, rosy-cheeked boys and girls, fat *pink* pigs, or grandfather clocks with mice in them, all of which usually existed in middle-class surroundings far removed from the world depicted in the utopian space of the pages themselves. From there to

“Lochinvar” and “Daffodils” in school – without any clear idea as to what the Scottish Border or the daffodil looked like, in common with almost every boy or girl studying English in formerly colonized countries anywhere – was a short hop. The only concession to hard-earned political independence in these school text books was the inclusion of Derozio’s apparently dreary sonnet, “To India, My Native Land” (a title ascribed to the sonnet by the anthologist rather than the poet), or some even drearier Sarojini Naidu specimen on Coromandel fishermen or palanquin bearers that continues to be part of school text books today.

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Homi Bhabha has called Naipaul’s fictional Trinidadians “vernacular cosmopolitans of a kind, moving in-between cultural traditions, and revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language,” relating them to his own “growing up in Bombay as a middle-class Parsi,” “learning to work with the contradictory strains of languages *lived*, and languages *learned*, [which] has the potential for a remarkable critical and creative impulse.”² While the condition of vernacular cosmopolitanism is one which he himself (as indeed do many of us) shares to a greater or lesser degree, what is far more surprising in the context of Bhabha is his fervent declaration elsewhere in an interview: “I was absolutely convinced in those days [Bombay in the ’70s] that my great gift was to be a poet . . . It was my all-embracing, all-absorbing passion.”³ This incongruous example is invoked here in order to point toward the power of the moment of the rebirth of modern Indian poetry in English, to show how pervasive and persuasive the space and place of the regeneration of this corpus had been. Bombay in the ’70s, with Dom Moraes, Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, Adil Jussawalla, Eunice de Souza, Gieve Patel, and the itinerant Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Kamala Das, was where Indian poetry in English was reborn in an independent, impoverished country, irritated with and deliberately forgetful of its colonial modern ancestry that could be traced back to Calcutta in the fecund nineteenth century. Just as the Bombay Progressive Artists’ Group turned impatiently away from the pioneers in the Bengal School of Art, the poets too, often personal friends with the “progressive artists,” began a conversation with American and European poets, with regional and Dalit poets (Dilip Chitre’s collaboration with Namdeo Dhasal comes readily to mind), with what Bhabha calls “the full clamour of contemporary experience,” with, in the words Bhabha cites of Auden’s, “*the democratic aspect of literary creation.*”⁴ It would be a

mistake to draw too firm a line between the cities and eras, however: the Progressives had an influential Calcutta chapter, and P. Lal's Writers Workshop, still operating today out of the same lane in south Calcutta, as we shall see in the chapter on it in this book ([Chapter 10](#)), published many of the Bombay poets for the first time. It is even more crucial, however, that nineteenth-century poetry in English about India not be dismissed out of hand. This is not just because such a move would dishonor the origins of a tradition, but also because there is much in that body of work that rewards study. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra had famously said, in his introduction to the hugely influential *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* in 1992, "Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghose, and Sarojini Naidu were courageous and perhaps charming men and women, but not those with whom you could today do business."⁵ His chapter here, on the other hand, begins with this quotation, and continues in the next sentence: "What follows is an atonement for what is said above." Given that poets such as Mehrotra (and many other critics and writers) have re-evaluated this body of work – not least because it forms, in itself, such a fascinating field – the present volume has attempted to correct the imbalance in the attention paid to the nineteenth-century corpus by devoting a substantial section to it in its many incarnations.

In an essay written in English in 1854, Michael Madhusudan Datta spoke of the Hindu as "a fallen being – once – a green, a beautiful, a tall, a majestic, a flowering tree; now – blasted by lightning!" and asked, "Who can recall him to life?"⁶ Conflating language and race in an essay that extolled the beauties of the English language, he answered unequivocally: "it is the glorious mission of the Anglo-Saxon to regenerate, to renovate the Hindu race!"⁷ Whether writing in English, as here, or in Bengali, which too was informed by English in unprecedented ways, such sentiments were not his alone, but common to the age – albeit perhaps not always in so exaggerated a rhetoric. Four years later, in 1858, the Gujarati poet Narmad published an essay, "Kavi ani Kavita" [The Poet and Poetry] as a manifesto for a new poetry, therein attempting something very similar to Madhusudan's endeavors in Calcutta at the same time – to sweep away the older forms in favor of the new. Thoroughly impressed with the need to reform the old style in order to usher in a modern poetry for the people, Narmad described the concept of *rasa* in this article as "*andarni maja*" or inner delight, using both Aristotle and Wordsworth in his attempt to redefine poetry as a work of the imagination, or, as he put it, as "the spontaneous expression of feelings."⁸ Madhusudan was thwarted in his ambition to be an "English poet" (his poems were rejected by Blackwood's Magazine, and

in India, Englishmen told him to write in his own tongue); nevertheless, his reading of the Western canon became instrumental in his reformulation of a modern poetry for Bengal, as we shall see here. The material power of the modern – whether incarnated in the steam engine or the printing press – was gladly appropriated by many writers in the nineteenth century involved in the formulation of a modern Indian literature, regardless of the language they wrote in. (Bankimchandra Chatterjee, for instance, said: “And with this new dawn of life came into the country one of the mightiest instruments of civilization, the printing-press.”⁹) Sometimes we forget how thin the line dividing those who wrote in the regional languages and those who wrote in English actually was.

Whatever the languages of composition, it could perhaps be said that what Madhusudan Datta had tersely reminded a friend of in 1859 in relation to his Bengali work holds true of every poet in modern India: “Besides, remember I am writing for that portion of my countrymen who think as I think, whose minds have been more or less imbued with western ideas and *modes of thinking*.”¹⁰ This is a defense most often – and almost automatically – associated with the Indian writer of English now, though it is, of course, equally applicable to those writing in the Indian languages, such as Madhusudan himself, although it is doubtful if many would have had the courage to continue to make such a defense as nationalist sentiment grew in the years succeeding him. What it reminds us of today is that literary writing in India was often criticized for being located in an Indian modernity deemed unacceptable because it did not penetrate the hearts of the common people of the country, or, indeed, our kitchens, as Marathi writer Bhalchandra Nemade has reiterated in a recent interview: “You walk through the gutter by way of English, but don’t bring it to your kitchen.”¹¹ Outer and inner domains are neatly separated in such organicist rhetoric, reminiscent of R. Parthasarathy’s finding of “deposits of . . . Kannada and Tamil . . . assimilated into English” in A. K. Ramanujan’s poetry, with the native languages in the deepest, purest, innermost layer being excavated to build poetry in the shallow soil of the English language.¹² The critic who scorned such “a geological model” of the hierarchical stratification of languages, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, has also more recently pointed out that the hostility stems “in large measure from the animosity toward the social class English has come to be identified with: a narrow well-entrenched, metropolitan-based ruling elite.”¹³ Yet, while it is true that many (although increasingly, and crucially, certainly not all) writers of English in India belong to the metropolitan elite, “it is also true that many who write at all, irrespective of language, belong to a privileged stratum.”¹⁴

As I have pointed out elsewhere, in India, colonial domination added its own complexities to the repudiation of what was perceived to be “foreign” influence, with the nativists joining hands with social activists in promoting a fundamental feeling of guilt at being associated with anything so inconsequential as literature or literary studies in the post-Independence years of nation building and civil engineering, poverty alleviation and the green revolution, war and peace. That this was not a turn unique to India, although particularly virulent in its manifestation here, is testified to by J. Hillis Miller when he wrote about the changes to literary studies in *The Ethics of Reading* (1985), where he suggested that the denudation of the field had been propelled by “a sense of guilt in occupying oneself with something so trivial, so disconnected from life and reality, as novels and poems, in comparison with the serious business of history, politics and the class-struggle.”¹⁵ The importance of materialist Marxist critics to this turn in these years, of course, hardly needs pointing out in this context.¹⁶

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Very little critical work has been done on the history of Indian poetry in English. The intermittent publications of anthologies that have appeared over the years have contained introductions or head-notes to individual poems that were generally the most reliable guides to the field, filling the gaps between the poems themselves with information and sometimes insight into the importance of individual poets and their works. D. L. Richardson, poet, teacher, and editor in Calcutta through the 1830s and '40s, was the first to anthologize some of this poetry in his *Selections from the British Poets* (Calcutta, 1840), an anthology published for the benefit of “Hindoo” students of English literature in India, compiling the work of both British and Indian poets in India as annexures at the far end of his compendious anthology. While the section titled “British-Indian Poetry: Specimens of British Poets Once or Still Resident in the East Indies” began with John Leyden and included copious amounts of his own verse, three poems by Derozio were included under “Poems by An East Indian” and one by “Kasiprashad” (as he spelled it) Ghosh under “Poem by a Hindu.”¹⁷ Preventing the English verse written in nineteenth-century India from passing into oblivion, however, was the life’s work of another man, Theodore Douglas Dunn, who brought out three anthologies, including *The Bengali Book of English Verse*, introduced by Rabindranath Tagore, in 1918.¹⁸ Toward the end of the twentieth century, two important and interesting anthologists published their selections in 1976 and 1992. R. Parthasarathy’s controversial *Ten Twentieth-Century*

Indian Poets (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976) provoked Arvind Krishna Mehrotra to write one of the finest essays on Indian poetry in English, “The Emperor Has No Clothes,” and to later put together his own selection in *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).¹⁹

But before either Parthasarathy’s or Mehrotra’s anthologies, we had a pioneer in Roby Dutt, who edited *Echoes from East and West* from Cambridge in 1909, preceding Dunn, while V. N. Bhushan’s well-known *The Peacock Lute: Anthology of Poems in English by Indian Writers* was published in 1945. In 1946, Fredoon Kabraji’s had published his excellent *This Strange Adventure: An Anthology of Poems in English by Indians, 1828–1946*, a compilation that was comprehensive and accommodating in its reach and range. Although the post-Independence years were lean ones for the field – due in part, no doubt, to the utter marginality that this body of poetry was relegated to in the context of modern Indian culture generally – a resurgence of interest led to several additional anthologies in the 1970s, as well as Parthasarathy’s; so we have Saleem Peeradina’s *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1972) at the start of the decade, and Keki N. Daruwalla’s *Two Decades of Indian Poetry: 1960–1980* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980) at its end. In between, Adil Jussawalla’s path-breaking *New Writing in India*, which contained poetry and prose that was both translated and originally in English, was published in 1974, for which, as the chapter on him in this book points out (Chapter 16), Jussawalla had traveled to different parts of India and started collecting material in 1967. Eunice de Souza, meanwhile, has not only anthologized women’s poetry – *Nine Indian Women Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) – but has also attempted to reformulate early poetry in English in India – *Early Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology: 1829–1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) – while bringing out a wide-ranging selection of post-independence poetry in English – *Both Sides of the Sky* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2008). Meanwhile, Ranjit Hoskote has edited *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets* (Viking/Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2002), and Jeet Thayil’s *60 Indian Poets* (2008) came out in the same year as his *Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*; subsequently, Sudeep Sen has edited *The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry by Indians* (2011). These are only the most representative names that preside like milestones in a field populated by many other anthologists/anthologies of selected poetry; often, they have also acted as a guiding beacon to readers finding their way across a landscape that has very few signposts and even

scarcer literature on the significance and meaning of the territory under review.

Books of criticism on the subject of Indian poetry in English have been much scarcer than the anthologies, although certain defining publications have appeared fitfully over the years. Critical works both preceded and followed Dunn's anthologies in the early twentieth century: Edward F. Oaten's *A Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature* (London, 1908) was the first book on such a subject, and was concerned mainly with writing by Englishmen in India; however, it also included an estimation of the poetry of Derozio, Greece Chunder, Hur Chunder, and Shoshee Chunder Dutt, as well as of their niece, Toru Dutt. Lotika Basu's *Indian Writers of English Verse* (Oxford, 1933) was written in a rather dismissive tone that was characteristic of the time; nevertheless, her work remains a departure in that it focused on the poetry alone. Following independence, a great number of Indian critics devoted themselves to the larger subject of Indian writing in English, with a section dedicated to poetry; most, however, such as Meenakshi Mukherjee, concentrated on fiction alone in the period following Salman Rushdie's publication of *Midnight's Children*, which led to a growing demand for circumambulations in the textual premises of nation and narration.

Among the older critics, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar wrote pioneering studies alongside another noted critic, M. K. Naik, who published several overviews with titles that included words such as "Aspects," "Perspectives," "Survey," or "Studies" of the field, including *A History of Indian English Literature* (1982) from the Sahitya Akademi, the official caretaker of the nation's literary upkeep. Twenty years later, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's *Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* (2002) proved itself by far the most valuable guide to all genres of writing in English to be found in print; however, although richly informative, critically informed, and beautifully illustrated, poetry is but one constituent part of the book. None of these books, in fact, devoted themselves exclusively to poetry. The few notable exceptions to this rule over the years have been Bruce King, foreigner and expatriate, an American in Paris, who has written a substantive critical work on Indian poetry in English, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (New Delhi, 1987), which can safely be described as the definitive work on the subject; Makarand Paranjape, who began his career with *Mysticism in Indian English Poetry* (Delhi, 1988); and the much-neglected Sudesh Mishra, *Preparing Faces: Modernism and Indian Poetry in English* (Adelaide, 1995). Mary Ellis Gibson's *Indian Angles*, published comparatively recently in 2011, restricts itself, as the subtitle indicates, to "English

verse in colonial India from Jones to Tagore,” and it, along with Máire Ní Fhlathúin’s *The Poetry of British India 1780–1905*, published by Pickering and Chatto in the same year, robustly embodies the new spurt in interest in nineteenth-century English poetry written in India.

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The [first section](#) of this book, *The Broad Nineteenth Century*, is subtitled “Indians in English and the English in India,” so that both communities that wrote English poetry in the nineteenth century may be productively brought together. Among the British poets in India are some who were known by their pseudonyms alone – Anna Maria, Aliph Cheem – and some whose names were recognized by the entire community of “Anglo-Indians” (as the British in India were then known) living in the country in the nineteenth century. They are discussed in this section in the chapters on the early years ([Chapter 2](#)), comic poetry ([Chapter 6](#)), and women poets from the British lineage ([Chapter 4](#)), highlighting the moment of genealogical commencement that all of this work represents in relation to the later poets writing in English in India. These early poets may have imagined themselves writing for London audiences, but they published their poetry in books and newspapers that were widely available and widely read in India, contributing thereby to the creation of a broader literary sphere than they themselves, perhaps, had dreamed of. Separate chapters on William Jones or John Leyden or D. L. Richardson may have been appropriate here, as perhaps might another on the greatest name to come out of here in this context, Rudyard Kipling the only poet among these still alive in the popular imagination. Yet lack of space has necessitated the regrettable omission of these and many others from this volume, despite the knowledge that the poetry of some among them will withstand the test of time. Most of the comic and satiric poets, military and exilic poets, as well as Englishwomen in India who have found a place in this volume, on the other hand, existed in a minor mode that was doubly marginalized by its location; the forgotten texts and contexts of their poetic productions are presented here for the first time. It was vital to begin our history by including the poems published not just by Indians, but by British men and women in India, in order to both appreciate the functioning of this verse at the inception of print culture in India, as well as, crucially, to note that this ephemeral poetry of the early nineteenth century was read by the public as “Indian poetry” so long as these poets were located in India and writing about India.

Notwithstanding the fact that British poets in India preceded him chronologically, it nevertheless seemed only appropriate to begin the volume with

Derozio, who so strangely straddled both communities by being born to an English mother and a Portuguese father with some “native ancestry,” and who so emphatically participated in civil rights campaigns for his community, then known as “East Indians.” At the same time, Derozio not only identified himself in his verse as an Indian poet but was also identified in turn by an English reviewer as India’s first national poet.

As far as Indians were concerned, the speed with which the idioms and conventions of English poetry and criticism percolated from the printed page into civil society at large can be appreciated by the fact that by 1830, three books of English poetry had been written and published by Indians in Calcutta, thereby inaugurating a tradition that has rarely been recognized as one. Two of those volumes were by Derozio (in 1827 and 1828), and while his poetry has found a place in a chapter here (Chapter 1), it has, unfortunately, not been possible to have a separate chapter on Kasiprasad Ghosh, whose 1830 publication, *The Shair*, has not merited sufficient attention to date.²⁰ (Nevertheless, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra partly deals with, and Amit Chaudhuri comments on Ghosh’s delightful “To a Dead Crow” - a poem I believe I first pointed out to both.) The poetry of “Indians in English” will intercut the work of the British poets in India in this section, as we attempt to retrieve a critical perspective on these poets, neglected because their poetry has been read as “derivative,” primarily as it is unresponsive to the protocols of reading that nationalist and postcolonialist critics have used.

Derozio’s poetry (less commented on than his legacy) embodied an internationalist politics in poems against slavery or in support of Greek independence in the wake of Byron, and indigenous culturalist intent in narratives such as *The Fakeer of Jungheera* (1829), creating an unmistakable and distinctive strand of early Indian poetry in English that I have elsewhere called “Orientalist verse,” notwithstanding its unmistakably nationalist impetus.²¹ Madhusudan Datta’s English poetry, generally considered a “failure,” is examined here in relation to his Bengali works - something rarely attempted - to highlight the continuity between the two linguistic parts of his literary production, without an understanding of which his oeuvre cannot be comprehended in its entirety. Toru Dutt, meanwhile, was responsible for one of the most fascinating documents to come out of poetry criticism in the nineteenth century; an essay titled “An Eurasian Poet.” Originally published in the *Bengal Magazine* in 1874, this essay was lost in time, missing from the few extant copies of the magazine it appeared in, and

had acquired a legendary status among Derozio scholars who had presumed it to be about him. As I found out, it was not.²² What it was, nevertheless, as the chapter on it in this book shows (Chapter 7), was a brilliantly written summation of a Mauritian poet writing in French, Leconte de Lisle, and a profound testament to the global cosmopolitanism of world literature in an age of empire.

Around the last quarter of the nineteenth century, an emergent nationalism made the mother tongue more important in the consciousness of the Indian middle classes, and important work began to be done in the regional languages. Poetry written in English by Indians in the years after the Great War continued in a sluggish way. There were many practitioners of the craft in this period, from Behramji Malabari and other poets in Western India (as Eunice de Souza has shown) to Sarojini Naidu stationed in Southern India, to Roby Dutt who lived in Britain; however, one of the most famous was perhaps Aurobindo Ghose, whose epochal *Savitri* (1950), venerated for its spiritual and uplifting message to mankind, was so dull and weighty – not just literally – that it nearly killed off the genre (at almost 24,000 lines, 12 books, and 49 cantos, it is the longest poem ever written in the tradition). His brother Manmohan Ghose's work, on the other hand, was emblematic of the new beginnings of modern Indian poetry in English in the posthumously published *Songs of Love and Death* (1926), continuing on the route that Toru Dutt's last sonnets had briefly illuminated. Nonetheless, it was only in the 1960s and '70s that the field was rejuvenated by a generation of radical young poets, taking a turn sharply divergent from the old influences and preoccupations.

But before that, in 1913, importantly, Rabindranath Tagore was in London, the object of unprecedented adulation, winning the Nobel Prize for his own English translations of his Bengali poetry in *Gitanjali*. We might wonder whether the general reader in the West at the time fully realized that they were reading only selected translations. They seemed to treat what they read by him as original English poetry, which was then judged (with some exceptions) by certain identifiable parameters of mysticism, spiritualism, exoticism, and easternness, as indeed all the poetry from the East had been so far. A revaluation of Tagore's aesthetic in his English poetry in comparison with the Bengali is long overdue; this history proposes to fill the gap by attempting to understand the transformation of language that took place in the journey from the Bengali (Chapter 8), arguing, in the context of recent re-translations, that his translations of his own poems in *Gitanjali* (1912) remain, unfortunately sometimes, the best available of that epoch-making book.

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Under the [second section](#) – *Publishers, Publishing Houses, and the Periodical Press* – falls a neglected category that this volume attempts to install as an element vital to our understanding of the operation of English poetry in India. Print culture and the publishing industry in India flourished from the nineteenth century onward, growing exponentially with time, thereby enabling the publication of poetry, reviews, critical articles, and essays in the pages of newspapers and journals that in turn were largely instrumental in the establishment of a modern cultural sphere informed by a notion of the literary and the poetic. The arena in which poetry in English has flourished in India has been sustained, supported, and, at times, kept from falling apart, by publishers and publication venues that have stood solidly behind some of its finest poetic productions. This book focuses for the first time on the important nineteenth-century context of the periodical press and literary editorship in Calcutta. Through a figure such as that of Dr. John Grant, editor of the *India Gazette*, which published the poetry of Derozio and others, a literary culture began to spread its roots in unprecedented directions (see [Chapter 9](#)). The lives and legacies of two of the most important twentieth-century publishers of Indian poetry in English in India – Writers Workshop in Calcutta and Clearing House in Bombay – are then explored in individual chapters ([10](#) and [11](#)). The first of these was run by poet, translator, and academic, Professor P. Lal, in Calcutta; Lal’s motive for setting up his press in 1958 was identical to those of the Clearing House poets a little later: “The reason I went into publishing is simple – nobody was around, in 1958, to publish me. So I published myself.”²³ What is most noticeable in this endeavor is the pan-Indian outreach of the published poets, who ranged from Nissim Ezekiel, Lawrence Bantleman, R. de L. Furtado, Ira De, and Lila Ray to Adil Jussawalla, A. K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Pritish Nandy, Suniti Namjoshi, Shankar Mokashi-Punekar, G. S. Sharat Chandra, Vikram Seth, Gauri Deshpande, and Agha Shahid Ali. Astonishingly, William Carlos Williams contributed the preface to N. K. Sethi’s *The Word Is Split* in 1961, showcasing the internationalist ambitions of the publishing house Lal ran so locally from Calcutta. The second development on the opposite side of the country in Bombay (as it was called then) was the establishment of a poetry publishing collective which the poets Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, and Arun Kolatkar started in the mid-1970s. The history of Clearing House and its role in the rebirth of modern Indian poetry in English in the ’70s is explored here, looking at fresh archival resources not previously available to the public. Both Clearing House and Writers Workshop had distinctive design values, bringing to

their print productions an elegance of form and distinctiveness of appearance that marked them out immediately from the poetry productions of commercial publishing houses – no history of Indian poetry in English would be complete without an understanding of their contribution to its precarious existence in post-Independence India. The section is brought to a close by an exploration into little magazines, bilingualism, and the culture of poetry in Bombay at this time (Chapter 12). Focusing closely on the contents, editorial policy, and scope of individual periodicals such as *Poetry India*, *Vagartha*, and *ezra* allows a showcasing of the multilingual culture of poetry writing, highlighting the expanding locations of its operations from Bombay to Delhi, and its contributions to the poetic and cultural scene.

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The third and meatiest section of the book, *Poetry 1950–2000*, deals with the poets who, to our minds today, represent the body of Indian poetry in English most influentially and significantly in the last half of the twentieth century. Beginning with Nissim Ezekiel, and including Dom Moraes, Jayanta Mahapatra, A. K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Adil Jussawalla, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Keki N Daruwalla, Gieve Patel, Kamala Das, and Eunice de Souza, among others, this section deals with the poets who dominated the decades from the 1950s to the end of the millennium, publishing an eclectic range of poems over many years, often from relatively obscure journals or publishing houses and enclosed in self-designed covers. Here the modernist aesthetic commingles with regional and local traditions, American beat poetry, Goan inflections and indigenous landscapes in a body of modern-day work whose quality is exceptional in the history of contemporary poetry written in the English language *anywhere in the world*; sadly, this self-evident fact has remained hidden from the eyes of commentators, both “Western” and Indian, to date.

This is a period in which some of the finest – as well as the most formative – English poetry was written in India. If, for Larkin, the “Annus Mirabilis” was 1963, when sexual intercourse began “Between the end of the ‘Chatterley’ ban / and the Beatles’ first LP” – for Indian poetry in English that *annus mirabilis* was 1952, when Nissim Ezekiel published his first volume of poetry, called, appropriately, *A Time to Change* – an event that, like a pebble that created an avalanche, set in motion a train of publications of astounding quality in the succeeding years. His contribution to the field will be read “contrapuntally” in an interpretation that looks at him as a poet “in a minor tradition,” where minority is constructed as an enabling, and, indeed, sustaining inheritance (Chapter 13). Four years later, in

1956, Dom Moraes published his first book, *A Beginning*, from the same publisher, Parton Press, that published Dylan Thomas. The youngest ever recipient of the Hawthornden Prize, Dom returned to Bombay in the 1970s to a fecund poetry scene that encompassed Arun Kolatkar, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawalla, Eunice de Souza, Dilip Chitre, and others who were all connected to Bombay in these years by an indissoluble tie, city and poetry feeding off each other's energies in a voracious give and take.

Yet poetry written by Indians in English after the 1950s belongs not just to one city as the nineteenth century arguably belonged to Calcutta. Poets of the provincial towns and other cities have to be included, for if Bombay is important, so too are Cuttack and Delhi and the Goan village, because of their presence in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and Keki Daruwalla, Manohar Shetty and Melanie Silgado. Individual chapters on those poets will speak for their poetry and their presence through these years in this tradition. The women poets in this volume have not been ghettoized into a separate fenced enclosure with a sign above blinking "Women Poets"; their contribution, rather, is enmeshed in the larger story that started unfolding in the poetry scene in India more generally. In this section, some of the most important women poets of the post-1950s in India – Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgado – have had their work dealt with in the same way that they themselves were imbricated in the warp and weft of poetry writing in India at that time, with each poet looked at in the context of their writing and their commitment to craft as it has evolved over the course of their careers.

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At the same time that Nissim Ekekiel and Dom Moraes returned to India, the United States, United Kingdom, Denmark, Germany, France, Canada and Australia witnessed the arrival and scattered presence in their territories of those Indian poets writing in English, who have been called, in the [fourth section](#), *Poets of the Diaspora*. As Jeet Thayil put it in his Introduction to *60 Indian Poets* (2008), "to present them [poets writing in English] together in one volume requires more than an appreciation of the cartographer's instinct, it needs a rethinking of the enterprise . . . Indian poetry, wherever its writers are based, should really be seen as one body of work."²⁴ Chapters on the work of expatriate poets of Indian origin show how they belong to the country of their birth and the country of their habitation in different degrees and in different ways. In the work of G.S. Sharat Chandra and Vijay Seshadri, for instance, we see

how difficult it is to decide whether the poetry should be classified as American rather than Indian poetry in English, compared to the work of the poets who preceded them, such as A. K. Ramanujan or Agha Shahid Ali, also based in the United States but emphatically and identifiably seen as Indian poets by Indians themselves. Sujata Bhatt, Meena Alexander, and Imtiaz Dharker are studied to show how their expatriate status is constituted of certain experiences of multiple border crossings, whether in the realm of languages or memories, that establishes a kind of kinship between these poets, allowing them to be studied together through their individual works.

The subjects of the **last section** of the book – *The New Millennium Poets on Themselves* – have rarely spoken of each other’s work, and it has been difficult to persuade them to cast a critical eye on their own substantial achievements. The first fifteen years of the twenty-first century having now passed, a diverse range of Indian poetic voices continue to find expression in English. The poetry scene in India, as anywhere else in the world, seems to have become a subculture in a literary milieu in which the status of literature, the author, and the text itself has become a contested site, constantly threatened with eviction and dispossession, existing with the support of a subterranean stream of readers, writers, critics, publishers, and poetry prizes. The poets of the new millennium in India are perhaps too near us and to each other to lend themselves to assessment and analysis, so that the work of only three young poets – Arundhati Subramaniam, Ranjit Hoskote, and Jeet Thayil – has been commented upon by another, Vivek Narayanan, while their contemporary, Anjum Hasan, has reflected more broadly upon the speaking voice in the English language in India, leaving much of the corpus unexplored here. In the end, the absence of a myriad contemporary practitioners who form the matrix of the scene of Indian poetry in English as it exists today allows us, perhaps fittingly, an open-ended conclusion to the fraught question of English in India with which the volume began.

Notes

1. Since the coinage “Indian English Poetry” has a pejorative connotation in its implication of “wrong English” as used by Indians, and has been made the subject matter of some famous comic poems by Nissim Ezekiel, Eunice de Souza, and others, that term has generally been avoided here.
2. Homi Bhabha, Preface, *The Location of Culture* (Oxford: Routledge Classics Edition, 2008) pp. xiii, x.

3. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, "Surviving Theory: A Conversation with Homi K. Bhabha," in Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (eds.) *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 370, 371.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 371 (italics in original).
5. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).
6. Michael Madhusudan Datta, Essays, "The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu," *Madhusudan Rachanabali* (Calcutta: Sahitya Sansad, 1993), p. 630.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 635.
8. Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature: 1800–1910: Western Impact, Indian Response* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1991), p. 145.
9. Bankimchandra Chatterjee, 'A Popular Literature For Bengal,' Bankim Rachanabali Vol. III (Calcutta: Sahitya Sansad, 1998) p. 99.
10. Michael Madhusudan Datta, Letters, in *Madhusudan Rachanabali*, p. 545 (original emphasis).
11. Interview with Devapriya Roy, available at: <http://scroll.in/article/715348/E2%80%98Indians-writing-in-English-cannot-come-close-to-Manto,-Premchand-or-Bibhutibhushan> (accessed March 22, 2015).
12. Quoted in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Partial Recall: Essays on Literature and Literary History* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), p. 163.
13. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Partial Recall*, p. 225.
14. *Ibid.*
15. J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 5.
16. See Rosinka Chaudhuri, *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry, and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xxxi.
17. Richardson spelt Ghosh correctly, as it is spelt in the title page of *The Shair* (1830); Dunn, however, used "Ghose" in his *Bengali Book of English Verse*, creating some confusion for later scholars.
18. T. O. D. Dunn (ed.), *The Bengali Book of English Verse* (Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1918). Dunn also brought out two other collections of English verse written in British India: *India in Song: Eastern Themes in English Verse by British and Indian Poets* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1918), and *Poets of John Company* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co, 1921).
19. Originally published in 1982 in the influential journal edited by Jayanta Mahapatra, *Chandrabhaga*, the essay was given new lease of life when it was excerpted in Amit Chaudhuri (ed.) *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (London: Picador, 2001). The essay is reprinted in *Partial Recall*, pp. 147-195.
20. *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2002) was perhaps the first sustained analysis of nineteenth-century Indian poetry in English, including that by Kasiprasad Ghosh.
21. Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal*.

22. The story of its rediscovery is told in the Preface to Rosinka Chaudhuri (ed.) *Derozio, Poet of India: The Definitive Edition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).
23. P. Lal, "The Torch Not the Sceptre," *SPAN Magazine*, 1984.
24. Jeet Thayil, "Introduction" to *60 Indian Poets* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008).

SECTION I

*The Broad Nineteenth Century: Indians
in English and the English in India*

*The First Indian Poet in English: Henry Louis
Vivian Derozio*

Manu Samriti Chander

Born, and educated in India, and at the age of eighteen [the author] ventures to present himself as a candidate for poetic fame.¹

“Poetic fame” is a particular kind of fame, one that is poeticized, romanti-
cized. It does more than make the poet known; it makes the poet known *as*
a poet, a figure possessed of a particular cultural privilege in the nineteenth
century. Rooted in anxiety over the devaluation of poetry brought on by
the expansion and diversification of the reading public, poetic fame
became a matter of legitimacy as well as popularity. In the particular
context of Calcutta, it meant distinction within a burgeoning public
sphere, one which existed “on a par with London as a center of publication
through the 1860s.”² To achieve poetic fame within such a context meant,
according to the Romantic ideology of the period, to transcend that very
context, to exist above and outside the cultural field.

Thus, when the Calcutta-born Henry Louis Vivian Derozio
announces in the preface to his 1827 *Poems* his candidacy for poetic
fame, he makes a claim for acknowledgment as a singular figure. This
version of Derozio seems to have been taken up by his earliest and most
enthusiastic reviewers, who singled him out as the first “national poet” of
India (*D* 399) and the “beginning of a literary era.”³ Of course, such
assessments invite scrutiny, as the search for the origins of Anglophone
Indian poetry raises ideologically fraught questions about authenticity.
What qualifies Derozio to stand as a representative of India? Is it the fact
that, unlike earlier Anglophone poets living in India, he was born there?
Or is it the trace of native ancestry in the “Eurasian” poet of primarily
English and Portuguese descent?⁴ Indeed, is it even possible to speak of a
national poet of India in the 1820s, decades before the rise of coherent
nationalist movements in the region?

If the tendency to identify an originator of Anglophone Indian poetry
merits some suspicion, the fact that Derozio was from the outset read as a

foundational figure nevertheless suggests that he might serve as an important case study for understanding the history of canon-formation in India, a means of reflecting upon the process by which literature and nation develop in relation to one another. In fact, prior to publishing his first volume, Derozio had explored this very process in the first installment of his column “Torn-out Leaves of a Scrap Book” in the *India Gazette*, which appeared in July 1826. Writing under one of his early pennames, “Juvenis,” Derozio asks:

Why is it that Literature does not flourish in this country – is the soil or the climate uncongenial to the culture of so delicate a flower – or is there a paucity of those talents which are necessary to accelerate its growth? . . . There is something that withers it in spite of every effort, and every care. What it is, I have never yet satisfactorily ascertained. (*D* 82)

To explain the development of a national literature, Derozio uses an extended agricultural metaphor familiar to nineteenth-century audiences: literature as a flower, rooted in the soil of the country, nourished by the poet. Yet it is the failure of this metaphor that most interests Derozio: because no amount of cultivation will yield a native literature, a revised model of literary production must be discovered. Thus, he continues, “Without being able to satisfy myself why Literature does not thrive in India, I have come to the determination of tearing out the leaves of my Scrap-book, and sending them for publication to one of the newspapers” (*D* 82–83). In offering up this strategy, Derozio claims his own status as an inaugural figure, a point of origin – in the absence of an organic Indian literature, he distributes “leaves” born not of the soil but of his own “Scrap-book.”

Of course, these “leaves” were not created *ab nihilo*. Rather, they pulled together diverse literary traditions to create what nevertheless aspired to be a uniquely Indian literature. Thus, his early “Don Juanics,” which was published in the *India Gazette* over the course of four issues, mimics the style of Byron’s wildly popular poem while situating the poet/speaker squarely as a native Indian. The poem’s skillful invention of the subcontinental adventures of Don Juan gained Derozio – or rather, “Juvenis” – a number of admirers at once eager to learn the poet’s real name and skeptical that the poet could really be as young – “not seventeen” (“Don Juanics” XII.2) – as the poem states.⁵ “Don Juanics” not only points to Derozio’s increasing popularity, but also to his self-conscious reworking of non-Indian literatures, what Makarand Paranjape identifies as Derozio’s “systematic and structural hybridization.” For Paranjape, “it is not possible to explain or understand a poet like Derozio merely by speaking of

influence and imitation. In fact, whatever he borrowed, he superimposed in his local, Indian material, creating a new idiom in English poetry.”⁶ This “new idiom,” then, represents a kind of transcultural assemblage, by means of which the poet retains his position of authority in a field that places supreme value on originality and situates himself in relation to fellow bards, as we see in the 1827 *Poems*.

The collection opens with an epigraph from Thomas Moore’s “To the Harp of Erin”: “If the pulse of the patriot, soldier, or lover/Have throbb’d at our lay, ’twas thy glory alone;/I was but as the wind passing heedlessly over,/And all the wild sweetness I wak’d was thy own” (*D95*). Mary Ellis Gibson has noted the importance of bardic tropes – the harp being foremost among these – to Derozio’s “complex poetic geography,” in which “India and the poet himself are placed in a web of identifications . . . of a piece with earlier Scottish, Welsh, and Irish claims to distinctive culture and national heritage.”⁷ Indeed, this “web” exceeds the English-speaking world, as Derozio situates the bardic tradition in Persia (in his translation of Hafiz, which appeared in the *India Gazette* and then again in the 1827 volume), Ancient Greece (in his poem “Sappho”), and sixteenth-century Italy (in “Tasso”).

Yet, even as Derozio aligns himself with diverse bardic figures, he also distinguishes himself from other bards, notably by rethinking the Orientalist poetic tradition made popular by Lord Byron, Robert Southey, Thomas Moore, and others. Derozio clearly admired such figures (with the possible exception of Southey, at whom he takes a Byronic jab in the closing lines of “Don Juanics”), but, as we see in several of the poems, he subtly undermines what Edward Said calls the “positional superiority” of the Orientalist.⁸ Thus, a poem such as “Heaven,” written, according to the epigraph, “In Imitation of Lord Byron’s ‘Know ye the land where the cypress and myrtle,’ &c,” redeploys Byron’s representation of Turkey in the opening lines of *The Bride of Abydos* to describe, using images pulled directly from the Bible, a Christian vision of heaven.⁹ While it would be hasty to suggest that Derozio is deliberately questioning the problematic, exotic representation of the East by redeploying Byron’s language, “Heaven” clearly demonstrates Derozio’s tendency to manipulate rather than merely imitate Orientalist tropes. This strategy is particularly visible and politically relevant to Derozio’s *The Fakeer of Jungheera*, the title poem of his second collection, which was published in 1828.

The Fakeer of Jungheera, Derozio’s most ambitious poetic project, tells the story of Nuleeni, a widow who, as the tale begins, is preparing to sacrifice herself on the funeral pyre of her Hindu husband. Before she can

do so, she is rescued by her true love, the titular “Fakeer,” or Muslim mendicant. In response, Nuleeni’s father leads an army against the Fakeer, leading to a final battle in which the Hindu army is forced to retreat, but not before Nuleeni’s love is slain. When, the following morning, a peasant comes across the Fakeer’s corpse, he finds Nuleeni dead as well, holding her love in a final embrace. Her death, either from grief or suicide (the poem leaves it unclear), fulfills the destiny laid out in the poem’s opening.

Derozio had experimented with the genre of the Oriental tale in “The Enchantress of the Cave” in the 1827 volume. The poem, which tells of a warrior on his way to battle reuniting with the wife he believes he has left behind, draws heavily on the conventions of Orientalist poetry developed by such poets as Byron and Moore, whose *The Giaour* and *Lalla Rookh*, respectively, provide the epigraphs for Derozio’s poem. Such poems obviously inform *The Fakeer of Jungheera* as well. However, there are some important differences between the two poems, beginning with the fact that the later poem does not include the epigraphic nods to the poet’s contemporaries that figure so prominently in the first collection. If “The Enchantress of the Cave” self-consciously situates itself next to the poems of Byron and Moore, *The Fakeer of Jungheera* – just as self-consciously – establishes its uniqueness even as it appropriates the genre of the Oriental tale.

One common device for nineteenth-century Orientalists was the use of extensive explanatory notes, which Chaudhuri identifies as a “Western convention [rooted in] anxiety about authenticity, as there was a fear of fakes flooding a receptive market.”¹⁰ Such notes attest to historical accuracy and work to establish the expertise of the Orientalist poet. The notes to *The Fakeer of Jungheera* also work to authenticate the poem, but at the same time they reposition the poem against certain Orientalist ideas. The poem’s early description of Jungheera, according to Derozio’s note, comes from a single visit to the site: “Although I once lived nearly three years in the vicinity of Jungheera, I had but one opportunity of seeing that beautiful and truly romantic spot. I had a view of the rocks from the opposite bank of the river, which was broad, and full, at the time I saw it, during the rainy season” (*D* 227). As if to verify his memory, Derozio then quotes from Charles Ramus Forrest’s *A Picturesque Tour along the River Ganges and Jumna in India* (1824), an illustrated account of Forrest’s travels in the region.

Forrest’s description of the scenes he draws as “picturesque” situates him in a particular tradition of Orientalism popular during the early nineteenth century.¹¹ As Romita Ray puts it, “Art-making in the colonial setting coincided with the development of theories of the picturesque in England . . . Just as amateur artists armed with Claude glasses and

sketch-books visited celebrated picturesque sites throughout the country, so too their counterparts in India found visually appealing locations to fill their sketch-pads.”¹² According to Ray, the picturesque represented a means of coming to terms with the foreignness of India in British terms. Forrest’s representation of Jungheera emphasizes the picturesque quality of the landscape: “The whole forms a pretty object as you run past in a boat; and the thick and luxuriant foliage which crowds the summit, adds much to the effect of the picture.”¹³

Derozio’s Jungheera, by contrast, while drawing on Forrest’s description and drawing, employs the language of sublimity: “Jungheera’s rocks are hoar and steep,” he writes, and he goes on to describe the madrasa there in increasingly ecstatic language:

High on the hugest granite pile
Of that grey barren craggy isle,
A small rude hut unsheltered stands –
Erected by no earthly hands. (I.III.11–14)

The Fakeer who dwells there takes on his own unearthly character, as Derozio continues:

And never earthly eye has seen
His hallowed form, his saintly mien;
Some say its holy heavenly light
Would be for mortal view too bright;
As never eye hath dared to gaze
On Surya’s everlasting blaze. (I.III.31–6)

The description that Derozio offers reminds one of Turner rather than Forrest, in that it is majestically romantic rather than quietly picturesque. Even as Derozio participates in the exoticization of his scene, turning the Indian vista into an unearthly tableau, he exposes the limitations of Forrest’s picturesque construction. In this sense, he mobilizes one Orientalist strategy – representing the East as unrepresentable – against another that presents India as an extension of the picturesque landscapes of England.

Derozio’s use of the sublime is bound up with his broader political critique of sati in *The Fakeer of Jungheera*. In the first canto, picturesque description gives way to sublime imagery as Derozio introduces Nuleeni’s impending fate. Thus, he describes the crowd approaching to witness the ceremony:

Lo! something moving o’er the plain
Like morning mist upon the main,
But dimly may the gazer’s eye
Its indistinct advance descry;

Slowly it moves – thus slow we find
 Truth dawn upon the doubting mind:
 At first, a cloud its hues appear,
 And then it rolling gathers near,
 Just ray by ray, till robed in light,
 It dazzling stands before the sight.
 A glittering throng advanceth nigh
 With drum, and gong, and soldiery; (I.V.1–12)

If the picturesque relies on a stable observing subject – one capable of properly framing the scene – the sublime in Derozio’s poem questions the certainty of the subject’s perspective, as the truth of the scene, its dazzling brilliance, “dawn[s] upon the doubting mind.”

Shortly afterward, Derozio echoes this representational strategy in aural terms. Section VI presents a “Chorus of Women” singing of the glory that awaits the devoted wife after death: “Happy! thrice happy thus early to leave/Earth and its sorrows, for heaven and bliss!/ . . . / . . . /Happy! thrice happy! thy lord shall there meet thee,/Twined round his heart shalt thou ever remain” (I.VI.29–34). The bouncing dactylic lines of this section, however, disappear, as, in the next section, the crowd grows louder:

The distant listener might have deemed
 So sweet the choral voices seemed,
 So like a soft ethereal hymn
 Heard far and faint by twilight dim,
 If half his griefs he might forget,
 That earth and heaven had kissed and met.
 Advancing toward the grass-grown bank,
 In many a gaudy group and rank
 The throng proceeds; the holy train
 Wake into life the sleeping strain,
 And loud and deep its numbers roll,
 Like song mysterious o’er the soul. (I.VII.5–16)

In each of these passages Derozio challenges the capacity of the “gazer” or “distant listener” to frame the scene in picturesque terms: the “dazzling . . . glittering throng” with voices “loud and deep” overwhelm the imagined audience. In doing so, Derozio exposes the limitations of the Orientalist picturesque, its inability to capture the horror of social ills, particularly sati. As he later writes, “O! could you once gaze/On those whom martyrs now you fondly deem – /’Twould break the magic of your golden dream!” (I.X.28–30).¹⁴

Paranjape has noted that most critics agree that *The Fakeer of Jungheera* is not primarily concerned with the practice of sati. He argues that, in Derozio’s

poem, “*sati* is merely an exotic episode, with the poet’s treatment of it evidently romantic rather than serious.”¹⁵ That Derozio opted for romanticism over political activism is echoed by several readers. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, for example, writes that “Derozio is constructing a romantic tale, and it is the formal thrust of the genre that determines its message, rather than a social critique of women’s oppression”; and Gibson suggests that “social commentary and romance are uneasy companions in ‘The Fakeer.’”¹⁶

It is worth noting, however, that there is an important social commentary in Derozio’s romantic tale, which takes to task the reception of *sati* in the West. That is to say, whether or not the poem unequivocally condemns *sati*, it does without hesitation condemn the romanticization of the ritual. Derozio works to reconfigure the Western gaze, the “mistaken opinion,” as he calls it in his notes to the poem, “somewhat general in Europe . . . that the Hindu Widow’s burning herself with the corpse of her husband, is an act of unparalleled magnanimity and devotion” (*D* 229). Among many examples of the Western reverence for the *sati* to which Derozio alludes, one that was certainly familiar to him was the “Indian Bride” section of Letitia Landon’s *The Improvisatrice*. Landon’s poem – which Derozio excerpts for his epigraph to “Love’s First Feelings” in the 1827 volume – tells the tale of Zaide, a young maiden whose wedding day becomes her funeral day when she discovers her groom has died and throws herself on his funeral pyre.

Ay, is not this love? –
That one pure wild feeling all others above:
Vowed to the living, and kept to the tomb!
The same in its blight as it was in its bloom.
With no tear in her eye, and no change in her smile,
Young Zaide had come nigh to the funeral pile.
The bells of the dancing-girls ceased from their sound;
Silent they stood by that holiest mound.¹⁷

Here Landon capitalizes on public interest in widow-burning to describe it as a sign of supreme devotion. That Derozio’s poem uses, to recall Sunder Rajan’s phrase, “the formal thrust of the genre” of the Oriental tale to undermine this sentiment suggests an alternate reading of the poem, one that emphasizes the political usefulness of the genre.

Paranjape writes that “Nuleeni tries to commit *sati* twice, first unsuccessfully beside her dead husband in the traditional manner, then in the more deadly if less fiery fashion sanctioned by the conventions of western romanticism”; Sunder Rajan goes further, suggesting that “it would seem as if for Derozio *sati* would be tolerable if the wife had married the husband

for love in the first instance.”¹⁸ There is, however, an important difference between the final death scene and the earlier sati. Sati, as Derozio describes it, is a “spectacle of misery” (*D* 229), but there is nothing spectacular about the end of the poem: where the noisy throngs disrupt the picturesque calm in the earlier scene, at the end “all around is tranquil as the sea” (II.xxiii.23). There are no witnesses to Nuleeni’s death, no one to praise her devotion. In fact, her death is hidden from even the audience. We do not learn that she has died until a solitary peasant comes upon her body the next morning, at which point the poem closes.

If John Grant was correct in suggesting that, with *The Fakeer of Jungheera*, Derozio “felt . . . obliged to adopt the popular and fashionable model” (*D* 423), it is nevertheless the case that this popular, Romantic model provided the means for reworking Romantic Orientalist ideologies. Derozio clearly situates his poem in relation to popular tales, establishing his contemporaneity with British Orientalists; yet he nevertheless distinguishes himself from his fellow bards both aesthetically, by working against certain Orientalists strategies of representation (that of Forrest, for example), and politically, by critiquing the romanticization of sati that he locates within the European imagination. In this way Derozio rethinks the possibilities of the Oriental tale, reforming the Romantic tradition from within.

Despite Derozio’s obvious sensitivity to representations of India and his project to recast these representations, several of his earliest reviewers found his poetry poor in terms of the loco-descriptive details expected of an Indian poet. The *India Gazette*, noting that Derozio’s “actual local observation” was limited to Bengal, wished to see him “muse amidst the ruins of Delhi” (*D* 399); the *New Monthly Magazine* simply noted that his first volume “contains little Indian and less English materials in the way of sentiment or illustration” (*D* 395). Indeed, sixty years after Derozio’s initial reception (and nearly thirty years after his death), Rudyard Kipling lamented, “Henry Derozio . . . was bitten with Keats and Scott and Shelley, and overlooked in his search for material . . . that [which] lay nearest to him.”¹⁹ Derozio’s essential failing as what Kipling calls “the poet of the race” is that, by imitating the Romanticism of Keats et al., he abandoned the local in favor of the universal.

Certainly there are universal subjects of interest in Derozio’s work, reflective of his aspirations to transcend the very cultural sphere he proudly acknowledged as his native land. Yet the self-conscious attempt to position himself as a representative of India, to forge a national tradition out of the “leaves” he collected, guided his poetic project throughout his short career. The uncollected “Sonnet: To the Rozunigundha,” which appeared

in *The Kaleidoscope* in 1829, testifies to the importance of the local and the broader aspirations of the poet:

The fragrance comes upon my heart as 'twere
 A love-breathed sigh from bashful maiden fair,
 So sweet, so soft. My inmost raptured sense
 Of bounteous Nature feels th' omnipotence.
 Thou art like Goodness, – by the cold world's eye
 Unseen, unfelt; while breezes pass thee by,
 Receiving a rich boon from thy sweet breast –
 An odour like the breath of angels blest:
 Thus, like petitioners they wake the sigh
 Of incense pure from gentle Charity,
 That from her home in shades unseen, unknown
 Bestows her bounties, blest by those alone
 Who feel their influence – the world ne'er knows
 Where and for whom that flower of sweetness blows! (ll. 1–14)

As Chaudhuri writes, “What is striking about this sonnet addressed to the rajanigandha flower in its Bengali name is its very conception, which indicates at the same time an extremely individual mind as well as a strong and unashamed commitment to the local” (*D* 292). We might add that the poem recalls the horticultural metaphor voiced in the 1826 essay on Indian literature. Here the flower – the symbol of a native literary tradition – at once preserves its local identity while traveling on the breeze. Notably this is not a poem about roots, but about fragrance, essence, that which reaches up toward the world.

And it is a poem about acknowledgment, poetic fame, as it were: the sonnet reveals tension between the felt and unfelt, seen and unseen. In raising this issue Derozio suggests that the question of Indian literature is not simply a matter of production but also of reception. The responsibility for the development of a native literary tradition does not fall on the poet alone, but on “the cold world's eye,” which the poet might open.

Notes

1. Rosinka Chaudhuri, ed. *Derozio, Poet of India: The Definitive Edition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008): 96. Prose from Chaudhuri's edition henceforth cited parenthetically as *D*; poetic works cited by title and line number.
2. Henry Schwarz, “Aesthetic Imperialism: Literature and the Conquest of India” in *Modern Language Quarterly* 61:4 (December 2000): 563. For a fuller treatment of print culture in early nineteenth-century Calcutta see Daniel E. White,

- From Little London to Little Bengal: Religion, Print, and Modernity in Early British India, 1793–1835* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).
3. According to a reviewer for the *India Gazette* on October 30, 1828, Derozio “has some title to be considered as a national poet . . . for he is a son of the soil; born, bred, and entirely educated in India.” For the full text of this review, see Chaudhuri (2008): 398–403. That he might represent the “beginning of a literary era” is argued by a reviewer in the *Quarterly Oriental Magazine* 7.3–4 (1827): 81.
 4. Beginning in the 1840s, “Eurasian” replaced “East Indian” as the favored term for describing people “[o]f mixed European and Asiatic (esp. Indian) parentage” (*OED*, s.v. “Eurasian”). Derozio’s mother, Sophia Johnson, was an English settler in India; his father was Portuguese, and there is evidence of native Indian ancestry on his father’s side as well. For a more detailed treatment of Derozio’s biography, see Chaudhuri (2008).
 5. The letter to the editor of the *India Gazette* in which these sentiments are expressed by one of Juvenis’s admirers is included in Chaudhuri’s account of Derozio’s early poems. See *D* 51–52.
 6. Makarand R. Paranjape, “‘East Indian’ Cosmopolitanism,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 13.4 (2011): 561.
 7. Mary Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011): 82, 76.
 8. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979): 7.
 9. A fascinating controversy surrounding the accuracy of Derozio’s images and raising questions about the author’s fitness to represent a Christian heaven followed the publication of the 1827 volume. See Chaudhuri’s account of the exchange in *D* 390–93.
 10. Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2002): 39.
 11. On Derozio’s incorporation of the picturesque, see *D*, p. lxxi, as well as Elizabeth A. Bohls, *Romantic Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013): 177–78.
 12. Romita Ray, “The Memsahib’s Brush: Anglo-Indian Women and the Art of the Picturesque, 1830–1880,” in Julie F. Codell and Dianne Sachko Macleod, eds. *Orientalism Transposed: The Impact of the Colonies on British Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998): 89–90.
 13. Charles Ramus Forrest, *A Picturesque Tour Along the River Ganges and Jumna in India* (London: R. Ackermann, 1824): 146.
 14. Sunder Rajan discusses “the positive view of sati” in the nineteenth century, when Europeans conceived of the ritual in terms of Christian martyrdom. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1993): 43.
 15. Paranjape (2011): 561.
 16. Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*: 49; Gibson, 93. As Chaudhuri points out, despite Derozio’s outspoken critique of sati, his zeal is tempered by his suggestion in the notes to Canto I that, before abolishing widow-burning,

reformers “should first ensure the comfort of these unhappy women in their widowhood, – otherwise, instead of conferring a boon upon them, existence will be to many a drudge, and a load” (*D* 229). See also Chaudhuri’s analysis of Derozio’s attitudes toward sati in *D* 284–86.

17. Letitia Elizabeth Landon [L.E.L.], “The Improvisatrice,” *The Improvisatrice; and Other Poems* (London: Hurst, Robinson and Co., 1824): ll. 862–69.
18. Paranjape (2011) 559; Sunder Rajan 49.
19. Rudyard Kipling, “City of Dreadful Night,” *The Writings in Prose and Verse of Rudyard Kipling*, Vol. XIV (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899): 355.

English Poetry in India
The Early Years^f

Suvir Kaul

What happens if we take for our model of the late eighteenth-century British poet in India not one of the many men who moved there in the service of the East India Company, but a woman about whom we know little – Anna Maria? Mary Ellis Gibson, editor of *Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India, 1780–1913*, reminds us that all we have of this poet is a slim volume, *The Poems of Anna Maria*, and that we “can attach no definite name, no parentage, no dates of birth and death” to her.² In fact, “Anna Maria” might well be a *nom de plume* chosen by a poet who wished to claim affiliation to the circle of Della Cruscan poets in London and Florence, in the same way that Hannah Cowley became “Anna Matilda” and Mary Robinson styled herself “Laura Maria.” For Robert Merry (“Della Crusca” himself), Italian poetics authorized the mannered, overwrought lyricism that he and his friends articulated in poetic dialogues in London in the 1780s, and Gibson suggests that Anna Maria, writing in Calcutta, fondly imagined her poetry joining in that international conversation.

What internationalism did Anna Maria bring to these poetic dialogues? Precious little, other than references that linked Greek and Latin classicism and eighteenth-century English art and aesthetics. Even though some of her poems were published in the Calcutta weekly *Asiatic Mirror* and the *Calcutta Morning Post*, they are formulaic exercises in contemporary English poetics. Her “Ode to Happiness” complains of not finding this “Phantom” in the life of English luxury, or indeed country retirement, and of seeking it equally unsuccessfully across the globe from Greenland’s “bleak unfriendly Coast” to the tropics. This poem rehearses the piety and sentimentality produced in poem after poem by poets who never left English shores. The point here is not that Anna Maria was an unimaginative poet, but that her poetry does not suggest any elements of her experience of India. This is as true of her “Ode to Sensibility” as it is of her “Ode to Reflection,” “Ode to Solitude,” or “Ode to Fancy.”

However, the opening of “Invocation to the Muse” invokes Clio, the Greek muse of History and the lyre, as the backdrop to the poet’s search for “*Virgin Images*” (l. 10) – for a brief moment, the dialectic between poetic convention and thematic novelty suggests the aspirations of the English poet of non-English experiences. But not for long, for the next few lines deck the Muse’s breast with flowers plucked from “chaste Ida’s sacred Bow’rs” (l. 15) and we are back with the conventional Grecian mythology that subtends English inspiration throughout this century. Evening comes, and the rapturous poet sees a vision by “*Houghly’s* winding Side”:

Ten thousand Elves in Sport advance;
And Fawns and Satyrs flit the Dance;
A fancied World, a sprightly Train,
Appear upon the Diamond Plain;
The Tritons blow their hoarse shrill Note;
And Mermaids on the Water float; (ll. 29–34)

No India here, no Hooghly or Calcutta, only the time-honored poetic and painterly neo-classical European paraphernalia of fawns, satyrs, tritons, and sporting mermaids.

In Anna Maria’s “Ode Inscribed to Della Crusca,” however, we note a self-consciousness about her location, her sojourn in “Regions far from laurel’d Fame.” At this distance, the poet asks Della Crusca to “induct” her “through the hallow’d Glade,/Where Learning’s mould’ring Sons are laid” and, not surprisingly, these “sons” turn out to be Virgil, Sappho, Petrarch (lisp to his Laura!), and those others who “drink the chaste Olympian Dews” (ll. 21–32). They will fire her muse with “wild Ambition.” “Or,” she writes, she will “stray” in the moonlit night “Where India’s God in secret roves,/Through the rich consecrated Groves;/Where Brahma pours his pious Pray’r,/To the religious, list’ning Air.” That “Or” is interesting, particularly as this passage ends with the promise that she will “from the Fervor” of Brahma’s lays “weave a Wreath of magic Praise” for Della Crusca’s brows (ll. 39–48). This is the one moment in her verse that Anna Maria invokes Hindu songs of worship (not in any detail, of course) and hears in them the fervor that might inform her praise-song for Della Crusca. But the poem says no more and eddies away from that claim. Brahma shows up again in “Adieu to India,” the poem that follows the poet on the ocean journey home – although here this Indian divinity is no source of an alternative poetics, but rather is the doctrinal opposite of the “*Art and Science*” and “*Learning*” that reign in the England to which she returns (ll. 19–27). She bids the *Houghly* – “The Seat of Commerce and the

Muse's Pride" – goodbye, and mourns the "Hours of Bliss" and "Scenes of soft Delight" (ll. 41–48) that she leaves behind. At no point are we offered any details, which means that her bliss and these scenes remain fond abstractions – poetic clichés, really, empty of any specifics or particularity of feeling.

I begin this chapter with Anna Maria to point to the shaping power of poetic figuration and convention on the writing of British poets who wrote in spaces far from, and with historically little connection to, Britain. None of this should be surprising, for most poets then – in England, as elsewhere – worked within the conventions that defined polite, belletristic forms of poetry. Most occasional and formal verse in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries traversed familiar terrain. Poets often wrote of places and peoples elsewhere – they were avid readers of travelogues and newspapers – and they modeled an aggressive internationalism in their poetry, but they did so without leaving Britain.³ When British poets lived elsewhere – in North America, the Caribbean, or, as in this case, in India – they still thought of themselves as writing for a metropolitan audience, and the metropolis was London, not Philadelphia or Kingston or Calcutta. For instance, when James Grainger wrote *Sugar-Cane: A Poem* (1764) to highlight the improved agricultural practices, efficient management of slaves, and innovative pharmacological discoveries made by West Indian plantation owners, he addressed his poem to audiences in England to convince them that planters were not boorish, uncultured tyrants lording it over their slaves. Anna Maria, as well as other British poets in Calcutta in the late eighteenth century, even when they were numerous enough to constitute their own community of readers and writers, still imagined membership within the larger circuit of English literary culture centered around London (with provincial outposts in Edinburgh, Dublin, Philadelphia, Boston, and now, perhaps, Calcutta).

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Most often, when India shows up in the poetry of the gentleman poets stationed there, it is as a scenic backdrop against which they can stage the vignettes of history and morality that animate large tracts of eighteenth-century British poetry in general. To take one instance, when, in "DUM-DUM. To Captain G——." (1790), John Horsford wrote of his pleasure in the male company and nationalist pursuits of his fellow military officers stationed in Dum Dum (outside Calcutta), his tone and method (if not his skill and verve) are not different from Alexander Pope's in his *Windsor-Forest* (1713). Both poets write loco-descriptive verse: they meditate on their

location and find in it features that fuel both the muscular imagination of Englishmen triumphant in war (always on the side of the good!) and the more cultivated practice of poetry. Each poem celebrates the combination of arms and arts that describes English nationalism in its imperialist phase, the difference being that Pope only imagines English soldiers at war overseas whereas Horsford writes as one of them. He too invokes the Muse, who in this case will transform Dum-Dum from “martial” to “poetic ground” (l. 4; ll. 14–20).⁴ The vision that follows shimmers with aesthetic, moral, and political gratification:

When morning first appears in rosy dawn,
 How bright and beautiful your splendid lawn;
 Your level green can pompously display,
 BENGALLA'S army standing in array:
 With martial pride here her artillery shines,
 In files, divisions and embattled lines;
 And learns to curb, still borne on Conquest's wings,
 The boundless hopes of tyrannizing kings. (ll. 5–12)

Pope's *Windsor-Forest* developed as an elaborate compliment to George Granville, First Baron Lansdowne, as does Horsford's “DUM-DUM” to an anonymous friend and fellow officer, “Captain G——.” Horsford's dedication suggests one of the reasons why Englishmen in the military or civil service of the East India Company wrote poetry – or, rather, why they often wrote the kind of poetry they did: “Captain G ——” is described as “accomplish'd,” then again as “all accomplish'd,” as able to enjoy “easy verse,” to perform “all the softness of Italia's art” (that is, play the romantic lover), and dance with “all the polish'd elegance of France” (ll. 14–20). He embodies the polite capabilities of a European gentleman even as he soldiers for his nation, and, in complimenting him, Horsford reminds his readers that Englishmen in service abroad are as polished as any at home, with equally sophisticated manners and cultural knowledge. Pope's poetic dedications to aristocratic men and women had bestowed on them cultural and symbolic capital (they, in turn, helped him become rich); Horsford's “circle” does not quite have the same heft, but he too knows that the practice of poetry, and the circuit of addressees and readers that poems nominate and bring into being, are a powerful cultural mechanism for the promotion of lives spent in colonial ventures far from home.

Horsford's poem thus imagines Dum-Dum as the latest staging ground for English glory: different from *Windsor Forest*, to be sure, but no less a landscape that can be animated into a celebration of British triumphs overseas. Accordingly, the poem contains a long passage celebrating Robert

Clive's victory over Sirajud-daulah's much larger army at Plassey (Palashi) in 1757. Clive is seen as a moralist avenging Sirajud-daulah's cruelty against the Englishmen and women who died when they were held in an airless dungeon in Fort William (the "Black Hole of Calcutta"), a claim that instantiates Horsford's earlier piety that English armies act only to curb the "boundless hopes of tyrannizing kings." Plassey heralds the future:

Here glory reign'd, nor will she cease to reign,
While you, O sons of thunder! tread the plain.
Shou'd faithless pow'rs again our rights invade,
And future time require your potent aid,
Then will you fight, in dazzling trophies dress'd
With ENGLAND'S lion, rampant, on the breast. (ll. 77–82)

Horsford is clear that British soldiers will deal their enemies "the death-destroying wound," but he also tells them that if they expire "in your country's cause," they should rest assured that "Hereafter heroes will your names admire" (ll. 83–88).

Triumph or death, and, if the latter, then the consolation of elevation into the national pantheon of heroes: these are staples of imperialist and patriotic poetics in this century.⁵ But Horsford's poem (again, like *Windsor-Forest* and many other eighteenth-century British poems) also contains another crucial element of English poetics, which is the poet's genteel, self-effacing retreat from such triumphalism into the "softer glory" and "charms" of poetry:

Be theirs the just retreat – the brave advance;
Be mine the maiden's smile, and sidelong glance;
Let them mid pomp of glit'ring armies move,
Let me, mid peaceful shades and social love.
To me, kind Heav'n, let lovely peace be sent,
The source – the parent of divine content. (ll. 93–98)

This is the preferred form of self-representation – a variation of the humility topos – of several English poets who wrote on public themes. Their precedent is the Horatian ideal, the *beatus vir* on his Sabine farm, the public man who gives up authority to cultivate his sensibility and morals in retirement, and, in doing so, critiques political corruption. For Horsford, the claim to a quiet and contented retirement in the midst of his celebration of imperial power serves two purposes: it makes clear that even English military officers in India know the superior morality and cultural value of "fair Learning's purer joys" (l. 35), but perhaps even more importantly, it preserves them from the taint of having "turned Turk," so to speak. Unlike

elite Englishmen, they have not given way to the corrupting luxuries of the East.⁶

How happy he, who in such blissful bow'rs,
 Can pass in sweet content the studious hours; . . .
 He seeks no weak'ning couch to loll away,
 In stupid indolence the lazy day,
 While crouching vassals with officious care,
 By turning punkas force unwholesome air:
 He nor the pomp of slothful IND assumes,
 The hucca smoaking fragrant with perfumes;
 Nor on the soft, luxurious carpet laid,
 Calls for entrancing opium's soothing aid:
 Forc'd joys but transitory bliss impart,
 They merely please, but never glad the heart. (ll. 31–46)

The poet becomes exemplary of the British scholar-soldier in India: he goes successfully to battle, but is otherwise preoccupied with his books and is at (Heaven-sanctioned) peace with his world, in Company Bengal or in literary England.

This is an ideal that Horsford develops in his “Epistle to Sir William Jones, Written to Him During the Late War with Tippoo” (1790). The poem is an extended compliment to Jones’s scholarship and his linguistic abilities, but they are positioned as the polar opposites of the military actions of the East India Company:

To us what joy can jarring armies yield,
 Or levell'd cities, or th' ensanguin'd field,
 Or sack'd Pagodas, or the plunder'd fanes,
 Or Indians gasping on their native plains,
 Or pillag'd wealth from HYDER'S lov'd abodes,
 Or ransack'd ornaments from idol gods?
 The spoils of war no real joys can give,
 'Tis POESY'S soothing voice that makes us live. (ll. 47–54)

Horsford goes on to say that it is Poesy who has caused him to travel the world, moving from Europe to Africa to the “sunny wilds” by the “brown-hair'd GANGA” (ll. 55–62). The Company might be at war, but the poet can always retreat into “that enchanting art,/Which charms and steals away the human heart” (ll. 66–67).

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Horsford also wrote occasional poems on significant events in India and elsewhere – as, for instance, this poem on a shipwreck: “The Halsewell,

Inscribed to the Hon. East India Company” (1789). The *Halsewell*, a ship in the service of the East India Company, broke up in a storm off Dorsetshire on January 6, 1786, shortly after leaving London, with great loss of British lives. English poets, musicians, and painters memorialized this tragedy and Horsford joins in this national conversation from afar. He was struck by the fact that the ship’s captain, Richard Pierce, lost two daughters who were traveling with him. For Horsford, this shipwreck is a powerful reminder of the continuing dangers attendant on overseas trade, and of the sacrifices made by people who enable such commerce:

Ye who transfer the wealth from orient shores,
 Who load the Thames with India’s passing stores,
 Who turn’d on golden realms th’ exploring eye,
 And raised thy glories, COMMERCE! to the sky;
 Who gave, when summer burn’d, the light array,
 And sooth’d the bard with CHINA’S fragrant tea,
 Say! for your PIERCE cou’d I the verse prolong,
 Say! wou’d ye hear the lamentable song? (ll. 85–92)

He wants Pierce honored, and argues that even such non-military shipwrecks merit national memorials: “such misfortunes claim/The sad memorial of recording Fame;/While England’s flag rules sov’ reign of the sea,/So long immortal shall their mem’ry be” (ll. 99–100). However, Horsford makes certain that the poem does not turn into a lament, for he closes with the wish that Britain’s navy continue to “triumphant ride/And whirl war’s thunder thro’ th’ aerial void.” That firepower is, after all, how it will “keep each nation of the world in awe” (ll. 111–14).

Horsford clearly identifies with Captain Pierce, for he too was a man who had moved away from home in order to make a living at one of the outposts of the empire. He writes as a man who knows the advantages, the temptations, and the losses attendant upon the Company’s service, and this local knowledge individuates – perhaps even makes *Indian* – two very different poems. The first is Horsford’s pungent satire “The Art of Living in India,” which offers stringent critiques of the dissolute lives of Company men, particularly those who are upper-class.⁷ They live on credit (while avoiding their creditors), are waited on hand and foot, spend their days in “kill time visits” and their nights in “chit chat parties” (ll. 51–52), drink to excess and die young. He reminds these men of Hastings’s fate, and warns them that the wealth generated in India, and the indolent, pampered life it yields, can destroy them and their wives. The social satire here echoes that of early eighteenth-century English satirists such as Swift and Pope, but the poem is distinguished by its sense of the novelty of colonial forms of

corruption. Company life in India is different from lives lived in England, and the efforts of aspiring Company men and women to replicate upper-crust English social mores seem particularly strained and foolish.

At the end of this long poem, Horsford introduces an unexpected (and even moving) *local* theme:

Let no bold youth, with ENGLISH warmth elate,
 If he desires to shun poetic hate,
 E'er by insulting words dare to debase,
 What LADY PRUDERY calls "an half bred-race";
 Else will th' avenging bard, their champion, rise,
 And whirl him headlong to the nether skies.
 Illiberal man, if you my ire inflame,
 I'll damn to late eternity your name!

(ll. 194–201)

Horsford generates Miltonic ire here as the poem condemns racists (in particular those elite Englishmen who father children with Indian mistresses, but do not see their children as fit for marriage into "society"). The next passage goes on to describe, with some tenderness, biracial Eurasian young women (on whose "modest cheeks" the "rosy tincture forces through the brown": ll. 214–15), who possess great virtues of birth and breeding and who are now living in a Howrah orphanage. He offers them his poem, as they embody the virtues of a land he loves:

Ye shapely Nymphs, who form my pleasing theme!
 Ye, born where GANGA rolls her hallow'd stream,
 Accept these numbers, written with spirit free,
 I love your INDIA and your INDIA me!

(ll. 222–25)

Mary Ellis Gibson tells us that Horsford might have adopted children from this orphanage; in any case, he had fathered children with an Indian woman, Sahib Jan, and was sensitive to slights directed against biracial children.⁸ His paternal feelings sparkle in his touching "Ode to My Infant Daughter, Eliza Howrah": "COME Smiler! in my lap repose,/ Child of the Lily and the Rose" (ll. 1–2). He strings together flowers – the "CHAMPAC" and the "BELA" – for her hair (ll. 8–10), describes her as being the product of "CONNUBIAL LOVE,/In HOWRAH'S Whampee-scented grove" (ll. 13–14), and lists the "VIRTUES" ("MODESTY" and "INNOCENCE") who attended upon her birth (ll. 19–26). The "HOUGLY stop'd to kiss the child" too (l. 18), Horsford writes, thus mingling neo-classical figures with local features of landscape and making the poem itself an easy performance of the commingling of different icons and conventions. When we remember that the occasional

father who wrote a poem to his infant daughter primarily exhorted her to a dutiful future, Horsford's tenderness and happiness simply to play with his daughter, as well as his insistence in keeping in view Eliza Howrah's biracial being, make for a remarkable poem:

Kiss, little Smiler, and go then
To thy fond mother's arms again:
Go, in her bosom find repose,
Child of the Lily and the Rose. (ll. 27–30)⁹

At these moments, Horsford becomes an English poet of Indian themes and lives, including his own.

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Meditating on the wreck of the *Halsewell* caused Horsford to want his fellow Britons to commemorate the lives of those who traveled and worked in the circuits of empire and trade. Such self-reflection on gains and losses is to be found in the writing of other poets too, and takes an unusual form in John Leyden's famous "Ode to an Indian Gold Coin. Written in Cheral, Malabar."¹⁰ Leyden's opening couplet, ostensibly addressed to a gold coin, could well be considered an ironic comment on his own situation in India: "Slave of the dark and dirty mine!/What vanity has brought thee here?" While gold is mined, and often by slave labor, Leyden's poem transforms the metal itself into the slave who works the mine, product and labor fused into a hallucinatory figure that prompts and troubles the poet's musings. The gold coin is the "vile yellow slave" (l. 16) that Leyden has "bought so dear" (l. 4), and for which he has moved away from Scotland, his "sacred natal clime" (l. 21). In each stanza, his fond memories of people and places at home is marred by the baleful gleam of the yellow coin, by the haunting presence of this "Slave of the mine!" (l. 25), this "vile yellow slave" (l. 33). In this poem, the dream of Indian riches births a cruel, sardonic monster:

Ha! Comes thou now so late to mock
A wanderer's banish'd heart forlorn,
Now that his frame the lightning shock
Of sun-rays tipt with death has borne?
From love, from friendship, country, torn,
To memory's fond regrets the prey,
Vile slave, thy yellow dross I scorn! –
Go mix thee with thy kindred clay! (ll. 41–48)

At the beginning of this poem, the poet's question to the gold coin ("What vanity brought thee here?") seemed uncannily like a question addressed to

himself. At the close of the poem, once again, as the poet disavows the gold coin and commands it to return to its “kindred clay,” it is hard to avoid the recognition, emphasized by his despair and the weariness of his “frame,” that he too will return, sooner rather than later, to his own kindred clay – not Scotland, but the earth in which he will be interred on his death. (Leyden did in fact die far away from home, in Fort Cornelis, Java.)

So far, I have called attention to poems by Anna Maria, John Horsford, and John Leyden to suggest the range of poetic concerns and attitudes explored by British men and women whose poetry, written in India, ranged across the globe.¹¹ In their poems, “India” need be no more than a few proper nouns – *Hougly*, Brahma – that gesture toward, rather than individuate, the setting (the irony, of course, is that the poet need not have been in India at all to write such a poem, as the plethora of earlier English poems that refer to places and peoples elsewhere make clear). Other occasional poems commemorated military campaigns and victories, lamented the loss of friends and fellow officers, reiterated patriotic and colonialist slogans about Britain’s obligation to bring justice to oppressed people, or satirized the gap between the ideological claims and the everyday practices of Company servants. Nor were poems necessarily about public themes: on occasion platitudes give way to more personal feeling, as when Horsford writes on Eurasian children, including his daughter. A few poems – or rather, passages in poems – question elements of Britain’s commitment to overseas trade and territory, but a poem such as Leyden’s, haunted and weary, deeply disturbed about the choices made by a man who leaves home in pursuit of a fortune in India, is rare.

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In what remains of this chapter, I will turn to poems written by English poets who immersed themselves in, and translated, Sanskrit and Persian literature and scholarship. They found in these traditions novel themes and figures that offered a vitalizing contrast with conventional European tropes and icons. Not surprisingly, novelty was not celebrated for its own sake; often, these writers rendered cultural difference familiar or tame by comparing it to supposedly similar European intellectual and mythological traditions. A good instance of such thinking is the opening of Sir William Jones’s “Argument” to his “A Hymn to Camdeo” (written in 1748). A linguistic polymath and scholar, Jones was a great boundary-crosser – or, rather, synthesizer of cultural knowledge across cultural and national boundaries – and he begins his hymn by rendering Camdeo familiar, writing that he is “evidently the same with the *Grecian* Eros and the

*Roman Cupido.*¹² He then makes clear why he still chooses to write on Camdeo (Kāma): “the Indian description of his person and arms, his family, attendants, and attributes, has new and peculiar beauties.” “New and peculiar beauties – this phrase could sum up the aesthetic, and even intellectual, enhancements and pleasures offered by ideas, things, and places in India to an Englishman steeped in Greco-Latin classicism and Christian theology and literature.¹³ Jones provides an extensive headnote to the poem (as indeed he did for all the “Hymns to Hindu Deities”) that explains Camdeo’s origins, his incineration by Śiva, his vital place in Hindu mythology, and links him to Persian and Hetruscan (pre-Roman) belief systems. Jones’s efforts in comparative mythology and poetics are of a piece with his agenda for the Asiatick Society that he helped found in 1784. He had no doubt about “the superiority of *European* talents,” but argued that “although we must be conscious of our superior advancement in all kinds of useful knowledge, yet we ought not therefore to contemn the people of *Asia*, from whose researches into nature, works of art, and inventions of fancy, many valuable hints may be derived for our own improvement and advantage” (Jones 1799, I: 10–11).

Jones was to write several Hymns to Hindu deities, but here, even as the poem expands on Camdeo’s attributes and life, it also features the poet’s exaltation in the presence of this god of desire and love. A hymn is a song of praise, to be sure, addressed to a divinity, but this hymn contains several elements more characteristic of the (Pindaric) ode – the apostrophic address, the giving up of the control exercised by reason as poetic inspiration moves, the feeling of having traversed emotional and existential spaces not accessible ordinarily. That is, the poem is not simply a song of praise for Camdeo, but is itself evidence of Camdeo’s power to move humans into altered states of feeling and being:

I feel, I feel thy genial flame divine,
And hallow thee and kiss thy shrine. (ll. 9–10)

...

“Behold” – My swimming eyes entranc’d I raise,
But oh! they shrink before th’ excessive blaze. (ll. 13–14)

Jones is here an English poet enraptured by a Hindu deity and thus transported into another world of faith and celebration (this is the sort of animation that underlies “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” John Keats’s 1816 sonnet on the power of literary traditions not your own, even when received in translation, to expand the horizons of creativity).

Jones's poem becomes a testimonial to his belief that the "new and peculiar beauties" of Sanskrit mythology or poetics will act to rejuvenate the English poetic imagination. Jones was not alone in this belief; the London *Critical Review*, after noting the "surprising connexion between the Hindù mythology and that of Rome," praised his efforts (and the aims of the Asiatic Society) in identical terms: "We might reasonably expect to enlarge our stock of poetical imagery, as well as of history, from the labours of the Asiatic Society."¹⁴ If nothing else, this poem allows Jones to innovate, for the form of "The Hymn" – ten-line stanzas (five rhyming couplets, with no repetition of rhyme endings) – seems without precedent in English poetics. Nor, from what I can tell, is this a form derived from or even inflected by his Sanskrit (or even Persian) sources. Jones lists some of the many names of Camdeo, and so participates in a rhetorical and ritual feature of many prayers in Sanskrit (it is auspicious to sing the many names – often the attributes and powers – of the deity). But Jones also humanizes Camdeo – or rather, sees in him not sublime power but a softer, more tender inspiration: he is, after all, the "God of the flow'ry shafts and flow'ry bow,/Delight of all above and all below!" (ll. 41–42). Camdeo, lord of desire, is also Camdeo, muse of joyful poësis: "Wreathy smiles and roseate pleasures/Are thy richest, sweetest treasures" (ll. 27–28).

Jones also attempts not to abstract Camdeo away from his place in Sanskrit poetics and Hindu iconography. He does this not only by including many words from Sanskrit – *Bessant*, the term for spring; *Chumpā*, *Amer*, *Nagkesar*, *Kiticum*, and *Bela*, the five flowers that arm Camdeo's love-arrows; *Krishen* and *Mahadeo*, the names of divinities – but also by describing Camdeo's features, actions, and story without external comment or comparison. There is no cultural condescension on view, nor the estrangement of rationality; Jones relates to Hindu mythology here with the same ease as other eighteenth-century English poets who seamlessly incorporated Grecian and Roman mythology into their own cultural patrimony. James paints a picture of Camdeo's consort *Affection* (*Rati*) and her handmaids, tells of his arousing *Krishen* into his dance with his *Gopia* (*gopis*) in *Matra* (Mathura), and of his devastating encounter with *Mahadeo* (the divine ascetic Shiva), who incinerated Camdeo for daring to fire the arrow of desire at him. (The myths also tell of the rebirth of Camdeo, but this time as a formless being, and Jones's representation of the perpetual effects of Mahadeo's anger on Camdeo is striking: "Whilst on thy beauteous limbs an azure fire/Blaz'd forth, which never must expire"; ll. 69–70.) Jones wrote his prose headnote as a student of comparative mythology, but his poem contains no such analogical or explanatory

annotations; it simply revels in the pleasures of poetic description and transport, worshipping Camdeo on his own terms, without apology. The final stanza makes clear once again Camdeo's place in Hindu faith ("O thou for ages born, yet ever so young,/For ages may thy *Bramin's* lay be sung!"; ll. 71–72), but this does not prevent the poet from claiming the deity for himself: "Thy mildest influence to thy bard impart,/To warm, but not consume, his heart" (ll. 79–80). In all these ways, Jones's "A Hymn to Camdeo" represents the richest interweaving of English poetics and Indian themes and iconography to be found in the writing of British poets who lived in India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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Undoubtedly, large numbers of Britons – no matter how uneven their quality or achievement – wrote poetry in India, and there is a great deal of work yet to be done on their writing in its multi-lingual and bi- or multi-cultural contexts. Theirs was the interconnected world being forged by British colonial and commercial expansion in India and elsewhere, and their ideological moorings were derived from its economic policies, military campaigns, modes of civilian governance, and attempts to synthesize Indian (or "Asiatic") learning and literature in ways that could be assimilated to European forms of knowledge. A great deal of their poetry, even when sympathetic to Indian patterns of life and being, follows the racist and supremacist logic of colonial rule. After all, they had been trained in, and participated in, a literary culture that had had been molded, over the course of the eighteenth century, to embody the civilizational and moral superiority of Britain.¹⁵ However, every now and then, in entire poems or, more likely, in passages within poems, we find these poets meditating on the costs of colonial rule. Occasionally we also find ideas, images, and sentiments that testify that some British encounters with India, and with things Indian, did escape the polarities of colonial difference.

India's novelties provided inspiration for many of the poets who followed in the nineteenth century, but few of them escaped their sense that they were writing in exile. Thus, even a poet such as David Lester Richardson (1801–65), who was principal of two different colleges in Calcutta and immensely influential as an editor and critic of Indian poetry in English, wrote deeply sentimental poems about his faraway "home" and its culture and topography. Others, such as Walter Yeldham (who published as "Aliph Cheem"), felt at home enough to write satires of Britons in India and of Euro-Indian "half-castes" and petty rajas who aspired to Englishness, or to be titillated by Toda

women (the “niggers” of the Nilgiris), whose polyandry he noted as a warning against English women asserting greater rights.¹⁶ Poets such as Kasiprasad Ghosh, Henry Derozio, and Michael Madhusudan Datta – arguably more Indian in their interests and sympathies – drew on such writing, extending some of its formal practices and rewriting its attitudes. The history of such verse then, is the pre-history of Indian writing in English. Well before Indians wrote novels and plays in English, they wrote poetry. It is important to remember that they read and learned from not only the work of those poets who lived and wrote in Britain, but also those who came to India.

Notes

1. Thanks are due to Rosinka Chaudhuri, Ashley Cohen, James Mulholland, and Ania Loomba for help with this chapter.
2. Mary Ellis Gibson, *Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India, 1780–1913: A Critical Anthology*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011a, 52.
3. For an extended argument along these lines, see my *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire*. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2000.
4. John Horsford, *A Collection of Poems, Written in the East Indies*. Calcutta: Joseph Cooper, 1797, 9.
5. Horsford wrote several poems that celebrate English power in India and elsewhere in terms that were repeated ad nauseam by eighteenth-century British poets: Britain dethrones tyrants, no others; when it does so Freedom, Peace, Science, and the Arts follow in its wake. The native population is so grateful that they worship Britain as they do their gods, and the entire universe is astonished that kings everywhere bend their knee to England’s monarch and are proud to act as his delegates. This vocabulary is fully on display in “The Prospect. Written in the Year 1791. During the former War with Tippoo” (John Horsford. *Miscellaneous Poems written in the East Indies*. In *Poems in Three Parts*. Calcutta: Hircarrah Press, 1800, 73–75).
6. In 1772, Parliament had inquired into the large fortune acquired by Robert Clive in India, and in 1787, Warren Hastings had been impeached for similar crimes – these were the most high-profile instances of the widening recognition that servants of the East India Company were routinely corrupt and immoral in their behavior in India. In her “Epistle to William Wilberforce Esq. On the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade” (1791), Anna Letitia Barbauld uses an even sharper vocabulary to describe the effects of pampered, imperious indolence on creole slave owners in the Caribbean

plantations (lines 47–70). She also comments on the corruptions of the wealthy in India and thus links the two theaters of empire.

7. Horsford, *Miscellaneous Poems written in the East Indies*, 112–20.
8. Gibson, *Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India*, 46
9. In general, however, Horsford held that women in India knew none of the privileges Englishwomen enjoyed. In “The Contrast. 1793” Horsford addresses the “DAUGHTERS of IND” and is sad that “They live/Like cag’d canaries, never to be free,/Nor never know the sweets of liberty” (ll. 28–30). He sees their being cloistered as a manifestation of the oppressive rule of the Mughal emperor (ll. 54–69). On the other hand, Englishwomen, being the “fairest work of God’s almighty hand” (l. 45), live in “that delightful land,/Where lib’ral sentiments the soul expand” (ll. 31–32), a situation enabled by the admirable rule of the “ENGLISH KING” (l. 73) (Horsford, *A Collection of Poems, Written in the East Indies*, 39–43). As the “Ode to Benaras” also makes clear, Horsford was glad to blame “the proud MUSSULMAN’S imperious rule” (l. 50) for the decline of (Hindu) art and spirituality in the city (Horsford, *A Collection of Poems, Written in the East Indies*, 43–46)
10. John Leyden, *Poems and Ballads*. Kelso: J. & J. H. Rutherford. 1858, 312–13. This poem found a wide readership and was often anthologized, which might tell us something about the anxieties that attended the consolidation of British power in India.
11. See James Mulholland (“Connecting Eighteenth-Century India: The Translocal Poetics of William and Anna Maria Jones.” In *Representing Place in British Literature and Culture of the Long Eighteenth Century: From Local to Global*. Eds. Evan Gottlieb and Juliet Shields. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate. 117–136, 2013a; and “Impersonating Native Voices in Anglo-Indian Poetry.” In *Sounding Imperial: Poetic Voice and the Politics of Empire 1730–1820*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013b) for persuasive analyses of such colonial and “translocal poetics.”
12. Jones wrote this poem before he had learned Sanskrit; as Mary Ellis Gibson reminds us, “it was based on his reading of Persian translations of Sanskrit texts,” which fact itself is a fine instance of multiple border-crossings and syntheses (Mary Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011b, 37).
13. Nandini Das argues that, in writing poems such as this one, Jones attempted to “rejuvenate the tired imagery of eighteenth-century poetry with the help of the ‘poetry of the Eastern nations’” (Nandini Das, “[A] Place Among the Hindu Poets’: Orientalism and the Poetry of Sir William Jones (1746–1794).” *Literature Compass* 3: 6. 2006, 1245). This essay is a cogent guide to Jones’s concerns and methods as a poet and translator.
14. Anonymous, “Review of A Discourse on the Institution of a Society for Enquiring into the History, Civil and Natural, the Antiquities, Arts,

- Sciences, and Literature of Asia; and a Hymn to Camdeo. By Sir William Jones." *The Critical Review, or, Annals of Literature* 59 (Jan. 1785), 21.
15. See Suvir Kaul, *Eighteenth-century British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
 16. Aliph Cheem [Yeldham, Walter]. *Lays of Ind*. Bombay: Thacker, Vining & Co. 1871.

*From Albion's Exile to India's Prodigal Son:
The English Poetry of Michael Madhusudan
Datta (1824–1873)*

Alexander Riddiford

The early English poetry of Michael Madhusudan Datta (or “Madhusudan,” as he is known by current scholarly convention¹), the mid-nineteenth-century Bengali poet and playwright,² cannot be fully understood in isolation from his later Bengali oeuvre.³ Scholarship on Madhusudan’s works has tended to focus either on his earlier English works as part of the history of Indian poetry in English, or on his later Bengali works as part of the history of Bengali literature, or on the moment of the poet’s transition from English to Bengali as his language of poetic composition and the implications of this transition (in the 1850s Madhusudan forsook his ambition to become a noted English language poet and began instead to compose literary works in Bengali).⁴ However, scholars rarely seek to trace or foreground the continuities between the two linguistic parts of his oeuvre. This may well be because Bengali scholars and those scholars with enough of the language to speak to Madhusudan’s Bengali works (which are more novel and, for the most part, more sophisticated than his English oeuvre) tend to focus primarily on these,⁵ while scholars who only have access to his English poetry (and to translations of that small part of his Bengali oeuvre which has been translated into English⁶) are unable to engage in a detailed or thoroughgoing analysis of his corpus of Bengali works.⁷

For these reasons, insufficient attention has been paid to the way in which the arc of Madhusudan’s career as an English language poet reveals that another juncture, just as critical to the shape of his oeuvre as a whole as his shift from English to Bengali composition (in the late 1850s), came toward the end of Madhusudan’s time as a student at the famous Hindu College in Calcutta (late 1842/early 1843). Poems like *The Upsori* and *King Porus*, which mark the beginning of the poet’s new phase in late 1842/early 1843, have less in common with the poet’s earlier English works than they do with later English works such as *The Captive Ladie* (1849) or later

Bengali works such as Madhusudan's epic *Meghnādbadh Kābya* (1861). It is not clear what exactly prompted this earlier shift in Madhusudan's literary practices in the early 1840s. The period commencing in late 1842/early 1843 was in various respects a time of coming of age for Madhusudan, with a rebellion against his father's plans for an arranged marriage, clandestine preparations for conversion to Christianity followed by conversion in February 1843, and the effective loss of his literary mentor Captain David Lester Richardson, who had announced his departure from the country at this time. However, whilst the shift in Madhusudan's poetic practices in late 1842/early 1843 cannot obviously be ascribed to any one cause, its features are easy enough to describe: having previously limited himself to rather derivative Romantic poetry, now for the first time all of the major elements of Madhusudan's aesthetic vision came into full view – the Anglicist and Orientalist, the European and the Indian – in a manner which subtended much of his later literary output (both English and Bengali). It was in late 1842/early 1843 that various rich contradictions began to emerge in his English poetry which would later suffuse the poet's most sophisticated Bengali works, in particular a fervent Indian patriotism as set against an Anglicist love of Western culture.

In brief, the trajectory taken by Madhusudan's career as an English language poet demands that his English works be assessed in the context of his literary career as a whole. This observation of a fundamental continuity between the two linguistic parts of Madhusudan's oeuvre gives rise to a more general observation, namely that the history of Indian poetry in English cannot be understood in isolation from the other literary cultures (or the other linguistic communities) to which the authors of these English works also belonged.

Albion's Exile

Madhusudan lived a self-consciously avant-garde and, in various ways, transgressive life. Born in 1824 (on or around January 25⁸) in the Jessore district, some eighty miles east of Calcutta (as it then was), to a successful and wealthy lawyer father Rajnarayan and his wife Jahnabi, Madhusudan was raised in a Hindu household. However, after the family had moved to Calcutta in 1833–34, and during his attendance at the famous Hindu College (where he achieved a native fluency in English and acquired a life-long taste for high Western culture), Madhusudan took the controversial (and, in many ways, personally disastrous) step of converting to Christianity on February 9, 1843. After his conversion Madhusudan was

prohibited from returning to Hindu College (the school's policy was to prohibit conversion among students), and resumed his education (after a hiatus of several months) on November 9, 1844, at Bishop's College, a missionary college where (an Indian convert among mainly European students) he gained an advanced knowledge of subjects such as Latin and classical Greek, standing out for his academic attainments (particularly Latin and Greek) but without (perhaps due to lack of funding) completing his final examinations.⁹

After concluding his education at Bishop's College, and having assumed the Christian name "Michael,"¹⁰ Madhusudan moved to Madras, where he worked as a schoolmaster and newspaper editor, and married the "Anglo-Indian" Rebecca McTavish by whom he fathered four children¹¹. Upon his return to Calcutta in the late 1850s, having abandoned his wife and children and taken up with Henrietta White (an Englishwoman with whom he spent the rest of his life and raised three more children¹²), he attained notable success with the publication of various Bengali works, particularly the epic *Meghnādbadh Kābya* (1861). In June 1862, with his literary fame in Calcutta at its height, Madhusudan fulfilled a life-long ambition to travel to England, with a view to qualifying as an English barrister. Although he was eventually called to the Bar by Gray's Inn on November 17, 1866 (and was among the first Indians to achieve this), Madhusudan's sojourn in Europe was a personally and financially disastrous episode from which he never fully recovered. Returning to Calcutta in early 1867, his legal and literary careers faltered and he died a tragic death from consumption and alcoholism in 1873.

Madhusudan composed his earliest English poetry in 1841, whilst still a student at Hindu College. These English juvenilia, which are marked (indeed marred) by their author's adolescence, speak to an identification with Western high culture figured as a kind of homesickness, most famously in poem [8] (dated 1841):

I sigh for Albion's distant shore,
Its valleys green, its mountains high;
Tho' friends, relations, I have none
In that far clime, yet, oh! I sigh
To cross the vast Atlantic wave
For glory, or a nameless grave!¹³

This theme of dislocation, echoed elsewhere in Madhusudan's earliest English works (as, for example, his yearning for "climes where science thrives, / And genius doth receive her guerdon meet"¹⁴), reflects a heartfelt

identification with the distant society of Bengal's colonial rulers. However, as scholars have pointed out,¹⁵ this theme of exile speaks not only to a dislocation from an absent and imagined home in Britain, but also to a profound attachment to one present and real Briton in particular: Madhusudan's teacher at Hindu College, Captain David Lester Richardson (referred to by Madhusudan by his poetic signature "D.L.R.").¹⁶ In particular, D.L.R.'s poetry of (literal and literary) exile serves as the young poet's primary literary model in these early works. Compare, for example, D.L.R.'s: "Fair children! still, like phantoms of delight,/ Ye haunt my soul on this strange distant shore".¹⁷ Further, D.L.R.'s conception of the Western literary canon, as embodied in the compendious *Selections from the British Poets* (Calcutta, 1840), which Macaulay himself had invited D.L.R. to compile for the benefit of Bengal's Western-educated youth,¹⁸ had a profound influence on the formation of Madhusudan's literary tastes and his choice of literary models, not only at this early stage but (to some extent) throughout his life. Spenser, Milton, Keats, Byron, and Tennyson each took a prominent place in D.L.R.'s compendium, and each finds echoes in Madhusudan's English *juvenilia*.

Many of these early Hindu College poems are addressed to the poet's friend and colleague Gour Das Bysack. In one such poem [15], which is dedicated to Gour "as a slight but sincere token of respect for his learning, admiration for his amiable qualities, and esteem for his valuable friendship," Madhusudan describes himself as like the Earth revolving round the Sun:

Now, fond hope buds, blossoms, sweetly,
 Vernal thoughts do fill my head, Boy,
 Now, dark disappointment, dreadful,
 All my joys and hopes doth blast, Boy.

Apart from the homoerotic (or, at the very least, homosocial) tone of the Gour poems (among others, there is an acrostic poem spelling out Gour's name,¹⁹ while another beseeches Gour: "Thou wandering star! No longer thus stray/ From thy own herd, 'mid flocks unknown away"²⁰), we might also note the poet's recourse to personal experience, or a stylized version of it, for these poems' subject matter.

This dark sense of the poet's foreboding, of joys and hopes blasted, is echoed in another poem titled *Sonnet to Futurity* ([28], dated August 19, 1842). This envelope sonnet,²¹ closer to the Petrarchan than to the Shakespearean form (though, following D.L.R.'s example,²² he experimented with both²³), was composed when Madhusudan's father Rajnarain had

decided to send his son to the family's country home in Jessore, apparently to remove him from the bad influence of his friends, particularly Gour. A letter written to Gour on August 7, 1842, shows clearly the poet's depth of feeling on this issue (which Ghulam Murshid coyly refers to as "similar to the romantic love between a man and a woman"²⁴): "To leave the friends I love, – particularly ONE, – (imagine, who that 'one' could be) my poor heart cannot but break!"²⁵ The poem *Sonnet to Futurity*, when read in light of the letter he had written to Gour a few days previously, offers an intensely personal *cri de coeur*:

Oh! how my heart doth shrink, – while on thy sky,
Futurity! I mark the gathering gloom,
Nursing the dreadful tempest in its womb –
The tempest rude of woe and misery!

Much else in these early Hindu College poems draws on either real or imagined personal experience, markedly in the Romantic vein. As Gibson points out, during the 1840s young Indian poets such as Madhusudan (as well as young European poets, such as Mary Carshore, who resided in India) "were two generations away from the orientalist poems of Sir William Jones and a generation away from Byron and his contemporaries,"²⁶ and yet it was these poets in particular who inspired many of them.

These early poems are the juvenilia of a poet working under the influence of a literary mentor, at a time when the poet self-identified above all as a student of English literature, and they do not look far beyond the canon of Romantic poetry to which Madhusudan was then enthralled. Indeed, on October 4, 1842, Madhusudan submitted a poem (it is unclear which) to the English literary periodical *Bentley's Miscellany*, writing in his covering letter to the editor: "I am a Hindu, a native of Bengal – and study English at the Hindu College in Calcutta"²⁷ (unsurprisingly, perhaps, nothing came of this submission nor of his other attempts to publish poetry in Britain). And yet it was around this time, or soon afterwards, that Madhusudan would seek to broaden the horizons of his literary compositions, adding various new colors to his literary pallet in a way that foreshadowed much of his later literary output (both English and Bengali).

India Regained or an Admixture of Orientalism

The shift in Madhusudan's artistic practices in late 1842/early 1843 was an evolution rather than a revolution. He did not go so far as to rebel against D.L.R.'s brand of Anglicism (after his conversion Madhusudan evidently

remained in regular contact with his mentor until his departure in early 1843 and even “bought four beautiful books” from him²⁸), but, rather, he sought to commingle it with further (in some respects conflicting) influences.

This was a time, as suggested above, of coming of age in various respects for Madhusudan. November 1842 saw the departure of D.L.R. from Hindu College (which effectively meant the suspension of his mentorship), something which Madhusudan railed against: “Now I have made up my mind to it, that is, I will not go to college until D.L.R.’s return, be it of whatever duration – I don’t care.”²⁹ Just two days after declaring his truancy protest to Gour, Madhusudan wrote to him again, on November 27, 1842, with much graver news: “At the expiration of three months from hence I am to be married; – dreadful thought! It harrows up my blood and makes my hair stand like quills on the fretful porcupine! My betrothed is the daughter of a rich zemindar; – poor girl! What a deal of misery is in store for her in the ever-inexplorable womb of Futurity!”³⁰ This prospective arranged marriage was, in many ways, the defining dilemma of Madhusudan’s life. The poet’s solution – bold, headlong, and a peculiar mixture of naïvety and cynicism – was to convert to Christianity, which he formally did on February 9, 1843. On the occasion of his conversion Madhusudan composed a poem in four quatrains of iambic tetrameter, titled simply “Hymn” (poem [46]). The perfection of the poem’s structure (four verses, four lines, four feet); the way it pivots around the central theme of conversion (two quatrains on the poet’s previous “Error”: “Long sunk in Superstition’s night”; two quatrains on the poet’s new faith: “But now, at length thy grace, O Lord!”); its incantatory iambs lending the work an air of solemnity: all of these features mark this work out as an act of great piety, but also one of great – indeed, excessive – artifice. The artificial piety of “Hymn” stands, then, as a curiously appropriate emblem for Madhusudan’s conversion: a religious commitment conceived, at least in part,³¹ as a tactic not only to evade an arranged marriage, but also to further his ambition to travel to England.

Around the same time as Madhusudan’s headlong embrace of Christianity, which gestured toward a desire for a greater affinity to many of the British poets he admired (not least of whom D.L.R.), indeed, apparently,³² just as he was making secret plans for his conversion in late 1842/early 1843, the poet composed his first works showing a distinct Orientalism and use of Indian subject matter. Amit Chaudhuri has aptly described the “rebirth” of the vernacular in modern Indian literature, tracing a one-hundred-year arc between the literary

careers of Madhusudan and Nirad Chaudhuri, in terms of the complex impulses of the Indian middle class toward “disowning” and “recovery.”³³ Late 1842/early 1843 marks a crucial juncture in Madhusudan’s disowning and recovery of the vernacular tradition and language. Whilst not yet ready to experiment with the palette of the vernacular language, the poet’s curiosity about vernacular culture is piqued and, having previously been focused more or less exclusively on Western literary paradigms, he begins to explore themes from Hindu mythology.

Madhusudan’s introduction into his English poetry of Indian themes in the Orientalist vein, whilst at odds with the poetic practices of D.L.R. (an Anglicist and “Tory to the backbone”³⁴ whose works romanticize the English countryside), could not be called a rebellion, as such, against his literary mentor. Indeed, in *Selections from the British Poets*, D.L.R. included works by Derozio, D.L.R.’s atheist and iconoclastic predecessor at Hindu College, whose rich and complex poetry exalted the idea of India, alongside examples of his own work.³⁵ Rather, what we see for the first time in *The Upsori* and *King Porus* is that paradoxical confluence of Anglicist and Orientalist features which subtended much of his future English and Bengali literary output.

The Upsori, a lengthy but unfinished poem in twenty-six almost-Spenserian stanzas (verses of iambic pentameter, as in Spenser’s *Faerie Queen* and Keats’ *Eve of St. Agnes*, but each stanza comprising ten such verses rather than the Spenserian nine), has been described, fairly enough, as a “pastiche of Keats, Spenser and Shakespeare.”³⁶ As Gibson has pointed out, the poem “reverses the specular gaze of Keats’s *Eve of St. Agnes*,” and gives “the [*apsarā*] the role of Keats’s Porphyro or Shakespeare’s Romeo and the young sadhu the role of erotic object.”³⁷ Thus, the nymph looks upon the sadhu (stanza XIX): “How heaved her heart when he could not be seen! / What tears throng in her eyes!” However, what is most striking about the poem, when viewed retrospectively through the lens of Madhusudan’s later English and Bengali works,³⁸ is the sudden emergence in this early English work of the Orientalist practice of Indo-European syncretism. The poem, which treats the visit of an *apsarā* (a class of female Hindu goddesses, the wives of the Gandharvas, who inhabit the sky but often visit the Earth³⁹) to a Kali temple, exploits the Orientalist conceit of using Graeco-Roman and Sanskritic religious and mythological terms interchangeably,⁴⁰ as, for example, when the poet refers to the *apsarā* as a nymph (stanza X): “The beauteous nymph then slowly took her way.” This Orientalist conceit is foregrounded in stanza VI when the Hindu goddess’s

flight is described using the following (almost Homeric) simile referring to Zeus' rapture of Semele:

Down, down she flew, like to the lightning glad,
Beck'd by some green aspiring tree that flies,
When, as the Thunder'r, in his terrors clad,
Descending once the blue Olympian skies
To hapless Semele – its hot embrace
But scorches what it loves.

The roughly contemporaneous⁴¹ work *King Porus* (poem [45]), a poem in tetrameter couplets treating the invasion of India by Alexander the Great and the Indian King Porus's valiant stand against him,⁴² evidences a similar interest in points of overlap (here historical rather than mythological) between Indian and Graeco-Roman antiquity. The poem's double preface – a Shakespearean quotation (“We ne'er shall look upon his like again!”) alongside a Byronic one (“When shall such hero live again?”)⁴³ – gives rise to multiple layers of irony and complexity. The reader is thus prompted to think of Byron's Themistocles (India being figured as Themistocles' Greece being invaded by a Persian Alexander), but also of the dramatic irony of Hamlet's exclamation to Horatio on the topic of his late father (apparently an altera lectio for “I shall not look upon his like again”⁴⁴). The poem reaches a patriotic climax (“Thus India's crown was lost and won”), although King Porus's victory is one which resonates strongly with the poem's colonial context, his crown being returned to him by a triumphant Alexander as a reward for his pride in defeat:

How should I treat thee? Ask'd
The mighty king of Macedon, –
“Aye – as a king!” – respons'd
In royal pride Ind's haughty son.
The king was pleased,
And him released
Thus India's crown was lost and won.

As if the applicability of this story to contemporary India was not clear enough, Madhusudan then addresses the reader:

But where, oh! Where is Porus now?
And where the noble hearts that bled
For freedom.

As Rosinka Chaudhuri has noted, Madhusudan's lament for a fallen India resonates with the works of Derozio from a generation earlier, and suggests

that “a consciousness of national identity” was arising in Bengal’s literary culture from a relatively early date.⁴⁵ Further, the quotation from *Hamlet*, the eponymous hero’s musing on his father (dead but soon to reappear), evokes the narrative arc of Hamlet’s inner turmoil and is suggestive of the poet’s own conflicted state of mind in the months preceding his conversion to Christianity.⁴⁶ The treatment of Alexander and King Porus also has the effect, as Gibson has noted, of causing a reversal of the “culturally expected alignment of poetic sympathies,” which is a distinctive feature of *Meghnādbadh Kābya* (1861) in particular, but also of the *Padmābatī Nāṭak* (1860) and *Hekṭor-badh* (1871), Madhusudan’s Bengali prose version of *Iliad* Books 1–12.⁴⁷

In *The Upsori* and *King Porus* we see a dramatic turn of the poet’s gaze toward India and the past, a nostalgic vision which resonates with Derozio’s poetic practices and with the Orientalism of earlier generations (in particular Sir William Jones’ comparative mythology). This Orientalist nostalgia, and perhaps a recognition of its detachment from reality, is foregrounded in *The Upsori* (stanza V): “But far, – dim as a dream of days gone by/ On the horizon of the shadowy past –/ The earth, soft-bossom’d on Infinity,/ Now burst before her eyes.”

The poet’s vision of a fallen (but not quite irremediable) India remained a mainstay of his later English and Bengali works. This vision was expressed in manifesto form in Madhusudan’s *The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindoo* (1854), a lecture given to a predominantly English audience in Madras.⁴⁸ An Orientalist nostalgia is expressed for a lost India, greater even (or at least more antique) than Europe’s classical past: “Volumes could be written on the glories of Old India – volumes could be written on the achievements in love and war of her heroic sons and lotus-eyed daughters.”⁴⁹ The remedy for this loss, as proposed in Madhusudan’s lecture, is for Britain (figured as the “Anglo-Saxon”) “to renovate, to regenerate, or – in one word to Christianize the Hindu.”⁵⁰ For Madhusudan, as Seely has pointed out, Christianity “represented not just a religion but also an intellectual, even civilizational, tradition,” and it even represented Western authors such as Virgil and Homer, “however incongruent with Christianity these . . . pagans may be.”⁵¹ In short, Madhusudan proposed, paradoxically and almost nonsensically, that an Anglicist (and Evangelical) intercession was what was needed to restore India to its Orientalist glory.⁵²

The vision propounded by Madhusudan in his 1854 lecture can be read forward into his later Bengali works as the rationale for his commingling of European and Indian (as well as Anglicist and Orientalist) elements in the cosmopolitan aesthetic subtending these works (indeed, it is plain that as

early as August 1849 he was “preparing for the great object of embellishing the tongue of my fathers” by immersing himself in a variety of Indian and other languages⁵³). However, this vision can also be read back into *The Upsori* and *King Porus*, as well as Madhusudan’s last substantial poetic works in English, composed in Madras in the late 1840s.

Madhusudan made his final attempts to forge a reputation as an English language poet after he had concluded his education at Bishop’s College and whilst resident in Madras (where he arrived in January 1848). At Bishop’s College it would appear he was not encouraged to compose English verse (the description of Madhusudan by the Principal of the College in July 1847 is telling: “very intelligent, a good Greek & Latin scholar and thorough master of English, as you may suppose when I mention that before coming here he affected fame as an English poet”⁵⁴), although the knowledge he acquired at Bishop’s College (particularly of the Graeco-Roman classics) would inform his later literary practices.

In Madras in the late 1840s Madhusudan resumed his efforts to acquire literary fame as an English language poet, beginning, shortly after his marriage to Rebecca, to publish English poems in the city’s literary periodicals under the quaintly English name “Timothy Penpoem.”⁵⁵ His last throw of the die, in terms of attempting to establish himself as a serious English language poet, came with the publication of *The Captive Ladie* (poem [52]). This long narrative poem was first published in the *Madras Circulator*, where it was well received, before being published in book form alongside another lengthy work, titled *Visions of the Past* (poem [51]), an ecstatic poem relating the Christian message of temptation and redemption.

The poor reception of *The Captive Ladie* in Calcutta, especially in an excoriating review published in the *Bengal Hurkaru*, was a source of great disappointment to Madhusudan.⁵⁶ It is well known that the advice of J.E. D. Bethune, upon being shown (if not actually reading) *The Captive Ladie*, that the poet should turn his attention to composing poetry in “his own language” rather than in English,⁵⁷ appears to have been determinative in prompting Madhusudan to turn to the cultivation of Bengali as a literary language.⁵⁸

It has been fairly said that *The Captive Ladie*, a long poem composed very rapidly in the course of the month of November 1848 (perhaps with a view to raising money – and the author’s prestige – at a financially difficult time), is “more than uneven” and that “in many places [it] scarcely rises above doggerel,”⁵⁹ bearing the marks of the rush with which it was written. The poem, which Madhusudan insisted was a “thorough Indian work, full

of Rishis – Calis – Lutchmee – Camas – Rudras and all the Devils incarnate” (emphasis in original),⁶⁰ continues the techniques of literary sampling deployed in *The Upsori* and *King Porus*. The poem’s plot is drawn from Dow’s *Ferishta*, Vol. I.45 (3rd edn.),⁶¹ the Persian *Ferishta* (or Dow’s *Ferishta*) having also served as the source for the plot of *King Porus* (see above). Dow’s *Ferishta* had previously inspired Byron, Southey, and Landon and, appropriately enough, Madhusudan prefaces the two cantos of his poem with quotations from Byron’s *The Giaour* and Thomas Moore’s *Lalla Rookh*. The plot of *The Captive Ladie* – based loosely on the story of Prithviraj, the last Hindu king to fight the Muslim invaders (a rich source for later nationalist writers) – concerns the rescue by a minstrel (a warrior in disguise) of his beloved who has been imprisoned in a tower by her father, followed by the warrior-minstrel’s defeat by Muslim foes who construct a pyre onto which he and his bride then cast themselves (Canto 2):⁶² “With all a warrior’s fearless pride,/ He shrinks not from the fiery tide.”

The Captive Ladie is, despite the poem’s rushed and unpolished texture, a fascinating work from a historical point of view as well as from the perspective of Madhusudan’s development as an artist, representing an organic extension of techniques and tropes first deployed in *The Upsori* and *King Porus*, and foreshadowing various aspects of the poet’s later Bengali oeuvre. Arguably, the most interesting aspect of *The Captive Ladie* is the footnotes which the poet himself added to explicate the text, footnotes which cite a range of works including Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* and Horace’s *Odes* 3, as well as the Sanskrit epic *Rāmāyana* and the Persian poet Hafez (“*Kenara ab rocnabad o gul gushte mosellay rā*”). In particular, one might note the poet’s citation in Latin of Horace *Odes* 3.3.18–21 (“Ilion, Ilion/ fatalis incestusque iudex”), where the Roman poet locates the cause of the fall of Troy in Paris’ seduction of Helen, which Madhusudan cites as a description of the “consequence” of Rāvaṇa’s abduction of Sītā. This footnote, which proceeds on the Orientalist assumption that the Graeco-Roman myth of the seduction of Helen and the Hindu myth of the abduction of Sītā are rooted in essentially the same Indo-European origin, foregrounds and makes explicit Madhusudan’s Orientalist approach toward comparing the Graeco-Roman and Hindu past, an approach which owed much to Sir William Jones (whom he also quotes in another footnote). In this way, Madhusudan foreshadows in the footnotes to *The Captive Ladie* the Indo-European comparativism which he would go on to explore more extensively in his later Bengali works (especially the *Meghnādbadh Kābya* (1861)).⁶³

Madhusudan's Bengali language works were received by their contemporary readership with praise and acclaim. Although it has been convenient for many later Bengali artists and intellectuals (for different reasons and in different ways) to disparage the vision underpinning these Bengali language works (or their "authenticity" as Indian art),⁶⁴ their influence (albeit often subtle and indirect) on later artists is undeniable.⁶⁵ By contrast to the reception of his Bengali works, the almost total failure of Madhusudan's English poetry (both in terms of its lukewarm contemporary reception and the poet's terminal abandonment of this mode of versification in favor of the Bengali vernacular) itself became a potent symbol for later Indian artists. When, as late as 1963, Buddhadeva Bose was able to assert that "The best of Indian-English verse belongs to the nineteenth century, when Indians came nearest to speaking, thinking and dreaming in English" and that his contemporaries "do not yet realize that Indo-Anglian poetry is a blind alley, lined with curio shops, leading nowhere,"⁶⁶ Bose's striking use of the word "curio" (and indeed the word "nearest"⁶⁷) may perhaps bring to mind most immediately and vividly the memory of Madhusudan's eccentric foray into English versification. However, notwithstanding the quite separate lives that Madhusudan's English and Bengali works have led in terms of their reception in the generations since they were first published, in fact a close analysis of his work as a whole reveals that the processes of the "disowning" and "recovery"⁶⁸ of Indian cultural heritage are inscribed across his entire oeuvre and that, at least in this respect, there are important points of continuity between the two linguistic parts of Madhusudan's oeuvre.

Notes

1. The story of Madhusudan's life and works is inseparable from the story of their reception by later generations of Bengali readers. The complex trajectory of this reception over the years is intimated by the unsettled convention for naming the poet, from "Madhusudan" (see, for example, Sasankamohan Sen's biography *Madhusudan* [Calcutta: A Mukherji, 1921]), to the reverential "Sri Madhusudan" (Mohitlal Majumdar's *Kabi Sri Madhusudan* [Calcutta: Bidyodoy Library, 1947]), to the sometimes affectionate, sometimes scathing "Michael" (in the latter sense, see Buddhadeva Bose, *Sahityacarca* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2007 [1954]). For an analysis of the various names by which Madhusudan has been conventionally known, see Rosinka Chaudhuri, *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry, and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2013).

2. For the poet's biography, see esp. Yogindranath Bosu, *Māikel Madhusūdan Datter Jīban-carito* (Calcutta: Ashok Pustokalaya, 1893); Nagendranath Som, *Madhu-smṛti* (Calcutta: Gurudas Chatterjee and Sons, 1916); and Ghulam Murshid, *Āsār Chalane Bhuli* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1995; 1997 [revised edition]), translated in abridged form as *Lured by Hope, A Biography of Michael Madhusudan Dutt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
3. For the best version of most of Madhusudan's works see Kshetra Gupta, *Madhusudan Racanabali* (Kolkata: Shishu Sahitya Samsad, 2012); for the critical edition of the *Meghnādbadh Kābya* (1861), see Ujjvalakumar Majumdar, *Meghnādbadh Kābya Carca* (Kolkata: Sonar Tari, 2004).
4. See, for example, Amit Chaudhuri, *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008).
5. See, for example, the "Introduction" to William Radice, *Michael Madhusudan Dutt, The Poem of the Killing Meghnād* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2010). My own study of Madhusudan's reception of the Graeco-Roman classics – Alexander Riddiford, *Madly after the Muses: Bengali Poet Michael Madhusudan Datta and His Reception of the Graeco-Roman Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) – also falls into this category.
6. See the two recent translations of the *Meghnādbadh Kābya* (1861): Clinton Seely, *The Slaying of Meghanada, A Ramayana from Colonial Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Radice, *The Poem of the Killing Meghnād*.
7. See, however, Mary Ellis Gibson's excellent survey of Indian poetry in English, from Sir William Jones to Rabindranath Tagore (*Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), whose analysis of Madhusudan's Bengali output, pointing out some of the continuities between these and the earlier English works (see especially *ibid.*, 159, 166–67), is compelling despite the lack of English translations for most of Madhusudan's Bengali works.
8. See Murshid, *Lured by Hope*, 11; Riddiford, *Madly after the Muses*, 2.
9. Riddiford, *Madly after the Muses*, 38–50.
10. *Ibid.*, 2, n. 3.
11. Murshid, *Lured by Hope*, 107.
12. *Ibid.*, 160, 168, 183f.
13. Citations from Madhusudan's English works refer to the edition of Gupta, *Madhusudan Racanabali*, whose numbering system is also followed.
14. Poem [29], dated 1842. Gupta, *Madhusudan Racanabali*, 429.
15. See Gibson, *Indian Angles*.
16. As Gibson, *Indian Angles*, notes, Madhusudan's attachment to D.L.R. was such that when, in late 1842, D.L.R. took a leave of absence from Hindu College, Madhusudan vowed to skip school until his return.
17. See David Richardson, *Selections from the British Poets* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1840). Also Gibson, *Indian Angles*.
18. For the genesis of this work and its place in the syllabus at Hindu College, see Riddiford, *Madly after the Muses*, 40–1.
19. Poem [7].

20. Poem [6].
21. Note the division of the poem, characteristic of the “envelope” sonnet form (a variation of the Italian sonnet), into two quatrains (rhyme scheme ABBACDDC) and a sestet (EFEFEF).
22. See Gibson, *Indian Angles*, 160.
23. Madhusudan would later pioneer the Bengali sonnet, composing a collection of 102 examples in book form as the *Caturdaśpadī Kabitābālī* in 1866. See William Radice, “What sort of Sonnets did Michael Madhusudan Dutt write?” in *Samaj o Samskriti [Festschrift for Anisuzzaman]* (Dhaka: Mowla Brothers, 2007), 409–23, where it is argued that Madhusudan’s Bengali sonnets fall between the Shakespearean and Petrarchan categories (belonging to neither).
24. Ghulam Murshid, *The Heart of a Rebel Poet: Letters of Michael Madhusudan Dutt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21.
25. *Ibid.*, 20.
26. Gibson, *Indian Angles*, 156.
27. Murshid, *Rebel Poet*, 22.
28. *Ibid.*, 37.
29. A letter to Gour dated November 25, 1842: Murshid, *Rebel Poet*, 28.
30. The poet, perhaps unconsciously, echoes his own *Sonnet to Futurity* (poem [28], August 19, 1842), cited above: “*Futurity! I mark the gathering gloom,/ Nursing the dreadful tempest in its womb.*”
31. Note that the time Madhusudan spent as a houseguest of Thomas Smith of the Scottish Church, between his conversion and enrolling at Bishop’s College, appears to have given rise to a more sincere Christian faith (Murshid, *Lured by Hope*, 56), although throughout his life one feels that his espousal of Christianity always represented a rhetorical pose as much as a genuine belief.
32. In early January 1843 Madhusudan wrote a letter stating “I am writing a long poem” (Murshid, *Rebel Poet*, 34: it is unclear whether this is *The Upsori* (poem [44]) or *King Porus* (poem [45]), but both poems appear to have been written around this time.
33. See Amit Chaudhuri, “Poles of Recovery: from Dutt to Chaudhuri,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (2002) (vol. 4, iss. 1).
34. See Subrata Dasgupta, *Awakening: The Story of the Bengal Renaissance* (New Delhi: Random House India, 2010).
35. See Richardson, *Selections*; also Dasgupta, *Awakening*, who remarks on D.L. R.’s conceit at including his own work in his anthology.
36. Gibson, *Indian Angles*, 160.
37. *Ibid.*
38. See Riddiford, *Madly after the Muses*.
39. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1872), ad “*apsaras*.”
40. The practice of comparative Indo-European mythology and theology, on which this practice is based, may be said to begin with the 1788 essay of Sir

- William Jones in the first volume of *Asiatick Researches*, “On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India” (*Asiatick Researches*, vol.1: 221–75).
41. Note that *King Porus* was composed in the months preceding Madhusudan’s conversion but only appeared in the *Literary Gleaner* in September 1843.
 42. The poem’s subject matter may be taken from Ferishta’s mention of Phoor or Foor in his history of India, which Madhusudan may have read either in Persian or in English translation. See Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2002), 106. For Madhusudan’s translation from the Persian of Sadi, see *Ode* (poem [47]), composed in 1844.
 43. Byron’s *The Giaour* remained a firm favorite for Madhusudan in his later English works, with a further citation from this poem prefacing Canto First of *The Captive Ladie* (1849) (“Love will find its way/ Through paths where wolves would fear to prey”).
 44. See, for example, in *The Dublin & London Magazine* (No. 11, January 1826), where Madhusudan’s version of the quotation “We ne’er shall look upon his like again” is applied to Byron’s activities in Greece by an author identifying himself as “the Hermit in London.”
 45. Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets*, 72.
 46. Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets*, 106, first raises the suggestion that the poet can be loosely identified with Porus, “a beleaguered and brave king standing steadfast in battle against his enemies.”
 47. See Riddiford, *Madly after the Muses*.
 48. *Ibid.*, 123, n.3.
 49. See Gupta, *Madhusudan Racanabali*, 601.
 50. *Ibid.*, 608.
 51. Seely, *The Slaying of Meghanada*, 9.
 52. For the mixture of Orientalist and Anglicist themes in Madhusudan’s lecture, see Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets*, 86.
 53. Murshid, *Rebel Poet*, 78. In this letter Madhusudan sets out what he says is his routine of study, which includes Hebrew, Greek, Telugu, Sanskrit, Latin, and English.
 54. Archives of the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospels, Rhodes House, Oxford: C. Ind./113/134.
 55. Most of these have been lost since the periodicals in question are no longer available. See Murshid, *Rebel Poet*, 50–51.
 56. See Murshid, *Rebel Poet*, 52.
 57. Bethune’s advice is quoted in Basu, *Māikel Madhusūdan Datter Jīban-carito*, 116–17, one of the primary biographies of Madhusudan.
 58. See in particular the careful analysis of this “turn” in Chaudhuri, *Clearing a Space*, 39–56.
 59. Gibson, *Indian Angles*, 162.
 60. Murshid, *Rebel Poet*, 67.
 61. See Canto 2, note q (Gupta, *Madhusudan Racanabali*, 491).

62. This trope “reprises the double self-immolation scene popular with male poets in India”: Gibson, *Indian Angles*, 164.
63. See Riddiford, *Madly after the Muses*.
64. See chapter 4 of Chaudhuri, *The Literary Thing*, for an account of Madhusudan’s reception from the nineteenth to the late twentieth century.
65. It is fair to say that Tagore, for example, developed a certain lightness and clarity in his Bengali register in response to Madhusudan’s heavy and sonorous tone.
66. See Buddhadeva Bose’s entry under “Indian Poetry in English” in *The Concise Encyclopedia of English and American Poets* (London, 1963), 177–78.
67. “Almost the same, but not quite,” to draw on the language of Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994), 122.
68. See [fn. 33](#) (this chapter).

*Transforming Late Romanticism, Transforming
Home: Women Poets in Colonial India*

Mary Ellis Gibson

Women's English language poetry in India – from the late eighteenth-century effusions of the pseudonymous Anna Maria to the early twentieth-century aesthetic verse of Adela Cory Nicolson – addressed the personal, the devotional, and the political. Like other colonial poets, women poets in India were, from a metropolitan perspective, both distant from and belated with respect to the metropole.¹ Before the advent of steam and telegraph at mid-century, the lag of many months for round-trip communication between India and Britain made distance in space and time especially acute for poets born in Britain. Yet, even in the last half of the nineteenth century, notions of cultural, physical, and psychological distance and belatedness shaped the life-worlds of poets writing English regardless of their birthplace, ethnicity, or parentage.²

Here I take belatedness and distance (1) as tropes for the gendered maintenance of the poetic canon; (2) as marking the place or displacement of the colonial poet; and (3) in the pragmatic sense defined by physical, temporal, and spatial distance from the metropole.³ To begin with the pragmatic. The pseudonymous poet “Anna Maria” can serve as an extreme, even amusing case of poetry foundering in the distance from the metropole. “Anna Maria” (b. circa 1770) participated in the late eighteenth-century phenomenon of Della Cruscan poetry, in which pseudonymous poets corresponded in verse in middlebrow London newspapers. Anna Maria's only volume of poetry (Calcutta, 1793) included an elegiac “Ode to the Memory of Della Crusca” commemorating the leading Della Cruscan poet Robert Merry; Anna Maria's poem was written upon a false report of Merry's death. A further “Ode, to Della Crusca” in the same volume admitted the author's belated realization that Mr. Merry “still lives.” Della Cruscan poetry depended for its effect on immediacy, but Anna Maria found herself stranded – talking to herself alone, halfway around the world.⁴

Most poets, of course, avoided this sort of gaffe, or at least purged their published volumes of its evidence, but more subtle forms of displacement shaped their work.⁵ I articulate distance and belatedness in the contexts of Dipesh Chakrabarty's suggestive discussion of repetition and displacement. Contrasting Western notions of stadial time with actual social and artistic practices, he makes the point also suggested by Geeta Kapur in *When Was Modernism* that the exclusions implicit in Western artistic canons assume homogenous time (in which India is belated). Thus, metropolitan critics fail to recognize the new in Asian cultural production.⁶ To this I would add that the assumption of belatedness creates a metropolitan failure to reckon with cultural productions in India at all. In response to this exclusion, nineteenth-century poets such as David Lester Richardson lamented "exile" in a way that furthered ideas of displacement. Richardson mined the trope of exile in response to metropolitan invisibility and used it to accrue pathos to what was, after all, a career choice (for Richardson first the army, then the academy in Bengal). Women poets seldom responded to distance from the metropole in quite this way. Their lives were shaped not by career choices, but by the chances of marriage and child rearing, an arena in which they often had limited agency despite class or race privilege.⁷ Exile seldom concerned them, though separation from or loss of children did. It may not be too far-fetched to see male poets' attraction to tropes of exile as both a form of masculine privilege and a measure of cultural distance. In contrast to the masculine glorification and pathos of exile, women poets measured distance differently. For example, the second-generation inhabitant of India, Mary Carshore (1829–57), daughter of a colonial administrator from Ireland, gave voice in "Lines to a Withered Shamrock" to the iconic plant that she called a "Frail traveler of the watery waste."⁸ Unlike many poems on thistles and daisies (exilic poems of home written by British men in India), Carshore in a move of double displacement, ventriloquizes the shamrock, voicing synecdochically the Irish countryside and then the anticipated response of her "exiled" father. But she remains elsewhere, escaping the home/colonial dyad. Distance and time wither the shamrock; the poet herself is distanced from the tropes of distance – the shamrock is not *her* native flower.

The third dimension of distance and belatedness I address here is still more insistently gendered than the pragmatics of colonial communication or the figuration of exile. Dislocation affected male and female poets differently, for even in Britain women poets were often considered belated (that is, derivative) or distant (that is, engaged with matters peripheral to

the central concerns of culture). From the eighteenth century in Britain, women poets carried the stigma of the “poetess,” a word that neatly indicates their peripheral status. The poet comes first; the poetess represents a secondary linguistic formation. Although a writer as prominent in India as Richardson felt excluded in the metropole, his female counterparts contended both in metropolitan cultural spaces and in India not only with the assumption that colonial poetry was secondary, minor, or marginal, but also with implicitly masculinist canons of taste. As I will argue below, the weight of this complication is felt in gendered rewritings of the Oriental tale.

Although in Britain, up until about 1860, critics valued lyrics about domestic scenes and often anthologized male and female poets together, in the latter half of the century the tradition of separate spheres took shape in the practices of anthology making and canon formation. This critical practice created a growing separation of women writers from an increasingly male canon.⁹ Accusations of derivativeness or triviality – or even the elevation to a kind of secular saintliness – contributed to the gendered maintenance of a poetic canon in which male poets worried about the feminization of poetry and, by the 1860s, began to decry the poetry of domestic affections. By the middle of the nineteenth century, women labored under the cultural assumption that their poetry was *merely* domestic or picturesque – derivative and thus unimportant. The weight of this marginalization is felt in their own margins or paratexts, where prefaces and even titles both apologize for women’s verse and assert their femininity or domesticity. Colonial men, too, diminished their verse in paratexts – defending the “minor” via paratextual devices – but male poets never felt compelled to mark their verses as either masculine or explicitly domestic.¹⁰

I explore this gendered colonial dislocation here, first, by examining women poets’ entry into the discourses of Orientalism and late Romanticism and their uneven access to literacy and education. Second, turning to tropes and modes, I show how women poets negotiated geographical and cultural distance as they transformed key genres of colonial poetics. My focus is only on women of European parentage, but readers may wish to consider how such poets as Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu also worked with these genres. Women poets in India practiced poetry in all the important nineteenth-century genres, save epic, publishing oriental tales and other narratives, meditative topographical poems, personal lyrics and elegies, as well as hymns, songs, and airs.¹¹

British Romanticism: Debts and Disagreements

Although they faced different economic challenges from men, women poets writing in English in nineteenth-century India, like their male counterparts, entered a terrain shaped by the discourses of Orientalism and late Romanticism. Their verse developed intertextually with poetry in the metropole. The British oriental tale was imitated in India, derived poetically from the practices of Thomas Moore and Lord Byron, but recast in the wake of James Tod's romantic historiography in *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*.

Not everyone took Tod and Moore at face value, however; women poets recast female narrative heroines, echoing but also reshaping the tropes of Orientalist narrative. Mary Carshore, for one, used her footnotes to criticize Moore's Orientalism as ill-informed, thus giving offense to the important Calcutta editor, Richardson. In the preface to the only volume of her verse published in her lifetime, Carshore called herself the "Authoress" and claimed that her only "object in publishing" was to "give a more correct idea of native customs and manners, than she has yet observed Europeans to possess."¹² Carshore characterized Moore's Orientalism as the mythology it indeed represented.¹³

Despite such criticisms, women writers were influenced by Moore's and Byron's verse and by Keats and Wordsworth likewise, but Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon were equally important to them.¹⁴ Emma Roberts (1791–1840), the first woman journalist in India, wrote Landon's memoir and imitated Hemans's adoption of historical poetic personae. Carshore too praised Landon, composing an elegy in which she recognized the English poet as a fellow colonial. Buried beneath public paving stones at Cape Coast Castle, West Africa, Landon could not defend herself from neglect and calumny. On her behalf, Carshore turned on Landon's English detractors:

Then rest secure, England! thy accuser is far,
Even her ashes repose 'neath a strange foreign star,
Then rest thee unquestioned, there's none to upbraid thee,
The living thou feedest with vain empty breath,
And 'tis thus thou rewardest thy children in death.¹⁵

Far from the observation of the metropole, Landon and Hemans appear in women's poems in India, as also in the poetry of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio.

Women poets also engaged with their male contemporaries in India, with Roberts dedicating *Oriental Scenes* to her friend Derozio, who saw the

volume through the press, and E. L. writing appreciatively about the poet Kasiprasad Ghosh (*Anglophone*, 205). Though E. L. appears to have made friends across religious and ethnic differences, we know little about her. Her pseudonymous (or initialed?) verse makes clear her strong Christian convictions and her American origin, but little else can be deduced about her identity, save that she arrived in India before 1846.¹⁶ She seems to have made any number of friends across potential ethnic divisions, but how she did so is unclear. Like Roberts, however, E. L. acknowledges her Indian contemporaries. The mysteries of E. L.'s position point to women poets' partial inclusion in the colonial scene and their distance from metropolitan success.

A Question of Access: Literacies and Print Culture

Though recent anthologies have discovered or made available many poems written in India by women, no doubt many more are yet to be uncovered both in Indian periodicals in English and in manuscript archives.¹⁷ Occasional poems, periodical verse, and works produced for consumption only in the domestic sphere have much to tell us about the ways women experienced empire, whether they spoke from a position of relative privilege, as did Honoria Lawrence, the wife of the successful colonial administrator Henry Lawrence, or sought to parlay their poems into ready cash and further writing opportunities, as Roberts did.

It scarcely needs to be said that these poets were relatively privileged simply by virtue of their access to literacy and to writing in English. If we take the figures for Bengal in the nineteenth century, we can extrapolate literacy rates to the rest of India. In 1857 James Long estimated that only three percent of the rural population could read at all; clearly the literacy rate for English was much lower, though higher in urban areas.¹⁸ Anindita Ghosh has argued that in Bengal in particular at the beginning of the nineteenth century, literacy was more widespread than was commonly thought, but she goes on to add the caveat, following C. A. Bayly, that such literacy was restricted to "clean caste" boys and men. Ghosh's and Bayly's research indicates the prevalence of "being read to" and the continuing importance through much of the nineteenth century of oral and manuscript culture.¹⁹ In nineteenth-century India, women had nearly equal access to oral culture, but constituted a very small minority of the literate. Women of British parentage usually had an educational advantage over women with Indian parentage (the exceptions being the daughters of Christian converts or members of the Brahma Samaj, such as Toru and

Aru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu, as well as a small number of upper-class daughters of progressive and reformist fathers).

Although they lived in a polyglot oral culture, few women of any background had access to poetry in classical languages, whether Greek and Latin or Persian and Sanskrit. Such complex linguistic competence was available to Orientalist poets such as Sir William Jones, but to no women I have discovered. Through the first half of the nineteenth century competence in Latin, Greek, and Persian was common to poets such as James Atkinson, Horace Hayman Wilson, and John Leyden. Thus, the source books of learned Orientalism – that is, Orientalism based in the study of languages as opposed to the popular Orientalism of Byron and Moore – were unavailable to women in the early years of the century. By the 1830s, men of the British East India Company were no longer learning Persian (which was discontinued as the legal language of north India), but British women in India finally began (if in very small numbers) to learn both classical and modern languages. Only after mid-century did women poets acquire some approximation of the multiple literacies common to elite men earlier in the period. The exception early in the century was E. L., who, according to internal evidence in her poetry, would appear to have studied Bengali, Hindi, Greek, Arabic, and French (though we have no way of knowing how successfully). Among the poets I discuss here, the most learned was Mary Leslie, who seems to have been bilingual in Hindi/Urdu and English, to have been fluent in Bengali, and to have studied German, Italian, and Latin. Both learned and less-educated English language poets often accessed the lively oral tradition of poetry and song that constituted most women's poetic knowledge on the subcontinent. Mary Carshore, who had little formal education, claimed to translate "songs" and "airs."

Despite their educational disadvantages, many women in the long nineteenth century in India published in new periodicals and via publisher/booksellers. Subscription publishing of poetry persisted longer in India than in Britain, and poets from the anonymous "Anna Maria" to Emma Roberts (1830) collected significant cash for their efforts – in part, I suspect, because subscription publication enabled a genteel woman such as Anna Maria to raise money for her homeward voyage to Britain. On the whole, however, women poets, like their male counterparts, persisted in writing verse for the social, intellectual, and personal rewards it brought, not for its pecuniary value.

Newspapers and other periodicals were more or less open to female authors, including such periodicals as *The Bengal Annual*, the *Calcutta*

Review, Calcutta Literary Gazette, the Oriental Observer (edited for several months by Roberts), and the *Madras Ladies Magazine*. Some poets published both in India and in London: Roberts, for instance, brought out a revised edition of her poetry in London in 1832, two years after *Oriental Scenes* first appeared in India. The poetic appetite, such as it was, of the metropole can be gauged by the differences between Roberts's two collections, with the first containing poems on Italian topics while the latter substituted for them additional poems on Indian subjects. Poets in India addressed many topics – classical, European, and Indian – but metropolitan taste craved materials understood to be “Indian.” In the eyes of metropolitan reviewers, narrative verse proved to be best adapted to Indian materials.

Narrative Verse

Women's narrative verse in nineteenth-century India included oriental tales, retellings of traditional stories, and domestic vignettes, with poems sometimes combining elements of all three. Unlike most of their male counterparts, women often wrote what I call here “domestic narrative”: poems that ranged from realist romance plots to verse diaries. Mary Eliza Leslie (1834–1907) was one of the most productive women writers of narrative verse. The daughter of Andrew Leslie, missionary and pastor of the Lower Circular Road Baptist Church in Calcutta, Mary lived all her life in Bihar and Bengal. She appears to have been schooled at home, but because her father was an excellent linguist she benefited from relatively wide-ranging instruction in classical and modern languages. The title poem of her first volume, *Ina and Other Poems* (1856), however, was not terribly successful, for it was set in a weakly imagined Britain. It violated outright the old advice “write what you know.” Setting her poem in a country she knew only from a brief childhood visit, the poet struggled fully to imagine place and characters.²⁰

By contrast, E. L.'s poem “Kádambini” realized a domestic vignette with considerable verve. The anonymous E. L. remains unidentified, but her dedication to *Leisure Hours: Desultory Pieces in Prose and Verse* reads thus: “To America this Volume is Affectionately and Dutifully Inscribed by One of Her Absent Daughters.”²¹ Like Leslie, E. L. seems to have been a devout Christian and to have spent much of her time teaching. “Kádambini” relates an exchange between an American teacher and the child whom she proposes to instruct. The poem, while not always metrical, is unusual in being the only one I have discovered that readily blends colloquial Hindi

and Bengali with English. This linguistic flexibility gives the short tale an unusual freshness:

The Rájá brings to her his child,
 A lovely one, with face as mild
 As Chandra, whom some castes address,
 In Purnimá the hand they kiss.
 The lady spake: – the child came near,
 “Here is an English Pustak, dear,
 With pretty stories, pictures too,
 Brought from America, for you.”
 “Bahutkhush, do ham ko,” lisped the child²²

E. L.’s “Kádambiní” and Leslie’s “Ina” grapple with the domestic as the foreign. “Ina” evokes a foreign (that is, British) domestic scene purely imaginary in its details, with no exotic Orientalism to flavor its rather unconvincing realism; that is, British domestic life is foreign to Leslie, but the poem provides no place to acknowledge this estrangement. In contrast, E. L.’s little domestic scene represents mutual exoticism within the domestic: the child, her language, and her schoolroom are foreign to the recently arrived American, and the teacher and her picture-book, equally, are foreign to her pupil. “Kádambiní” neatly captures the ambivalence of hospitality as Emile Benveniste, Jacques Derrida, and Seyla Benhabib describe it: *hospis* (host) and *hostes* (enemy) have common roots. In Benhabib’s words, hostility and hospitality are mutually entangled: “When the stranger (the guest) comes upon the shores of the other, the home of the other, there is also a moment of anxiety, generated by the undecidability of the other’s (the host’s) response.”²³ Indeed, both in the domestic narrative and in the common tropes of the colonial lyric, this undecidability figures significantly. The missionary zeal of “Kádambiní” is inadequate to the poem’s own account of human interaction and the beauties of the natural world.

A longer poem than “Kádambiní,” Honoria Marshall Lawrence’s “A Day in the District” engages the domestic differently. Lawrence (1808–54) originally intended the poem for the private reading of friends and family in Ireland and England. Though many of her poems were eventually published, their primary audience was her social circle. In a pocket book given to her friend Mary Gaylon Stiles, Lawrence wrote in 1848 that “for four or five years, I have lost the power of even rhyming, though previously I took great pleasure in the work, for the modest rhymes I could make were a pleasure to my husband. Some of these I will copy.”²⁴ “A Day in the District” was one such poem; it served as a verse diary

recording Lawrence's newlywed experience. The manuscript version of the poem ends with a note to her first circle of readers: "Take these lines as what they are, an attempt to describe what I have seen, and the overflowing of a happy heart."²⁵ Lawrence's poem/diary of her typical day was written while she accompanied her new husband through the countryside, for Henry Lawrence had been seconded from the Army of Bengal to the revenue service as a surveyor. Henry and Honoria had married after an acquaintance of about two weeks and a long-distance courtship by proxy, and Honoria had come out to India at age twenty-nine, not having seen her prospective husband for ten years. As the twelfth of fifteen children born to an Anglo-Irish clergyman, Lawrence might easily have become one of those almost homeless women that Emma Roberts's prose trenchantly described.²⁶ Despite the risks of marriage following so short an acquaintance, Lawrence obviously found great compatibility with her husband, as her early domestic narrative testifies:

Oh, pleasant, pleasant, are the hours
We pass within these forest bowers!
And pleasant is the mango shade,
Wherein our bustling camp is laid,
And pleasant is it, as we sit,
T'indulge this idly rhyming fit,
And tell the dear ones far away,
How glides along the Indian day!

Come with me to our forest home!
With many a charm 'tis gilt,
Nor change we howsoe'er we roam,
The home within us built.
Are not all places where we rove
Brightened alike by mutual love?
Is not maternal nature there,
Greeting us with her aspect fair?²⁷

The poem depicts empire as a liminal space, where guest and host exchange places freely. The delights of love in a tent, however, give way in Lawrence's later lyrics to what David Arnold has called "imperial death-scapes."²⁸ Hospitality gives way to hostility as Lawrence advises courage for "The Soldier's Wife" and mourns the death of her brother in the first Afghan war.

In contrast to the resolutely domestic idyll created by Lawrence's or E. L.'s scenes, the narrative poems of Roberts engage with stories in a traditional and more Orientalist vein. Roberts often gives narrative verse an

explicit political edge. Her poem “The Rajah’s Obsequies” takes on the controversy over the abolition of sati that culminated in the Bengal sati regulation of 1829, outlawing the practice in the Bengal Presidency. Roberts’s extensive notes to the poem acknowledge directly the writings of her friend Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, whose complex opposition to sati she shared and who argued – as Roberts implicitly does – that the general oppression of women was the real issue.

Influenced by Hemans’s “Dramatis Personae” and Landon’s poetic speakers, Roberts creates two dramatic poems within her larger narrative. She sets her story in Benares (Varanasi) at some undefined period before the Mughal conquest of north India, and recounts the ritual immolation of a rajah’s two wives. Each is given a relatively long dramatic speech; the younger, more favored wife willingly sacrifices herself, while the older, Mitala, dies defying patriarchal tyranny. Mitala’s language, indeed, echoes Derozio’s version of romantic radicalism:

I, from my earliest infancy, have bowed
 A helpless slave to lordly man’s control,
 No hope of liberty, no choice allowed,
 Unheeded all the struggles of my soul;
 . . .
 The tyrant sleeps death’s last and endless sleep,
 Yet does his power beyond the grave extend,
 And I this most unholy law must keep,
 And to the priest’s unrighteous mandate bend,
 Or live an outcast – reft of queenly state –
 A beggar lost, despised, and desolate.²⁹

After Mitala’s defiance, the poem returns to the third-person narrative voice and recounts the double sati. Mitala is reduced to “a cloud of ashes on the gale.”³⁰ The language of slavery, liberty, and tyranny finds its objects safely in the past and yet engages with the immediate political controversy over the abolition of sati. Mitala’s speech, like Derozio’s political writings, broadens the controversy over sati, reframing it within larger questions of rights and liberties for all women.

Women’s narrative poems often bring the moral, the implicitly political, or the religious dimensions of the colonial scene back to the domestic. Although Roberts’s attitudes were shaped in the free-thinking morality of her radical Calcutta circles, in their narrative verse, Mary Leslie and E. L. (and Toru Dutt, for that matter) navigated domestic morality through an appeal to Christian virtues.

Meditative Topographical Poems and the Picturesque

Despite the importance of narrative, both men and women in nineteenth-century India wrote topographical and personal lyric effusions more often than any other kind of verse. The topographical poem might describe or moralize nature, relying upon notions of the picturesque or, less often, notions of the sublime. Common topoi included ancient monuments, tropical flora, and natural phenomena.

For example, virtually every British-born writer who saw the Taj Mahal felt called to inscribe verses about it. Stronger poets viewed the scene through the late romantic poem on ancient monuments (along the lines of Shelley's "Ozymandias"); weaker poets merely moralized upon the Taj. Typical of the moralizers was Maria Nugent (1770/71–1834), who was principally a diarist rather than a poet. Accompanying her husband (an officer in the British Army) to India in 1811, she traveled extensively. Paying the obligatory visit to the Taj, she read the monument as a testament to wedded love:

The stately rising dome, the burnish'd spire,
 The casement, that their soften'd light impart,
 Each in its turn, and all alike, conspire
 To strike the wondering eye, and touch the heart;
 And while, rapt in delight, I silent gaze,
 My heart to wedded love its well earn'd tribute pays.³¹

For Nugent, the Taj Mahal was not so much a monument to a long-dead emperor's love and power as a testament to the virtues of companionate marriage: "Friendship and faithful love, in one soft union bound."³² Nugent forbears to mention Shah Jehan's other wives, focusing solely on the bond between him and Mumtaz; nor does she allude to the mosque attached to the complex. Her meditation entirely effaces the Muslim religious meanings of the mausoleum, thus contributing to the popular perception of it as a monument to undying love.

Emma Roberts, in contrast, attempted to restore the monument to some version of its original historical meanings; in that strain of Orientalism that celebrates ancient monuments, Roberts played in "The Taaje Mahal" on the distance between past and present. The poem's first section, like "The Rajah's Obsequies," creates a dramatized speaker – the emperor Shah Jehan himself. This daring though not altogether successful move allows Roberts to have the speaker predict visits of later pilgrims who will "gaze upon the work sublime" and see in it also a memento mori for empire.³³ More

successful topographical and meditative poems describe more tractable scenes, which are considered for their sublime or picturesque qualities.

Roberts's poems meditate not on landscapes but deathscapes, as do Lawrence's and Carshore's poems about the deaths of children. Carshore, for example, concludes a description of her infant son Clarence's tomb:

I see the slender grass
Around thy sepulchre still sigh and wave,
More blest than I, alas!
To sigh beside thy solitary grave. (*Anglophone*, 253)

Carshore's deathscape has nothing to do with "exile" as Roberts ambiguously constructed it in "Indian Graves." Having been born in India and never leaving it, Mary Carshore was hardly like to think of herself as an exile. Forced to move away from the site of her son's tomb, she lamented her estrangement from a place that enshrined both the infant and her memories. Roberts, by contrast, meditated upon Indian graves more conventionally, and with considerable ideological incoherence. Despite her claim in the preface to the 1832 edition of *Oriental Scenes* that she wished to describe the "sunny provinces of Hindoostan" (viii), Roberts more often described stormy landscapes and tombs: "Few Europeans can view without horror the crowded but neglected cemetery in which they may expect to find a grave," she wrote in a note to that volume (1832, 196). The European dead as described in "Indian Graves," are "Unwept, unhonoured, and unknown" (1832, 11).³⁴

Elegiac Poetry

Topographical/meditative poems often verge on or morph into the elegiac. Proper elegies are represented by such poems as Lawrence's elegy for her brother killed in the first Afghan war and Mary Leslie's sonnet sequence on the uprising of 1857.³⁵ Lawrence, like Carshore, laments her distance from the loved one's body:

Where Kabul's hostile heights arise,
And snow descends from Kabul's skies,
My brother's bloody bed was made,
My brother's tombless bones are laid. (*Anglophone*, 161)

Lawrence celebrates the soldier's courage and expresses a desire to have comforted him, staunched his wounds, and prayed for him: "Then might I dry my tears, and sing, / Where now, O Death, thy vanquished sting?" (*Anglophone*, 162). Finally she finds comfort in the certainty of God's grace

toward her brother as toward herself. Lawrence's poem has an interesting subtext: it cannot defend the war, and the two versions of the poem suggest that the defense of empire is an afterthought as Lawrence replaced the line, "It was an Irish heart that sank" with "it was a British heart that sank" (*Anglophone*, 162).

Elegy and empire are a more hostile mix in Mary Leslie's long sonnet sequence published in *Sorrows, Aspirations and Legends from India* (London, 1858). Indeed, Leslie's whole sequence proleptically mourns the end of empire. In addition to elegiac poems honoring Henry Lawrence (Honoraria's husband, who survived his wife only to perish at Lucknow) and Henry Havelock (famous for the relief of Lucknow), the entire sonnet sequence is an unconscious elegy for empire. The glory that was to be the empire is now reduced to "smouldering embers" and "past agonies remembered one by one," a matter for "deep griefs, and wailings, and low sighs."³⁶ Despite the trauma of the uprising, Leslie attempts Christian consolation, which she can only imagine as a prophetic Christianizing of India; she replaces the picturesque à la Roberts with an eschatological sublime.

Songs, Airs, and Hymns

The sublime mode, however, was seldom sustainable, particularly given the affective realm to which women poets felt themselves either privileged or confined. Shorter and more intimate forms had their uses. Among songs and airs, Mary Carshore's are perhaps the most effective, translated to be sung to the original tunes. Carshore's verses created their own English metrical and sonic pleasures, as in this second stanza of a two-part air lamenting a lover's faithlessness:

But, when this captive heart was fettered to thee,
 Thy love how quickly didst thou disavow!
 And now, alas! it is my lot to woo thee,
 And it is thine, love! to disdain me now. (*Anglophone*, 251)

Carshore's lyric "To Annie" expresses affection in the manner of Burns, just as her "Poetical Letter to Mrs. V" resembles Shelley's verse letters; but, unlike her narrative poems, these works undo the conventions of romance, instead celebrating love among women.

Though she wrote no secular songs that we know of, Mary Leslie was certainly the outstanding hymnodist of the period, with one or two remaining popular well into the twentieth century. Her best-known hymn, "The Gathering Home," appeared in her third collection of poems, *Heart Echoes*

from *the East; or, Sacred Lyrics and Sonnets* (1861). Although this volume retreats from her earlier social and political commentary, the poems proved to be the most important Christian devotional verse written in India in the nineteenth century. The sacred lyrics demonstrate considerable metrical invention and a tone of persuasive sincerity. “The Gathering Home” imagines the same spiritual journey invoked in Christina Rossetti’s “Uphill”; each Christian undergoes a general condition but a personal trial:

Before they rest they pass through the strife
 One by one,
 Through the waters of death they enter life
 One by one.
 To some are the floods of the river still
 As they ford on their way to the heav’nly hill,
 To others the waves run fiercely and wild,
 Yet all reach the home of the Undeiled
 One by one.³⁷

Like many European men in India, Leslie engages the trope of exile in these devotional poems, but, for her, exile is the general human condition and doubt is the constant companion of belief.

For comfort Leslie transforms Christ into a mother, at once recasting and elevating domestic tropes. Alluding no doubt to Reginald Heber’s hymn for Trinity Sunday, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” Leslie presents her poems as an offering of flowers to Christ:

O more than mother dear, than mother tender,
 Receive my offering,
 And smile upon it, till amid Thy splendour,
 Within the angel-ring,
 I take the crown Thou givest; and straight bending
 In adoration deep,
 Cast it before Thee, while the songs ascending,
 The crystal arches sweep.³⁸

Here Christ-as-mother draws the Christian to a heavenly home.

At the fin de siècle, poets such as Sarojini Naidu and Adela Nicolson (who published under the pseudonym Lawrence Hope) composed nationalist and secular lyrics that lent themselves to or borrowed from the public performance of music. Like Mary Leslie and Mary Carshore, they imagined lyric both through traditional genres such as the meditative/topographical lyric and in its most musical forms as well.

As they explored the genres and tropes of late Romanticism women poets in nineteenth-century India attempted, with considerable unease, to

situate themselves with respect to the metropole, within a growing if fragile tradition of colonial poetics in English, and with respect to poetic traditions in many languages, both vernacular and classical, European and Asian. At once imbricated in the discourses of metropolitan poetics and distant from them, at once proximate to yet still largely excluded from colonial and metropolitan cultural and political institutions, women poets created, revised, and re-envisioned the poetic forms and tropes they inherited.

Women in India who chose to write poetry in English engaged multiple literacies and complex cultural exchanges as they negotiated distance and belatedness with respect to the metropole. Against these odds, they created poems that attest to cosmopolitan sensibilities forged within or against the constraints of religious dogma, British paternalism, and domestic labor.

Notes

1. Daniel Coleman, *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 16.
2. Cf. Patrick Williams, "'Simultaneous Uncontemporaneities': Theorising Modernism and Empire," in *Modernism and Empire: Writing and British Coloniality*, ed. Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 13–38.
3. Although I discuss transformations of late Romanticism, in deploying the idea of "belatedness" I am not harking back to Harold Bloom's model of generational conflict and overcoming, a model of Oedipal struggle almost wholly inapplicable to women poets, who were on the whole more intent on locating foremothers (Sappho, Corrine) than in displacing supposed fathers who, in any case, never owned them. See Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
4. Previous critics erroneously identified Anna Maria as the wife of Sir William Jones; I disprove this theory and quote Anna Maria's elegy and retraction in *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 53–60. On Della Cruscan poetry see Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1996).
5. I want to distinguish the belatedness of poets in colonial India from Ali Behdad's notion in *Belated Travellers*, where he shows that late nineteenth-century European travelers in the Middle East suffered from a sense that the old world was gone, that the discoveries of eighteenth-century learned travelers had already been made, and that only nostalgia was left; see *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). More germane are the essays in Rigby and Booth, *Modernism and Empire*; for a nuanced view of time, space, gender, and belatedness in

- Australia, see Bill Ashcroft and John Salter, "Modernism's Empire; the Cultural Imperialism of Style," available at www.academia.edu/8423627/Modernisms_Empire_the_Cultural_Imperialism_of_Style; and Theo d'Haen, ed. *(Un)writing Empire* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).
6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Belatedness as Possibility: Subaltern Histories Once Again," in *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader*, edited by Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri (London: Routledge, 2011), 163–76; Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000).
 7. Emma Roberts described the plight of European women in *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindustan* (London: W. H. Allan, 1835): "Many young [British] women in India may be considered almost homeless; their parents or friends have no means of providing for them except by a matrimonial establishment; they feel that they are burthens upon families who can ill afford to support them, and they do not consider themselves at liberty to refuse an offer, although the person proposing may not be particularly agreeable to them" (22). Of the women poets I discuss here, none, other than Roberts, supported herself as a writer.
 8. Carshore, *Songs of the East*, 2nd edn. (Calcutta: Englishman Press, 1871), quoted in Gibson, *Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India, 1780–1913* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 256–58. The 1871 edition of Carshore's poetry is considerably enlarged with a biographical preface by Carshore's sister, recounting the poet's burial of her poems during the rebellion of 1857 and her subsequent death at Jhansi. The first edition of *Songs of the East* (Calcutta: D'Rozario, 1855) is available from Google Books: http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=72ovltOWPXwC&dq=Mary+Carshore+Songs+first+edition&source=gbs_navlinks_s. Accessed September 23, 2014.
 9. Linda Peterson, "Anthologizing Women: Women Poets in Early Victorian Collections of Lyric," *Victorian Poetry* 37 (1999): 193–209; Kathryn Ledbetter, *British Victorian Women's Periodicals: Beauty, Civilization, and Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Tricia Lootens, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender and Victorian Literary Canonization* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996). Equally important is the fact that metropolitan anthologies nearly always ignored India and other colonies.
 10. David Lester Richardson's titles – for instance, *Literary Leaves: or, Prose and Verse* (Calcutta: Samuel Smith, 1836) – serve this purpose, as does Kasiprasad Ghose's preface to *The Shair, and Other Poems* (Calcutta: Scott, 1830). On "the minor" as a canonical/critical category see James Najarian, "Canonicity, Marginality, and the Celebration of the Minor," *Victorian Poetry* 41 (2003): 570–74.
 11. At least to date I have found no poem by a woman poet I would describe as epic, though Toru Dutt undertook the retelling of traditional stories from the Indian epics; her uncle Romesh Chunder Dutt did undertake translations of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*; and Michael Madhusudan Dutta created as his magnum opus in Bengali the Miltonic epic, *The Slaying of Meghanada*.

12. Carshore, *Songs* (1855), preface, n.p.
13. Of course, this critique was not restricted to women writers: cf. Henry Meredith Parker, *Bole Ponjis* (London and Calcutta: W. Thacker, 1851); and for discussion of Parker's jesting rejection of Orientalism, see Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Freedom and Beefsteaks: Colonial Calcutta Culture* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2012).
14. Máire ní Fhlathúin has examined Byron's place in 1830s India, pointing to his ubiquitous presence in periodicals published on the subcontinent through the 1830s and later: "Transformations of Byron in the Literature of British India," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 42 (2014): 573–93.
15. Carshore, *Songs* (1855), 122.
16. For a discussion of E. L.'s misidentification as the missionary Lydia Lillybridge Simons, see Gibson, *Anglophone*, 204.
17. Eunice de Souza, ed., *Early Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology, 1829–1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005); Máire ní Fhlathúin, ed., *The Poetry of British India, 1780–1905* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011); and Gibson, *Anglophone*.
18. Robert Darnton, "Book Production in British India, 1850–1900," *Book History* 5 (2002): 242.
19. Anindita Ghosh, "An Uncertain 'Coming of the Book': Early Print Cultures in Colonial India," *Book History* 6 (2003): 23–55; Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society, 1778–1905* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); C. A. Bayly, "The Indian Ecumene: An Indigenous Public Sphere," in *The Book History Reader*, ed. Alistair McCleery and David Finkelstein (London: Routledge, 2002), 174–88.
20. Extant biographical materials suggest that Mary E. Leslie only visited Britain for a few months as a child. See Gibson, *Anglophone*, 271–72; Mary Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 199–209.
21. E. L., *Leisure Hours: Desultory Pieces in Prose and Verse* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1846), n.p.; excerpts from this rare book are also available in Gibson, *Anglophone*.
22. Chandra: the moon; Purnimá: full moon. Pustak: book. Bahutkhush, do hamko (Hindi): very happy, give me.
23. On Derrida and Benveniste, see Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Robert Post (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 156. See also Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000).
24. The pocket book, now in the British library, was written on and off over fifteen years between 1833 and 1848, Ms. Eur F85/135. By permission of the British Library.
25. British Library, MsEur F 85/78.
26. See Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan, with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society*, 3 vols. (London: W. H. Allen, 1835).

27. "A Day in the District" appears to have been first published in the anonymous *Real Life in India by an Old Resident* (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1847), 128–34. *Anglophone Poetry* corrects this text against the BL ms. and is cited here, 165.
28. David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800–1856*, Culture Place and Nature Series (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).
29. Emma Roberts, *Oriental Scenes, Dramatic Sketches and Tales* (London: Edward Bull, 1832), 58–59.
30. Roberts, *Oriental Scenes*, 61.
31. Maria Nugent, *A Journal from the Year 1811 till the Year 1815, Including a Voyage to and Residence in India* I: 365 (privately printed, n.p., n.d., 1839). Accessed at: http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=DxIIAAAAQAAJ&dq=A+Journal+from+the+Year+1811+inauthor:Nugent&source=gbs_navlinks_s (August 29, 2015).
32. Nugent, *A Journal from the Year 1811*, 365.
33. Roberts, *Oriental Scenes* (1832), 32–33.
34. Compare, for example, Sarojini Naidu's poem, "At Twilight: On the Way to Golconda," *The Bird of Time* (London: William Heinemann, 1912), 25.
35. Cf. Toru Dutt's "Our Casuarina Tree," discussed in [Chapter 5](#) of this volume.
36. Mary Eliza Leslie, *Sorrows, Aspirations, and Legends from India* (London: John Snow, 1858), 37.
37. Mary E. Leslie, *Heart Echoes from the East; or, Sacred Lyrics and Sonnets* (London: James Nisbet, 1861), 46. Available at: <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=7fEOAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA108&dq=Heart+Echoes+inauthor:Mary+inauthor:E+inauthor:Leslie&hl=en&sa=X&ei=vIZ7VJKwOeSu7AbzwIGYBQ&ved=0CCIQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=one%20oby%20one&f=false>. Accessed August 29, 2015.
38. Leslie, *Heart Echoes*, 7.

*The Locations and Dislocations of Toru and Aru Dutt**Tricia Lootens*

Whether as translator, critic, and anthologist; groundbreaking female experimenter in the Indian novel in English; first female Indian writer to publish a novel in French; or, most famously, the poet of *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, Toru Dutt (1856–77) claims her place within any serious introduction to Indian literary history – a place inseparable from the challenges of defining “Indian literature” itself. Aru Dutt, Toru’s elder sister (1854–74), lived only long enough to complete eight verse translations. Still, by right of those pieces, her contributions to sisterly collaborative literary visions, and the significance of her loss for Toru Dutt’s larger self-positioning as writer, Aru Dutt, too, has her own place here.¹

What might “India” have meant in the time of Toru and Aru Dutt? What might English have meant – and what does it still mean – within the literature of India? To ask what might be “Indian,” within that rich, varied body of writing which Toru Dutt produced, so far as we now know, in English and French, is to raise such questions.² Domestically overdetermined, yet culturally alienating, Toru and Aru Dutt’s turns to Western languages helped shape an Indian literature whose power seems to spring “not from the site of a monolithic ‘truth’ and ‘native’ authenticity, but from the infinitely more fascinating site ... of reinvention and improvisation.”³

Born, like their elder brother Abju, into a family already establishing the “genealogical chart of early Indian English literature,” Toru and Aru Dutt divided their privileged, sequestered, yet cosmopolitan childhood between their family’s Calcutta city house in Rambagan and a beloved country home at Baugmaree.⁴ Nilmoni Dutt, their great-grandfather, was a distinguished figure with ties to “many prominent Englishmen”; their grandfather Rasamoy Dutt, who served on the managing committees of both the Hindu College and the Sanskrit College, possessed a “splendid collection of English books.”⁵ The children’s father, Govin Chunder, joined other English-speaking poets of his family in publishing the 1870 *Dutt Family*

Album, the first anthology of English poetry by Bengalis.⁶ Their mother, Kshetramoni, published a book-length translation of William Reid's *The Blood of Jesus* into Bengali.⁷

Even in its expansion of Dutt family traditions, however, this last publication bespeaks a rupture with the religious and cultural past, for the extended Dutt family's conversion to Christianity, formalized in 1862, irreversibly altered Aru and Toru's relations to their cultural surroundings.⁸ In 1865, fourteen-year-old Abju died. Socially isolated, and no longer subject to Hindu caste restrictions on overseas travel, the Dutt family embarked in 1869 on yet another dislocation: an unprecedented, transformative European tour. Landing at Marseilles, Kshetramoni Dutt and her daughters became what biographer Harihar Das has termed "the first Bengali ladies to visit Europe" (19). The Dutt family settled in Nice, where Aru and Toru studied French at a pensionnat, before undertaking a "prolonged stay" in Paris (19, 22). In the spring of 1870, they traveled to England, where they lived first in London and then, between 1871 and 1873, in Cambridge and St. Leonards (22, 39). As the first Indian women to attend Cambridge's "Higher Lectures for Women," Toru and Aru participated in a revolutionary moment for British women's education, meeting with Anne Jemima Clough, the first Principal of Newnham College, and other intellectual Englishwomen, including Mary E. Rodd Martin.⁹ Taking their travels as what Inderpal Grewal terms "a means" to become "writers," the sisters seem to have begun sharing ambitious visions of multilingual writing projects by the time the Dutt family departed for Calcutta in 1873.¹⁰

Aru, however, was already suffering from tuberculosis. The following summer, she died.¹¹ Driven in part by fear for Toru's health, the Dutt family settled back uneasily into life in Calcutta and Baugmaree. For the rest of Toru's life, her letters would report plans for travel or even relocation to France or England, temporarily thwarted by immediate health issues or financial considerations.¹² Over time, however, her emphasis on longing to return to English friends, education, and social and physical freedom came to be tempered by expressions of unease at the prospect of leaving India, and especially Baugmaree.¹³ Not incidentally, as recent critics have stressed, such expressions coincided with increasingly explicit reflections on contemporary Indian politics and culture.¹⁴

Even before this, however, Toru Dutt had already established a thoroughly public authorial presence. Destined to be read and taught for generations as an ambiguously, incompletely Anglicized and safely privatized "brilliant, but protected, upper-class child-poet, who died early of consumption," she began her publishing career on very different terms.¹⁵

From a lively 1874 essay on French Creole republican poet, translator, and revolutionary historian Leconte de Lisle, she went on to establish herself as a self-described “regular contributor” to the *Bengal Magazine*, where she published her own and Aru’s bilingual, transcultural projects – translations whose most explicit engagements with patriotism, nationalism, and calls for cultural independence drew, in Toru’s case, on the writing of Victor Hugo.¹⁶ Passionately republican, defiantly patriotic, the Hugo who appears here is, above all, the eloquent soon-to-be-exiled or already exiled mid-century opponent of Louis Napoleon. Toru Dutt’s *Bengal Magazine* work scarcely reflects her complex, lifelong engagements with Hugo’s oeuvre, then, much less her larger understandings of French politics.¹⁷ Still, by offering the *Bengal Magazine* English versions of both Hugo’s scathing 1851 condemnation of Louis Napoleon’s imperial pretensions and of the explosive French National Assembly debates that ensued, Toru Dutt invested her early poetic Hugo translations with an express political charge: one that may have carried forward, among knowing Indian readers at least, into these translations’ later reprintings.¹⁸ Certainly, the *Bengal Magazine* itself underscored the newsworthiness of both sisters’ poetic translations, marketing these as “Specimens from the Modern French Poets.”¹⁹

Having been positioned by family tradition, then, to write in English, Toru Dutt thus quickly began exploring how turns to French might serve both as sources of inspiration and as resources for potentially freeing acts of literary dislocation.²⁰ Such triangulation of what we might now call the British colonial center/periphery model drives the achievement of that erudite and witty, opinionated and ambitious volume that was to establish her international reputation: *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*.

Sheaf, which Govin Chunder Dutt first helped see into print in 1876, remains a tour de force. Acutely attentive to the technical challenges of conveying metrical effects across linguistic boundaries, both Toru and Aru Dutt’s translations combine focused analytical thinking with the sort of creative improvisation that transcends any confusion of the “authentic” with the literal. Moreover, translation is only the beginning here: from this volume’s opening epigraph, with its playful rewriting of Friedrich Schiller’s “Das Mädchen aus der Fremde,” through Toru Dutt’s quiet introduction of original poetry in the “Concluding Sonnet,” to her extensive notes on a strongly defined constellation of 165 works by some 70, mostly nineteenth-century, and largely Romantic poets, *Sheaf* unfolds as an energetic, even exuberant, exercise in literary dislocation and relocation.²¹ A pun on “baboo,” a gloss in untranslated Sanskrit – through these and other moves, Toru Dutt’s lively, idiosyncratic prose commentaries

dramatize their origins in Calcutta, no less than Nice or Cambridge.²² In this, they assume, enact, and celebrate the emergence of India as a center for transnational comparative poetic studies.

Still, as the volume's wistful "Concluding Sonnet" may suggest, *Sheaf* is also a text of mourning. Had Aru Dutt lived, Toru's final note asserts, "this book with her help might have been better" (374). The loss thus memorialized is personal; but, within a culture rapidly moving toward what Partha Chatterjee has resonantly termed the "nationalist resolution of the Women's Question," it may bear public implications as well. Might Aru and Toru have sought to model an alternative, yet still passionately familial and spiritual vision of public feminine cultural patriotism?²³ See Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question." In *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 233-53. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989. If so, then Aru's death may have put an end to dreams of this new "Dutt family" project. Certainly had Aru lived, later critical celebration – and containment – of Toru Dutt as an isolated exception might have proved far more difficult.

As it was, international reviews of *Sheaf* established Toru Dutt's extraordinary claims as a critic and practitioner of translation.²⁴ She herself carefully monitored such responses, at once with an eye toward a revised, expanded edition and with an acute, sometimes comic awareness of her own emerging position, both as international poetess and as a figure within debates over Indian women's education.²⁵ Significantly, she also joined her father in an ambitious course of studies in Sanskrit language, literature, and scholarship, dreaming of creating "another 'Sheaf, not gleaned in French but in 'Sanskrit Fields!'"²⁶ Having consulted Clarisse Bader's *La Femme dans l'Inde Antique* for "a good insight into the old Hindu legends, which I hope to be able to read in a couple of years in the original Sanskrit," she wrote to request translation permission, thus sparking a lively epistolary friendship.²⁷ In August of 1877, however, before Toru Dutt could complete her Sanskrit "Sheaf" or even begin her proposed translation of Bader, she died.²⁸

After his daughter's death, Govin Chunder Dutt discovered among her papers the unfinished novel, *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden*, which he saw into print from January through April 1878 in the *Bengal Magazine*; the French *Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers*, published in Paris under the auspices of Bader in 1879; and a body of poems, posthumously combined for publication in London in 1882 under the unlikely title of *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*.²⁹ Which of these texts Toru Dutt wrote first, which she hoped to see into print, and in what form, remains unknown.³⁰

Given their Western settings and characters, how might Toru Dutt's novels best be addressed as "Indian literature"? Implicit within early critics' hunts for transparent revelations of authentically "Indian" feminine interior life, this question now grounds more nuanced autobiographical readings.³¹ And indeed, on many levels, including physical descriptions, both *Bianca* and the *Diary* (as the *Journal* is termed in translation) do ratify conventional nineteenth-century impulses to associate female authors with their protagonists.³² Still, direct autobiographical references scarcely exhaust these novels' gestures toward their Indian author, for, like Toru Dutt's poems and translations, with which they powerfully resonate, *Bianca* and *Diary* explicitly dramatize their own textual location within a richly multilingual, cosmopolitan late-nineteenth-century Bengali intellectual milieu. Indeed, read in conjunction with *Sheaf* and *Ancient Ballads*, Toru Dutt's fictional deployments of poetic citations, including song lyrics, help position *Bianca* and *Diary* as "Indian," not least by right of their polyglot modernity, their highly particular, allusive transnational literary sophistication.

Poised at a point of convergence for many forms of personal and cultural desire, many registers of literary language, and, as it turns out, several national literatures, *Bianca* in particular takes form, like *Sheaf*, as a daring, insistently intertextual project.³³ Humor and seriousness intertwine here, too, often in ways that gesture – actively, if obliquely – beyond purely European frames of reference.³⁴ By the time *Bianca* lingers at what Malashri Lal might term the "threshold," undressed and dreaming of her beloved Lord Moore, for example, her turn to poetic recitation should come as no surprise.³⁵ Her choice of American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, however, might – were it not that through *Bianca*'s murmured description of Minnehaha, dreamily longing for Hiawatha, one famous desiring "Indian maiden" enters the novel of another: a Bengali "young Indian maiden," in the latter case, who dearly loved a pun. Behind Toru Dutt's Spanish performer, then, stands her Indian author. In a later scene, too, as a flower-crowned *Bianca* reads aloud to Lord Moore, her increasingly "clear and ringing" voice fills an imaginary English garden with French poetic declarations of patriotic readiness to endure isolation, exile, and even death. This is the original language of Victor Hugo's "Après le Coup d'État": language through which the English translator of *Bengal Magazine* and *Sheaf* makes herself felt (107–08).

These are playful moves: akin, it might seem, to the sort of teasing irony which names a dark-skinned heroine "Bianca." In repeatedly condemning *Bianca* as a "Spanish gipsy," however, Lord Moore's bigoted mother means no joke (105, 114; see, too, 103, 121). Indeed, by repeating the title of George Eliot's controversial 1868 tragedy, Lady Moore's epithet underscores a powerful strain

within *Bianca*, linking apparently casual expressions of domestic prejudice to terrifying histories of reciprocal transnational, ethnic, and imperial violence.³⁶

Of all the contemporary textual resonances of *Bianca*, however, the most suggestive may be those between Toru Dutt's novel and her own "Savitri," from *Ancient Ballads*. Raised in "far-off primeval days" when "fair India's daughters" could wander at their "pleasure" with "young companions" in "boyish freedom," Savitri enters that volume as daughter to a father who lets her "have her way / In all things, whether high or low" (2-3). In this, she resembles the boyish Bianca, whose father, too, "has let her have her own ways in almost every thing."³⁷ Bianca's father trusts her "alone in the wildest company" (107). She has proved "as good as a son" to him: she possesses what he terms "a heart as bold as any man's" and a "head as sharp and intelligent as any mathematician's" (94). Still, she is no Savitri. How could she be? Savitri's ancient Indian freedom is protected by radiant, invincible virtue, after all.³⁸ Bianca's, in Toru Dutt's night-time nineteenth-century English countryside, requires a gun.³⁹

In *Ancient Ballads* as elsewhere, Savitri's father must challenge her choice of husband: within the year, he knows, Prince Satyavan is doomed to die. In Toru Dutt's retelling, however, her ancient heroine overcomes such resistance by calmly – and revealingly – defending her own desire. Savitri's free gift of "heart and faith," she insists, austerely, is "past recall." Indeed, her father and his advisor, by urging her to revoke that gift, are counseling a "fall" into "sin" (10-11).

That Savitri will win her case is a given: this is, after all, the woman whose loving, courageous speech will save her husband from Death himself. And, at first, Bianca seems primed to speak as Savitri's heir. Caught off-guard, in her garden, by Lord Moore's unpremeditated, "impetuous" kiss, she tells her father, refuting his charge that she has allowed "a man to insult" her, with "deep fire in her eyes" (108-09). Already, however, Bianca has been sexually and spiritually unnerved by the force of her own response to Lord Moore's touch. When her reproachful father angrily forbids marriage, she collapses. Her near-fatal fever of panic and shame, which causes her father to relent, dramatizes her radical difference from Savitri. Moreover, it positions Toru Dutt's all-too-modern "Spanish maiden" as a significant, unrecognized precursor for doomed fictional New Women to come, from Olive Schreiner's Lyndall to Thomas Hardy's Sue Bridehead.

Ambitious, disquieting, the *Diary* is a very different sort of text: a somber two-part narrative experiment, saturated with references to contemporary music, and unfolding in part as a monitory lesson in poetic reading. Here, teenaged diarist Marguerite d'Arvers, caught up in

imagining herself as heroine of a charming tale of romance, opens by recounting, without fully registering, a series of imbedded narratives, songs, signs, portents, and poetic citations: missed clues to her own secondary position within a gathering story of gothic disaster. By the novel's second portion, Marguerite has become a better reader. Haunted by revelatory lines of verse, she now senses what her new husband, parents, and doctor do not: that is, the likelihood that she will need to resign herself, as tenderly and confidently as possible, to an early death. Autobiographical resonances seem painfully strong here. Still, is there anything particularly "Indian" about all this? Though Bader's first-edition introduction insisted there was, the question remains under exploration.⁴⁰

When *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* first appeared in 1882, the admiring tone of Edmund Gosse's substantial "Introductory Memoir" would surely have been expected. As noted, Gosse's 1876 praise of *Sheaf* had, after all, brought both Toru and Aru Dutt's achievements to the attention of English-speaking Western audiences. Still, the staying power of this same memoir's imperialist myth-making could hardly have been predicted. Gosse's characterization of *Ancient Ballads* as the work of a dying "poetess" who seems "to be chanting to herself those songs of her mother's race to which she always turned with tears of pleasure"; his depiction of Toru Dutt herself as a "fragile exotic blossom of song": these and other textual moments have long helped shape Toru Dutt's strange and variable reception history, obscuring what Rosinka Chaudhuri rightly terms a language "crafted," in part, out of "a sensibility that belongs to modern India."⁴¹

In key respects, even the retellings of tales from the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, Bengali oral tradition, and the *Vishnu Purana* that open *Ancient Ballads* claim their places here as diverse creations of a specific cultural moment. Each poem repays consideration on its own terms, whether as a calculated artistic response to familial Bengali oral tradition; a translation and transformation of the precise language, no less than the narrative and cultural force, of sacred texts unbounded by the limits of Toru Dutt's own time; or some combination of these two.⁴² At the same time, posthumously gathered under the subtitle "Ancient Ballads of Hindustan," yet arranged so as to culminate in the intimate original verse of "Sita," these poems seem designed to register the emergence of the "ancient" itself as an explicitly modern category, newly invested with immediate, various, and intensely felt forms of cultural charge.⁴³ Indeed, in mounting a closing defense of "Jogadhya Uma," the narrator turns not once, but twice toward the authority of the ancient/present, proposing that this Bengali folk tale

may be “ill-suited to the marching times,” then justifying its retelling through living memory of love for “the lips from which it fell.”⁴⁴

As Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, these opening narratives tend to focus on “women, the lower castes, children, and other marginal creatures” (97). Utopian, visionary, the autonomous ancient female virtue of “Savitri,” addressed above, thus takes its place in *Ancient Ballads* alongside other modes of contemporary critical engagement.⁴⁵ The stern closing anti-ascetic address “to Brahmins wise, or monks” in “The Royal Ascetic and the Hind”; the “seething anger” over “caste brutality” which Mukherjee sees in “Buttoo”: these offer overt, dramatic cultural critique, seeming to encourage topical readings of other poems as well.⁴⁶ “Prehlah,” too, in its closing shift from recounting the righteous wrath of India’s mythic lion-man to threatening “[t]yrants of every age and clime,” may target the Raj itself. For if, as seems likely, the “lion’s strength” of Toru Dutt’s suffering “peoples” invokes Tennyson’s famous “hungry people, like a lion, drawing nigher,” this allusion invests the language of that imperial standard, “Locksley Hall,” with newly grounded, evocatively enigmatic menace.⁴⁷

In its title, this section’s culminating “Sita” might seem to turn back through *Ancient Ballads* itself, toward a figure whose richly difficult presence has already driven the narrative of “Lakshman.” Here, however, “Sita” is, above all, the subject of a mother’s “old, old” sorrowful song: a catalyst for cherished memories of childhood intimacy and for articulation of deep familial longing.⁴⁸ Much as “Sita” closes the volume’s first portion by bringing home the intimate, shifting, perhaps intransigently vernacular, everyday lives of previous narratives, so, too, does “Near Hastings” serve as pivot into the volume’s closing section, “Miscellaneous Poems.” In this brief, apparently autobiographical account, Toru Dutt celebrates the memory of a gentle stranger’s kindness to two weary, ill women. When, after asking her companions whether they are “from France,” the stranger presents them with red roses, “wet,” as if “with tears,” “sweet and full, / And large as lotus flowers” (128), she helps frame the poems that follow, foreshadowing both the dissolution of the apparently abstract Francophile patriotism of “France. 1870” and “On the Fly-Leaf of Erckmann-Chatrian’s Novel entitled ‘Madame Thérèse’” and the vividly tactile force of Indian plants and trees within those few, now-famous original poems which close this volume. These are poems charged with overt autobiographical power. An assaulted, terrifyingly corporeal female figure dramatizes identification with national crisis in “France. 1870”; the phrase “my heart beats fast!” snaps “Fly-Leaf” into focus as an intimate, corporalized scene of patriotic reading (134). Rich, difficult botanical presences,

too, now emerge in force: presences already implicit in *Sheaf*, yet grounded, here, in an explicitly Indian linguistic, no less than literal, landscape.⁴⁹ Named, in her own words, for the flower of the “Torulota or Creeper-Toru” plant, Toru Dutt stands overtly self-positioned as heir to the English and French Romantic poets; and she does so within intimately, precisely conceived living spaces whose forms seem calculated to speak not to belated or secondary nostalgia for lost rural “authenticity” so much as to risky, experimental, transnational gardening and gathering.⁵⁰ Gosse’s characterizations notwithstanding, here, at least, are no “fragile exotic” blossoms. Rather, the presence of thriving plants, whether rooted most immediately in dream-vision, as in “The Tree of Life”; in allegory, as in “Sonnet. – The Lotus”; or in descriptions of the literal grounds of the Dutt’s garden home, as in “Sonnet. – Baumaree” and “Our Casuarina Tree,” helps dramatize an imaginative and linguistic vitality, a polyglot local authority that seems all the more Bengali by virtue of its insistence on mixed origins, its shifting botanical, linguistic, and literary forms. The “delicious touch of those strange leaves” in the “Tree of Life,” whose “divers kinds” include “dead silver and live gold” (132, 131); the “sharp contrasts of all colours” in “Sonnet. – Baumaree,” whose synaesthetic seemul may matter as much for bearing its own botanically precise name as for being “Red, – red, and startling like a trumpet’s sound” (135); the abstract, insistently literary subject of “Sonnet. – The Lotus,” which resolves, by trumping, the competing claims of English poetry’s “lily-white” and “rose red”: as emerging critical readings underscore, these can hardly be reduced to a single symbolic pattern.⁵¹ Still, each, in its own way, works to extend Toru Dutt’s explorations of India as an expressly contemporary alien homeland, a living, literal “*patrie*” whose claims become all the more powerful when played out against impulses of temporal, cultural, and geographical dislocation, translation, and alienation. Such explorations attain their most celebrated expression in the most famous of Toru Dutt’s poems, “Our Casuarina Tree.” Worthy of a chapter of its own, that poem’s central figure – which “gallantly” bears the literal weight of a strangling, python-like creeping vine, crimson flowers, birds, bees, and baboons; which meets an almost dizzying series of symbolic meditations on home and on exile, presence and memory with an “eerie speech” all its own; and which bears, through direct citation, both tribute and challenge to the national (and pre- or preternational) poetry of Wordsworth – seems a fit closing image: a far from fragile reminder of its author’s powerful presence within studies of Indian literature.⁵² Still, in truth, no single image can suffice here, except, perhaps as a gesture toward others – visions

yet to be revealed by those new readings of the full range of both Toru and Aru Dutt's achievements, which are only now beginning to emerge. Various, complex, and unpredictable, the increasingly accessible writings of Toru and Aru Dutt now seem poised to offer new insights into those crucial processes whereby, on the one hand, what once called itself "English literature" has definitively become "literature in English," and, on the other, "literature in English" has come to take its place as one among the many literatures of India: insights whose (dis)locations we are only now beginning to conceive.

Notes

1. On Aru Dutt alone, see A. N. Dwivedi, "The Poetry of Aru Dutt." *Papers on Indian Writing in English*, 2nd edn., 18–27. Atlantic Publishers, 2001. See "Aru Dutt" and "Toru Dutt," in *Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India, 1780–1913*, edited by Mary Ellis Gibson. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011, 287–293; 294–304.
2. Although Toru Dutt strongly identified with Bengal, her comfort level with written Bengali remains under dispute. See Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Hearing her Own Voice: Defective Acoustics in Colonial India." *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*, 89–116. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 90–91, 97, 105–11; Ellen Brinks, *Anglophone Indian Women Writers, 1870–1920*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2013, 25; Chandani Lokugé, "Introduction." In *Toru Dutt: Collected Prose and Poetry*, edited by Chandani Lokugé, xiii–xlvi. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, "Introduction," xxxvii–xxxviii.
3. Alpana Sharma Knippling's phrase signals spatial metaphors' powerful roles within emerging studies of Toru Dutt "Sharp contrasts of all colours': The Legacy of Toru Dutt." In *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, edited by Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj, 209–28. New York: Garland, 2000, 217; see, too, Alpana Sharma, "In-Between Modernity: Toru Dutt (1856–1877) from a Postcolonial Perspective." In *Women's Experience of Modernity, 1875–1945*, edited by Ann L. Ardis and Leslie W. Lewis, 97–110. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, 103–04). See, for example, Meena Alexander's account of the "piecemeal" character of those "habitations that language provides" ("Outcaste Power: Ritual Displacement and Virile Maternity in Indian Women Writers." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 24 [1989]: 12–29.); Ellen Brinks's citation of Robert J. C. Young on how hybridity moves writers to "dislocate existing cultural forms and identities" (12–13); or Alison Chapman's defining concern with "placing Dutt" ("Internationalising the Sonnet: Toru Dutt's 'Sonnet – Baumgarce.'" *Victorian Literature and Culture* 42 [2014]: 595–608; 595). Here, I seek to make use of – though not, I hope, to naturalize – those access-points

which my own Western cultural locations and dislocations make most readily available.

4. G. J. V. Prasad, "Romance in the West: Toru Dutt, the Novelist." *Writing India, Writing English: Literature, Language, Location*, 92–102. New Delhi: Routledge, 2011, 94; see Rosinka Chaudhuri, "The Dutt Family Album and Toru Dutt." In *A History of Indian Literature in English*, edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, 53–69. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, esp. 54–60, 62; Harihar Das, *The Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*. London: Oxford University Press, 1921, 14–16.
5. Das, 2; see Chaudhuri 2003, 55.
6. On this "album," which includes translations from French and German, see Chaudhuri 2003.
7. See Chandani Lokugé, "Toru Dutt: A Biography." In *Toru Dutt: Collected Prose and Poetry*, edited by Chandani Lokugé, viii–x. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, viii.
8. Das, 10. This conversion began in 1854 among male family members (8–12). Female family members, while formally acceding to their husbands' desires, apparently reserved private commitments to Hinduism. Kshetramoni Mitter's conversion seems to have been hard-fought; her birth-family remained Hindu (10–11). See Praphu S. Gupta, "Toru Dutt: Lover of France." *The Literary Half-Yearly* 20 (1979): 49–61, 56; Christopher Foss, "'We, who happier, live / Under the holiest dispensation': Gender, Reform, and the Nexus of East and West in Toru Dutt." In *Gender and Victorian Reform*, edited by Anita R. Rose. 161–77. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008, esp. 164–69; and, in broader terms, Brinks, 14–17.
9. Das, 39, 280, 39–42. English literature, by classical scholar Richard C. Jebb (66); "Harmony," by musician G. M. Garrett (80, 118); French, by Lucien Boquel: these lectures were supplemented by private tuition (80, 118, 142, 160, 188, 190). Most of Toru Dutt's known remaining correspondence, we owe to her epistolary friendship with Martin (13; 52–283).
10. *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, 163. These projects would have been *Sheaf* and the *Diary*. On the latter, see Edmund Gosse, "Toru Dutt. Introductory Memoir." In *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, by Toru Dutt, vii–xxvii. London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, 1882, xv.
11. Das, 43.
12. See, for example, Das, 60–68, 78–79, 84, 186–87, 209–10, 241, 277. Such passages often seem to respond to Martin's own expressed desire for reunion. On the wide-ranging, often dissonant aspects of "free life" in Europe, see esp. Grewal, 166–74.
13. See, for example, Das, 136, 154, 159–60, 171, 197, 233, 241, 266.
14. See, for instance, Das, 120–23, 131–32, 137–39, 168–70, 190–92, 212–13, 248; see esp. Brinks, 28–35; Sharma, "Modernity," 106–08.
15. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. "Preface." In *Women Writing in India, 600 B.C. to the Present*, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. 2 vols., 1: xvii–xxv. New York:

- Feminist Press, 1991, xviii. On Toru Dutt's reception, especially as conditioned by Western imperialist romanticization, see Subhendu Mund, "Lost in 'a strange light': An Enquiry into Toru Dutt's Legacy." *Indian Women Poets*. 176–93. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2009, 178–91.
16. Das, 78. Aru Dutt's translated engagements with expressions of national feeling center on other poets: see "My Village" and "The Swallows" (*Bengal Magazine* [March 1874]: 352–53; [May 1874]: 438–39). Toru Dutt's later works also appeared in the *Calcutta Review*. (On her first essay see Mehrotra, [Chapter 7](#) in this volume.)
 17. "Scenes," her second French National Assembly translation, brings this latter point home. By translating Adolphe Thiers's 1870 speech opposing France's entry into the disastrous Franco-Prussian War, she honors a conservative politician and orator who was, to say the least, no reliable ally of the radical Hugo.
 18. Destined to join the most celebrated translations of *Sheaf*, "Napoléon le Petit" actually first appears here as poetic "pendant" to Hugo's oration: see "Scene" (*Bengal Magazine* [June 1875]: 510–22). "Après le Coup d'État," too, was to move from the *Bengal Magazine* into *Sheaf*; on its role, at one remove, in *Bianca*, see below. *Sheaf* is cited here from the expanded 1880 edition, which includes a photograph of Aru and Toru Dutt; a "Prefatory Memoir" by Govin Chunder Dutt, comprised of a brief biographical account; two previously published poems, "The Royal Ascetic and the Hind" and "The Legend of Dhruva"; the Bader correspondence; and some 193 translations (London: Kegan Paul).
 19. See, for example, January 1875, 267–81. Post-*Sheaf*, this title shifts to "Echoes of the French Poets": see, for example, March 1877, 375–79.
 20. See Guptara, esp. 52, 54–55, and Tricia Lootens, "Bengal, Britain, France: The Locations and Translations of Toru Dutt." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34 (2006): 573–90, esp. 575–79. Private no less than public, such explorations play out through the letters' famous characterization of India as "my *patrie*" as well as their hitherto overlooked turn to a repellent, visceral, untranslated passage from French novelist Edmond About, in condemning Britain's representatives in India (Das, 241, 204). Not surprisingly French critics could attempt to turn such affiliation to imperial ends (Mund 183–84; see, too, Guptara 51; Lootens 2006, 576).
 21. See Lootens 2006, 579–82. In its overt fascination with histories of translations confused with originals, *Sheaf* anticipates the later linguistic dislocations and relocations of Toru Dutt's own writing (580). In 1966, for example, Dipendranath Mitra wrote that "in Bengal perhaps more people" had read "Jogadhya Uma" in "Satyendranath Dutta's beautiful Bengali rendering than the original in English" ("The Writings of Toru Dutt." *Indian Literature* 9 (1966): 33–38; 37–38; see, too, Mukherjee, on discovering that this same poem had first appeared in English (106)).
 22. See Das 352, 350; see Lootens 2006, 581–82; Guptara 53–54; Sharma 103–05. (Again: see Mehrotra, [Chapter 7](#), this volume.)

23. See Das 176, 178. To raise such possibilities need not be to oversimplify, much less sentimentalize, either Govin Chunder Dutt's paternal mentoring, Toru Dutt's own Western-influenced attempts to define and extend "ancient" womanhood, or even her enthusiasm for nineteenth-century Indian women's education in English (Grewal 162–77, esp. 162–64, 164–65; 171; see also Mukherjee, 92–94, 110–11).
24. For a list of reviews, see Das 358–59. Having sought "not just to match, but to outdo, the British" (Susie Tharu, "Tracing Savitri's Pedigree." In *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 254–68. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, 258), Toru Dutt entered Edmund Gosse's now-legendary 1876 *Sheaf* review as creator of "an amazing feat. . . performed with a truly brilliant success," a work that recalled "the French more vividly than any similar volume" ([“E. W. G.”]. "A Book of Verse from India." *Examiner* (26 August 1876): 966–67; 967; see Gosse 1882, viii–x). No other English-speaking contemporary French poetry critic had achieved "at once such exactitude of detailed information and a critical sentiment so delicate and so sure," distinguished French scholar James Darmesteter ruled in 1883 ("Miss Toru Dutt." *Essais de Littérature Anglaise*, 269–92. Paris: Librairie Ch. Delagrave, 1883, 278–79; my translation). To be sure, such early Western critics do also seem, at key points, to have "neutralized their amazement with a patronizing stance" (Sharma 102–03). Asserting that Govin Chunder Dutt took "his daughters to Europe to learn English," for example, Gosse's own later memoir deployed this unlikely proposition in framing apparently chivalrous warnings against expecting too much poetic skill from Toru, whose English was thus, after all, a "late acquirement" (1882, xii; xxiv–xxvi; see, too, Mund 186–87; Chapman 595–97).
25. On reviews, see Das 143, 154, 157, 159, 163, 174–78, 182, 197, 220–24, 239–40; on continuing translations ("almost thirty new pieces" by early 1877; 251), see 201, 211, 253, 289, 328. "You see," she joked, "I have become quite a public character, like L.E.L. or Mrs. Hemans!" (178; see, too, 146). More seriously, she wrote, "I do hope Indian girls will be in the future better educated, and obtain more freedom and liberty than they now enjoy" (264; see, too, 275).
26. Das 111–12, 125, 133, 142, 144–45, 146, 151, 167–68, 185, 190, 189–90, 202; see also 242. "If I succeed," she wrote Martin, "I shall. . . send two copies to Professors Max Müller and Monier-Williams, respectively; as it is, I have only as yet gathered two ears, and my 'Sanskrit Sheaf' is far from being gathered and complete" (Das 203). Suggested here is a scholarly as well as creative project very different from *Ancient Ballads*.
27. Das 129–30; see 44–51. For the Bader correspondence in English, see 350–55. Reprinted in Govin Chunder Dutt's *Sheaf* "Memoir" and excerpted in Bader's own *Diary* introduction, this correspondence was to furnish iconic passages both for scholarly and popular biographies (xvii–xxvi). Indeed, Gosse's very *Ancient Ballads* memoir already celebrates its still-famous account of the poet weeping over her mother's songs, as if it were a Toru Dutt poem (1882, xviii–xix, 5, 7–8).

28. In 1925, Martin herself completed this translation project, so successfully that her *Women in Ancient India* was still reappearing, in a new Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series edition, as late as 1962.
29. For controversy concerning this choice of publication venue, see Malashri Lal, *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995, 37–39; Lokugé, “Introduction,” xxix–xxxi; Prasad 2011, 96–102.
30. What became of other remaining “fragments” in “prose and verse” is also unclear (Das 320; see Mund 191).
31. Suggestively, for example, Gosse presents *Diary* as both a “simple” story and a “revelation of the mind of a young Hindu woman of genius” (“Memoir,” xxi; for the descriptor “simple,” see, too, Das 324–25. Bader, too, finds here “the sentiments, character, and the premature death of Toru Dutt” (“Introduction,” 20). Informed, perhaps, by what Parama Roy has termed a “more heterogenous model” of authorial “identity formation,” later readings explore more complex interplays of national and biographical analysis (*Indian Traffic: Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 3–4). See, for example, Lal’s account of *Bianca* as a “cultural autobiography,” both “personal” and “depersonalized” (39; 34–56); Lokugé, “Introduction” (xvii–xx, xxi, xxix–xxxvi); G. J. V. Prasad, “Introduction.” In *The Diary of Mademoiselle D’Arvers*, by Toru Dutt, translated by N. Kamala, xi–xviii. New York: Penguin, 2005, xv–xviii; and Prasad 2011, esp. 97–102.
32. With its opening funeral and depiction of father/daughter mourning, for example, *Bianca* seems designed to invoke the loss of Aru. Only slightly less directly, Marguerite d’Arvers opens her *Diary* by regretting how her otherwise welcome departure from convent school parts her from Sister Véronique, who has been “like an elder sister” to her – and who later proves to have been dying (*The Diary of Mademoiselle D’Arvers*, translated by N. Kamala. New York: Penguin, 2005, 21; see 32, 42–44).
33. See Lokugé, “Introduction,” xxxi–xxxvi; Prasad 2011, esp. 96–100. Unfinished, this Tennyson-haunted novel draft ends, forebodingly, as its soldier-hero prepares for the Crimean War. Especially in their musical setting by Carl Friedrich Zelter, the sweetly melancholy lines of the draft’s Jean-Baptiste Rousseau epigraph foreshadow events to come (92). On Toru and Aru’s vocal studies, see Das 18, 93, 34–35, 37, 84; on Toru’s piano studies, 33, 60, 63, 68, 93, 183. Thanks to Anne Williams and David Schiller for helping me grasp this evocative aspect of her work.
34. Indeed, “nonbinary, serious playing,” Sharma notes, characterizes Toru Dutt’s career as a whole (108).
35. Lal 99. Repeated scenes of quotation and reading, including from the Bible and Alfred Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, precede Bianca’s recitation (91–93, 95–96, 98). See Lal’s introduction, esp. 4–5, 16–21.
36. Like many sources Toru Dutt quotes verbatim, *The Spanish Gypsy* receives no mention in the letters. Still, given her praise for Eliot’s novels and attention to

- Eliot, Toru Dutt seems unlikely to have missed this widely reviewed tragedy of ethnic violence, with its dark-skinned, passionately creative female protagonist and troubling father-daughter-lover triangle (Das 105, 117, 234, 268–69).
37. P. 104 (emphasis mine). Quoted here from Lokugé's *Toru Dutt*.
 38. On the nineteenth-century resonances of such "ancient" fearless virtue, see Tharu 258–60.
 39. "I should not be jealous," Bianca thinks, pondering her father's overmastering grief for her recently deceased, more feminine, and apparently more beloved sister Inez: "I am strong; I can take care of myself" (94). Indeed she can: as it turns out, this pistol-packing heroine has actually saved a female cousin's "honour" by confronting a would-be attacker "as bravely, as gallantly, as any man" (102, 109, 117).
 40. Xxvi–xxvii; see, most recently, Prasad 2011, 100–01; Mund 192.
 41. Gosse 1882, xxiv, xxvii. Anticipated by Bader's more vital metaphor of thriving botanical transplants ("Introduction," 18), Gosse's "blossom" appears as destined to find "a page" in the "literature of our country": an overconfident prediction, as Mukherjee notes (xxvii; 107). On modernity see Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project*. Calcutta: Seal Press, 2002, 69; Guptara 55–60. As modernity vanishes, so may humor: Gosse's celebration of narratives that "breathe a Vedic solemnity and simplicity of temper" tellingly certifies Toru Dutt's opening retellings as "singularly devoid of that littleness and frivolity which seem, if we may judge by a slight experience, to be the bane of modern India" (xxiv).
 42. See especially Mukherjee 105–08; Sunanda P. Chavan, *The Fair Voice: A Study of Indian Women Poets in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1984, 16–20. Brinks, too, historically contextualizes Toru Dutt's translations, which she conceives as "inquiries" (27–28; 38–39; 45–57).
 43. On invocations of the "ancient" in both Orientalist and emerging cultural nationalist terms, see esp. Brinks 9, 35–50; in Dutt familial terms, see Chaudhuri 2002, 4–5.
 44. P. 64. On oral origins, see Mukherjee 105–06; on the "living mother" as source of "Sanskrit tradition," Brinks 40–41, 44, 50. "Maternal" may be metaphoric: suggestively, Das traces this story to "an old family nurse, Sucheé" (334).
 45. On "Savitri," see, for example, Tharu 258–62; Mukherjee 108–09; Grewal 166–68; Sharma 106–08; Lokugé, "Introduction," xlv–xlvi; Brinks 45; Natalie A. Phillips, "Claiming Her Own Context(s): Strategic Singularity in the Poetry of Toru Dutt." *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* (2007). Web. 10 September 2014 [unpaginated].
 46. "Royal Ascetic," 70. Though critics identify this critique as directed at Hinduism (Lokugé, "Introduction," xlvii; Foss, 166–67; Brinks 41–42), Christian asceticism seems no less vulnerable (Guptara 56–60; Mehrotra 2014, 2–5). On "Buttoo," see Mukherjee 107; Brinks 40, 44. Closer reading

- seems likely to render all these texts more, not less, controversial: see, for example, Brinks on “The Legend of Dhruva” and “Sindhu” (41–43).
47. The Tennysonian echoes of “Jogadhya Uma,” like the Wordsworthian cadence of “Sindhu,” underscore this likelihood (Das 334; Mukherjee 114, n. 41; see also Alexander 14.
 48. Pp. 122–23. See Lokugé, “Introduction,” xlvi; and, in contrast, Brinks 45.
 49. From its opening epigraphic transformation of Schiller’s “Sie brachte Blumen” (“She brought flowers”) into “Ich bringe Blumen” (“I bring flowers”), to the disquieting invocation of flowers and flower-gathering in its “Concluding Sonnet,” *Sheaf* underscores the seriousness of its title metaphor.
 50. Das 167; see 70; Brinks 51; 54–57; Chapman 599–605.
 51. On “Sonnet. – The Lotus,” see esp. Lokugé, “Introduction,” xliii–xliv; Phillips [unpaginated]. A reading of “Sonnet. – Baumaree” most immediately grounds Chapman’s call for positioning Toru Dutt “at the centre of British Victorian poetry” (605; see 600–05); see, too, Brinks, 55–57; Phillips [unpaginated]; Gibson, 302.
 52. Pp. 137, 138; see Grewal, 175–76; Lootens, 2005, 300–05; Mund 188–89; Gibson 302–03

Poetry of the Everyday: Comic Verse in the Nineteenth Century

Máire ní Fhlathúin

The Nature of the Corpus

When David Lester Richardson compiled the “British-Indian Poetry” section of his *Selections from the British Poets* (the first attempt to anthologize the poetry of British India) in 1840, he included no comic poetry.¹ Despite the fact that humorous verse, satire, and parody had been the staple of the occasional verse published so regularly in newspapers and periodicals, it was only by the turn of century that comic verse was recognized to have formed a substantial and recognizable part of this corpus, meriting a named chapter in one of the first studies of Anglo-Indian literature, E. F. Oaten’s *A Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature* (1908).² In terms of production, the poetry follows the normal pattern of prose of the same period, in that it is written by elite writers rather than the working-class; however, it is highly gendered, since – unlike prose and other forms of poetry – almost all the comic poetry that I am aware of was written by men.³ Analyzing a selection of poems drawn from across the nineteenth century that respond to India and/or the British presence in India in some way, this chapter scrutinizes the literary forms used by the poets, their chosen subjects and treatment of these subjects, and the ways in which their representation of British India is inflected by and sustains their perception of the exile community as distinct from both the “home” society of Britain and the colony.⁴ It also traces a chronological development within this body of work, as earlier texts – roughly speaking, those produced before the rebellion of 1857 – describe the plight of the individual seeking to come to terms with life in India, while later poems focus on the role of individuals within the larger community, identifying and censuring acts of transgression or nonconformity, and thus drawing and policing the boundaries of British society in India.

Literary Form

The subject matter of these poems, the location of the writers in a small community in exile, and the forms of these comic works (largely satires and pastiches) are interlinked. Adaptation of metropolitan source-texts is a favored technique throughout the nineteenth century, but particularly so in the 1820s and 1830s, when Byronic satire became popular. “Rinaldo, or the Incipient Judge” (1820), Charles D’Oyly’s *Tom Raw, the Griffin* (1828), and others use the model of *Don Juan* (1819) to describe the career of a disaffected employee of the East India Company and his attempts to negotiate life in India.⁵ (Henry Derozio’s *Don Juanics* (1825) is described by Mary Ellis Gibson as “imitative” both of Byron and of these East India Company satires, and lies outwith the scope of this essay.⁶) Similarly, Thomas Moore’s *Fudge Family in Paris* (1818) provides the model for “A Letter from Sir Anthony Fudge to his Friend, Sir Gabriel” (1820), which depicts the trials of a Ganges voyage, and offers a sardonic account of the usefulness of languages learned at the College and details of the “squabble for rank, and precedence of place” among the British community.⁷ The misunderstood hero of these works becomes a vehicle for the exiles’ shared experience of alienation.

Metropolitan works originally serious in intent also became source material for comic poets. The “Hours of Imitation” series appearing in the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* (1834) is satirical in tone and includes imitations of Byron, Thomas Moore, Letitia Landon, and Wordsworth.⁸ “Satan in Pandemonium” (1836) uses *Paradise Lost* as the template for a satiric account of Calcutta current affairs.⁹ The parodies of *Lyrics and Lays* (1867) use Poe, Longfellow, and Schiller as models for poetic commentaries on the life and characters of Calcutta.¹⁰ At the turn of the century, John Kendall brings together the pairing of Walt Whitman and Rudyard Kipling in a version of the latter’s “Mandalay” titled “To Mandalay – Greeting” by “Waltyard Whipming” (1905), and thereby also signals that a writer of British India has become part of the mainstream.¹¹

Parodies of this kind, while often derivative or banal in their use of the original, nonetheless serve a complex purpose, often working to challenge the primacy of metropolitan literary forms. Roderick McGillis points out that as “most parodies target canonized works, the parody has a political function in that it makes fun of high art and its claim to privilege.”¹² In the context of British India, where the literary community is peripheral to and often dependent on metropolitan models, the use of parody enables comic poets to assert a knowledge and mastery of elite literary forms while

simultaneously distancing and differentiating themselves from the mainstream.

This is evident in the untitled lines by “A Civilian” (appearing in the *Madras Literary Gazette* in 1834) who, while waiting for the arrival of the “tappal” – or mail – “up country” is moved to think of “those lines in the *Giaour* . . . wherein the mother of Hassan is represented as looking out ‘from the gates of the steepest tower’ for her lost son.” Byron’s original passage ends with a catastrophic reversal of the mother’s hopes, as the long-awaited arrival turns out to be a messenger carrying her son’s severed head.¹³ The parody tracks Byron closely, as the “Tartar” of the original becomes the runner bearing the mail, but the lines of racial otherness are clearly and disparagingly drawn:

The nigger rested at the gate,
But scarce upheld his sinking weight.
His sooty visage spoke distress,
But this might be from weariness.

At the climax of the passage, the messenger’s burden is delivered, and the high rhetoric of the original punctured, as “He drew forth a note with an ominous thrill – / Angel of death! ’tis Ashton’s cursed bill!”¹⁴

A parallel impulse toward appropriation and disavowal can be seen in the comic poets’ response to texts drawn from the Eastern tradition. David Kopf argues that these poems are motivated by an “anti-Orientalist” contempt among the ranks of the East India Company’s civil servants for the education they received at the College of Fort William in Calcutta, based on the attitudes of Sir William Jones and his generation, whose knowledge of and sympathy for Eastern languages and cultures was by the 1820s being superseded by the Anglicist movement for the reform of India on British lines. Romance narratives from the Persian tradition are parodied in works such as “Azim: A Tale of Khorassan” (1836), which includes a satiric attack on the work of the poet Firdausī: “Ferdousi’s Epic, / A poem most insufferably long, / And if you read it through ’twould make you sick.”¹⁵ The story of the unhappy lovers Laylá and Majnūn was a subject for serious writers from William Jones onwards, but also the subject of parody, as in “A Forlorn Princess’s Ditty,” where the female protagonist proclaims her intention to take romantic matters into her own hands:

. . . if papa denies our love
I’ll run from home quite slyly,
He shall a second Mujnoon prove
And I another Leilee.¹⁶

“The Rubayat of the Discontented District Officer” (1899) satirizes at once its source text and its subject matter by using the stanza structure, tone, and themes of Edward FitzGerald’s *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1868). Echoing FitzGerald’s theme of the vanity of human wishes, and re-enacting the *Rubáiyát*’s turn to wine and fellowship, the poem casts its civil servant protagonist as essentially hopeless, while the use of a pseudo-FitzGeraldian high rhetoric mocks the professional position (“a Secretariat”) to which he had aspired:

Would but the Dak, though dimly and afar,
Hint at Promotion as a distant Star
To which my Hopes might spring, as springs at Eve
The dry Lieutenant toward the Club-Room Bar!

But ah! that Time his wheels so fast should drive!
And Age’s leafless woods so soon arrive!
Our darling Hopes that smile at Forty-nine,
Where shall they vanish to at Fifty-five?¹⁷

There is a strong anti-Orientalist tendency in this poetry, but also a strong anti-metropolitan tendency. The East is rejected (satirized) as a model, but the knowledge the poetry performs also excludes the “home” reader and strengthens community bonds. It forms part of a tradition going back to Parker’s “Oriental Tale” (1833), which responds to metropolitan critics’ demands for more material “of an Oriental character” by offering them such traps for the unwary as the deeply insulting “Soor [swine] and son of a soor,” glossed as a term of endearment, “so soft and expressive in the tongues of the East, so untranslatable into the languages of Europe.”¹⁸

The often esoteric or highly context-specific vocabulary of this comic verse, and its specifically colonial subject matter, play an important part in this process, often making the corpus virtually impenetrable to any but local readers. The author of *Lays of the Law*, for example, works with the avowed intention of writing about specific legal cases for a group of intimates: “But yet the first materials I’ll supply / For lawyers rhyming cases to rehearse.”¹⁹ The language of the poetry underscores this exclusion: it draws on the vernacular of British India, full of loan-words and local terms not immediately familiar to metropolitan readers. The deliberate misuse of these terms in contexts designed to mislead the naïve reader becomes a long-standing joke in the literature, as the poet “Aliph Cheem” observes in his creation of such outlandish misconceptions as “truculent dhoolies, / The wild tribe of Hadjees, and ice-machine coolies.”²⁰ This trope also has the obvious effect of consolidating the community of

colonizers – who are familiar with these terms and the objects to which they normally refer – and excluding those of the metropolis, in a reversal of the prevailing relationship of dependency between the center and the periphery. The category of “home” is thereby recast in the creation of new circles of addressees, challenged through satirical forms, or excluded through esoteric vocabulary.

Coming to Terms with India: The Formation of a Colonial Community

Alienation from home is also expressed through the common theme of the trajectory of disappointment. *Shigram-Po* (1821) chronicles its eponymous protagonist’s journey to India, his military training, and his service in the Anglo-Nepal war of 1815–16. Disappointment, in various guises, occurs throughout the poem: Shigram finds promotion slow and his life dispiriting, and returns to his home town of Durham, to open a shop on the lieutenant’s half-pay on which he has retired. An embedded narrative tells the story of Jack Kightly [*sic*], who similarly arrives in India “in hopes of quick promotion,” is disappointed in these hopes, and eventually hangs himself. Disappointment is not confined to the male characters: Miss Monsoon, in India to seek a husband, finds her own fortune-hunting as unsuccessful as the men’s: “For she had fifteen years remain’d, / Yet not a nibble had obtained!”²¹ Like the Byronic satires mentioned above, this poem’s main theme is the British protagonists’ alienation from India, and from their occupations there.

At the same time, many of these texts also convey a sense of alienation from Britain. The family of Tom Raw is influenced by misguided notions of Eastern splendor: the “sparkling gems of Samarcand” – an echo of the noted Orientalist William Jones’s famous “Persian Song of Hafiz” – are but one of the many “odd conceits” that lead misguided parents to send their children overseas.²² Henry Torrens’s “Ballad” “dedicated to the Junior Members of the Bengal Civil Service” represents the export of young men to India as more deliberate. These “younger sons” are directed toward India (as well as Canada and Australia) not for their own benefit so much as for the benefit of the relatives and the wider society they leave behind; any misgivings on their part are ignored: “If after all an Indian life Bill be not quite decided for, / Never mind, at any rate a younger son’s *provided* for.”²³

Once arrived in India, the “griffins,” or newcomers, are further troubled by the many comic trials and difficulties of coming to terms with colonial life. Colonel Young imagines them beleaguered by “hovering troops” of

mosquitoes who “assail / Juicy English cheek and lip” in search of “Griffin-blood.”²⁴ H. M. Parker writes at length in “Chateaux en Espagne” (1832) of the contrast between newcomers’ expectations of India and the reality that awaits them. The “Rupee tree” of imagined wealth proves a fantasy – “Has now no more reality / Than Scheherazade’s stories” – and the “Arabian tales, and travels” read by youths are equally misleading. Expecting “palmy isles,” they suffer seasickness; instead of “tropic breezes, just released / From nets of spice and roses,” they endure “a blast at East North East / Which lacerates their noses.” The representation of India here is steadfastly anti-romantic, with an emphasis on the protagonist’s encounter with the material, the repulsive, and the smelly:

He finds on the “dark blue sea” a swell
That makes him rather sickly,
The “Floating Palace” has a smell
Which few get over quickly.²⁵

This vision of the colonizer as a put-upon, miserable individual persists into the second half of the century, with the appearance of another stock character type: the long-suffering district officer. Alec McMillan’s collection of *Divers Ditties* highlights several examples of this, including “the callow young Civilian, disappointed at finding that the gorgeous East is not as gorgeous as he had expected,” and his older counterpart, “embittered by long waiting for promotion.” “Address to the Wallahs of 1869,” for instance, constitutes a warning to prospective British employees of the Indian Civil Service to do anything rather than go to India. The poem contrasts the narrator’s idealism of three years before with his current state of disillusion: he describes his low pay (stolen by servants), the heat, scorpions in his shoes, the way “my liver hour by hour expands,” the ants eating his books, fever, prickly heat, and mosquitoes. As a final indignity, the “last home mail brought out the news / My Maud had wed that blockhead Snooks.”²⁶ McMillan’s civil servants are disappointment personified:

Dull drag the days in a station drear,
Dead are the dreams that pleased langsyne,
Dead and buried, and I sit here
A moody rhymer at Forty Year.²⁷

If we accept James Barron’s description of humor as “akin to sublimation, a transformation and reorganization of experience,” we can posit that these comic poems rework the trajectory of trauma and alienation from “home” by creating a new community of insiders around the shared experience of

disappointment.²⁸ It follows that another concern of these poets is the maintenance of the structural integrity of this society.

Policing the Boundaries of British Indian Society

The role of humor as response to anxiety or threat – allowing the threat to be acknowledged, but simultaneously put aside or made little of – leads to comic verse becoming a vehicle for the management of anxiety about the boundaries and faultlines around and within the society of British India. These occur particularly on the differences of race, gender, and class. The relatively small size of the British community in India, its rigid social structure, and its atypical gender balance (men far outnumbered women) produced a society with particular tendencies to anxiety over gender norms and social hierarchies, a trait exacerbated by the presence of biracial individuals.²⁹ Comic poetry therefore performed a complex procedure, policing not only the boundaries between Indian, Eurasian, and British societies, but also the boundaries between different classes and genders within British society. While offering a release from anxiety, it narrates or performs transgression as a means of re-establishing order, taking delight in the antics of transgressors before enacting retribution upon them. It is therefore innately conservative in its carnivalesque form.

The collection *Indian Lyrics* (1884) gives a sense of the rigid categorization of this society along both class and gender lines. “Round Tables,” subtitled “The Lay of an Indian Bachelor,” looks back in comic nostalgia to “Good king Arthur’s ancient court,” where “no one for precedence fought,” and the round table meant all were seated on an equal level. The oblong table of Anglo-India, however, raises issues of gender – the bachelor, should he wish to sit at one end of the table, has no wife to counterbalance him at the other – and of social precedence.³⁰ The latter is invoked again in “The Burra Mem” – the title denoting the wife of the man of highest social status – where she, and the social and professional influence she represents, must be courted by all those inferiors who seek preferment:

O young Assistant Magistrate!
 Desiring not promotion late,
 Betimes present, for her to sniff,
 Unwearied flattery’s fragrant whiff:
 You’ll thrive, if you can captivate
 The *Burra Mem*.³¹

Webb's work further suggests the degree of anxiety and suspicion engendered in the British community by those who transgress these boundaries. His church-goer resists the idea of supporting missionary endeavors, for instance – "Why pay for men who earn their living / By making Christians out of Hindus?" – and sees such endeavors as actively harmful:

A Christian Bearer's mostly vicious;
And caste itself is sometimes handy;
For when 'tis lost, I grow suspicious
He'll drown his sorrows in my brandy.³²

Policing the boundaries between British and Indians is primarily done by satirical accounts of Indian people, particularly those who are seen to adopt British ways or trespass on British privileges. Henry Meredith Parker was a member of the Calcutta literary scene in the 1830s, when the Eurasian poet and teacher H. L. V. Derozio was inspiring a group of Bengali students to reform, radicalism, and rebellion. Parker was a personal friend and fellow writer, but despite – or, perhaps, because of – that his poem "Young India: A Bengal Eclogue" (1831) is a satiric account of just such Indians – partially Anglicized Bengalis hesitating between one world and another – and their attempts to navigate the inter-cultural currents of Calcutta. The poem dramatizes the clash between traditionalist and modernizing impulses in contemporary Hindu society, and in particular the students of the Hindu College, whose western-style education set them at odds with many of the tenets of Hinduism. Hurry Mohun Bhowe's high-flown rhetoric on liberty runs parallel to his eating of beef (taboo for Hindus), which throughout the rest of the poem becomes a comic metonym for western ideas, culture, and ways of life. Mutton is rejected as a compromise: he holds "in scorn the slave who takes / That middle course the chop – and shuns the steaks"; and the poem ends with a flourish as he promises his companion that "Your mind shall flutter its unshackled wings, / Spring upward, like an eagle when he wakes, / And soar at once to Freedom and Beef Steaks."³³

By the latter decades of the century, knowledgeable and affectionate mockery such as Parker's had given way to a more prevalent resentment of the increasing willingness of Indians to claim a part in their own government. "Young India" sums up this attitude in a limerick:

There was a young man of Bengal,
Who e'er was a slave and a thrall,
Till some fools from the West
Made him *think* he's oppressed,
And *now* he finds Ind is too small.³⁴

Other works by the same author carry the same message of contempt both for aspiring Indians – primarily the Bengali elite whose participation in nationalist politics was laying the foundations for eventual independence – and for their sympathizers in Britain. The latter are disparaged in “Tempora Mutantur” for their lack of knowledge of India: “An Englishman’s training commences but when / He’s far from his land, among cities and men”; and the “stay-at-home fool” in Britain is accused of “doing your best to increase / Our troubles and care by your senseless intrusion.”³⁵ In “The B.A.” the educated Bengali who turns “patriot” is motivated by his failure to secure government employment; and in “The Babu” the “babu of Calcutta” has “Britons . . . all in a flutter” with the power of his “mind – / *So acute and refined.*”³⁶ The British in India – the colonizers – are cast as the true defenders of India as well as the victims of Indian ingratitude and the willful misunderstanding of the liberal intelligentsia: in “Young India” their “sahiblog’s despot rule” is sarcastically invoked as the narrator adopts the voice of an India grasping for self-government:

Let sahibs begone – Their rule is o’er –
 Their rôle is played and done.
 Let Bhárat’s children evermore
 Enjoy what sahibs have won!³⁷

The presence of mixed-race individuals – living evidence of the blurring of the line between European and Indian societies – was also a source of tension from the beginning of the nineteenth century, when John Horsford in “The Art of Living in India” (1800) remarked upon the turn against those whom “Lady Prudery calls ‘an half-bred race’” – including his own biracial children.³⁸ This tension is evident in works such as the account of an event given the derogatory title of “The Chee-Chee Ball” (1867). The narrator dwells on the material bodies and overwhelming physicality of the dancers’ “company so numerous,” with their “scent of oil of cocoanut” and “bad perfume,” while also noting their implicit recognition of their own inferiority – his uninvited presence is welcome, he remarks, because his “appearance” proves him “one of the ‘upper crust.’” A woman is described as “a petite belle, a modest little girl,” and the narrator highlights her racial difference: “Her hair was twisted down her cheeks in many a spiral curl; / Her teeth were polish’d ivory, her eyes were very bright, / And the little thing look’d blacker from being dress’d in white.” These qualities are transferred to her male companion, feminized

and made childish as she is – “And ever as I saw this girl I mark’d a little man / Whom lovingly she ogled behind her pretty fan” – the effect, in total, is to underline their otherness, but also their ludicrous and repellent nature.³⁹ While the Eurasians of this poem appear to accept their lowly position, those who do not are given a harsher treatment by other poets, as with the protagonist of “Snooks, EAC” (1899), of whom the narrator remarks that he, one of “inferior service, and sub-fuscous hue, / Talks louder and bigger than I, Sir, or You.” Snooks’s pretensions lead to his ruin in the end, as he is transferred to “Jehenumabad” (Helltown) with the “fever and aches, / For cholera, scorpions, typhoid and snakes.”⁴⁰

Other instances of Eurasian and white British communities turning antagonistic are to be found in texts that raise the specter of sexual predation on white women. “Cardozo, the Half-Caste” (1879) invokes a stereotypical sexual threat to British men through the Eurasian man’s interest in British women. Cardozo is motivated by ambition and revenge, traveling to London and passing himself off as a Spaniard, “De Cardozo.” There he finds a family with eight daughters, who are “not over-squeamish as to skin”: “A ‘De’s a ‘De,’ and gold is gold, and his he freely spent / And people didn’t ask him for the proofs of his descent.” In a now-familiar twist, he is defeated by the local knowledge of “Lieutenant Smith, a cousin, *who to India had been,*” and is forced to abandon his quest.⁴¹

The reversal of the gaze also proves the downfall of the Parsi protagonist of “The Jollipore Ball” (1871), who has a “restless, inquisitive, hungry eye, / Which nothing could pass unscrutinized by!” The wealth of Parsi entrepreneurs gave them social status and agency in colonial Bombay; but they could also, as this poem demonstrates, be seen by their British contemporaries as encroaching on British prerogatives. The British community profit by the Parsi’s social aspirations, and are happy to drink his champagne, and turn out in numbers to his ball. Disaster ensues for him, however, as his scrutiny of the dancers, and his attempt to assert his own proprietorial rights to the occasion (“I gave dis Ball, sare, I’ve come (*hic*) to see / B’ut’ful Ladies, bare necks, (*hic*) white arms! – *He, he!*”), brings about a hostile British response. He is dragged from the room and thrown into a nearby tank, while the British revelers continue to dance.⁴²

While British women thus constitute a weak point in the barrier between British India and other societies, they were also targets of satire in themselves. In India, as in Britain, particular categories of women were singled out: the series “Sketches of Character in the East,” by the pseudonymous “Cawdor of the Cloud” instances first the woman who reads poetry, and then the “Bluestocking.”⁴³ In a society where men outnumbered

women, the single woman was an object of both desire and suspicion. The appearance of this figure – described by Emma Roberts as subject to pressure to marry because her presence in the house is intolerable to her married relatives – is greeted by misogynistic reflections on her presumed predatory intentions.⁴⁴ “On a Flirt” (1822), for instance, represents the single woman as setting a trap for potential husbands, but remarks that “Since her charms were out of date, / The trap has been without a bait.”⁴⁵ After a lull at mid-century, when the outbreak of rebellion resulted in British women being represented predominantly as victimized heroines, the designing spinster returns in the latter decades.⁴⁶ “Arabella Green; or, the Mercenary Spin” (1873) relates how Arabella and her mother plot from her early childhood to make her attractive to men in anticipation of finding a wealthy husband. On her arrival in India, she turns down many suitors, including some “real substantial offers,” but fails to attract any “Brigadiers” or others who meet her standards. The poem dwells gleefully on her advancing years, as her mouth “gets pinched” and her nose becomes beak-like; and her subsequent departure from India, still single, is held up as a warning to other “spins.”⁴⁷ In similar vein, “Song of the Ancient Spin” (1895) points the same moral, as the desperate, aging woman buys human hair to supplement her own, and is termed the “station hack.” The blame for her situation is assigned firmly to herself, as the narrator insists that her “dreams were of riches and place” and she “waited, alas! too long” for a man of higher status than the one who had made her an offer.⁴⁸ These poems, with their narrative of over-reaching female ambition, identify and counter the situational agency of women who find themselves in a position to choose between men. The miserable fate of such women reinstates patriarchal dominance through the medium of humor.

The comic situations of Rudyard Kipling’s *Departmental Ditties* (1886), by contrast, offer powerful women as part of their inversion of the norm. In “Army Headquarters,” Ahasuerus Jenkins is incompetent in his role, but protected by his admirer “Cornelia Agrippina, who was musical and fat.” Cornelia is indisputably the source of power: she “controlled a humble husband, who, in turn, controlled a Dept. / Where Cornelia Agrippina’s human singing-birds were kept.”⁴⁹ Potiphar Gubbins, of the poem “Study of an Elevation in Indian Ink,” similarly succeeds through his marriage to “Lovely Mehitabel Lee.”⁵⁰ This genre reaches its apotheosis when the woman’s exercise of power can be turned back upon herself, as in “The Post that Fitted.” Here, Sleary’s engagement to Minnie Boffkin brings him to the pinnacle of his ambition, the post of “Something somewhere on the Bombay side.” Having achieved this position, he fakes “epileptic fits” to get

Minnie to release him from his engagement so that he can marry his true love, Carrie. The poem invites the reader to enter into the delight of Sleary's plan, and his enthusiastic deployment of soap to give the impression of seizures, while Minnie's disappointment is passed over and her mother's discomfort positively relished: "Year by year, in pious patience, vengeful Mrs. Boffkin sits / Waiting for the Sleary babies to develop Sleary's fits."⁵¹

Poetry of the Everyday

The comic poetry of British India is, above all else, quotidian: it chronicles the everyday lives and preoccupations of the writers and their readers, and ignores – or satirically rejects – any association with the romantic East of metropolitan literature and of Orientalist scholarship. Collecting his own poetry about India, H. M. Parker introduced the section titled "Orientalisms" with a warning to the reader that these "realms of Orientalism" have nothing in common with "those made glorious and gorgeous by Lord Byron and Thomas Moore"; he writes instead of "the simple prosaic East of this every day world."⁵² Viewed as a whole, the poems discussed in this essay fall into the same category: they take as their subject matter the daily tasks and interactions of British India, and present these to the reader as the ordinary material of life in the colony.

That "simple prosaic East" is also, however, a version of India that makes its own case for continued British colonial intervention. This is apparent even in such banal texts as "The Great Rent Case" (1867), which offers the contemporary audience of Calcutta a barely fictionalized representation of a real court case. The poem introduces the fifteen judges of the High Court in Calcutta under transparent pseudonyms, from "P. Coccus" (Chief Justice Sir Barnes Peacock) to "Sambo Niger" (the first Indian judge appointed to the court, Sumboo Nath Pandit, his presence "A sop to the Bengallee, / To English minds a wrench"). As British and Indian judges sit as apparent equals on the bench, the poem offers a depiction of India that emphasizes its material poverty, its "otherness" to the British and its dependence on the colonial administration; while the derogatory reference to "baboo" (the Bengali middle classes) counters the rise of Indian self-determination:

From paddy fields and jungle
Where snakes and jackals sport;
From talook and from village

Where naked urchins play;
 From hut and from cutcherry
 Where suitors bribe their way;
 From where the dirty buffaloes
 Through muddy marshes roam,
 As greasy and as dirty
 As baboos are at home;
 From many a “country garden,”
 From many a city slum –
 To hear the Rent Case judgments
 The swarthy Natives come.⁵³

These poems, though apparently naïve in their representation of India, encode a vision whereby British society in India is both regarded with disaffection, and viewed as the stable point in between the “home” from which the émigrés are alienated and the colony from which they are divided. They also strive to create and maintain a vision of India that justifies the British presence there.

Notes

1. D. L. Richardson, *Selections from the British Poets from the Time of Chaucer to the Present Day* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1840).
2. See Edward Farley Oaten, “Humorous and Satiric Verse,” in *A Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature* (London: Kegan Paul Trench Trübner, 1908), pp. 97–115.
3. Emma Roberts’s caustic accounts of Anglo-Indian life were confined to her prose (*Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan*), as were the observations of Emily Eden (*Up the Country*). Eliza Ryves’s mock-heroic ode *The Hastiniad* is an obvious exception, but like other texts surrounding the Hastings impeachment and the role of “nabobs” more generally, it is written from Britain and voices metropolitan concerns.
4. This means that comic poetry where the India location is more or less incidental – such as the “mournful L E G” addressed to “Miss L N” of Chowringhee – is excluded. “L E G,” *Bengal Annual* (1831), p. 27.
5. David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 222–27. These Byronic satires have been relatively well served by criticism and will not be further analyzed here. See also Nigel Leask, “Towards an Anglo-Indian Poetry? The Colonial Muse in the Writings of John Leyden, Thomas Medwin and Charles D’Oyly,” in *Writing India, 1757–1990*, ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 52–85; Máire ní Fhlathúin, “Transformations of Byron in the Literature of British India,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 42.3 (2014).
6. Mary Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), p. 72.

7. *Calcutta Journal*, June 27, 1820, p. 675. See also "Writers of the Calcutta Journal," in *The Poetry of British India*, ed. Máire ní Fhlathúin (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), vol. 1: 151–61.
8. See works by "K" in the "Hours of Imitation" series, *Calcutta Literary Gazette* (1834), including "238 –No 1 – Lord Byron – A Fragment" (p. 238), "No 2 – Thomas Moore" (p. 260) and "No 3 – Miss Landon" (pp. 276–77); also "Hours of Imitation, No 5 – Wordsworth," by DLR [David Lester Richardson] (p. 308).
9. *Meerut Universal Magazine* vol. 4 (1836), pp. 135–46.
10. Pips, *Lyrics and Lays* (Calcutta: Wyman, 1867). See "The Union Bank Shareholder and the Rook," with its defrauded shareholder resolving that "I'll be gulled – oh! never more" (pp. 49–55); also "Hiawatha in Calcutta" (pp. 81–94), and "The Boxwallah, or the Eastern Knight of Toggenburg" (pp. 35–39), where the spurned knight of the original becomes an Indian pedlar.
11. Dum-Dum, *Rhymes of the East* (London: Constable, 1905).
12. Roderick McGillis, "Nonsense," in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, eds Richard Cronin et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 156.
13. See Byron, "The Giaour," *Byron: Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Frederick Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 258–59. The line preceding the parody should properly read "gazed through the grate of his steepest tower" (l. 696).
14. *Madras Literary Gazette*, September 13, 1834, p. 316. Ashton & Co. were Madras traders.
15. "Azim: A Tale of Khorassan," *Meerut Universal Magazine* vol. 3 (1836), p. 42.
16. G. R. P. Becher, "A Forlorn Princess's Ditty," *Bengal Annual* (1836), p. 403. See *The Works of Sir William Jones*, ed. Lord Teignmouth, vol. 13 (London: Stockdale, 1807), pp 394–95.
17. S., *C.P. Pieces, and Other Verse* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1899), pp.105–06.
18. H. M. Parker, "An Oriental Tale," *Bengal Annual* (1833), p. 8; see also D. L. Richardson's editorial preface, pp. v–vi.
19. W. E. H., *Lays of the Law: Being a Selection of Leading Cases from the Bombay High Court* (Bombay: Bombay Gazette Steam Press, 1885), p. 2.
20. Aliph Cheem, "To a Griffin," *Lays of Ind*, 2nd series (Bombay: Times of India Office, 1873), p. 99. See also Daniel White's discussion of the "polyphonic" use of language by returned "Old Indians," *From Little London to Little Bengal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 162–63.
21. *Life and Adventures of Shigram-Po* (Calcutta, 1821), pp. 300–04.
22. Charles D'Oyly, *Tom Raw: The Griffin* (London: Ackermann, 1828), p. 3. Cf. William Jones, "A Persian Song of Hafiz," *Sir William Jones: Selected Poetical and Prose Works*, ed. Michael Franklin (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), pp. 186–88.
23. Henry Torrens, *A Selection from the Writings . . . of the Late Henry W. Torrens*, ed. James Hume (Calcutta and London: Lepage, 1854), vol. 1, p. 27. The "Ballad" appeared originally in the *Bengal Annual* (1836).

24. Colonel Young, "The Mosquito's Song," *Bengal Annual* (1830), pp. 312–14.
25. H. M. Parker, "Chateaux en Espagne" (first published *Bengal Annual* 1832), in *Bole Ponjis* (London: Thacker, 1851), vol. 2: 206–14.
26. Alec McMillan, *Divers Ditties, Chiefly Written in India* (London: Constable, 1895), pp. v–vi, 15–19.
27. McMillan, "'Joint' at Two Score," *Divers Ditties*, pp. 90–92.
28. James W. Barron, "Conclusion," in *Humor and Psyche: Psychoanalytic Perspectives* (Hillsdale, N. J.: Analytic, 1999), p. 219.
29. On the composition of this society, see Peter Marshall, "British Immigration into India in the Nineteenth Century," *European Expansion and Migration: Essays on the Intercontinental Migration from Africa, Asia, and Europe*, eds P. C. Emmer and M. Morner (New York: Berg, 1992), pp. 179–96. Those successively known as East Indians and Eurasians during the nineteenth century adopted the term Anglo-Indian in the twentieth century; "Eurasian" has been retained in this essay for clarity. As well as the descendants of British-Indian interracial liaisons, nineteenth-century India also contained Luso-Indian communities, the legacy of Portuguese colonial incursion. Regardless of specific heritage, the line between white British (referred to sometimes as "Europeans") and "natives" and those of mixed race, is a rigid barrier in the society of British India. See C. J. Hawes, *Poor Relations: The Making of a Eurasian Community in British India 1773–1833* (Richmond: Curzon, 1996).
30. W. T. Webb, *Indian Lyrics* (Calcutta: Thacker, 1884), pp. 173–74.
31. Webb, *Indian Lyrics*, p. 215.
32. Webb, "Church-Going," *Indian Lyrics*, pp. 167–72.
33. Parker, *Bole Ponjis*, vol. 2, pp. 223–28. See Rosinka Chaudhuri, "Young India: A Bengal Eclogue: Or Meat-eating, Race and Reform in a Colonial Poem," *Freedom and Beef Steaks* (2012), pp. 17–40; and Gibson, *Indian Angles*, pp. 128–29.
34. Ram Bux, *Boojum Ballads* (Bombay: Tatva-Vivechaka Press, 1895), p. 37.
35. Bux, *Boojum Ballads*, pp. 240–50.
36. Bux, *Boojum Ballads*, p. 38. Compare Kipling's similar contempt for the educated Bengali in "The Head of the District" (1891).
37. Bux, "Young India," p. 59. Both incomers from "home" and Westernized Indians are also the subject of satires by Kipling; see, for example, "Pagett, MP" and "A Legend of the Foreign Office," *Departmental Ditties* (1886), 6th edition (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1891), pp. 8–9; 60–61.
38. [John Horsford], *Miscellaneous Poems Written in the East Indies* (Calcutta: Hircarrah Press, 1800), p. 118.
39. Pips, *Lyrics and Lays*, pp. 32–34.
40. S., *C.P. Pieces, and Other Verse* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1899), pp. 56–67.
41. Aliph Cheem, *Lays of Ind*, 6th edition (Calcutta: Thacker and Spink, 1879), pp. 66–70.
42. Robert C. Caldwell, *The Chutney Lyrics: A Collection of Comic Pieces in Verse on Indian Subjects* (Madras: Higginbotham, 1871), pp. 5–11.
43. *Government Gazette* (Madras), September 29, 1831; October 20, 1831.

44. Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan* (London: Allen, 1837), vol. 1: 25–28.
45. *Calcutta Journal*, August 26, 1822, p. 808.
46. See, for instance, Mary Leslie's representation of the heroic Mary Wheeler and the "frantic woe" of the women of Cawnpore in "Sorrows and Aspirations," *Sorrows, Aspirations and Legends from India* (London: Snow, 1858), pp. 12–13.
47. Aliph Cheem, *Lays of Ind*, 2nd series, pp. 46–54.
48. McMillan, *Divers Ditties*, pp. 77–85
49. Kipling, *Departmental Ditties*, pp. 4–5.
50. Kipling, *Departmental Ditties*, pp. 6–7.
51. Kipling, *Departmental Ditties*, pp. 12–13.
52. Parker, *Bole Ponjis*, vol. 2, pp. 139–40.
53. Pips, *Lyrics and Lays*, pp. 134–53.

*Toru Dutt and “An Eurasian Poet”^x**Arvind Krishna Mehrotra*

I

Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghose, and Sarojini Naidu were courageous and perhaps charming men and woman, but not those with whom you could today do business.²

What follows is an atonement for what is said above.

In December 1874 there appeared in *Bengal Magazine* a short essay, “An Eurasian Poet,” by Toru Dutt. As an early example of an Indian poet in English commenting on another poet, and the only piece of criticism we have by her, it is a literary document of obvious importance. It is also the beginning of a tradition of Indian poets writing on other poets, though one that has surfaced only fitfully. For self-absorbed Indian novelists, the tradition of writing on other novelists may not have surfaced at all. A literary document carries with it the historical moment in which it is written. It is this moment, and this hitherto unexamined document, “An Eurasian Poet,” that I propose to read closely, while also dwelling on the poetic tradition that its two opening paragraphs refer to.

The essay begins, “Ah – it’s the hackneyed subject of Derozio with the innumerable Christian names again – exclaims the reader glancing at my title.”³ And glancing at the title, so the reader could well have exclaimed. Even 140 years after it was published, readers are exclaiming the same thing, with one difference. While the *Bengal Magazine* readers would have turned to page 189 and learned the truth about the Eurasian’s identity in 1874, Dutt scholars, and especially Derozio scholars, have only made references to the essay, followed by some wrong assumptions.⁴ Ironically, since Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was a Eurasian or East Indian, the contemporary terms for a person of mixed race, they have invariably presumed, “glancing at [the] title,” that by Eurasian she meant him.⁵

“Not at all,” Dutt’s essay continues:

Derozio had great talents, and he left his mark on his generation, – and I do not think he is quite hackneyed yet, – but it is not Derozio. – Is it T. B. Lawrence then? No, nor the hundred others who have written a great deal and not a line worth remembering.⁶

T. B. Lawrence is Thomas Benson Laurence, author of *English Poetry in India* (1869). But who is the Eurasian? Toru Dutt has still not said who he is, but has meanwhile told us a few things about herself. One of them is that, at eighteen, she can write with unmistakable verve, and the other is that she is not in awe of her famous precursor. So famous is the precursor, in fact, that the subject has become almost "hackneyed." But she quickly corrects herself: "and I do not think he is quite hackneyed yet." She is not in awe of Derozio, but she is not dismissive either. When she evaluates him, it is one poet sizing up another. She also knows that there is plenty of poor writing around: "and not a line worth remembering." As we shall see, a similar remark about unmemorable writing being in plentiful supply was made in the preface to *The Dutt Family Album* (1870), which featured poems by members of her family, including her father Govin Chunder. The picture of Toru that emerges from this first paragraph is one of someone who is keenly self-aware, fiercely literary, outspoken, and with a streak of mischief. There's more to come.

The second paragraph is written in the same light-hearted tone as the first:

Still less it is Kasiprasad Ghosh. I am not going to evoke the poor old man from his rest to chant the Boatman's Song to Ganga once more. Nor is it M. M. S. Datta [Michael Madhusudan Datta] who abandoned early his English muse for his Bengali, and did quite right too, for his Bengali poetry is magnificent. Nor am I going to cut up the Dutt Family Album for the editor and contributors of which, I entertain (imagine my best bow here) the profoundest respect. These are not Eurasian poets at all. They are pure Indian or Asiatic poets writing in an European language.⁷

The tone again is deceptive. What it conceals is the literature's past that, in 1874, was still within living memory. Toru's declaration "They are pure Indian or Asiatic poets writing in an European language" could not have been made – at least, not in this matter of fact way – by the preceding generation of poets, the contributors to *The Dutt Family Album*, or by the one before that, Kasiprasad Ghosh's.

II

Kasiprasad Ghosh, who had died in the previous year (1873) and whose “The Boatman’s Song to Ganga” was much reprinted in the 1830s, was Derozio’s Hindu College student and exact contemporary.⁸ They were both born in 1809. Like Derozio and Toru Dutt, he was precociously gifted and was only eighteen when, at the suggestion of the Orientalist Horace Hyman Wilson, he wrote a review of the first four chapters of James Mill’s *History of British India* (1817). It was excerpted in the *Calcutta Government Gazette* of February 14, 1828, where, in a note, the author was praised “for his acquirements in the English language,” and familiarity “with the classical and recondite learning of the West.”⁹ In the review, Kasiprasad defended the four yugas of Hindu cosmology, the caste system, and the privileges of the Brahmins, admitting at the same time that some of the things they did were indeed corrupt and had no sanction “in any of our sacred writings, nor [were they] ever practised in the ancient or more learned times of Hindustan.”¹⁰

In the late 1820s, in some Hindu College circles, an admiration for things Hindu could not have been very fashionable. It is, for instance, hard to see Kasiprasad in the company of Derozio’s free-thinking students, who attacked not just Hindu notions of purity and pollution but the religion itself:

It was at this time that some of the senior students of the Hindu College started *The Athenaeum*, a journal in which they mercilessly attacked the orthodox institutions of Hinduism. One of the students, Madhab Chandra Mullick, once wrote thus of the religion of his forefathers: “If there is anything that we hate from the bottom of our hearts, it is Hinduism.”¹¹

The forefathers were not amused. In April 1831, for his efforts to fire the imagination of his students, Derozio was fired from his Hindu College job. Rosomoy Dutt, Toru Dutt’s grandfather and one of the managers of the college, was among those who were at least partly responsible for the dismissal. Though they moved in the same literary circles, published in the same journals, and had friends in common, the socially conservative Kasiprasad and the avowedly liberal Derozio would have had their differences. And Kasiprasad was not one to forget what they were. Twenty years later, in the *Hindu Intelligencer*, of which he was the editor, he would attack the Derozians for their “evil propensities, ill-calculated to uphold society,” and frequently lampoon them:

Baby-food we now eschew,
For us ’twill no more do;

Roast beef and barbecue
 Suit us best, suit us best,
 Roast beef and barbecue

Suit us best.

("An Invite from Punch, Jr. on Behalf of Young Bengal")¹²

When he wrote the preface to *The Shair, and Other Poems* (1830), the only book of verse he published in English (and in which "The Boatman's Song" first appeared), Kasiprasad lifted the phrase that had praised his familiarity "with the classical and recondite learning of the West" and used it to express the opposite: his unfamiliarity with the very learning for which the *Gazette* had praised him. The preface, specially its first paragraph, is a mock apology for his apparent ignorance. It concludes: "[T]he Author is perfectly conscious of the imperfections which must have occurred in this little work, but for which a sufficient plea will, he hopes, be provided in the circumstances just before mentioned."¹³ While perfectly aware that, with Derozio, he was entering an as yet unnamed literary territory, Kasiprasad, in the preface, described himself as "the first Hindu who has ventured a volume of English Poems," thereby shrewdly distinguishing himself from his Eurasian teacher.¹⁴ As a Hindu poet, he was expected to write on certain subjects; as a colonial poet in English, he was expected to follow certain unwritten guidelines.

Nothing illustrates this better than the sequence of poems on "Hindu Festivals" in *The Shair*. The poems, Kasiprasad says in the preface, were his attempt to write "something by way of national poetry," thereby conflating, as others had also done, "Hindu" and "national."¹⁵ Necessarily, this "national poetry" came with Orientalist trappings, like the learned footnotes that make frequent references to the Orientalist writings of the period and are often addressed to "the European reader." But once we look outside the tradition in which he wrote, we will find that, in the poems, there are surprising turns. For example, the first line in the stanza below from "Rás Yátra" may remind us of Wordsworth's "Behold her, single in the field," but otherwise, in style and coloration, the portrait of "the Indian Apollo" and his favorite "milk-woman" prefigures present-day bazaar art. We can see it being sold on the footpath or hanging on a wall. What the bazaar artist will never be able to express, though, is Rádha's inner turmoil, her fear of losing the azure-hued god by her side. In the last line, the liquid *l* and the soft *k* sounds are expressive of her beauty, as much as the *ing* word-endings are expressive of her desire for Krishna:

Behold young Krishna's azure hue
 Is like the spring-cloud's lovely blue,
 With sparkling eyes like diamonds proud.
 And there is Rádha by his side,
 In budding youth and beauty's pride,
 Like lightning clinging to a cloud.¹⁶

"English Poetry by a Hindu" was the title of a review of *The Shair* in the *Asiatic Journal* (1831).¹⁷ While it praised the poems for their diction, rhyme, and musical quality, it began by saying:

But a few years back, such a prodigy in literature, as a volume of English poems, written by a Hindu, printed at an Indian press, clothed not merely in the English language but in its general idiom . . . would have excited at least as much astonishment and interest as a cameleopard, a pair of united twins, or even a Malay mermaid.

In a different context, this description of Kasiprasad would not be altogether fabulous; he would have recognized himself in it. Like Michael Madhusudan Datta, but also A. K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, and Jayanta Mahapatra, he was a bilingual poet, a kind of early cameleopard, or a united twin. "I have composed many songs in Bengali," he said, "but the greatest portion of my writing is in English. I have always found it easier to express my sentiments in that language."¹⁸

Bilingualism and translation have from the beginning been a part of the make-up of Indian poetry in English, as they have of modern Indian literature. It would be difficult to find an Indian writer in the nineteenth century, regardless of the language in which he or she wrote, who did not also know English, and, if they wrote in English, did not know an Indian language.¹⁹ Kasiprasad had included translations of Bengali songs in *The Shair*, and, despite what he had said, that was the language in which he chose to write his own.²⁰ But he continued to write the occasional poem as well as most of his journalism in English. Three of these English poems ("To a Young Hindu Widow," "Storm and Rain," and "To a Dead Crow"), culled from periodicals, were included by Theodore Dunn in *The Bengali Book of English Verse* (1918), and they are some of his best. As no attempt has yet been made to collect or index his work, how many more await discovery is impossible to say.

Similar to Kasiprasad's is the anonymous statement that prefaces *The Dutt Family Album*. It was probably written by Govin Chunder. The poets in the *Album*, the preface says, are "of one family, in whom the ties of blood relationship have been drawn closer by the holy bond of

Christian brotherhood. As foreigners educated out of England, they solicit the indulgence of British critics to poems which on these grounds alone may, it is hoped, have some title to their attention."²¹ Kasiprasad and the Dutt, in their prefaces, used religion and their colonial Indian education both to get their books noticed and to pre-empt criticism. And, strategically, they set their sights low, or at least pretended to. "[A]ware that bad poetry is intolerable, and that mediocre poetry deserves perhaps even a harsher epithet," the most the Dutt wanted for their *Album* was that it be "regarded . . . as a curiosity."²² The four poets who had contributed to the *Album* were Govin, Hur, Greece (their Anglicized names), who were brothers, and Omesh, their nephew. But the poems, like the preface, were not ascribed, perhaps adding to the book's curiosity. A poem in the *Album*, "No. 13, Manicktolla Street," could be the first poem in Indian literature to have a postal address for its title, and the first to mark off the sanctuary of an urban home from the rude imperial city outside.²³ While the poem, which is by Greece Chunder, shows only "A modest homestead" and "a mossy lawn," it is a visitor who takes us inside the house, where books are a substitute for the absence of offspring. The visitor was the Rev. J. Barton, who knew the family from 1865 to 1870. His wife has left behind the following recollection:

Girish Babu [Greece Chunder] was such a cultivated man, and taught his wife both French and German. One day Mr. Barton called and found them both reading Schiller. Girish Babu said "God has denied us children, so these are our children." And, turning to his wife he said "Show Mr. Barton how many of these classics we have read." She got up shyly and ran her fingers along a shelf containing twelve or twenty volumes.²⁴

The various members of the close-knit Dutt family may have been "foreigners educated out of England," but far from needing to apologize for their education, they were, all of them, ardent Europhiles, and proud to be so. And they were not exceptional.

In 1876, Edmund Gosse drew attention to the jobbing press where Toru Dutt's *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, an anthology of almost 200 mainly contemporary French poems in English translation, was printed: "At that moment the postman brought in a thin and sallow packet with a wonderful Indian postmark on it, and containing a most unattractive orange pamphlet of verse. . . . A hopeless volume it seemed, with its queer type, published at Bhowanipore, printed at the Saptahiksambad Press!"²⁵ The *Asiatic Journal* had similarly gone out of its way to point out that *The Shair* was "printed at an Indian press." In the forty-six years between 1830 and 1876,

between *The Shair* and *A Sheaf*, little seems to have changed for Indian poets. Their books remained “literary curiosities” of one sort or another. The phrase comes up often in the early reviews. These were first impressions, no doubt, and some of the reviewers went on to praise the books, as Gosse famously did: “When poetry is as good as this it does not much matter whether Rouveyere prints it upon Whatman paper, or whether it steals to light in blurred type.”²⁶ One would have thought that a man of letters like Gosse would be familiar, at the height of the Raj, with the “blurred type” of the English books coming out of India. Though not all of them were in the English language, there were according to one estimate about 200,000 books printed in the country from 1868 to 1905, which is “more by far than the total output in France during the age of Enlightenment.”²⁷

The Indian poets in English were being condescended to well into the twentieth century, but now by other Indians, who saw them as Shakespeares in saris, Shakuntalas in skirts, poets in drag, the LGBT community of Indian literature. They became curiosities of a different kind. The history of this poetry is a history of caricature – sometimes self-caricature – when the poets used self-deprecation as a form of self-defense: “My students think it funny / that Daruwallas and de Souza’s / should write poetry. / Poetry is faery lands forlorn.”²⁸ Thus, a century after *The Shair* and *The Dutt Family Album*, we get a title like Fredoon Kabraji’s *A Minor Georgian’s Swan Song* (1944). In a sign of the changed times, Kabraji – whose poetic sympathies, as the title indicates, were anti-modernist – prefaced the book with a long combative statement, “May the minor Georgian hit out?”²⁹ At the end of what he called his “fighting preface,” however, Kabraji, though a long-time resident of England and a part of its literary culture (he was a friend of L.P. Hartley and Walter de la Mare), touched on a subject that had also troubled the Indian poets before him: he was an outsider to the English language, a language in which he felt so much at home:

At last (or at least), quivering with repressed rage, you ask who I am? Let me make a present of my name to all my foes. May they puzzle out the nationality and invent all sorts of good reasons why the English language can never be the same delicate and responsive instrument to me as to the English-born in all the associations of its words and nuances, images, allusions, undertones, overtones.³⁰

Perhaps, then, there was more to the prefatory apologies of *The Shair* and *The Dutt Family Album* than mere conventionalism. The epigraph to

the *Album*, taken from Leigh Hunt, said it best: "Not oaks alone are trees, nor roses flowers, / Much humble wealth makes rich this world of ours." Or as Marianne Moore put it, "His shield / was his humility."

Given this history, Toru's statement "They are pure Indian or Asiatic poets writing in an European language" was a reflection of her confidence as a writer, a confidence that came from the small body of Indian poetry in English that had by then been created, some of it by members of her own family. Even so, her statement would not have been an easy one for an Indian poet to make in 1874; as the example of Kabraji shows, it would not be an easy one to make in 1944; or even in 2014.

III

And what about the Eurasian? It is only after the two teasing but historically rich paragraphs that Toru, finally, tells us who he is. She drops the name like a tiny bombshell:

Who then is my Eurasian poet? Comment s'appelle-t-il? He is a poet born in the Mauritius – a Creole, and his name is, – I wonder if ever you have heard it, – Leconte de Lisle.

But why after all should he be called an Eurasian poet, if he was born in the Mauritius? For this plain reason, – the Mauritius is peopled by Asiatics, – Indians, I should say, and because it is nearly as much an Indian dependency as Ceylon.

And what has Leconte de Lisle written? Not a single line in English, as far as I know, but a great deal in French, and he has achieved for himself an European name and reputation. Is it not a wonder that a Creole from the Mauritius, should beat all our Indian and East Indian poets, and acquire a celebrity in the civilized world which they have yet to attain?³¹

In the rest of the paragraph Toru mentions de Lisle's "principal works" and his contributions to reviews. Then in a new paragraph she gives her assessment of de Lisle:

The faults generally attributed to all Asiatic or half-caste poets writing in the languages of Europe, are weakness, langour, conventionalism, and imitation. From most of these defects Leconte de Lisle is singularly free. He is wonderfully vigorous, and very often thoroughly original. Not only is he very well read, not only has he meditated much, but he has that gifted poetic eye which can seize at once and extract poetry from the meanest object.³²

Racial stereotyping was an acceptable intellectual pursuit in the nineteenth century, but Toru's ideas about de Lisle's "defects" and strengths have a specific source. They're taken from Baudelaire's essay "Leconte de Lisle" in *Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains* (1861):

I have often wondered, without ever being able to find an answer, why Creoles, generally speaking, have not introduced any originality, any power of conception, or of expression into their literary productions. They might be considered feminine souls, made solely to contemplate and to enjoy. . . . Langour, graciousness, a natural ability to imitate, which, by the way, they share with Negroes, and which almost always gives a certain provincial air to the Creole poet, however distinguished he may be, these are the things we have generally observed in the best of them.

M. Leconte de Lisle is the first and only exception I have encountered. Even if we assume that there are others, he will unquestionably remain the most astonishing and the most vigorous. . . . not only is he erudite, not only has he given much time to meditation, not only has he that poetic eye which can extract the poetic character from everything, but also he has wit.³⁵

If we leave aside the stereotyping and the borrowing, Toru's balance sheet of a poet's strengths and weaknesses brings to mind Ezra Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste": "The immediate necessity is to tabulate A LIST OF DON'TS for those beginning to write verses."³⁴ The balance sheet is her Poundian tabulation, her reminder note to herself about what someone who is "beginning to write verses" should avoid (imitation, conventionalism), and what it is that she should strive for (vigor, originality). The last part of her last sentence – "extract poetry from the meanest object" – sounds more like a description of William Carlos Williams or Arun Kolatkar than of a highly regarded but now largely forgotten French poet.³⁵ It was Sarojini Naidu who introduced Pound to Ernest Fenollosa's widow in 1913 (the same year "A Few Don'ts" appeared), setting off a train of events that led to *Cathay*. But even if she owed her insights to Baudelaire, it is Toru Dutt he could have done business with.

Following this, in the next paragraph, Toru again quotes from Baudelaire's de Lisle essay, this time acknowledging her source: "Of his style a French critic of no mean repute – himself a poet – Charles Baudelaire thus writes." She quotes him, in her translation, on de Lisle's language: "His language is always noble, decided, strong, without any shrill clamorous note, and also without any false prudishness."³⁶ The last phrase is significant, and we'll see why in a moment.

These two and a half paragraphs of "An Eurasian Poet" appeared in the note to de Lisle's "The Sleep of the Condor" in *Sheaf*, but without

mentioning the essay's title, which is what later led to the misunderstanding. Prefacing the note is a comment: "Leconte de Lisle, the author of this piece, is a creole born in the Mauritius. A notice of his works by the writer of these pages will be found in the "Bengal Magazine," edited by the Rev. Lal Behari Day, for the month of December 1874. We append here an extract from the article."³⁷

The earliest reference to the Derozio essay is to be found in Harihar Das's *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt*:

Shortly after her return home, when she was barely eighteen, she published her first essay, on Leconte de Lisle, in the *Bengal Magazine*, December, 1874, containing some translations from his works into English verse. Of this essay, Mr. Gosse tells us that the subject was "a writer with whom she had a sympathy which is very easy to comprehend." *In the same number of the Bengal Magazine appeared her essay on Henry Vivian Derozio.* (Emphasis added)³⁸

It is apparent from the above that Das had not seen the magazine. From Toru's notes he knew that she had written on de Lisle; he somehow also knew that "An Eurasian Poet" had appeared in the same December issue; and he concluded not just that they were two different essays but also that, as she had predicted, Eurasian referred to Derozio. Furthermore, contrary to what Das says, the essay does not have "some translations" of de Lisle but only one poem, "The Sleep of the Condor."

The concluding paragraphs of "An Eurasian Poet," like the opening ones, were left out from the extract in *Sheaf*. In one of them she points out, in her characteristically forthright manner, her reservations about de Lisle's work: "He [de Lisle] has some heavy pieces on religion, which I have never read, and which I do not care to read for two excellent reasons, – firstly, they seem very dull, and secondly, they seem to embody views like those of M. Renan."³⁹ The "heavy pieces on religion" could be a reference to a biblical poem such as "La Vigne de Naboth," which was dedicated to Ernest Renan, or to his anticlerical writings.⁴⁰ Toru's father and uncles had converted to Christianity and Toru herself was passionate about the faith. It is no surprise therefore that she did not agree with de Lisle's and Ernest Renan's radical views on religious matters, especially Catholicism, many of whose aspects they found irrational.

In her poems based on classical Hindu myths and folk tales published posthumously in *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882), Toru is never dull. This is true of even her longest poem, "Savitri." The descriptions can sometimes be formulaic – "The soft black eyes, the raven hair"

– but she lets you know that she knows what she is doing: “All these are common everywhere.” The story is taken from the *Mahabharata*. Savitri, the ideal of Hindu womanhood (though Toru also gives her touch of the “Western” woman: “So she wandered where she pleased / In boyish freedom”), has foreknowledge of her husband’s death, but when the hour comes and Yama, the god of death, is taking him away, she is able to win her husband back from him. It’s a story of the natural meeting the supernatural, a human meeting a god, as much as it is of wifely devotion. One can only speculate what Toru would have thought of that other fictional character, Madame Bovary. In one of her letters to her friend Mary Martin in England, she updated her on her reading:

I was reading an article about the rising French novelists, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*; the principal *romanciers* are Theuriet, G. Droz, V. Cherbuliez, A. Daudet, and Flaubert and Zola. I have read a novel or two of all except Daudet and Flaubert. I must try and get hold of one or two of their works, *Madame Bovary*, or *Jack*, or *Fromont jeune et Risler aîné*, but I have not finished reading *Les Misérables*; it drags somewhat at the end.⁴¹

Toru died that same year (1877), aged twenty-one. She never got round to reading Flaubert.

“An Eurasian Poet” ends with “The Sleep of the Condor,” a poem she was obviously taken with. She gives both the French and English versions of the poem, and explains in the essay’s closing paragraph the reason for this:

I had intended to append a translation of one of De Lisle’s smaller poems to justify my praise and his renown, but it occurs to me, that translations proverbially come short of the original. Every body knows what Macaulay says about Bully Bottom and the translations of Homer, and if his remarks be just as regards translations in general – and Homer’s translations in particular – how much, ah! how much reason there is for me to fear the effect of mine! The only course open seems to be, to put the original and the translation together, that the author may not suffer from the translator’s incapacity.⁴²

Of greater interest than what Macaulay said about Bully Bottom or his remarks on the translations of Homer (about which Toru may well be wrong) is the magnificent “The Sleep of the Condor.”⁴³ It’s a poem of sexual desire, an enactment of the sex act. While all the innuendoes and *double ententes* – the “undertones, overtones,” to use Kabraji’s phrase – which are there in the French are impossible to carry over into English,

Toru, her translator's apology notwithstanding, forcefully conveys, "without any false prudishness," the poem's coital content, the moment of sexual climax it has been building up to in lines that surge, then withdraw, then surge again before collapsing, arms extended, like the condor himself:

In the depths of the heavens, on a sudden there lightens
The Cross of the South – a pale beacon that brightens;
There's a rattle of pleasure, his neck is erect,
Bare, musculous; he peers his flight to direct.
He stirs, whipping up, the sharp snow of the Andes,
He mounts the blue ether with a hoarse cry that grand is,
Far, far from this globe, by night's banner defended,
Far, far from its noise, from its strife, its endeavour,
A speck, but a speck, and as frozen for ever
He leaps in the air, with his wings wide-extended.⁴⁴

The "rattle of pleasure" is "Il râle de plaisir" in French. In English, as in French, "râle" is "An abnormal sound additional to that of respiration" (OED), but when used in a sexual context the French "râle" can hint at pleasure as well. Toru's "rattle of pleasure" has both, for in it we also hear the death rattle, the "abnormal sound," as we are meant to. Toru would have known the French euphemism for orgasm: *la petite mort*, the little death. The pleasure/pain, sex/death link is present throughout the poem. The French reader would have associated the adjective "roide" in the poem's first line, "Par delà l'escalier des roides Cordillères," with "râle," which appears toward the end. "Roide" means "stiff," as in corpse, but it can also mean "hard" or "erect." The English "steep" – "Beyond the steep ramparts of the high Cordillères" – does not have the same association. It is a moot point whether Toru had some of this in mind when she spoke of "the translator's incapacity."⁴⁵

Baudelaire's essay on de Lisle in *Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains*, which Toru both sweetly purloined from and quoted from in the note to "The Sleep of the Condor," is not the only reference to him in *Sheaf*. She quotes from *Réflexions* again in her note to a poem by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, but the quote is given only in French, and she has translations of two of Baudelaire's poems, "The Broken Bell" and "Man and the Sea." They are probably the first translations of these poems into English, and certainly the first to appear in an anthology, not that there were too many of those around in 1876. In the note to "The Broken Bell," Toru pointed out the borrowings from Longfellow's "The Psalm of Life" and Gray's "Elegy" in Baudelaire's poem "Le Guignon," to which no one had drawn attention in print before. The reference to "Le Guignon" is

gratuitous. It is not among the poems translated in *Sheaf* and she needn't have mentioned it at all, but it is a good example of how she worked, darting from one thing to another, making connections, barely able to hide her excitement:

Charles Baudelaire, the author of this sonnet [The Broken Bell], is a poet and critic of considerable eminence; but he borrows, without acknowledgement, too much from English and German sources. Look for instance at a little piece of his, entitled "Le Guignon," consisting of fourteen lines, – not put in the legitimate form of the sonnet. First you find the lines....⁴⁶

And off she goes. It was the excitement, perhaps, that made her forget she too had borrowed "without acknowledgement" in "An Eurasian Poet," and it was Baudelaire she had borrowed from.

The notes – whether illuminating, anecdotal, opinionated, or erudite, but never dull – are a riotous carnival of the world's literatures: French, of course, but also British, German, American, Indian, and Russian, with her always in the thick of things, keeping the show going. Along with her essay on de Lisle and her letters, the notes (they have been praised for their "masculinity") have some of the most animated prose written by an Indian poet.⁴⁷

Of the many poets in *Sheaf*, why is it that Toru wrote her essay on de Lisle and not, say, on Victor Hugo, twenty-nine of whose poems she translated? Given its subject – the anthropomorphic union of male bird and female continent – was "The Sleep of the Condor" her rebellion against the nascent tradition she so proudly invoked in the essay's second paragraph: "imagine my best bow here?" Did she, in 1874, when she wrote "An Eurasian Poet," see herself as coming from another literary lineage, one that she did not inherit but was of her own making? The more we ponder over these questions, the less the bespattered pigeonholes of gender, identity, authenticity, region, and nation seem likely to contain her.

Notes

1. Without the help of Rosinka Chaudhuri, Peter Connor, Mary Ellis Gibson, Graziano Kratli, Daniel E. White, and Laetitia Zecchini, this chapter could not have been written. I tapped them for published material; I also drew on their expertise, particularly Peter Connor's and Laetitia Zecchini's.
2. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed., *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 2.

3. Toru Dutt, “An Eurasian Poet,” *Bengal Magazine*, December 1874: 189.
4. Of how she tracked down this historic essay, Rosinka Chaudhuri has given a thrilling account: “I was asked, around the beginning of 2005, about the famous article Toru Dutt had written on Henry Derozio by Eunice de Souza for an anthology that she was compiling. In the National Library, Calcutta, the *Bengal Magazine* of 1874 had the November and December issues missing; indeed the printed periodical catalogue even listed it as such. In Britain, I launched an inter-library search for it through Cambridge University Library, which came to nothing. The British Library had a complete set of the *Bengal Magazine*, but in the 1874 issue, the same portion remained missing; obviously the set had been acquired in this condition. Upon my return to Calcutta, Partha Chatterjee helped by accessing the Library of Congress catalogue and the issues seemed to have been located in America, at Chicago, Harvard, and the Library of Congress, but further enquiry by Abhijit Bhattacharya, our archives officer, found that all three places had microfilms which had those issues missing – acquired at a later date, these were in all probability filmed from incomplete sources. Local enquiries at Srirampur, that houses the Serampore Baptist Missionary Library, the Uttarpara Library, and Bishop’s College Library, proved unfruitful. Just when I had given up, I found it reprinted in a journal, *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, published in three volumes from Calcutta, too late for Eunice de Souza’s anthology; there, astonishingly, was Toru Dutt’s “An Eurasian Poet.” *Derozio, Poet of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), xvi.
5. See Chandani Lokugé, ed., *Toru Dutt: Collected Prose and Poetry* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), xxiv; Tricia Lootens, “Bengal, Britain, France: The Locations and Translations of Toru Dutt,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, no. 2 (2006): 575–76; and Mary Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 218. Lokugé offers no explanation why “An Eurasian Poet” has been left out of a book that is called *Collected Prose and Poetry*.
6. Dutt, “An Eurasian Poet,” 189.
7. *Ibid.*
8. For a comparison of Derozio and Ghose and the reception of their books, see Daniel E. White, *From Little London to Little Bengal: Religion, Print and Modernity in Early British India, 1793–1835* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 120–40.
9. Quoted in Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentleman Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Colonial Project* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002), 65.
10. Quoted in Chaudhuri, *Gentleman Poets*, 66.
11. Sivanath Sastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri, Brahman and Reformer: A History of the Renaissance in Bengal* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1907), 68–69.
12. Quoted in Mrinal Kanti Chanda, *History of the English Press in Bengal: 1780–1857* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1987), 274
13. Kasiprasad Ghosh, *The Shair and Other Poems* (Calcutta, 1830), i.
14. *Ibid.*

15. This point is made in Chaudhuri's chapter on Kasiprasad Ghosh in *Gentlemen Poets*.
16. Kasiprasad Ghosh, *The Shair and Other Poems* (Calcutta, 1830), 129–30.
17. *Asiatic Journal* 5 (1831): 105.
18. James Long, *Hand-Book of Bengal Missions* (London: John Farquhar Shaw, 1848), 510.
19. See "Fundamental Bi- and Multi-lingualism," in Rosinka Chaudhuri, *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry, and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19–26.
20. According to Subal Chandra Mitra, he composed nearly 300 songs in Bengali; see Mitra, *Saral Bangla Abhidhan*, 8th edn. (Calcutta: New Bengal Press, 1984), 383.
21. Preface to *The Dutt Family Album* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1870), np.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 104.
24. Harihar Das, *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), 14–15.
25. Edmund Gosse, Introductory Memoir to *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, by Toru Dutt (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1882), viii–ix.
26. *Ibid.*, x.
27. Robert Darnton, "Un-British Activities," *The New York Review of Books* 48, no. 6 (2001): 84–8.
28. Eunice de Souza, *Fix* (Bombay: Newground, 1979), 23.
29. Fredoon Kabraji, *A Minor Georgian's Swan Song* (London: The Fortune Press, 1944), 6.
30. *Ibid.*, 13.
31. Dutt, "An Eurasian Poet," 189–90.
32. *Ibid.*, 190.
33. Lois B. Hyslop and Francis E. Hyslop, *Baudelaire as a Literary Critic: Selected Essays* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1964), 276–77.
34. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1954), 4.
35. In an inspired departure from the original, Toru translates Baudelaire's phrase "extract the poetic character from everything" as "extract poetry from the meanest object." I owe this observation to Peter Connor.
36. Dutt, "An Eurasian Poet," 190.
37. Toru Dutt, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, 2nd ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1880), 366.
38. Das, *Life and Letters*, 43.
39. Dutt, "An Eurasian Poet," 191.
40. I am grateful to Peter Connor for drawing my attention to the poem.
41. Das, *Life and Letters*, 266–67.
42. Dutt, "An Eurasian Poet," 191.

43. In her note to Arnault's "The Leaf," Dutt gives Macaulay's translation of the same poem, which she says is "taken from his Miscellaneous Writings." As can be seen from their opening lines, her translation is the better of the two, driven by the speaking voice and not by a ready-made poetic idiom: "Thou poor leaf, so sear and frail," (Macaulay); "Detached from thy stalk" (Dutt). See *A Sheaf*, pp. 13 and 338.
44. The text is from *A Sheaf*, 256–57. Compared to the text in "An Eurasian Poet," it has fewer long dashes and generally looks cleaner.
45. My discussion of the poem, especially in relation to the French original, owes everything to Laetitia Zecchini.
46. Dutt, *A Sheaf*, 367.
47. The praise is E. J. Thompson's. See "Supplementary Review" in Das, *Life and Letters*, 342.

Rabindranath Translated to Tagore: Gitanjali Song Offerings (1912)

Rosinka Chaudhuri

Almost every account of Rabindranath's English versions of his poems in *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (London, 1912) that led to him winning the Nobel Prize the following year begins with story of his discomfort with the English language. It was a story that, like much else in the critical corpus on his work, he himself insisted on shaping from the start. Sisir Kumar Das's magisterial volumes on *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* open, in Volume One: Poems, with a well-known letter Rabindranath wrote his niece, Indira, in which he reflects on the success of the translations (preceding the Prize).¹ Writing from London on May 6, 1913, he had said, in his original letter:

You have written to me about my English translations of *Gitanjali*. How I wrote them and why people liked them so much I still cannot quite comprehend. That I cannot write English is such a plain fact that I never had the pride to ever feel ashamed of it. If anybody wrote to me in English inviting me to tea, I didn't have the courage to even write a reply. You're thinking perhaps that I have rid myself of that illusion [*māyā*] today – absolutely to the contrary – that I have written in English seems to me to be the illusion [*māyā*]. (My translation)²

The translation that Sisir Das used in his volume is different from my translation above, in that in it, crucially, the word *māyā*, which Rabindranath used twice, was rendered as “delusion.” Now, *māyā* could certainly imply both delusion and illusion, and in the second instance it works, but the first time he uses the word, in the phrase “*māyā kete geche*,” it would be better rendered, it seems to me, as “rid myself of that illusion.” The difference lies simply in that the word “delusion” implies fallacy, whose synonyms may include “misconception” or “mistake,” whereas “illusion,” meaning “impression,” seems to take the reader toward pretension, and the getting rid of it thereof, which is what he seems to be

gesturing toward over here, coupled as the phrase is with the English social occasion of invitation to tea.

The larger point that this chapter on Rabindranath's English poetry in the *Gitanjali* wants to make springs, in part, from the change in the translated word (*māyā*), which leads us then to read Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* translations again in light of the fact that while he had no pretensions about knowing English well, history shows that he did not, in fact, need to know a language well in order to write creatively and successfully in it. Further, when he says "that I have written in English seems to me to be the illusion," that statement should be read for what it was: a declaration of modesty in keeping with the manners of the time, rather than an admission of failure. It is significant that similar sentiments were also reiterated by him with regard to his Bengali writing from time to time, and that this feeling of abnegation with regard to the act of creation or composition recurs in his letters. So he writes in a letter of 1894 of his Bengali poems: "in fact, when I read my own poetry I don't feel as if I've written it – almost as if I write good poems by accident, not because I want to."³ Of his lectures in English in America in 1913 too he said much the same thing, that they were happenstance, or accidental (*ogulo daibāth lekhā hoye geche*), and we realize then that the feeling of being once removed from the success of any creative act – whether these were poems in Bengali or lectures in English – was germane to his thinking.⁴ Finally, I will attempt here to show that Rabindranath Tagore's own translations for the *Gitanjali*, surprisingly, remain unsurpassed to this day, with every remaking of the original Bengali lyrics that have tried to replicate the musicality and the mystery of the original verses failing to achieve the effect of the original translations by Rabindranath himself. This has not so much to do with the perfection of Rabindranath's own translations (to which have accrued with time, however, a recognizability that is crucial to whatever success they still enjoy today), as with the "impossibility" of translating his poetry with any conception of "fidelity" in mind, as I hope to show. His translations of his own songs and poems here, in fact, succeed *because* he deviates from a literal rendering, transcreating rather than translating, often fashioning a new poem in English, almost, out of the original Bengali source. For the term 'transcreation' see P. Lal, *Transcreation: Seven Essays* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1996). Above all, he makes no attempt at preserving their character as songs, abandoning their form when sung and rendering, instead, the poem in a new mode.

What has not been pointed out by critics so far in relation to the issue of translation, crucially, is that Rabindranath's attitude toward the English language (always figured in his own and other people's accounts as a

language foreign to him, as it indeed was) had remarkable parallels in his approach toward other Indian languages as well, both ancient and modern. Most importantly, a close examination of his creativity in the sphere of translations shows us that even if he had no illusions that he knew a language well, he had no compunction in translating from it or in writing in it, and, in the process, in inhabiting it quite completely, as I shall show here in relation to his practice. Translations from languages foreign to him and also (albeit more rarely) translations *into*, or compositions in, languages foreign to him did not always rely for their success on the comprehensibility and ease with which he either approached or inhabited the particular language.

Before Rabindranath Tagore was first taken to England at seventeen by his brother in 1878, he went with him to Ahmedabad to prepare for the sojourn. His brother, Satyendranath Tagore, the second son of the family, was the first Indian to qualify for the Indian Civil Service, and was in Ahmedabad as District and Sessions Judge, living at the time in a huge old Mughal mansion in Shahibag. Wandering the spacious empty rooms in the afternoon to the throaty murmur of pigeons, Rabindranath wrote later of how he found an illustrated volume of Tennyson's poems on a shelf in one of the rooms that served as his brother's library. That book, with its large type and plentiful pictures, he says, "was as silent for me as the aristocratic mansion itself. I could only wander among its pictures again and again. It's not as if I didn't understand a word of it – but those sentences were more like the warbling of birds than like sentences."⁵ It was in order to mitigate that state of incomprehension that he had already embarked, by then, on a determined study of the English language: "It was because I was so weak in English that I started to spend the entire day, dictionary in hand, reading many different English books." Significantly, he then goes on to say:

I had this habit from my childhood onward that, even if I couldn't understand something completely, it didn't create an obstacle to my reading. Whatever little I understood I would use to construct something in my mind, and in this way proceed apace. I've been suffering both the good and bad consequences of this habit to this day.⁶

This was a policy that served him in his initiation into the French language as well, when he read and translated extensively from Victor Hugo. Translations preoccupied him deeply at this time; he was reading and translating from Tukaram, *Macbeth*, and Kalidasa's *Kumārsambhab*, and published, within the next couple of years, translations of Edwin Arnold, Christina Rossetti, Thomas Moore, Burns, Byron, Shelley, and Matthew

Arnold, among others. Nothing if not ambitious, he demanded that his brother order for him from Calcutta a selection of books on the history of English literature so he could begin to write a series of essays in Bengali on the subject for the family-run journal, *Bhārāṭī*. Still using that indispensable dictionary, he read and, as he read, he wrote. A series of Bengali essays on Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman literature, in which he translated from and discussed *Beowulf* and Caedmon's *Genesis* and *Exodus*, followed, while his translation and analyses of European poetry in English in essays titled "Beatrice, Dante and his Poetry," "Petrarch and Laura," and "Goethe and his Lady Loves" appeared in the same magazine in quick succession. Although the traffic of translation in these instances flows from another language into Bengali, which was his mother-tongue, the significance of the fact that a language need not be fully transparent to him for it to be appropriated and translated feeds also then into the reverse direction, when he composes or translates *into* a "foreign" tongue such as Maithili or English.

At around the same time that he was steeped in English books, Rabindranath found in Satyendranath's library in Ahmedabad, alongside the Tennyson, an anthology of Sanskrit poetry printed in the Devanagari script, edited by Dr. John Haeberlin, called the *Kavyasangraha* [*Collected Poetry*]. At 532 pages it was a substantial tome, and the copy preserved in the Rabindra Bhavana library in Santiniketan has pencil markings on a majority of the pages, indicating careful study.⁷ Rabindranath wrote in his memoirs, immediately following the lines on the Tennyson volume:

There was another book in the library, Dr. Haeberlin's edition of an anthology of ancient Sanskrit poetry published from Srirampur. Understanding those Sanskrit poems was an impossibility for me. But still, the sound and the rhythm of the Sanskrit sentences compelled me to walk repeatedly among those centuries-old immortal verses [*śloka*] that resonated like the sombre sound of the *mridangam* on so many afternoons.⁸

Both English and Sanskrit, then, are places that one wanders or walks through; of the first, he says: "*chabigulir madhye bārbār kariyā ghuriyā ghuriyā beṛāitām*" ["I would wander among the pictures, circling around them again and again"]; of the second: "*śloggulir madhye ghurāiyā phiriyāchi*" ["I walked around repeatedly among the Sanskrit verses"]. Both the languages are here located parallel to each other in this narration; both are equally incomprehensible, to be reached through sound – the English sentences are like the warbling of birds, the Sanskrit *ślokas* like the somber beat of ancient drums. There is no "ours" versus "theirs" here – no

native and foreign. If English was the language of another country, then Sanskrit too was of a foreign country that was one's past.

It should not, perhaps, be surprising then to recall that Rabindranath had first found his voice in poetry in the disguise of an imagined medieval poet long dead, in a language (Maithili) that was strangely obscure and archaic, tangentially placed within modern Bengali as it was spoken and written at the time in literary quarters.⁹ At the lonely age of sixteen, a year before Ahmedabad, he had read in Calcutta the poetry of the medieval poet, Vidyapati, whose poems had enraptured him. Making a careful study of the use of language in this old dialect in self-made notebooks, he had proceeded to fashion in it a number of poems that then began to appear in every issue of *Bhārati* magazine (save one) between the years 1877 to 1878 under the pseudonym Bhanusingha: "I have already written about the eagerness with which I used to read Akshaychandra Sarkar and Saradacharan Mitra's edition of old poetry. The Maithili language in which it was written was incomprehensible to me. *But it was for that very reason that I worked so hard to try and gain an entry into it.*" (my emphasis).¹⁰

Incomprehensibility, then, is an attraction rather than a deterrent. In every instance so far, the languages taken from have been "incomprehensible"; "*durbodh*," the word used in the passage above, translates also as "inaccessible."¹¹ These poems were later collected under the title *Bhanusingha Thakurer Padabali* in 1884. The difficulty and ambiguity of the Maithili dialect (a mixture of old Hindi and Bengali prevalent in eastern India) that he simulated to write these poems appealed to him for precisely those very reasons: their half-hidden, half-revealed nature, similar, he said, to the attraction held by "the seeds of trees, containing a mystery undiscovered underneath the earth."¹² He described his experience in reading those remote, ungraspable poems:

As I shed the covers one by one, I had hoped that I would spot one or two gems of poetry stored in an unfamiliar treasure house – that is what enthused me. Since I was engaged in an effort to pick out gems from this mysterious store in impenetrable darkness, I became possessed by a wish to hide myself as well in the same way in a mysterious cover in order to express myself.¹³

Here, finally, we arrive at the kernel that lies at the heart of much of Rabindranath's poetry and song – to express himself by hiding himself – to achieve summation through indirection. If the verses of the medieval poet Vidyapati are half-concealed for him, "like the seeds of trees," then those are the very seeds that contain embryonically within their encrypted

code the core of Rabindranath's poetic expression, the rhythm and magic that his poetry would convey later with such direct intensity.

Rabindranath's legendary disconnect with the English language, it may be surmised, had a parallel in the disjunction in his relationship with the Maithili dialect or the classical Sanskrit, or even the medieval Marathi, acting as an enabling rather than as a disabling device. Most standard work on Tagore's relationship to the English language has, over the last century, insisted on repeating his own story of his acute discomfort with the use of English. While that sense of unease might certainly have been true for him in day-to-day contexts, it was, nevertheless, a statement that had little or no bearing on the success or failure of his own transactions with the language in the creative sphere of the *Gitanjali* poems. A careful study of the evidence shows us indisputably that the ungraspable nature of a "foreign" or "distant" tongue had never been an impediment: neither for his appreciation of that language, nor, crucially, for his using that language for poetic compositions of great beauty and perfection. The case of his use of Maithili as well as English for creative compositions shows us, therefore, that the nature of Rabindranath's relationships to unknown or half-known languages have a crucial bearing on his eventual translations of his own Bengali poems into the English language for *Gitanjali*. (Why this remained the sole instance of his successfully translating himself into English, however, may be understood, in part, by the role played by the unconscious in the processes of translation, as I shall show below.) In order to fully comprehend the method of composition in a "foreign" or "old" language such as English or Maithili, therefore, it is essential to examine the reasons for his success in both cases individually.

In his essay, "*Chele bhulāno charā*," Rabindranath said that children's rhymes are self-born because they have risen spontaneously in the human mind. They belong to the world of shadows [*chāyālok*], they are like "so much that is trembling, swaying, moving, imminent, all around us," like "the shadow-world of the restless flow of *lilā* [play] whirling around at every moment."¹⁴ He continues a little later:

When we are quite relaxed, all those shadows and sounds that blow into our mindscape unnoticed, as in a dream, quite accidentally, sometimes incoherently, sometimes fragmentarily, building a constantly changing cloud world of different shapes and colours – if they could leave their reflection upon some unconscious frame, then we would see many similarities between them and the rhymes under discussion here. These rhymes are mere shadows of our constantly changing inner world, like the shadows of

the cloud-capped stars upon the fluid, clear lake. That is why I said they are self-born.¹⁵

Constructing, in his poetry, a literary project that is deliberately configured in opposition to the conscious, and to the self that is awake and active, he extends that analogy to his translations into English for the *Gitanjali*. In a famous letter from his houseboat many years before, he had constructed a similar dichotomy while comparing Western and Indian music:

It seems to me as if the world of the day is European music . . . a huge forceful tangle of *harmony*, and the world of the night is our Indian music, a pure, tender, serious, unmixed *rāginī* . . . We Indians live in that kingdom of night. We are entranced by that which is timeless and whole. Ours is the song of personal solitude, Europe's is that of social accompaniment.¹⁶ (words in italics are those used in the original text)

The rhymes for children, too, like Indian music being of the “kingdom of the night,” are “as strange as dreams but as true as dreams.”¹⁷ And because they arise from the unconscious space of shadows, they are disrupted by conscious ability, not enabled by it. “Even if you do not summon it, busybody ‘effort’ arrives on its own in the middle of every activity. And wherever it interferes, feeling loses its loose cloud-like form and consolidates, it does not retain the ability any more to fly with the breeze.”¹⁸ In his letter to Indira of May 1913 on the *Gitanjali* translations, Rabindranath had continued:

The English language has a number of very unstable things in it – like its *articles*, its *prepositions*, its *shall* and *will* – those cannot be supplied by common sense, they need to be learnt. I now realise that these things have built their nests like insect colonies in the underground recesses of my unconscious, my *subliminal consciousness* – when I give up and close my eyes and lie back while writing, they creep out in the dark and come and do their own work, but the moment they are exposed to the strong light of my waking consciousness, they scatter and run – so I can never, in the end, depend upon them entirely – so it remains true to this day that I do not know the English language.¹⁹

The division Rabindranath constructs in the passage quoted above between the power of the “subliminal” and its disruption in the light of day shows that creativity, for him, resides, he believes, upon “the underground recesses of my unconscious.” The English poems of the *Gitanjali* were, he seems to think, to use the word he coins for the children’s rhymes, “self-born,” spontaneously in an unconscious moment of creativity; the minute he wakes up and needs to reply to an invitation to tea using *shall*

and *will* the language will “scatter and run,” as indeed perhaps it did in his subsequent disastrous translations in *The Gardener* or *The Crescent Moon*.²⁰

Perhaps not coincidentally, the same dichotomies are mentioned in a letter on the *Gitanjali* translations to Ajit Chakravarti on May 12, 1913, written six days after his letter to Indira:

My English writings emerge out of my subconscious . . . Once I mount the peak of conscious will all my wit and wisdom get muddled. That is why I cannot gird up my loins to do a translation. I can only set the boat adrift and not sit at the helm at all. Then, if and when I touch shore I cannot quite understand myself how it all happened.²¹

As the only significant English writing he had done till then were the *Gitanjali* translations, these were what, perhaps, had been allowed to “emerge out of my subconscious,” where he let the flow of things take over. Both Yeats and Edward Thompson, ruing the terrible injustice he did himself with the later translations, attributed the failure of the subsequent books to Rabindranath’s conscious efforts in meddling with his own work (“an insult to the original” was what the latter said of poem number 42 in *Lover’s Gift*), and to his tendency to “sugar” the English versions with “pretty-pretty nonsense” not extant in the Bengali poems.²²

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“Nevertheless, the best of Tagore’s translations are still the best available.”
Buddhadeva Bose, 1963²³

The corpus of Rabindranath Tagore’s writings in English included not just his poetry, but also his plays and essays, his translations from Kabir, and, of course, all the lectures and addresses scattered across different venues of publication over the years. Of this entire corpus, translated usually from the original Bengali, the only poetry Rabindranath composed directly in English – and *in English alone* – and published as a separate volume was called “The Child.” But all the rest of the poems, which he himself translated into English from his own Bengali, are numerous enough to fill the 600 large encyclopedic pages of Sisir Das’s first volume of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* with ease, having appeared as individual books over the years from Macmillan in an “uninterrupted flow of production” which evinced, the editor of the volume felt, not only a “growing monotony of style and diction of translation but also . . . unimaginative selections and arrangements.”²⁴ Between 1912 and 1931, from *Gitanjali* (1912), *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon*, *Citrā* (1913), *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (1914), *Fruit Gathering*, *Stray Birds* (1916),

Lover's Gift, *Crossing* (1918), *The Fugitive* (1921), and *Fireflies* (1928) to *The Child* (1931), there were only a few books published that were not books of poetry.²⁵ Both Rabindranath and Macmillan's culpability was compounded by the disastrous publication, in 1936, of the *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore* in a volume that was actually a selection of translated works described by Das as "one of the most unfortunate and irresponsible publications from a reputed publisher."²⁶

Buddhadeva Bose, in an essay called "Tagore in Translation" (1963), was one of the only Bengali writers of his time to have engaged with the poetry of Rabindranath in a perceptive and informed way in the English language. While most of his outstanding literary reading dealt with the Bengali poetry, in this essay he attempted, through a close reading of lines of verse, to establish exactly why Rabindranath's poems in *Gitanjali* succeeded when translated into English. At first he follows Rabindranath's own version of events, as so many critics did, attributing the very existence of the translated poems to "an accident, a stroke of luck."²⁷ He soon comes, however, to the first poem printed in the English *Gitanjali*, of which he presents "a flatly literal translation," of which the first lines are:

You have made me endless
 Such is your *lilā* (love-play).
 You have finished me and filled me again
 Repeatedly with fresh life.²⁸

He then gives us "Tagore's English":

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou
 emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.

In the Bengali original, the lines "*āmāre, tumi aśesh korecho emani lilā taba, / phurāye phele ābār bharecho jībana naba naba*" would be heard by almost every Bengali reader with the tune of the song, set to the *Natamallār* raga in the *jhampaktala*, resonating in the ear even as the words are read. It is listed as a song of worship, *pujā*, which too has a specific connotation, but Buddhadeva locates the success of the translated poem in its last line, "*holo nā sārā kata nā yug dhari / kebalī āmi laba*," which he renders as "Through many an age it has not ended, / Ever shall I receive." In the *Gitanjali*, though, Rabindranath translated this as: "Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill." "Nowhere does the original touch the height of this line," Buddhadeva feels, exalting the translation above the original, and therein lies the reason for the poem being effective, because "its last verse suddenly gains in power and clarity."²⁹

That Rabindranath took liberties with his translations, transcreating rather than translating them, and that his English versions were, in fact, independent compositions that had only a tenuous connection to the originals has been remarked upon by every commentator. The latest interpreter to have retranslated the *Gitanjali* poems is William Radice, who has done more than any other scholar of his time to interpret and represent “Tagore” to the world. In the centenary year of the publication of the English *Gitanjali*, he presented us with a new translation of the original Bengali poems that went into the English volume, hoping thereby to take us closer, somehow, to the originals than Tagore did. Translating in a new way that he hopes “will instantly convey their song-like character,” he preserves repetitions of lines as they occur when they are sung, also indicating their four-part structure, putting the second and fourth part in italics to show they have the same melody. Sonnets and ballads are preserved as they are, and meter and rhyme are maintained. So his translation of the above line is:

You've made me limitless,
 it amuses you so to do
 You exhaust me, then fill me up again with new life
 You've made me limitless,
 it amuses you so to do³⁰

Apart from the infelicity of “so to do,” this translation works perfectly well, of course, except when compared to Rabindranath’s own “Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure,” which, for the lack of a better version, remains the best available. Further, it is also worth remarking that this no longer remains the opening line or first poem of the book, which has been rearranged to follow the manuscript preserved in the Rothenstein papers at Harvard, with the aim, as always, of bringing us “much closer to Tagore’s original conception,” to “*the real Gitanjali* [my emphasis].”³¹

“*Gitanjali*,” Buddhadeva Bose had felt in an earlier English piece he wrote on Rabindranath, “is a miracle of translation . . . [the poems] are more quiet in the English, more docile, the surrender is more utter. The Song Offerings are more of song in the original and more of an offering in the English . . . There are moments when the translation surpasses the original.”³²

In the subsequent section of his article it is possible to trace, through the close comparison he makes of the Bengali to the English, exactly why he thinks Rabindranath’s English *Gitanjali* works. Making it abundantly clear that the translations are denuded by the absence of meter and rhyme, which is “a very serious loss,” the Bengali original of “In the deep shadows

The translation into English of Rabindranath's Bengali – not only here, but also more generally – fails, inevitably, on many levels; most of all, it fails to capture the repetition of the words and the rhythm of the lines as they are spoken aloud. In their original spoken Bengali rhythm, the words work to constitute what in the context of Mallarmé was called “pure sound,” and what Barthes famously called “the rustle of language.” “Can language rustle?” Barthes asks, for it seems impossible, as in language “there always remains *too much meaning*” for that to happen.

But what is impossible is not inconceivable: the rustle of language forms a utopia. Which utopia? That of a music of meaning; in its utopic state, language would be enlarged, I should even say *denatured* to the point of forming a vast auditory fabric in which the semantic apparatus would be made unreal; the phonic, metric, vocal signifier would be deployed in all its sumptuousness, without a sign ever becoming detached from it (ever *naturalising* this pure layer of delectation), but also – and this is what is difficult – without meaning being brutally dismissed, dogmatically foreclosed, in short castrated.³⁵

Into that utopia of freedom – to paraphrase Rabindranath in one of the *Gitanjali* poems, “Where the Mind is Without Fear” – has this poem awoken; and both poet and reader are aware of the impossible nature of this attainment. Over and over again, in poems ranging from *Balākā* to *Sonārtori* to *Mānasi*, and certainly including many of those which made up the *Gitanjali* poems, this would be the unique character of Rabindranath's achievement, as he touched again and again this state of utopia where what he achieves in language is “that meaning which reveals an exemption of meaning or – the same thing – that non-meaning which produces in the distance a meaning henceforth liberated from all the aggression of which the sign, formed in the ‘sad and fierce history of men,’ is the Pandora's box.”³⁶

If the success of Rabindranath's poetry, then, “resides in the words themselves and not their meaning only,” in the resonance of the rustle of his language in the original Bengali, then to what may we attribute the success of his translations in *Gitanjali*? Why, in the end, must we concur with Buddhadeva that “nevertheless, the best of Tagore's translations are still the best available”? Buddhadeva does not enumerate why; he himself cannot quite gauge how good the English poem really is, his own “head being full of the pulse and beat of the Bengali,” but he believes an answer lies in trying to understand what Ezra Pound admired in the poem “In the deep shadows of the rainy July” when he quoted it in his *Fortnightly Review* article. He concludes that once we sacrifice “the pulse and beat” of the

Bengali (that I am calling, after Barthes, the rustle of Rabindranath's language), as indeed we must as they are irreproducible, the only way forward is for the Bengali poem to be "re-stated fairly fully; and the effect of this is considerable."³⁷ Those poems also work which are "admirably compressed in translation," as in poem 67 of the English *Gitanjali*, "There comes the morning . . .," which Pound found to be "like some pure Hellenic."³⁸ Word compression in Rabindranath's Bengali poems and songs is achieved to such effect that this skill too, in turn, serves to make the original Bengali untranslatable, but when the traffic is turned and the English poem is more compressed than the original Bengali, then a successful translation has been reached.

Radice's attempt, then, to reach some original intention of Rabindranath's when he first composed the poems, as well as to reproduce them in their rendition as song, is fated to fail. The repetition of the words and the attempt to reproduce the rhythm of the lines in the translation only work to hinder the translated poem, not help it, and any effort to present the song-like character of the verse is soon mired in a miasma from which there seems to be no waking:

I love to watch the road
 I love to watch the road
 Sunshine and shadows play,
 rain comes
 and the spring
 I love to watch the road
 I love to watch the road.³⁹

Apart from a doting parent blinded by love, as many Bengalis seem to become when faced with Rabindranath, why anybody else should regard this as poetry remains a baffling question. Yet this is the opening poem, the first poem you see of the latest translations of *Gitanjali* presented to the world; the line in Bengali ("*āmār ei path cāoyātei ānanda*" ["Just looking at the road makes me happy"]) is rendered futile in English in its jingle-like repetitiveness.

In the end, then, Rabindranath's English versions of his poems in *Gitanjali* in 1912 still remain predominant only because they are the most adequate version yet, but also for the accretion around them of the patina of time. With age, the original translations glimmer in the dark with recognizability: "This is my prayer to thee, my Lord – strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart" (Poem 36); "On the seashore of endless worlds children meet" (Poem 60); or the lines made famous

when Wilfred Owen's mother found them in her dead son's pocket-book: "When I go from hence let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable" (Poem 96).⁴⁰ Until we recognize perhaps, that there is no "real *Gitanjali*" to aspire toward endlessly, there will be no progress made; until more successful translations are accomplished in the future, there are only the old translations by Rabindranath that regain some of their luster in the context of re-readings and familiarity, which, in poetry, does not breed contempt.

Notes

1. Sisir Kumar Das, Introduction, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. 1, Poems (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994), 10–11.
2. Rabindranath Thakur, *Cithipatra* [Correspondence], Vol. 5 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Press, 1993), 19–20. All translations from the Bengali in this chapter are mine unless otherwise indicated.
3. Rabindranath Tagore, Letter 166 in Rosinka Chaudhuri (trans.) *Letters from a Young Poet* (Delhi: Penguin Modern Classics, 2014), 297–98.
4. *Cithipatra*, *ibid.*
5. Rabindranath Tagore, *Jibansmriti*, in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 9 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Press, 2003), 468.Pal, 4.
6. *Ibid.*, 358. Pal, Vol. 2, 6.
7. Prasantakumar Pal, *Rabijibani*, Vol. 2 (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1984), p. 5.
8. *Jibansmriti*, *ibid.*
9. For a detailed discussion, see Rosinka Chaudhuri, *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry, and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 7.
10. *Jibansmriti*, *ibid.*, 461.
11. The word used is *durbodh*, not *durboddhya* as one might expect.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Jibansmriti*, *ibid.*, 461.
14. Rabindranath Thakur, "Chele bhulāno charā," *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 3, p. 750.
15. *Ibid.*, 751.
16. Letter 142 in *Letters from a Young Poet*, *ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 753.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Italics indicate words originally in English. Das, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, 22.
20. Amit Chaudhuri has discussed "Rhymes to Entrance Children" (his translation), which is "striking" "for proposing a modernist argument at a time (1894) that predates modernism and is roughly contemporaneous with the

- early Freudian absorption in childhood and word-association.” See Amit Chaudhuri, Introduction to *Clearing A Space: Reflections on Indian Literature and Culture* (Ranikhet: Black Kite, 2008), 22.
21. Translated by Kshitish Ray, cited in Das, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, 28.
 22. The adjectives are Edward Thompson’s in *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work* (1921) and *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* (1926).
 23. Buddhadeva Bose, “Tagore in Translation,” *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* (1963), 36.
 24. Das, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 23.
 25. These included: *Sādhana* (1913), *Sacrifice and Other Plays, Personality, and Nationalism* (1917), *Creative Unity* (1922), *Talks in China* (1925), and *The Religion of Man* (1931).
 26. Das, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, 26.
 27. Buddhadeva Bose, “Tagore in Translation,” *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* (1963), 24.
 28. *Ibid.*, 26.
 29. *Ibid.*, 27.
 30. Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali Song Offerings*, a new translation by William Radice (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2012), 6.
 31. *Ibid.*, xii–xiii.
 32. Buddhadeva Bose, *An Acre of Green Grass: A Review of Modern Bengali Literature* (Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1948).
 33. *Ibid.*, 30.
 34. For a more detailed discussion see Rosinka Chaudhuri, chapter 7, *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry, and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).
 35. *Ibid.*, 77.
 36. *Ibid.*, 78.
 37. Bose, *An Acre of Green Grass*, 30.
 38. *Ibid.*, 28.
 39. William Radice translated *Gitanjali*, 2012.
 40. The lines that all Indians recognize – “Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high” (Poem 35) – however, is largely bereft of magic. It is a nationalist poem of good intentions, appealing to the governmental pedagogic impulse, not really a poem that gives delight in the manner Rabindranath describes at all, neither of the night or the subconscious in its purposeful and social utility and presence, and in that sense actually quite anomalous to the spirit of the *Gitanjali* poems.

SECTION II

*Publishers, Publishing Houses, and the
Periodical Press*

“Zig Zag sublimity”: *John Grant, the Tank School of Poetry, and the India Gazette (1822–1829)*

Daniel E. White

In the early nineteenth century, a vocal minority of Britons, East Indians, and elite Indians educated in English publically asserted a novel “Indian” culture in favor of free trade, greater autonomy from London, liberty of the press, and polyglot education. The period under consideration overlapped with the early years of the so-called Bengal Renaissance and saw protonationalist articulations of self-determination for Indian governance and culture emerging from several new circumstances: James Silk Buckingham’s journalistic critiques of company (mis)rule; Rammohun Roy’s cosmopolitan agendas for religious and educational reform; Henry Derozio’s and Kasiprasad Ghosh’s bardic poetry; the rise of the “Young Bengal” movement as a result of both Derozio’s teaching at the Hindu College as well as friction among various Hindu factions; and the proliferation of poetry published by anonymous men and women in the newspapers, weeklies, monthlies, quarterlies, and annuals of the day.¹ The subject of the present chapter lies in an underexplored aspect of this last cultural arena – in the comic, often satiric, and usually self-consciously bad poetry that filled the pages of the *India Gazette* newspaper and other periodicals and that constituted a large bulk of Indian poetry in English. Without making claims for the quality of much of this verse – in many instances, its badness is part of its point – I will consider the aesthetics and politics of “light reading” in the periodical press as part of a distinctively local and Whiggish modernity, as a critical and satirical spirit relatively unmoored from metropolitan authority and open to unknown political and social futures.

Before we turn to the poetry printed in the biweekly *India Gazette* in the 1820s, a brief overview of the periodical press will be helpful. From the turn of the century until 1818, the press had been strictly censored in accordance with Governor General Richard Wellesley’s Regulations for the Control and Guidance of Newspapers (1799), according to which every printer was

required to print his name at the bottom of the newspaper, every editor and proprietor of a newspaper needed to register his name and address with the Chief Secretary of the Government, and no paper was to be published at all until it had been inspected by the Chief Secretary or his proxy, with the sole and harsh “penalty for offending against any of” these regulations “to be immediate embarkation for Europe.”² Under these rules, the *Government Gazette*, the *India Gazette*, the *Bengal Hurkaru*, the *Calcutta Morning Post*, and the *Calcutta Monthly Journal* remained the major periodicals throughout most of the second decade of the nineteenth century, until a conflict unfolded due to the growth of the mixed-race or “East Indian” community and its increasing involvement in public life.³ In April 1818, Acting Chief Secretary W. B. Bayley objected to passages intended to be printed in the *Calcutta Morning Post* by its proprietor and editor, Jacob Heatley. The threatened penalty of deportation, however, could not apply to Heatley, who happened to be a mixed-race native of India and hence proceeded to ignore Bayley’s order. Because of this loophole, censorship was suspended and new general rules formulated. Censorship was re imposed by the Press Ordinance of 1823, yet after 1818 periodicals proliferated, especially oppositionist ones, in large part owing to the success of Buckingham’s *Calcutta Journal*, which was followed on the radical wing by the *India Gazette* under the editorship of Dr. John Grant (1794–1862) from 1822 to 1829.⁴ Whereas in 1814 there were only a handful of periodicals managed by Europeans and none by natives of India, by 1830 there were more than thirty European and approximately ten native publications.⁵

The *India Gazette* was by far and away the most influential purveyor of verse in the 1820s. About its editor, unfortunately, too little is known: in the words of one of the few extant descriptions of Grant, a biographical sketch in *Parbury’s Oriental Herald*, “no periodical was ever started in Bengal without the assistance of his pen. Magazines, annuals, every literary speculation in fact, from whatever party they might emanate, were indebted to him.”⁶ Unlike the *Government Gazette* or the *John Bull*, the *Bengal Hurkaru* did regularly feature poetry in its pages, but without the emphasis on original poetry that Grant brought to the *India Gazette*.⁷ Inspired by the popularity of the latter, in 1826 the *Bengal Hurkaru* launched for its subscribers a supplementary Sunday number dedicated to literary intelligence, which, under a new name, soon became the second major vehicle for periodical poetry: the weekly *Calcutta Literary Gazette* (1826–35), edited from 1829 by the other most influential figure on Calcutta’s literary scene, Captain David Lester Richardson.⁸ This

newspaper and this weekly, their editors, and their stable of contributors were responsible for the next significant development in the periodical publication of Indian poetry in English: the two literary annuals of the 1830s, Richardson’s *Bengal Annual* (1830–36) and *Orient Pearl* (1832, 1834–35), in both of which authors were more frequently identified by name, and aspirations to literary value were higher.⁹

The keynote of periodical verse was nostalgia. Predictably, the experience of exile inspired poem after poem longing for the landscapes of England and Scotland, lamentations for loves lost or left behind, and meditations on death and mourning.¹⁰ Thus, “Sonnet. By an Exile,” a typical poem by the master of the form, Richardson himself, printed in the *India Gazette* in 1823, opened by recalling “my loved haunts” – “The quiet valley, and the cheerful plain, / The still romantic Lake, and the tossed main” – and closed, “Oh! Ne’er again / Those raptures may be mine! Sickness and Pain / Have stamped their image on my pallid brow, / And on a foreign Land, where Nature faints, / Seared like an Exile’s heart, I pour my ceaseless plaints!”¹¹ Also predictably, readers of news abroad sought to remain current with events throughout Europe, which in turn furnished subjects for poems such as “Greece” (on the struggle for Greek Independence from the Ottoman Empire) and “Sonnet on the Second French Revolution.”¹² Similarly, in order to assert their place within the fashionable literary culture of the moment, numerous poets of exile tried their hand at imitations: in the spring of 1834, for instance, the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* ran a series called “Hours of Imitation,” featuring poems written in the style of Lord Byron, Thomas Moore, Letitia Landon, Henry Hart Milman, and William Wordsworth.¹³

But the better part of the poetry published in the *India Gazette* under Grant’s editorship represented a different kind of verse – one seldom, if ever, afforded much attention by literary historians – often called “light” literature or reading. As the writer for *Parbury’s Oriental Herald* put it, Grant excelled “in the departments of light literature,” and the “greater number” of his writings were “distinguished by a comic vein of the most felicitous description, sometimes sparkling with wit, at others, forming a happy union of drollery and pathos.”¹⁴ The broader context for this comic vein, which explicitly satirized and opposed nostalgia (even as Grant’s pages were open to anything, the poetry of exile included, that would sell), was a mine of humorous newspaper poetry that resisted or ignored Orientalist expectations by describing, in the later words of Henry Meredith Parker addressed to a metropolitan audience, the “simple prosaic East of this everyday world,” the “East Easty,” or “no such East as the

reader has, probably, been familiar with.”¹⁵ Foremost among such writings were Parker’s own “A Bengal Pastoral,” which appeared in the *India Gazette* in 1831 but is better known under its later title, “Young India. A Bengal Eclogue,” and Derozio’s “Don Juanics,” published in four installments in the *India Gazette* in 1825–26.¹⁶ Like these works, the satirical poetry to be treated in this chapter emphasized local Calcutta life rather than any idealized India imagined from a European outsider’s perspective, occupying, as Rosinka Chaudhuri writes of Parker, “the margins of both the English literary canon . . . as well as of the English establishment in India.”¹⁷

A Scot, Grant entered the service of the East India Company in 1816 and until 1821 served as Assistant Surgeon in the Military Department, primarily near Sambalpur in Orissa during and after the third Maratha War.¹⁸ Arriving in Calcutta in June 1821, he found his limited salary inadequate to support himself “at such an expensive place as Calcutta,” and accordingly considered various means to supplement his income: “surgeons and Assistant Surgeons holding Civil Appointments at the Bengal Presidency,” he reflected, “have always been allowed to trade, and enter into Mercantile Speculations in cotton, Indigo, building plans, shares in Banks[,] . . . Tontines &c.&c. and to be Editors and Proprietors of newspapers.”¹⁹ In late 1821 a lucrative opportunity arose when he was “invited to undertake the Editorship of the Gazette newspaper,” at the time a weekly, which provided an additional 1,000 rupees per month to his income.²⁰

Whereas in its early years, as J. H. Stocqueler recorded, the *India Gazette* was “a mere vehicle for the publication of advertisements, General and Government orders, shipping intelligence, accounts of local gaieties, details of the campaigns then rife throughout India, Supreme Court criminal sessions, amusing or silly correspondence, and extracts from English newspapers and new books,” this all changed in August 1822 when Grant, “a medical gentleman of great talent and extensive acquirements (who to this moment often assists the local periodicals with the offspring of his versatile genius), converted the *India Gazette* into a biweekly paper. From this period may be dated the commencement of its popularity and its influence on the public mind.”²¹ Appearing on Monday mornings and Thursday evenings and priced at 13 Rs. per quarter, the *India Gazette* resembled a typical newspaper of the day, with most issues consisting of eight pages printed in four columns.²² According to the sketch in *Parbury’s Oriental Herald*, Grant’s “perseverance aided by talents of the most agreeable as well as the most vigorous description, created a taste in the Anglo-Indian public which it never possessed before.”²³

What was this taste? In short, it was a taste for its own original productions, not just for imports from home. In other words, Grant did for poetry what Buckingham had done for news itself. When Buckingham printed the *Prospectus of a New Paper, to be entitled The Calcutta Journal* in September 1818, he boldly announced “a Monthly Compendium . . . to be called THE SPIRIT OF THE INDIAN JOURNALS, to contain only Indian News, whether of Politics, War, commerce, or Literature, omitting altogether the information coming to us from Europe.”²⁴ Like other colonial papers, the *India Gazette* did frequently reprint articles and poetry from the London journals, especially the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Literary Gazette*. But, under the heading “Original Poetry,” it also offered numerous poems composed “For the India Gazette.” Richardson was a frequent contributor (as “D. L. R.”), along with countless pseudonymous writers.²⁵ “We have hung the matchless jewels of *Original Poetry* in the Ethiop’s ears of our journal,” wrote Grant, stressing that the pages of the paper were open to contributions from its readers by evoking Joseph Addison’s famous lion’s head letterbox at Button’s Coffee House: “our Lion’s Mouth, if it has not *spoken*, has at least *looked* these words – ‘Walk in, ladies and gentlemen.’ Accordingly walk in they do – witness that department of our sheets usually headed *Original Poetry* – and *original* it is at least; – that the most cynical dog in the kennels of criticism must grant.”²⁶ Submissions arriving through the figurative Lion’s Mouth were then printed under the additional heading “Leonice Poetry,” an assertion of a local public sphere with its own interests and tastes.

The analogy between the *Calcutta Journal’s* emphasis on original news and the *India Gazette’s* passion for original poetry needs to be taken one step further, for both editorial positions were essentially political in nature. One of the dividing lines between those who supported absolute company authority and those who advocated for greater autonomy for local government concerned the very existence of “public opinion” in India.²⁷ If such a thing existed, separate from public opinion in Britain, then a free Indian press would be required in order to regulate local government and secure its responsibilities. As Buckingham ventriloquized the conservative line: “There is no Public in India – therefore, no public opinion – therefore, no use for an organ to express it – therefore, a free Press can do no good, and may do harm, &c.”²⁸ The debate played out in both London and the pages of the dueling *John Bull in the East* and *Calcutta Journal* in late March 1822, a matter of months before Grant assumed the editorship of the *India Gazette*. When Stocqueler described that paper, then, with respect to its literary and political allegiances, the connection he drew was more than

coincidental: its character, he wrote, ensured it “a favourable reception among those, and they are many in this country, who are fond of what is commonly called *light reading*. In its politics it is not merely strongly *Whiggish*, but approaches . . . to the *radical party*.”²⁹

In a March 1824 article for the *India Gazette* that has begun to garner attention as the literary history of the early empire in India has become a subject of increasing interest, Grant memorably proposed that

Calcutta ought to have its name changed. Instead of being called the city of Palaces, it should be denominated the city of Poets. Parnassus is no longer the haunt of the muses. They have fled to Calcutta, and the Hoogly has become the Castalian stream. The readers of the *India Gazette* cannot but have observed, long ere now, the copiousness and variety of the poetic talent which has adorned, and to this hour continues to embellish, its pages. Glad are we that our paper has been made the channel of such marvellous effusions of Genius.³⁰

Taken out of context, the article might seem to elevate local poetry in a fairly straightforward manner by placing it on familiar, classical ground.³¹ But read in the pages of the *India Gazette* in the spring of 1824, the “marvellous effusions of Genius” referred satirically and specifically to a very silly poetic competition fought out in the pages of the paper starting a year and a half earlier. One clue lies in the particular site where Grant set this new “*Augustan age in Calcutta*”: “In walking the streets ’tis ten to one but the observer stumbles against a Poet every ten yards. In Wellington-square, particularly, Poets do so abound, that straw ought to be scattered along the pathways . . . so as to prevent the rattling of chariots . . . from disturbing the heavenly meditations of the inspired inhabitants.”³² Earlier in the same issue readers would have encountered a poem by “a YOUTH FROM WELLINGTON-SQUARE,” and that was the immediate reference, but the passage also evoked a long-running joke.

It began back in October 1822 with the following letter from one “Petrarch Fitz-Tank”:

I have observed, Mr. Editor, a rich vein of a peculiar poetry among us, which has never been properly cultivated or patronized. To distinguish it by a title is a desirable thing. It comes, I think, nearer to the *Lake School* than any other I know. Consequently *we* (that is I and the other members) had thought of calling it the *Hoogly School*, but Mr. Baxter, the Plockamologist, who condescends to dwell near the fane of St. Andrew, and is reckoned an exceedingly great genius among us, disapproved of the idea, and proposed that as the most of us live near Tank Square, the Calcutta School should receive the denomination of THE TANK SCHOOL of Poetry!³³

Named after the great tank in front of the Writers' Buildings, awful Tank School poetry punctuated the pages of the paper from then on, starting with two poems by "Tim Fitz Ebony," "Lines on the Ceasing of the Rains. Saturday; 19th October, 1822" and "To My Horse Snortwell, on His Illness," the latter of which concluded, "Believe me then, thou luckless horse, / I'm *very* sorry you are worse –, / And so I ought to be, of course."³⁴ Tank School poems vied to outdo one another in their badness, and perhaps the laurel should go to "Lines to Theodora," in which "Arnolpho de Madrigal" described his lady love: "She sings like a thrush; and her hand is so small, / You could almost swear it was not a hand at all, / But a bit of a beautiful fin – sweet fish, / Thou art exactly according to my wish."³⁵

"Snortwellian Lines," Tim Fitz Ebony's sequel to his opening Tank School salvo, can serve as a manifesto for a new satirical, local, antiauthoritarian, and mobile poetics. Seeming to have recovered from his illness, poor Snortwell suddenly drops dead, but the interest of the poem lies elsewhere, in its programmatic celebration of light reading, resistance to rules (even of pronunciation), and radical politics: "I despise the trammels of measured lines, / But as the lightning plays among the pines, / With Zig Zag sublimity, so do I / Dash through the cedar groves of Po-et-ry," wrote Fitz Ebony before concluding, for the sake of readers who might ask for weightier matter, "sure I am my lines are not half so absurd / As Southey's on the apotheosis of George the third."³⁶ In another Tank School effusion, "Murmurs of an Exile," zig-zagging explicitly became the opposite of nostalgia for home: just as the title openly evoked the poetry of exile associated with Richardson and others, so did the lines, before veering in a very different direction: "Many a weary day have I sigh'd, / Since I came Eastward here to be fried; / And though I often dream of dear home, / My thoughts zig-zaggishly elsewhere roam."³⁷ In particular, his thoughts "flutter and fly" not back to a lost love left behind or upwards to an idealized denizen of the realms of Orientalist romance, but rather "About some one not far from Hoog-ly" – a resident, in other words, of the East Easty.

After a series of "Tank School Effusions" and even a Tank School Tragedy, in May 1823 "A Tank School Address to the Moon" provoked the introduction of a competitor school. In the poem, "LUNARDO FITZGLUM" cast aspersions on the chastity of "Miss Moon," who, he couldn't help but notice, would regularly grow round and full, then go away and come back much thinner.³⁸ Then, in the very next issue, a poem appeared by "PADDY O'WHACK" under the heading "Wellington-Square School," defending Miss Moon from Lunardo's "rakish strain." To this

defense, Grant appended the following editorial comment: "How fortunate for the City of Palaces to possess such two glorious Parnassian Academies as the TANK SQUARE and WELLINGTON-SQUARE Schools of Poetry! Thrice happy *India Gazette*, in which those beautiful blossoms that emanate from the Indian muses bloom so charmingly! – ED."³⁹ Soon thereafter, one "BOGIE SNUFFHIM" of Balligunge accused Grant of having accepted a bribe from the Tank School poets "not to admit *those* of the Suburbs to express their thoughts in a printed way in *your Paper*": "The Lays of Tank, / Are stale and rank, / Compared with Balligunge, Sir; / Her Poets bleed, / And you are fee'd, / My beauties to expunge, Sir."⁴⁰ It was "beautiful blossoms" such as these, emanating "from the Indian muses" of the Tank School, the Wellington-Square School, and the poets of Balligunge, that made the 1820s into the "*Augustan age*" of the "City of Poets."

It seems clear that the main purpose of multiplying poetic schools was to give readers a local story to follow from week to week and thus to sell newspapers. If Britain had its Lake School, its Cockney School, and its Satanic School, then thrice-happy Calcutta could match it, school for school. The consequence, thus far, might seem to be to project an image of Calcutta as a microcosm of home, a "little London in Bengal," as James Atkinson described the "City of Palaces" in his poem of the same name.⁴¹ But that interpretation would disregard the satire, its mock pretension to quality, bathetic adoption of aesthetic categories (such as the sublime), rejection of rules, embrace of mobility and the local, and exaltation of light reading through ludicrous comparisons to classical and neoclassical touchstones of literary value as well as currently fashionable schools of poetry. The new "taste in the Anglo-Indian public," in other words, eschewed Orientalism while pushing back against both the appetite for European imports and the nostalgic aesthetic of exile and imitation that characterized much periodical verse, and therein lay the correspondence between light reading and the radical politics of the newspaper. Instead of looking homeward, viewing colonial life only as a mirror reflecting and miniaturizing metropolitan culture, as a microcosm, this satirical and local imaginary flaunted authority by making claims for an Indian reading public that looked around, forward, and at itself, zig-zagging helter-skelter among the copious variety of light reading mobilized by the periodical press.

Did these schools even exist, though, or was it just Grant, perhaps with a few friends, making it all up? My suspicion that Grant himself was behind much of this stems from the fact that it all began in October 1822, shortly after he assumed the editorship of the paper, while its sudden end in early

1824 coincided with the appearance of a new monthly periodical from the *India Gazette* press: the *Helter-Skelter Magazine; or, Calcutta Monthly Miscellany*.⁴² The *India Gazette* put its weight behind this new magazine, running its prospectus on the front page, advertising it prominently, puffing it extensively, and, above all, using it to skewer the paper’s conservative rival, the *John Bull*.⁴³ Although no issues of the *Helter-Skelter* are known to survive, the *India Gazette* printed its contents and reproduced extensive excerpts from its pages. The magazine’s “Prospectus” appeared in the *India Gazette* on January 12, 1824, and three weeks later Grant reprinted the first issue’s “Address of the Helter Skelter Editors,” in which they expounded at some length upon their Snortwellian refusal to be bound by any rules whatsoever:

[W]hat is the plan of the Helter-Skelter Magazine to be? our readers will naturally enquire. Why the very title of the work protects us from any accusation that may be brought against us for want of order in the arrangement of our materials. Plan indeed! There is something exceedingly stiff and formal, and prosaic, in the very word, much less in the thing. Plan! it cribs, cabins, and confines the mind that pants to lounge at its ease on flowery banks of imagination . . . Plan! Gentle readers, would you put your Helter-Skelter Editors into the stocks? Would ye make them dance in fetters?⁴⁴

Instead, the editors intended “to hop, skip, and jump through our subject matter in a comico-serio, slip-shod, desultory, and, if possible, sportive vein.”⁴⁵

In this sportive vein, and in the hopping, skipping, and jumping rhythm of these sentences, can be heard the synthesis of poetry and politics that brought the periodical press in general and the *India Gazette* in particular to the attention of the government in the late 1820s. But first, it brought the *Helter-Skelter* to the attention of the *John Bull*, which took the bait exactly, no doubt, as Grant had intended. Although the magazine was described in Buckingham’s *Oriental Herald* as “The only successful periodical of the kind ever issued from the Indian press, professing to be of a purely original and literary character,”⁴⁶ the *Bull*’s editor James Bryce did not see it that way. On March 15, 1824, the *India Gazette* reprinted the *John Bull*’s “Remarks” on the second issue of the *Helter-Skelter*. “It is evidently a work intended merely for the amusement of young ladies and gentlemen, who are fond of light reading,” Bryce noted accurately enough, adding, “[but] with the entertainment afforded by the Helter-Skelter, there is mixed up a freedom of remark on moral and religious topics . . . under the mask of moral liberality and honesty, which we neither approve of, nor

mean to pass over in silence.”⁴⁷ Introducing the *John Bull*’s “Remarks,” Grant proceeded to goad Bryce by continuing to push the *Helter-Skelter* while simultaneously pretending to “heartily join in his condemnation of this without talent, common-place, radical, vile, atrocious, and altogether superlatively dull and abominable work.”⁴⁸ Alongside “Poetry” by “Leporello”/Derozio, in which Derozio, like Tim Fitz Ebony before him, attacked “pension’d Southey” for “his dear-bought laurel,”⁴⁹ a series of essays in the *Helter-Skelter* included a radical assault on royal legitimacy, raising the ire of Bryce, whose “Remarks” give the flavor of the discussion: “When we find the Editors very gravely bemoaning over ‘Kings conspiring against the liberties of Nations’ – ‘families of imbecile princes disturbing the peace of Europe’ . . . we buckle on our armour.”⁵⁰ According to the *Helter-Skelter*’s view of legitimacy, George IV was the rightful sovereign because the people were “content” to have him as their king – “a most excellent doctrine,” Bryce fumed, “to be held by your Hunts, and Cobbetts, and ———, and ———, who, whenever they say ‘not content,’ very logically infer that George the Fourth is bound to lay down his crown and sceptre and to make way for the Majesty of the People. – Tom Paine – or the Editors of the Helter Skelter.”⁵¹ Grant (who, I suspect, *was* the editor of the *Helter-Skelter*) emphatically agreed – “We trust we shall hear no more tirades about . . . Right Divine and Legitimacy”⁵² – before prominently advertising and extensively puffing the next number of the magazine, which included, along with the usual light verse, yet another essay on “Right Divine and Legitimacy.”⁵³ On the surface, there would seem to be no connection between the politics of the *India Gazette* and the light fare of poetry and prose provided by the *Helter-Skelter*, yet “[i]t is not very difficult to see,” Bryce rightly concluded, “that the Helter Skelter is to do the duties of a humble handmaid to the Whig Papers of this Presidency.”⁵⁴

By the end of 1825, the government had had enough. Back in London, the *Oriental Herald* reflected on the end of the *Helter-Skelter* a year earlier and “suspected that it was strangled by the arm of power, on account of its liberal opinions.”⁵⁵ Then a circular dated December 30, 1825 issued a “positive prohibition against any person in our Service either Civil Naval or Military Surgeons and Chaplains included, connecting himself with any Newspaper or other periodical Journal (unless devoted exclusively to literary objects) whether as Editor, sole Proprietor, or Sharer in the property.”⁵⁶ Both Grant and Bryce (also editor and proprietor of the *Quarterly Oriental Magazine*), as well as James Atkinson, superintendent of the *Government Gazette* Press, were engaged for the next three years in a losing battle with the Governing Council in

Calcutta and the Board of Directors in London. All three lost their stations, with Grant relinquishing his editorship of the *India Gazette* on March 31, 1829. This outcome played a significant role in refashioning the literary culture of the 1830s as the loosening of censorship in 1818 had in reshaping that of the 1820s. Whereas 1818 effectively brought poetry and politics together, 1826–29 rent them asunder, and while the 1820s were characterized by the cut and thrust of newspapers for an “Indian Reading Public,” which liberal and radical newspapermen such as Grant were trying to turn into “a *Helter-Skelter* reading Monster,”⁵⁷ the 1830s were dominated by periodical publications “devoted exclusively to literary objects,” in particular the *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, the *Bengal Annual*, and the *Orient Pearl*.⁵⁸ If the “Zig Zag sublimity” of the *India Gazette* came to an end in the late 1820s, it is nonetheless the case that in these circuitous byways of literary history we find a critical, satirical, and radical culture more at home, so to speak, in the East Easty of Calcutta than the poetry of exile had been or ever could be.

Notes

1. See David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization, 1773–1835* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); on Derozio and Kasiprasad in particular within this context, see Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002), 23–84.
2. See Margarita Barns, *The Indian Press: A History of the Growth of Public Opinion in India* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1940), 74, and A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed, *Social Ideas and Social Change in Bengal, 1818–1835*, 2nd edn. (Calcutta: Riddhi India, 1976), 56–57. See as well Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 115–18.
3. On the East Indian community, see Christopher J. Hawes, *Poor Relations: The Making of a Eurasian Community in British India, 1773–1833* (Richmond: Curzon, 1996).
4. D. G. Crawford, *Roll of the Indian Medical Service, 1615–1930* (London: W. Thacker & Co., 1930), 70. The dates of Grant’s tenure as editor are usually given as 1822–28, but according to “Report of the Council to the Court of Directors, dated 2 June 1829,” “Mr Surgeon Grant reported his having relinquished the Editorship and parted with his interest in the concern of the India Gazette Newspaper on the 31st March last.”
5. For lists of “European” and “Native” publications sanctioned by the British Government in the three Presidencies for the years 1814, 1820, and 1830, see *Asiatic Journal* 7 (January–April 1832): 190–91, and Robert Montgomery

- Martin, *History of the Possessions of the Honorable East India Company* (London, 1837), 164–68.
6. “Dr. John Grant,” *Parbury’s Oriental Herald* 2 (July–December 1838): 18. Grant returned to Britain on medical certificate in late 1842 or early 1843. *Bengal Hurkaru*, December 5, 1842, 3E.
 7. The *Calcutta Journal* also carried a significant amount of original poetry. After Buckingham’s deportation in April 1823, the government revoked the *Calcutta Journal’s* license in November of that year, ending its run.
 8. Mrinal Kanti Chanda, *History of the English Press in Bengal 1780 to 1857* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1987), 96. The *Calcutta Literary Gazette* had a second run some years later (1853–57). Chanda, *History of the English Press*, 98. Richardson also edited the *Calcutta Magazine and Monthly Register* from 1830 to 1833, when it became the *Calcutta Quarterly Magazine & Review*. W. F. B. Laurie, *Sketches of Some Distinguished Anglo-Indians. With an Account of Anglo-Indian Periodical Literature* (London, 1875), 189. Another literary periodical, which may have been edited by Derozio and was associated with the East Indian community, was the *Kaleidoscope*, c. 1829–30. Chanda, *History of the English Press*, 122–23.
 9. Richardson edited both, though he transferred the *Orient Pearl* to the East Indian William Kirkpatrick between the issues for 1834 and 1835. As the term of periodicals increased, so did expectations of literary value: “There is something more literarily respectable in the *sound* of a QUARTERLY, than in that of a *monthly* or a *weekly* miscellany, and thus a reader is led to expect . . . an absence of all those lighter articles which for a more frequent publication are so well adapted.” *Bengal Hurkaru*, January 6, 1825, 2C.
 10. The poetry of exile is a major theme of Mary Ellis Gibson’s *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), but see especially 127–35.
 11. *India Gazette*, June 19, 1823, 2B. Hereafter, *India Gazette* is abbreviated to “IG.”
 12. “Tumbril,” “Greece,” *IG*, June 16, 1823, 5C; J. Grant, “Sonnet on the Second French Revolution,” *Bengal Annual* for 1831, 332.
 13. “K.,” “Hours of Imitation. No. 1. – Lord Byron – A Fragment,” *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, April 19, 1834, 238; “K.,” “Hours of Imitation. No. 2. – Thomas Moore,” *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, April 26, 1834, 260; “K.,” “Hours of Imitation. No. 3. – Miss Landon. (L. E. L.),” *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, May 3, 1834, 276–77; “K.,” “Hours of Imitation. No. IV. Mr. Milman,” *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, May 10, 1834, 291; “D. L. R. [David Lester Richardson],” “Hours of Imitation, No. V. Wordsworth,” *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, May 17, 1834, 308.
 14. “Dr. John Grant,” 17.
 15. Parker, *Bole Ponjis*, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1851), 2:139.
 16. Reprinted from the *Government Gazette*, “A Bengal Pastoral” appeared under Parker’s pseudonym “Dionysius Stubbs” in *IG*, October 20, 1831, 3A, and was

- reprinted in 1851 under the title “Young India” in *Bole Ponjis*, 2:223–28, with only one substantive variant: the earlier version has Cobbett for Cobden in the line beginning “Forbid it Cobden . . .” “Don Juanics” appeared under the pseudonym “Juvenis” in *IG*, December 26, 1825, 4C–D; January 5, 1826, 2C; January 23, 1826, 4D; and April 10, 1826, 3C–D.
17. Chaudhuri, “‘Young India: A Bengal Eclogue’: Or Meat-Eating, Race, and Reform in a Colonial Poem,” *Interventions* 2, no. 3 (2000): 435.
 18. “Humble Memorial of J. Grant Assistant Surgeon (without date),” enclosed in a letter from the Bengal Council in Calcutta to the Board of Directors in London. Extract Bengal Public Consultations, July 20, 1826, British Library India Office Records F/4/912/25725.
 19. *Ibid.*
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. Stocqueler, “The Calcutta Press,” *Bengal Hurkaru*, October 7, 1833, 2C.
 22. The eight pages of each number were divided between the “Gazette,” 1–4, and the “Supplement,” 5–8. The newspaper occasionally also included an “Additional Supplement,” 9–10.
 23. “Dr. John Grant,” 16–17.
 24. Buckingham, *Prospectus of a New Paper, to be entitled The Calcutta Journal, or, Political, Commercial, and Literary Gazette* (Calcutta, September 22, 1818), 2.
 25. Among the more prominent pseudonyms that can be identified are “Bernard Wycliffe” and “Dionysius Stubbs” for Henry Meredith Parker; “Cytheron” for John Lawson; and “Juvenis,” “An East Indian,” and “Leporello” for Derozio (I am now fairly – but not entirely – convinced of the attribution of “Leporello” to Derozio). Grant played a large role in fostering Derozio’s talents, and Derozio dedicated *Poems* (1827) to him. See Edwards, *Henry Derozio, The Eurasian Poet, Teacher, and Journalist* (Calcutta, 1884), 167.
 26. *IG*, March 8, 1824, 4D.
 27. See Daniel E. White, *From Little London to Little Bengal: Religion, Print, and Modernity, 1793–1835* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 20–28.
 28. Buckingham, *Second Letter to Sir Charles Forbes, Bart. M.P. On the Suppression of Public Discussion in India* (London, 1824), 44.
 29. Stocqueler, “Calcutta Press,” 2D.
 30. *IG*, March 8, 1824, 4D. The article is reproduced in Chaudhuri, ed., *Derozio, Poet of India: The Definitive Edition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9–10.
 31. Alexander Riddiford mistakenly takes “city of Poets” to refer to “the proliferation of English poetry published by Bengalis.” Riddiford, *Madly after the Muses: Bengali Poet Michael Madhusudan Datta and His Reception of the Graeco-Roman Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 191.
 32. *IG*, March 8, 1824, 4D.
 33. *IG*, October 21, 1822, 7A–B. Baxter, a semi-literate hairdresser (thus “Plockamologist?”), would soon be elected President of the School. It is impossible to say whether the real James Baxter was party to his public role.

- In the *India Gazette* for June 26, 1823, Petrarch Fitz-Tank announced Baxter's death (3B). The death of "Mr. James Baxter, late of Calcutta, Hair-dresser," was recorded in the *Oriental Magazine* 1 (May 1823): 685, and of "Mr. James Baxter, the celebrated hair-dresser of Crooked Lane, aged 66 years" in the *Asiatic Journal* 16 (October 1823): 395.
34. *IG*, October 21, 1822, 7B.
 35. *IG*, November 4, 1822, 5D.
 36. *IG*, October 28, 1822, 5A.
 37. *IG*, February 13, 1823, 2D. Google's Ngram Viewer shows a remarkable peak in the use of "zig-zag" (and, more rarely, "zig zag") between approximately 1795 and 1840.
 38. *IG*, May 15, 1823, 3A.
 39. *IG*, May 19, 1823, 5D.
 40. *IG*, July 14, 1823, 4C. Snuffhim's second submission, in the same column, included one of the few appearances of Grant's name anywhere in the *India Gazette*, appropriately in a slant-rhymed pun: "Mr. Editor please / Your insertions of these / Few lines in your paper – Oh Grant!! / If it should be their lot / To be printed by Scott, / My thanks, sure you never shall want."
 41. Atkinson, *City of Palaces; a Fragment. And Other Poems* (Calcutta, 1824), 15.
 42. Twelve numbers were published from February 1824 to January 1825. The twelfth number, for January 1825, was advertised as published on February 2, 1825 in *IG*, February 3, 1825, 1A–B. Grant's editorial ("Calcutta ought to have its name changed") of March 8, 1824 followed one issue after the advertisement for the second number of the *Helter-Skelter* appeared in *IG*, March 4, 1824, 2A. Very little (if any) Tank School poetry followed.
 43. The Prospectus appeared in *IG*, January 12, 1824, 1B–C. It took up two columns of the front page and was then reprinted in each issue throughout the rest of the month. Another piece of evidence that Grant may have edited both the *India Gazette* and the *Helter-Skelter* is Stocqueler's description of the newspaper: "Its general 'gentlemanlikeism' of character has kept it aloof from editorial squabbling." Stocqueler, "Calcutta Press," 2D. "On Gentleman-likeism" was the title of one of the works from the second number of the *Helter-Skelter* reprinted in *IG*, March 15, 1824, 6A–C.
 44. *IG*, February 5, 1824, 2D.
 45. *IG*, January 12, 1824, 1A–B.
 46. *Oriental Herald* 6.19 (July 1825): 128. The *Bengal Hurkaru* described the *Helter-Skelter* as "being (for this country) a publication *sui generis*." *Bengal Hurkaru*, January 6, 1825, 2D.
 47. *IG*, March 15, 1824, 5C.
 48. *IG*, March 15, 1824, 4D.
 49. An essay signed "Leporello" and reprinted from the *Helter-Skelter* that has not been included in Chaudhuri's edition of Derozio's works is called "On the Art of Lying, in All Its Agreeable Varieties." *IG*, June 10, 1824, 1D–2D.
 50. *IG*, March 15, 1824, 5C.
 51. *IG*, March 15, 1824, 5D.

52. *IG*, June 10, 1824, 1D.
53. *IG*, July 5, 1824, 1B.
54. *IG*, March 15, 1824, 5C.
55. *Oriental Herald* 6.19 (July 1825): 128.
56. “Humble Memorial of J. Grant.”
57. *IG*, February 5, 1824, 2D.
58. I do not mean to imply that the poetry in these periodicals was apolitical (see W. F. Thompson’s contributions to the *Bengal Annual* for 1834 and 1835, for instance), merely that they presented themselves as exclusively literary.

*“The Torch Not the Sceptre”: Writers Workshop,
Calcutta*

Ananda Lal and Rubana Huq

In 1987, the Institute of Book Publishing in New Delhi established the Indian Publishing Hall of Fame, “to acknowledge, acclaim and honour those who have made outstanding contributions to the promotion of publishing and the cause of book culture in India.”¹ The inaugural list of inductees comprised, posthumously, Jawaharlal Nehru, K. M. Munshi (founder of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan), D. R. Mankekar (who authored many books of political journalism), and M. N. Rao (promoter of the Home Library Plan, among other initiatives, in Andhra Pradesh); and Dev Raj Chawla (of UBS Publishers’ Distributors), the Sahitya Pravarthaka Cooperative Society (in Kerala), and P. Lal (of Writers Workshop). The citation for Professor Lal read: “Writers Workshop has grown into a movement with an ethos of its own. It has succeeded in furthering the cause of Indian poetry in English despite its limited resources: a tribute to Lal’s devotion and energy. No one has been able to create and sustain a similar effort.” Yet, in 2008, when the planning started for an anthology marking fifty years of Writers Workshop, Lal shared with a researcher, “Fifty isn’t enough for anyone to evaluate the Workshop. One needs to stand sufficiently distanced from history to assess.”² Notwithstanding both the earlier encomium and his later warning, we attempt here to quantify Writers Workshop’s contribution to Indian poetry in English, beyond the self-evident fact that in those fifty years it launched over 1,000 titles, most of them poetry in English by Indians, surpassing the combined output from all other publishers in that genre.

The Beginnings till the 1960s

P. Lal (born in 1929) made his first significant appearance in print as a college student in the third issue of the ninth volume of *St Xavier’s Magazine* in July 1947, which contained his essay “In Defence of

Modern English Poetry” along with a six-page poetry section edited by him. Soon after, he started reviewing books and publishing poems in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (the nationally circulated magazine from Bombay edited by C. R. Mandy, one of the few patrons of Indo-Anglian literature, as it was then called, who also printed Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes), and writing a regular column for *Thought* (between 1954 and 1957) while co-editing the *Orient Review and Literary Digest*.³ By 1952, Lal had reviewed Ezekiel’s *A Time to Change*, brought out by Fortune Press in England, for *Thought*. Two points need explanation here: why would Lal have had to “defend” English poetry, and why was Ezekiel’s first book published abroad? In the decade after Independence, many Indians were pitching for the *Angrezi hatao* (“remove English”) movement in a knee-jerk reaction to newfound national pride. Even educated Indians considered the English language colonial baggage and Indian poetry in English as a passé and unworthy hybrid of British cultural tyranny. They regarded those using the language as an unpatriotic lot.⁴ Years later, Lal would title a book of his essays on Indian writing in English *Alien Insiders*, and would write a piece titled “The Torch Not the Sceptre: The Story of Writers Workshop” to point the reader toward the light of poetry rather than the symbol of power that the language had been associated with.

Thus, local publishing platforms were almost non-existent, and foreign exposure and endorsement mattered. Lal, at that time a young and popular teacher of English literature in St. Xavier’s College, dreamed beyond conservatism and believed that English was an Indian language. A chance encounter with K. Raghavendra Rao, a professor of English at Madras Christian College and later of Political Science at Gauhati University, led to their joint editing of the historic *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (1957),⁵ which, in Rao’s words, “became a virtual manifesto for a new kind of poetry in which the English language would be twisted and tortured to become a fit medium for poetry that could represent faithfully an Indian sensibility. It angered old-timers.”⁶ They had become the pioneering anthologizers of modern Indian English poetry.

The next year, Writers Workshop began its journey when Lal decided to set up a publishing house for Indo-Anglian writing: “When no one would publish our work, we had to do it ourselves.”⁷ He mobilized a group of seven young, like-minded, cosmopolitan Calcutta writers, tired of not being printed or noticed, to change the status quo. He later referred to this group as the “magical circle”:⁸ Anita Desai, Jai Ratan, Pradip Sen, Deb Kumar Das, Kewlian Sio, Sasthibrata Chakravarti (who soon emigrated to Britain, where he became better known as Sasthi Brata), and William Hull

(an American professor in India on a Fulbright fellowship). They nominated him as Secretary, charged a subscription fee for membership, and published themselves, trailblazing the path followed in the future by similar presses such as Clearing House. The first issue of their journal, the *Writers Workshop Miscellany* (which opened with Desai's short story "Grandmother"), and the first batch of six books appeared in 1960, two of them short story collections, by Jai Ratan and Kewlian Sio.

In order to provide maximum encouragement to themselves, Writers Workshop turned into a tight literary club where one composed verse, another wrote the introduction, and a third reviewed the book. The insular nature of the undertaking was understandable considering the conditions they found themselves in, even though their numbers rapidly increased. So, Lal introduced volumes by Das, Sen, Ezekiel, Lawrence Bantleman, and R. de L. Furtado; Raghavendra Rao wrote a preface for Lal, Ezekiel wrote one for Monika Varma, and Sen wrote one for Ira De; David McCutcheon, a professor of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, Calcutta, prefaced Lila Ray's *Entrance*. Getting William Carlos Williams to contribute the preface to N. K. Sethi's *The Word Is Split* in 1961 was a major achievement. The Workshop (a word chosen at a time when it had not become as commonplace as it is now, to designate collaborative and cooperative processes) pointed out their writers' excellence, mercilessly criticized one another's work in their weekly Sunday morning meetings,⁹ and swore by a detailed thousand-word constitution, better known as the "credo," which evolved over the decades and, in its most recent incarnation from 2010 (the year Lal passed away), appears as the last page of every Workshop book.

In 1962, the Workshop published the twenty-two-year-old Adil Jussawalla's debut, *Land's End*, and in 1965, A. K. Ramanujan's *Fifteen Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology*, long before Ramanujan became a name to reckon with. Additionally, this volume marked the Workshop's move into English translations of Indian literature, which eventually turned into one of its key domains. The year 1965 also brought Ezekiel's second collection for the Workshop (after *The Unfinished Man* in 1960), *The Exact Name*. The list of the chosen expanded to include Kamala Das's second book, *The Descendants*, and the sixteen-year-old Pritish Nandy's first, *Of Gods and Olives*, both in 1967. Both authors lived in Calcutta at that time. Nandy produced two more volumes of verse with the Workshop before establishing his own imprint. Lal discovered others from across India: Suniti Namjoshi (*Poems*, 1967), Shankar Mokashi-Punekar (*The Pretender*, 1967), G. S. Sharat Chandra (*Bharata Natyam Dancer*, 1968),

and the twenty-six-year-old Gauri Deshpande (*Between Births*, 1968). Namjoshi later became famous as a feminist author, and Deshpande for her bold and untraditional themes in Marathi fiction. All four stayed with the Workshop for their subsequent volumes of poetry.

Meanwhile, the *Writers Workshop Miscellany* (later, simply *The Miscellany*) continued under Lal's editorship to compile and disseminate the creative work of poets who did not yet have enough material for individual volumes, thereby encouraging them to carry on writing. Early contributors to the journal in this decade included Arun Kolatkar and Gieve Patel, both from Bombay – a fact requiring emphasis because of the myth, which we shall dispel through application of greater detail later, that the Bombay poets had nothing to do with the Workshop. The *Miscellany* appeared regularly – six times a year – against subscriptions of Rs. 6, three dollars, or one pound, postage free. It also served as a chronicle of literary happenings, recording authors' visits to and events hosted by Writers Workshop, while printing appreciations and criticism of other Indo-Anglian writings of that period.

Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo (1969)

The challenge facing Writers Workshop grew with the Bengali intellectuals who formed the majority in Calcutta's literary scene deciding that the days of English literature had gone with the British Empire. A strong wave of criticism buffeted the young poets. Buddhadeva Bose, one of the foremost Bengali poets and scholars of the time, a senior personality and founder-Head of the Comparative Literature department at Jadavpur University, tore into the nascent movement with passion. Rao recalls, "Bose was unleashing a vicious and vigorous onslaught on Indian writers in English. I remember having a violent quarrel with him when he visited Gauhati in the fifties to carry on his anti-English campaign."¹⁰ In *The Concise Encyclopedia of English and American Poets and Poetry*, Bose wrote that only Indians in the nineteenth century came nearest to "speaking, thinking and dreaming in English" and quoted from Yeats: "no man can think or write with music and vigour except in his mother tongue."¹¹ He famously concluded, "Indo-Anglian' poetry is a blind alley, lined with curio shops, leading nowhere." These lines prompted Lal, who viewed Bose's statement as both negative and damaging, to confront Bose through a questionnaire sent out to over one hundred writers along with a cyclostyled copy of Bose's article, requesting them to respond to his charges on the Indo-Anglian literary context, on the lack of a real

public in India, and on the extent of flexibility among the writers to change and recreate English. Seventy-six replies arrived, for inclusion in what Meenakshi Mukherjee called “probably the first major compilation of Indian poems in English,” containing selections from 132 poets and titled *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo*, a 600-page riposte to Bose.¹²

Lal’s fundamental query rested on a core issue: “Can an Indian poetry in English discharge the function of changing and re-creating [the language]?”¹³ Many of the respondents upheld the poet’s “right” to do so, while only a few stated that a poet had no such right. Some thought that Indo-Anglian writing would be more relevant in India than in the UK, as producing a modern, post-Orientalist Indian poetry in English would mean looking at the world through Indian eyes and not anyone else’s. While some believed that they just happened to write in English, some also thought that the poets who wrote in English did not have a choice in the matter. Gieve Patel felt that any discussion of even minimal complexity at home called for the use of English.¹⁴ Jussawalla had a simpler response: “The main circumstance was that I didn’t know poetry in any other language.”¹⁵ Gopal Honnalgere found writing in English easy and thought that, in order to evolve, Kannada still needed English and Indo-English poetry was “a happy catalyst.”¹⁶ Kewlian Sio, born to Chinese-Sikkimese parents, wrote that even those who spoke regional Indian languages often fell back on English words; for instance, they said “typewriter” rather than *taptapayantar*.¹⁷ Most of the poets had a bilingual mental world, their habits and thoughts rooted in things Indian, but with a greater facility of expression in English. Their knowledge of English did not imply the loss of a mother tongue, but the gain of an other tongue, which, by being an effective part of Indian life for more than a century, had become a useful vehicle of creative expression. There were also poets responding to the questionnaire who did not subscribe to the “mother-tongue myth” at all.

None of these poets wrote for either the effect or the audience. Of course, it was essential to be read, but it was equally difficult to get poems published in India as the poetry-reading public itself was small – and even smaller when it came to English. But according to Ezekiel there still existed a cross-section of Indian readership that formed their audience. Nevertheless, he rued the “lack of a real public” for his writing not only in India but everywhere else as well,¹⁸ though he was also quick to share that good writing had often been done in the worst possible cultural conditions. Saleem Peeradina thought that

“Until one can give a satisfactory performance one cannot expect an ‘audience,’ leave alone curtain-calls.”¹⁹ Thus, beset by a siege mentality that we must understand because, fifty years on, it no longer obtains, the contributors placed their convictions in print and rallied round a literary tradition that, defiant or otherwise, represented the natural flow of their creativity. Bose’s accusation of un-Indianness about a language that had stayed in India for nearly two hundred years and looked set to stay for many more was proved irrelevant. The anthology, extensively reviewed in the national press and journals, led the Workshop to formulate its influential manifesto on the role of Indian writing in English.

1970–1989

In 2000, Jai Ratan, the oldest founding member and an award-winning translator from Hindi to English, observed that Writers Workshop had become a “springboard to literary fame”²⁰ as it had promoted many new writers who were dominating the literary roadmap. The Workshop’s journey, as Lal said, had a sole goal: to make names known rather than print well-known names. Unpublished, unknown poets turned to Writers Workshop; this was its core value to the literary scene. For such purposes, funding clearly posed a problem. By 1970 Lal had become the de-facto sole proprietor, as most of the original circle gradually left Calcutta for career reasons. Confronted by the realistic possibility of having to close down the Workshop since he could not bear the expenses on his meager professor’s salary, he devised alternative means. In 1962, William Hull had facilitated a one-year “Special Professor” position for Lal at Hofstra University, New York. From 1968, invitations came from other American universities too, and Lal realized that he could capitalize on the favorable foreign-exchange rate to bring home his dollar earnings to subvent the Workshop. He paid an emotional price, however, having to leave his wife and two school-age children in Calcutta for regular periods of about one semester almost every year during the 1970s. But this enabled the Workshop to function for two decades. Whenever he was in the United States (and, later, Australia), he delegated its day-to-day activities to Prabir Aditya, his neighbor and owner of the manually operated letterpress, Lake Gardens Press, in the converted garage next door, which Lal chose as his dedicated press to print all books from the late 1960s. Lal’s wife and son attended to urgent correspondence and proofreading in his absence.

An aesthetic decision taken at roughly the same time had a permanent impact on the look of Workshop publications. In the first few years, their binding had been done in the conventional way by Tulamiah Mohiuddin, a professional binder working from the old Sealdah publishing district of Calcutta, whom Lal had patronized. As was his creative wont, Lal had another of his brainwaves, which he passed by Tulamiah, who readily complied: “Instead of glossily hiding mediocre mass-manufactured binding – the common 20th-century practice – the Workshop reveals the beauty of the hand-binder’s art by using only a slim jacket-slip” on handloom “sari-bound gold-embossed” volumes.²¹ A more contemporary Indian approach to book binding would be hard to imagine. The fabric that normally went into the hardback bookends covered up by paper jackets now proudly appeared on the surface; but, instead of ordinary cloth, Lal replaced it with colorful sari material, originally sourced from Puri, Odisha, his favorite vacation spot. A “slim jacket-slip” of paper, printed with the title and author’s name, was folded over it laterally and in turn was protected and kept in place by a clear vinyl dustjacket. When the dangers of plastic became established at the turn of the century, it was summarily dropped, the paper slips removed, and the title and author’s name gold-embossed in Lal’s calligraphy on the cloth cover itself. The sari’s contrasting border ran down the right edge of the front cover. This innovative design won first prize in the National Printing and Binding Awards in 1970, which Tulamiah received in New Delhi. Ever since, it has remained Writers Workshop’s visually distinctive USP, and though P. K. Aditya sold his house and left Lake Gardens in the 1980s, and Tulamiah died, his family, in a village near Diamond Harbour, 50 km from Kolkata, continues to bind the books in the same fashion.

Many people believed, and still do, that the Workshop had an office buzzing with activity where all aspects of publication were attended to by several competent hands during usual working hours. The prodigious output of titles would have justified such conjectures. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Lal did everything single-handed, except the printing and binding. Because he was a college professor during the day, he could only spend early mornings and evenings on Workshop matters. It had no office other than his own study at home, in which every wall, from floor to ceiling, was lined with bookshelves that held his huge library. He read manuscripts, designed layouts, corrected proofs, and wrote letters – and, of course, his own books too, increasingly of translations – at either one of the two desks in this room. All papers

and correspondence were filed away systematically in a four-drawer cabinet that still contains those holdings inscribed by so many now-household names. And Sunday mornings, as everybody knew, were reserved for Workshop members who dropped in, and doubled up as open house.

Developing this model of alternative, independent, and non-commercial publishing as the years rolled by, Lal decided that submissions had to meet one of three criteria to be accepted. First, the poems had to be so good as to be way ahead of their time – in which, by definition, mainstream presses would never risk investing. Second, the material should reveal promise and talent, and be in need of the encouragement of immediate publication, without which the despairing author might possibly abandon writing. Third, it had to appeal to Lal's personal taste, so that he would enjoy printing it and introducing it to friends, whatever their private doubts on the matter. Lal referred to the virgin poets who became successful after being published by the Workshop as his "10% syndrome."²² He often said that discovering those ten would not have been possible had he not published the other 90 percent.

Let us simply list without comment some of the most notable discoveries and first books of poetry in the Workshop's second phase: Shiv Kumar's *Articulate Silences* (1970); Keki Daruwalla's *Under Orion* (1970) and *Apparition in April* (1971); Mamta Kalia's *Tribute to Papa* (1970) and *Poems '78* (1978); Jayanta Mahapatra's *Svayamvara* (1971); Gopal Honnalgere's *A Wad of Poems* (1971) and *A Gesture of Fleshless Sound* (1972); Agha Shahid Ali's *Bone-Sculpture* (1972) and *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* (1979); Ruskin Bond's *It Isn't Time That's Passing* (1972) and *Lone Fox Dancing* (1975); Lakshmi Kannan's *Impressions* (1974) and *The Glow and the Grey* (1976); Meena Alexander's *The Bird's Bright Ring* (1976) and *Without Place* (1978); Santan Rodrigues's *I Exist* (1976); Malathi Rao's *Khajuraho* (1976); Ketaki Kushari Dyson's *Sap-Wood* (1978); Vikram Seth's *Mappings* (1981); Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Dark Like the River* (1987); Temsula Ao's *Songs That Tell* (1988); Robin Ngangom's *Words and the Silence* (1988). The experience of Vikram Seth seems to have been fairly typical. In 1981 Seth was a twenty-nine-year-old collector of rejection slips, and had made an appointment to meet Lal, who is quoted in a newspaper interview as having said, "A very weary and disillusioned Vikram came to me that summer. He had been rejected by almost a dozen publishers. I went through it [his manuscript of *Mappings*] and told him that he was at least a decade ahead of his times."²³

1990–2010

In 1989, Lal suffered a near-death experience during a lecture tour of North America. His recovery – possible only because the sudden trauma happened in the United States where, despite being uninsured, he received the finest medical treatment over three months at a Catholic hospital that subsequently wrote off a large part of the bill to charity – took several more months, and he never traveled abroad again after his return to Kolkata because his health did not allow it. Writers Workshop again faced a crisis in financial management. Lal overcame this by formulating an agreement (he refused to call it a contract) between every author and himself as publisher, whereby the former agreed to make an advance purchase of 100 copies of the book. This system enabled it to break even. Unkind critics have derided this as self-publishing, without remembering the time-honored precedents of this method all over the world, or that even academic presses routinely ask for and accept subsidies from various agencies for publications.

The Workshop continued to act as a welcoming point of entry for many young writers; although the maturing English-language publishing industry now offered other options as well, it still tended to decline experimental or unfashionable poetry. Lal accepted Hoshang Merchant's book *Stone to Fruit* (1989), the first of more than twenty, and Merchant, billing himself as "India's first openly gay poet," remains with the Workshop today, choosing it for his ongoing *Collected Works*, presently in three volumes. The novelist Indrajit Hazra and the dramatist Poile Sengupta had their first books of poetry published in 1990 (*Twenty-four Poems*) and 1991 (*A Woman Speaks*) respectively. Others include Vihang Naik (*City Times*, 1993), Mukta Sambrani (*The Woman in This Poem Isn't Lonely*, 1997), and Bashabi Fraser (*With Best Wishes from Edinburgh*, 2001). But if one sought the most significant Workshop trend during this period, it would have to be the debuts of several poets from many of India's neglected far eastern – somewhat erroneously called "north-eastern" – states. The movement had begun with Ao and Ngangom in 1988, but gathered momentum with Ao's *Songs That Try to Say* (1992), K. S. Nongkynrih's *The Sieve and Moments* (both 1992), Mamang Dai's *River Poems* (2004), and Esther Syiem's *Oral Scriptings* (2005). More have followed.²⁴

One must not overlook the Workshop's achievement in promoting English translations from Indian languages since its earliest days, much before the field became acceptable to regular publishers. Satyajit Ray's translation of Sukumar Ray's nonsense rhymes from Bengali; A. K. Ramanujan's of Adiga from Kannada; Sitakant Mahapatra's from Odiya

as well as Munda, Oraon, Kondh, and Paraja folksongs; Namjoshi's of Govindagraj from Marathi; Prema Nandakumar's of Nammalvar from Tamil; and Ghalib from Urdu, Mahadevi Varma from Hindi, Subramania Bharati from Tamil, Vinda Karandikar from Marathi, D. Balagangadhara Tilak from Telugu, Rammohun Roy, Tagore, Jibanananda Das, Bishnu Dey, and Samar Sen from Bengali number among the best known of them. The Workshop's classical list contains not only Lal's own "transcreations" of the *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita*, various *Upanishads*, the *Dhammapada*, and the *Jap-ji*, but also others' of Kalidasa, Jayadeva, Tulsidas, Kabir, and Mirabai. Only the Sahitya Akademi has published more English translations of poetry from Indian languages.

Comparison with Contemporary Publishers and Periodicals

The first major critical account of post-Independence English poetry was written by Bruce King, who made some highly injudicious statements that many accepted unquestioningly and echoed in their own pronouncements. One of them was his reference to a growing tension between the Workshop sensibility, under Lal, and those poets associated with Ezekiel. King went so far as to identify a schism between what he called the Calcutta and Bombay schools, and he quite partisanly sided with the latter because he considered it more "modern" – for which, read following Western ideas of modernism prioritizing irony and cynicism. As we observed in a review of his book, "publication by the Workshop often seems to be, in King's eyes, a disqualification. . . . Yet, curiously enough, of the nearly 200 titles of poetry volumes in the 'Chronology of Significant Publications' appended to the book, the Workshop accounts for 90."²⁵ Disregarding all the facts, however, the stigma stuck; the recent *Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* dismissed the Workshop in just one sentence that rather inscrutably ended with "the significance of the enterprise [is] greatly in excess of its worth."²⁶

A careful study reveals that King's theory holds no ground whatsoever. While it is true that some poets had differences of opinion with Lal, and that several never submitted anything to the Workshop for publication – this would be only natural in any artistic movement anywhere, and the Workshop certainly did not hold a monopoly – we have already seen that many in King's so-called Bombay circle did indeed have quite a few Workshop publications to their name. In fact, a mutuality ran through all the publishing entities of the time. A substantial amount of correspondence from the Bombay poets addressed to Lal between 1958 and 1980

reflects their intent in being published, reviewed, and patronized by Writers Workshop.²⁷

We may look at the other publishing enterprises – mostly located in Bombay, with a couple in Allahabad – by way of comparison. Of course, Ezekiel had started off first. He published himself in the early years and distributed his second and third collections, *Sixty Poems* (1953) and *The Third* (1959), through Strand Bookshop in Bombay. His fourth and fifth books appeared from Writers Workshop. He had also assisted in editing the newsletter of the Indian chapter of PEN, edited *Quest* between 1955 and 1957, managed *Design* magazine in 1961, become literary and reviews editor of *Imprint*, which ceased by 1967, and briefly edited *Poetry India*. During the 1960s, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, formerly of Bombay and then moving back to Allahabad, began Ezra-Fakir Press, from which appeared, among other things, his long poem *bharatmata: a prayer* (1966) and his magazines titled *ezra* and *fakir*. Mehrotra responded to Lal's questionnaire and contributed poems to Lal's *Modern Indian Poetry in English*.

Prithvi Nandy, already a Workshop poet, ran *Dialogue-Calcutta* between 1968 and 1970, bringing out nineteen issues, each hosting one poet. After its bankruptcy in 1971, he started Dialogue Publications and, between 1972 and 1975, *Dialogue-India*. In 1974, Kersi Katrak and Gauri Deshpande (also Workshop poets, based in Bombay) started the short-lived *Opinion Literary Quarterly*, which had connections with Lal and Nandy, but only published four issues. It was sold in 1982 and the new owners started *Kaiser-e-Hind* from 1984 in Bombay, which also published some poetry.

In the early 1970s, Mehrotra, Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel, and Arun Kolatkar (all of whom had featured in Lal's *Modern Indian Poetry in English*) had their own manuscripts but no publishers, so they started Clearing House in Bombay in 1976. As a cooperative venture, Clearing House was successful, in part because their books were cheap and attractively designed. They made a pre-publication offer of Rs. 25 for the first four titles: Kolatkar's *Jejuri*, Mehrotra's *Nine Enclosures*, Jussawalla's *Missing Person*, and Patel's *How Do You Withstand, Body*. Eight years later, H. O. Nazareth's *Lobo* (1984) was the imprint's last title. In the late 1980s, Jussawalla ran Praxis single-handedly, publishing three books of poetry. Meanwhile, Oxford University Press under R. Parthasarathy, who had contributed poems to Lal's *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, began the "New Poetry in India" series.

The other Bombay-based poetry-publishing collective that appeared almost simultaneously had an even shorter life: Newground, under the Bombay poets Santan Rodrigues (again, an already-published Workshop poet), Melanie Silgado, and Raul D’Gama Rose, commenced in 1978 and released four books – launching with *3 Poets*, named after the three founders – before fading out. Other brief ventures included the Hack Writers’ Cooperative started by Rajiv Rao and Rafique Baghdadi, who published their joint collection *45RPM* in 1983. Baghdadi ran the Jaico bookshop in Bombay, which had a special corner for poetry, and had links with the magazine *Kavi India*. Several other Bombay magazines that no one remembers today (besides those of general interest like the *Illustrated Weekly*) flitted past: *Bombay Duck*, *Dionysius*, *Blunt*, *Indian Writing Today*, *Tornado*, *Volume*, *Keynote*, *The Bombay Literary Review*.

None of these literary periodicals boasted the longevity of the Workshop’s *Miscellany*, and none of these endeavors developed into institutions. Indeed, for the most part, the poets seemed to have come together only to publish themselves and their friends, there was little (if any) professionalism, and no one seemed to know much about how publishing actually worked. Like Writers Workshop, everyone pitched in, personal funds were usually involved, and there was no clear differentiation between editorial and administrative responsibilities. The difference lies in the Workshop’s staying power and sustainability, ultimately under Lal’s solo initiative, and in its spread as it reached out all over the country to create a national movement. In comparison, even the big commercial publishers shied away from poetry, the combined output of Rupa, Viking, and Disha (Orient Longman) being sparse and fluctuating. In 2010, Lal passed away. But Writers Workshop continues, and in the four years since his death it has published about eighty new titles. Virtually the cottage industry of Indian English literature, especially poetry, it has outlived all other publishing attempts of its time.

Notes

1. Booklet, in the Writers Workshop archives, Kolkata.
2. P. Lal, interviewed by Rubana Huq, February 25, 2008.
3. The general-interest weekly *Thought*, published from Delhi, included “regular features on literature and the arts”. The monthly journal *Orient Review and Literary Digest*, published from Calcutta, “concentrates . . . on the background

- and cultural and philosophical contributions of the ‘East.’” Quoted from the respective periodicals.
4. For substantiation of these claims, see K. Raghavendra Rao, “Friend P. Lal: A prose portrait in lieu of a poem,” in *Be Vocal in Times of Beauty: Tributes to P. Lal at Seventy*, ed. C. Venugopal (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 2000), 181–87.
 5. P. Lal and K. Raghavendra Rao, ed., *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (Delhi: Kavita, 1957).
 6. Rao, “Friend P. Lal,” 184.
 7. Interviewed by Meenakshi Mukherjee, “Writers Workshop@fifty,” *The Hindu*, March 1, 2009, Literary Review.
 8. P. Lal, interviewed by Rubana Huq, January 28, 2008.
 9. For an entertaining description of these free-wheeling meetings, see P. Lal, “Writers Workshop: How It Functions,” [1961] quoted in the *Writers Workshop Checklist 2004*, 98 [further publication information unavailable].
 10. Rao, “Friend P. Lal,” 183.
 11. Buddhadeva Bose, “Indian Poetry in English,” in *The Concise Encyclopedia of English and American Poets and Poetry*, ed. Stephen Spender and Donald Hall (London: Hutchinson, 1963), 178. The quotation from Yeats comes from “A General Introduction for My Work” (published 1961), in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume V: Later Essays*, edited by William H. O’Donnell (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 211.
 12. Mukherjee, “Writers Workshop@fifty,” *The Hindu*, March 1, 2009, Literary Review. The quotations that follow come from the second edition (1971) of P. Lal, ed., *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1969), which had 734 pages, adding a supplement of 39 more poets. It may be relevant here to point out that this anthology has not received the scholarly attention it deserves, since Bruce King’s adverse reaction to it in his identically titled *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), the first (and, to date, only) major critical survey of the field. But King’s book is deeply flawed, containing innumerable errors of fact and perception on just about everything. For a full discussion, see Ananda Lal’s review of it in *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* 18 (January 1990): 44–49.
 13. Lal, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, 7.
 14. *Ibid.*, 391.
 15. *Ibid.*, 228.
 16. *Ibid.*, 210.
 17. *Ibid.*, 546.
 18. *Ibid.*, 169.
 19. *Ibid.*, 398.
 20. In Venugopal, ed., *Be Vocal in Times of Beauty*, 190.
 21. *Writers Workshop Checklist 2004*, 1.
 22. P. Lal, interviewed by Rubana Huq, January 28, 2008.
 23. Premankur Biswas, “Book Wise,” *The Indian Express*, August 3, 2008.

24. For an account of the Workshop in this phase, see Jed Bickman, *A Literal Journey in India: Encountering Writers Workshop* (Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2009), 22–40.
25. Ananda Lal, review of *Modern Indian Poetry in English* by Bruce King, 48.
26. Rajeev Patke, “Poetry Since Independence,” in *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*, ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 246.
27. Writers Workshop archives, Kolkata.

The Blue Rexine Archive: A Short History of Clearing House, a Poets' Cooperative of the 1970s¹

Jerry Pinto

I remember my first encounter with a Clearing House book of poetry as if it were yesterday. I was standing, hunched up and sweaty, on the mezzanine floor of the now defunct New and Secondhand Book Centre, a small bookshop in Kalbadevi, South Mumbai. I had just been converted to poetry by a stray encounter with Wilfred Owen's "Futility" in my state-sponsored school's English reader. This was a break from daffodils and skylarks and Lord Ullin's daughter who, poor thing, went to her death unnamed. It spoke of something real, of the sheer waste of human life that war represented. But it also made poetry into something that you would have to achieve at the cost of life experiences such as those. Later, at Elphinstone College, I was told that if I liked poetry, I might want to check out Indian poets as well. This was a revolutionary idea. I came from the generation that Eunice de Souza savaged in "My Students":

My students think it funny
That Daruwallas and de Souzas
should write poetry.²

I could not afford new books and the secondhand market for books was crowded with bestsellers and self-help books. There was very little poetry, except for the textbook discards of young brown subcontinental students studying dead white European men. So, the New and Secondhand Book Centre, which had a section devoted to poetry, was itself a find. I had begun with *Hymns in Darkness* by Nissim Ezekiel in the Three Crowns imprint (now defunct) of Oxford University Press and had come back, looking for more.

Those memories are more than thirty years old but I can still recall the feeling when one picks up a book/artifact that is beautiful and finds also, to one's surprise, that it is a book one will want to buy and keep. It was the odd shape of the book that made me pick it up. It is odd but I have always

thought of the Clearing House books as square; they turn out to be rectangles at 16.5 cm by 19.5 cm. Then there was the oddness of the cover, the great swathes of white in which each poem seemed to float that drew me to pick up my first Clearing House book. In other words, it was the design that drew me in. And then I was reading “Sea Breeze, Bombay”:

Surrogate city of banks,
Brokering and bays, refugees’ harbour and port,
Gatherer of ends whose brick beginnings work
Loose like a skin, spotting the coast,³

This was about my city and it seemed to contain echoes of what I had felt about Bombay. I could see someone lurking behind this poem, someone like me, someone dispossessed but longing to belong. I did not notice then the colophon or even the name of the publishing house. I was more concerned with whether I would be able to afford the book. I was delighted when I found that I could – I paid eight rupees but, at the time, this was the price of a substantial vegetarian meal in a downtown restaurant. I was also delighted that the man at the counter said he would be happy to keep other books of the kind aside, when they turned up. (I do not think he ever did, but I did eventually get all my Clearing House books from New and Secondhand Books.) That was in 1982.

One day, in 2012, I happened to be sitting in Adil Jussawalla’s Cuffe Parade flat and he pointed at a blue Rexine bag that was lying on the floor. “That contains all the Clearing House correspondence,” he said.

My heart missed a beat. For as long as I can remember, I have bewailed the absence of archives, the lack of any information about how anything cultural happens in India. Every so often one hears another terrible story: a photographic studio in Mumbai that had a treasure trove of theater photographs closes down and all the negatives are sold to the rag-and-bone man; a library’s records flooded; a complete lack of interest in the contents of a poet’s office. And here was someone saying that there was a complete record of a poets’ cooperative of the 1970s and early 1980s that had brought out some of the most important works of Indian poetry in English – some might even call them canonical now. But my elation faded at the thought that I might have to spend considerable time looking for letters that Jussawalla himself had sent to other people. I expressed these concerns and they were almost immediately allayed. Jussawalla said that he never kept copies of personal correspondence, but these were not personal.

To him they were part of the work world and so he had indeed kept carbon copies of his own letters.

The archive was more than exciting, I was to discover. Accidents of biography and geography and the nature of the Indian state had made it a veritable treasure trove. There were many candidates, it would seem, who were considered for being the first members of Clearing House as I would discover later. But eventually these were narrowed down to four: Adil Jussawalla, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Arun Kolatkar, and Gieve Patel, who, in 1976, became the first four members of Clearing House. (At a later stage, they would be joined by three other poets: Dilip Chitre, H. O. Nazareth, and Jayanta Mahapatra.)

“There was no first meeting as such,” Jussawalla said later:

Arvind and Arun and I had been discussing the idea for a while, the problem of all the manuscripts that we had lying around and which weren't getting published because there were no publishers. When the group finally coalesced into the four of us, I could feel that there was some considerable heartburn among other poets. I didn't want it to be that way. I thought we should have a larger group eventually, so that if there were six or eight of us, each poet would look after his own manuscript and help out with one or two others. At least, that's the way I envisaged it.

At one of the first meetings it was decided that all decisions would be unanimous. This was in the spirit of the 1960s and the spirit of the cooperatives. But this was also the 1970s, when telephony was a government monopoly, a trunk call to another city had to be booked a day in advance, and the Internet was still a couple of decades away. To make things a little more difficult, only two of the four poets were in Bombay. Jussawalla and Kolatkar both lived on the southern tip of the island city, almost within walking distance of each other, and so this means that there is very little written record of what they said to each other. Patel, who had just started his career as a medical doctor, was working in Sanjan in Gujarat, where his practice among India's poor would produce a life-long aesthetic sympathy with the human body in distress and under duress. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra had moved to Allahabad, and was settling a young family down in his old city. (One of the guilty pleasures of the blue Rexine bag was the way in which the poets, all of whom were friends, mixed the personal, the political, and the poetic. The baby was to be burped, a wife was to be escorted to the hospital . . . and no one could be sure that the visa was going to come through on time.) This meant that it would fall to Adil Jussawalla to keep everyone informed of what had been said in Bombay.

Kolatkar was, by his own admission, not much of a letter writer. But since Jussawalla kept copies of his own letters, it is possible to reconstruct much of the back-end of the publication of some of the finest poetry in Indian English.

First, they needed a name. A list of names was drawn up in order of preference:

1. Clearing House
2. Communicator
3. Minimum
4. Impulse
5. Intercom
6. Poetry
7. Lines
8. Touch and Go
9. Off-print
10. The Index
11. Narrow Margin
12. The Off-Chance
13. Tempo
14. Capacitor
15. Texts
16. Contexts

Another list offered four more possibilities. On this one, too, Clearing House, like About Ben Adhem, led all the rest.

Dynamo
Transmitter
Indicator
Pointer

This second list also had a section called “Names to consider”

The Needy Dragon
The Lesser Evils
Printer’s Devils
The Waiting Room
Lifers
The Suchmuch Press

Another small list indicated that there had been another set of choices too. New to the list were:

Dogma
Paper Tiger

Jussawalla says:

Clearing House won in the end, I suppose, because we were all sick of being told that there was no room for poetry books in the lists of publishing houses. If they wanted to have anything to do with poetry, it was in the form of anthologies. Of course, they would either pay the poets nothing – the assumption being that you should be so honoured to be included that you would not think of asking for money – or they would pay in copies of the book in question . . . The name seemed like a crisp clear statement of purpose.

On February 9, 1976, the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Office, then at the Esplanade, Bombay, wrote to Sri Adil Jussawalla to say that the Registrar of Newspapers in India had intimated to the court that the title "Clearing House" was available as a bi-monthly newspaper. He should therefore ". . . attend this office on any working day at 10–30 am (except on Saturdays) within 10 days from the receipt of this letter to get your declaration declaration [*sic*] authenticated."

A bi-monthly newspaper? That was indeed the original idea.

The idea is explained on a single undated sheet of paper, titled "Publishing Possibilities," which seems to have been minutes of an early meeting, although no one is quite sure. The publishing house, at this point in time working under the provisional title of "New Book Co," was to raise money, preferably by advance subscription. The idea was to approach well-off artists, writers, sympathizers, and their equivalents in the Indian languages, and "foreign presses and groups, blacks" and those who might feel marginalized in the Anglophone world. The advantages of one's own publishing house were obvious: the poet loses nothing, has greater control over his work than if s/he were to hand it over to a commercial publisher, and would get royalties too. The note ends with a list of "Poets to be published":

Eunice D'Souza/Rahul d'Gama Rose/ Adil [Jussawalla]
Arun [Kolatkar] / Arvind [Krishna Mehrotra]/ Santan [Rodrigues]/
Darius [Cooper]/ Saleem [Peeradina]

It has a section marked:

Ideal beginning
Arun/Arvind/ Adil

Eunice/ Rahul/ Santan
Darius/ Saleem/ Nissim [Ezekiel]

And another one called:

Likely beginning
Eunice/Rahul/ Adil
Nissim/ Arun/ Dilip [Chitre]

It is again unclear whether the original idea was to put three manuscripts together and publish them or whether it was to put out a manuscript per poet and have each set mark a “season.” Over several letters and meetings, and around two years before the first mentions of the idea, the concept of Clearing House was refined. Each book would be treated as the issue of a magazine. It followed that if the books could then be brought out on time, they could benefit from reduced postal tariffs for magazines. (“Book post” is still one of the best ways to send or receive books in India, as many small presses will tell you. Books do not get waylaid and they do arrive, albeit sometimes somewhat rain-worn and battered. However, the system works only if you’re not in too much of a rush.)

It took a while to settle who would actually be published first. As anyone who has readied a manuscript knows, it isn’t done until it’s done. This was probably also the reason why the magazine idea was not a good one. You simply had to meet the deadline and it was impossible for a collective of poets, working in as democratic and non-hierarchical a manner as possible, to bully and chivvy each other into meeting schedules as far as producing the manuscript went. And then there was the editing process. This was also a matter of mail. There are many letters which simply suggest grammatical changes, emendations of language, and line breaks, and each of these would take a couple of weeks to make its way across the subcontinent, be read, fumed over, and responded to, reconsidered, redrafted, typed out, and posted again. Meanwhile, paper prices were going up and down and each delay meant a change in the precarious finances of the new publishing house.

None of the principals is very sure how much was put in and by whom. The seed money came from Adil’s father, Dr. Jehangir Jussawalla, a naturopath. When Gieve Patel was interviewed for this, he was not very sure about how the financial arrangements were made “. . . but I do remember that I put in some money and I even got a refund.” Clearing House was, however, listed as a proprietorship, with Jussawalla listed as the publisher on the first set of books. Jussawalla recalls:

Filing income tax returns was always a tedious business but there didn't seem to be any other way out. The four of us together as a partnership was also suggested but it was never seriously discussed. How would we manage that with Arvind away in another city? I tried to make things more formal. I suggested a contract, a very basic one, but each one of the others was opposed to it in his own way. Arun was chronically opposed to any form of contract. I had suggested that out of all the money that came to the poet, a small percentage should be set aside for the publishing house. That would help build the corpus. It had become clear, even after the first set of books, that we could not rely on pre-publication subscriptions alone.

Gieve Patel remembers:

There was a bit of a conflict because at that time Oxford University Press had just started its Three Crowns imprint and Nissim [who had published Gieve Patel's first book of poems] was keen that I should be published with them. But I finally chose Clearing House. I think that my first few meetings with Ravi Dayal had not been memorable. And with Adil, Arvind, and Arun, I was comfortable. They were my friends. I did feel like I was abandoning Nissim but when I told him he was gracious. "You must publish with them if that's what you want," he said and made it smooth and comfortable for me.

In a long letter dated March 16, 1976, Adil wrote to Arvind, informing him that he was to go first:

A problem with the order and a surprise. You're first. I'm second and Arun and Gieve can battle for last place. Don't shout. It's like this. Arun would like to have time to prepare the manuscript of his Marathi work too, so that it can be published as a book about the same time as *Jejuri*⁴. Can't say No to that. I'd be willing to come out first if I could just have one day to myself, just one day, to type out the ms in fair. Problems right now, not just ones connected with CH, make that impossible. So be brave. Remember, even if you have to face the bullets first, we're all behind you.

Meanwhile, the books were being designed by Arun Kolatkar. He had long believed that the book should follow the lengths of the lines in the poem and no line in any poem should ever be broken simply because the book was not broad enough. And so the square format, Jussawalla maintains, the format that made these books into fetish objects, was based on the line lengths one sees in a poem such as "Between *Jejuri* and the Railway Station." Kolatkar, who had a background in commercial art, was also doing the cover designs.

When Gieve Patel's first book was to come out, he had suggested to Ezekiel that one of his [Patel's] paintings could go on the cover. Ezekiel had

said that no one would take a book of poetry seriously if it had an image on the cover. Patel was now in a quandary:

Well, all three of them were going to have an image on the cover. Arun would read the poetry, of course, and then he would also talk to the poet so he could get the right image. I think that statement of Nissim's was at the back of my mind somewhere so I announced one day that I wanted my book to have a plain cover. I think I wanted my book to be "taken seriously". I remember there was a bit of a silence. Then Arun said "Okay" but he was distinctly cool. I went back to Sanjan with this thing playing away at the back of my mind. I was already beginning to feel a bit left out of all the fun and the working together. Meanwhile, Arun had cast me into outer darkness. He said that if I wanted the book to have a plain cover, he didn't need to be worrying about it and he wasn't going to design it and so on. So I went back to work in Sanjan, mulling over all this, and after a while, I came back and said, "I think I want a cover with an image on it". Arun did a bit of grumbling and said that the work was already underway. I said, "I'm a poet and artists have the right to change their minds." That went down quite well. So we sat down to look at ideas for the cover. I said that my favourite colour was reddish-umber and so perhaps that could feature somewhere. The central image of the book was the human body under conditions of stress, but it was also the body trying to liberate itself. I directed him to the poem in which I am examining an old man and I ask him what I could do for him but throw him up in the air after laying him out like a child's game of sticks and colored paper, a kite. So it's a man far gone, perhaps beyond help, but throwing the man up into the air like a kite also makes it a crazy sort of a liberating image. I said, "Could we get all this into a cover image?" and when he showed me what he had done – well, it was just superb.

For each cover, Kolatkar brought a peculiar mixture of literalism and poetry into play. Patel's book has a torso-as-kite or kite-as-torso, thus giving flesh and blood to the last lines of a poem in which a despairing doctor wonders what he can do for an emaciated patient:

But lay you out like a child's game
Of sticks and coloured paper;
Then string you and shoot you up
And across the sky, an auger over trees
To frighten the life out of dying!⁵

Missing Person has Jussawalla in a suit, his face erased. *Lobo* by H. O. Nazareth takes the same trope: a man in a leather jacket, his head replaced by that of a wolf. *The False Start*, perhaps the weakest of the covers, is a photograph of a crumpled piece of paper on a dark olive-green background. *Travelling in a Cage* is the most ambiguous: here the

wires of a bird cage are twisted into the profile of a human face and trap a single shoe inside. Despite all kinds of problems – including a cover mishap with Mehrotra’s book – the first four books did make it out in 1976. Adil Jussawalla’s *Missing Person*, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra’s *Nine Enclosures*, and Arun Kolatkar’s *Jejuri* were released together, followed in very short order by Gieve Patel’s *How Do you Withstand, Body*. There is a handwritten list of those who had ordered the books, many from small-town India. For instance, on October 16, 1976, the poet Gopal Honnalgere wrote asking for a check-list.

As Jussawalla said:

That was the power of the mail order idea. It brought in inquiries from small towns in India, taking Clearing House to places other brews couldn’t reach. I cannot be sure if this was the first time Honnalgere wrote but I do know that it was around this time we made contact. And that is how I came to know of this fine poet and how I began to build my collection of his poetry, a collection that has come in handy for other people later.⁶

But the libraries, for instance, did not support the collective. Jussawalla adds:

As the list of subscribers makes clear, the libraries didn’t support us. The libraries had, and I suppose still have, their own system of ordering, their own book suppliers, their own bookshops with whom they do business. Unless a member of the staff of the College or University makes a very strong recommendation, a book from an independent publisher is not going to get into the library. But then I should have understood that we wouldn’t have been an alternative publishing house had we been accepted by the libraries. By and large, they were not interested in buying books of poetry. We should not have been surprised that professors of English literature didn’t buy our books either; nor did most poets.

The reviews were generally positive, if sometimes a little perplexed. The poets didn’t seem to fit. Their diction seemed odd, their meaning obscure. They did not seem to be uncomfortable in the language of expression and this made many nativist critics think of them as “inauthentic,” an accusation that still follows much writing in English that comes out of India. The collective had its major success when *Jejuri* won the Commonwealth Prize in 1977. The award was a unanimous decision and Soonoo Kolatkar, Arun’s wife, remembers that, as a result, he was issued a white passport, which allowed him many privileges.

The second set of books came out after a hiatus of five years. The poets were different – except for Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who was the only one

to bring out two books in the time of the collective – and so the struggles were different. Jussawalla’s name no longer appears as the publisher. “It was not my idea that I would go on publishing other poets, specially as Clearing House was conceived as a cooperative,” says Jussawalla. “Dilip [Chitre] was working in an ad agency run by Osbourne D’Souza and he had an office in the Eucharistic Congress Building, and once it was decided that the publisher for Dilip and Jayanta [Mahapatra]’s book would be Dilip’s wife, Viju Chitre, a new account was opened at the Bank of Baroda branch near Ozzie’s office.”

While all the four original poets were in agreement that Dilip Chitre should certainly feature on the Clearing House list, Chitre himself had some beliefs that made him an interesting poet to publish.

“Dilip did not believe that there should be any breaks in his poetry; that his life and his work were a seamless whole,” says Jussawalla:

This meant that his poetry should be published as it stood. When we were in Iowa together at the Paul Engel International Writing Program, he would often speak of how Sanskrit *shlokas* were written without breaks or pauses or without the full stop that came later, he said. It was an article of faith that the poems should flow as his life had flowed. This made it difficult for any publisher since he was a prolific and uneven writer. I took it upon myself to organise the sequence of poems called “Travelling in a Cage.”

To him the order I made was unsatisfactory. He said, “That isn’t what I would have done,” when he saw it. To which Viju replied, “Well, why don’t you do it then? Don’t go on about it, just get down and do it.” He would not, and so my ordering of the poems stands. I did feel however that I needed to explain Dilip’s idea of “seamlessness”; so I wrote a rather long blurb.⁷ I wasn’t sure how Arun would take that. He didn’t believe in blurbs. I don’t remember him actually saying it in so many words but I think he believed that a book of poems was self-explanatory; any introduction to it should be minimal. I had to tread carefully but Arun took it well. He seemed to understand and he found a way to fit the blurb into the look he wanted for the book.

When these eight books were out, the cooperative ended. “I like to think, a little facetiously, that the original idea was Marxist: from each according to his abilities, to each according to his need,” says Jussawalla, “but then the abilities were markedly different because the lives of the founders were also markedly different.”

That the lives and the skills and the poetry of the founders was remarkably different is testament to their ability to accept each other’s work on its own terms, rather than setting the agenda for what is or is not poetry. Although things were not always easy, they remained friends. That the

cooperative lived on, long after it folded up, can be seen in a number of later books which took the shape or the design of the Clearing House books: Newground brought out Eunice de Souza's *Fix* (1979) and Saleem Peeradina's *First Offence* (1980) in much the same format. But, more than that, it is in the poetic lives of the next generation of poets that these echoes resound.

The poet Arundhathi Subramaniam notes:

The first time I read *Jejuri* was during my first undergrad year in a dusty nook in the St. Xavier's College library in Mumbai. I recall being impressed – something I continued to be on subsequent readings. But when I revisited it last year during a remarkably quiet and hermetic writer's residency in Scotland, I felt something more than just admiration. Here, I felt, was writing from a guild to which I'd be proud to owe allegiance, glad to do apprenticeship.

Jejuri quite simply, a book that never seems to date. The words seem to spring out of even the most battered and dog-eared copy with an alert and invigorating freshness. There is obviously a keen sense of craftsmanship in the deliberate sparseness of the aesthetic, but the end result is anything but mannered. The voice that emerges from these pages is casually sophisticated, wry, colloquial, with a slyly dextrous ability to turn a line in all sorts of unexpected directions.⁸

Ranjit Hoskote, poet and cultural theorist, remarks:

In all, Clearing House published and distributed eight books . . . Some of these books have been reprinted numerous times;⁹ others, long out of print, circulate in the form of photocopies; yet others have been issued in fresh and annotated editions. They have entered the annals of postcolonial literature, are studied in India and overseas, and have influenced succeeding generations of poets and readers. How could – or perhaps, why did – eight books of poetry transform the nature of Anglophone poetry in India as they did? I would hazard at least four key reasons.

First, the Clearing House books marked the emergence of a new generation that was politically aware, linguistically inventive, playfully alive to the variousness of rhetoric. These new poets did not share the UK-centric, Eliot/ Auden/ Larkin-oriented approach of their immediate predecessors such as Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes. Clearing House presented poets like Adil Jussawalla, Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who aligned themselves more strongly with the teachings of Pound and Joyce and the literatures of Eastern Europe and Latin America. Their diction drew strength from the Hollywood road movie and the hymns of the Beats, and whose poetic strategies (especially for Chitre, Gieve Patel and Kolatkar) were nourished by cinema, painting and surrealism.

Second, whether through bilingual practice or translation commitments, the Clearing House poets immersed themselves in English as well as other languages such as Marathi (Chitre and Kolatkar), Hindi and Prakrit (Mehrotra), Spanish (Chitre). The experience of being, as it were, in a constant condition of translating and being translated, informs the work of these poets; and in the case of Jussawalla, this resulted both in a path-breaking anthology of contemporary Indian literature as well as a distinguished career in literary journalism, built on a sensitivity to polyglot contexts.

Third, these poets deliberately pursued an engagement with what we would today recognise as a local that was already opening itself out to, and being powerfully reshaped by, a sense of the global: in their poetry of place, Patel, Jayanta Mahapatra and H. O. Nazareth all offer rich examples of such a layering of life-worlds.

Fourth, and indeed quite crucially, Clearing House offers an early example of that paradigm that we have, in recent years, come to describe as the “collective” or the “collaboration.” The example of Clearing House candidly demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of a collaborative experiment at a time when funding was not readily forthcoming for cultural enterprises. Much may be learned of the early history of collaboration in the Indian cultural sphere, in terms of how writers began to “self-organise,” as we would now say, in the 1970s and 1980s – the skill-sets in design, editorial art, publicity and fund-raising that they pooled together, the negotiations they conducted with other sections of the cultural and political formation (painters, academics, activists and so forth), and, as always, the fine textures of dialogue, dissensus and mutuality that hold such a collective together, however briefly, and enable it to achieve contributions of lasting importance.¹⁰

In some ways, I wanted the Blue Rexine Archive to be a memorial to enduring friendships and lasting poetic interchanges. In a way it is. In a way it isn't. There were some rough moments, including some sharp notes. Jussawalla often remarks in the course of his letters that his novel was “killed” by the work he had to do keep the cooperative going. (He later recanted and said that there were probably other reasons too.) “I got myself into a position that I didn't really enjoy,” he said:

It [Clearing House] became a responsibility which I couldn't pull out of. The whole thing would have collapsed if I had. There were always problems about raising money and then there was the secretarial work, the running around, the avoidable and unavoidable delays . . . Much as Clearing House has been responsible for producing my book and other books, I wouldn't like to go through that experience again.

I pointed out that he had. He was a publisher for XAL-Praxis which brought out two books of poems – Eunice de Souza’s *Women in Dutch Painting*, Manohar Shetty’s *Borrowed Time* – and a play – Gieve Patel’s *Mister Behram* – all in 1988. In 1990, Jussawalla followed this up with Menka Shivdasani’s poetry book, *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* and, in 1991, with Cyrus Mistry’s play *Doongaji House*.

I asked him why he would do that to himself.

“I got paid,” he said.

Clearing House Books

1. *Nine Enclosures* by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (1976)
2. *Jejuri* by Arun Kolatkar (1976)
3. *How Do You Withstand, Body* by Gieve Patel (1976)
4. *Missing Person* by Adil Jussawalla (1976)
5. *Travelling in a Cage* by Dilip Chitre (1980)
6. *The False Start* by Jayanta Mahapatra (1982)
7. *Distance in Statute Miles* by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (1982)
8. *Lobo* by H. O. Nazareth (1982)

Notes

1. Through the course of this chapter, I have relied on the Blue Rexine Bag Archive of the Clearing House cooperative. Unless explicitly otherwise stated, all the rest of the quotations come from conversations I have had with the principles.
2. Eunice de Souza, *A Necklace of Skulls: Collected Poems*, Penguin India, New Delhi, 2009, p. 19
3. Adil Jussawalla, *Missing Person*, Clearing House, 1975, p. 39.
4. Kolatkar’s Marathi version of *Jejuri* came out from Pras Prakashan in 2010 as a work-in-progress.
5. “Rural,” p. 30, *How Do You Withstand, Body*, Gieve Patel, Clearing House, 1975
6. It was not. In the file on Honnalgere that Jussawalla maintained, there is a letter dated July 28, 1969, in which Gopal Honnalgere introduces himself as a twenty-seven-year-old science graduate of Mysore University, who once ran a second-hand bookstore and was then looking for a job. He had heard of the anthology that Jussawalla was editing – this was to become the magisterial *New Writing in India* (Penguin, 1974) – and wanted to submit poems for it. On September 11, 1985, he introduced himself again, saying that he had had six volumes of his poetry published. He wanted to have a volume published by Clearing House.

- The correspondence between Honnalgere and Jussawalla ends with a letter from Jussawalla which included a cheque for Honnalgere's *Collected Poems*, an advertisement for which had caught Jussawalla's eye. Whether such a book of poems was ever published is moot but it should have been. A final note: Jussawalla's file on Honnalgere has saved him from unwarranted obscurity. His inclusion in Jeet Thayil's anthology, *Sixty Indian Poets* (Penguin, 2008), is owed to this file. "I would never have found enough Honnalgere material if it weren't for Adil," Thayil wrote in an email (May 14, 2010) to me.
7. This reads: Dilip Chitre was born in Baroda in 1938. His first book of poems in Marathi was published in 1960. His second, a book of 144 pages, in 1978; and his third, of about 200 pages is expected in 1980. This tells us something about his prodigious talent as well as his attitude towards poetry: he sees it as a seamless unbroken activity of the spirit, as voice rather than print. If published, to be published in its entirety or not at all. The present volume is the result of a practical compromise. It contains merely a fraction of the poems Chitre has written in English, and they have been selected with his help from the work he has done in the last ten years.
 8. Arundhathi Subramaniam, email to me.
 9. Clearing House did a single print run for each of the eight books. *Jejuri* was taken over by Pras Prakashan, which still prints it.
 10. Ranjit Hoskote, email to me.

*“Melted Out of Circulation”: Little Magazines and
Bombay Poetry in the 1960’s and 1970’s*

Anjali Nerlekar

On the cover of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra’s *Collected Poems 1969–2014*, there is a long-haired young man holding a cigarette in his left hand. He is dressed in frayed jeans and a camouflage jacket, and sits on the wooden floor of a derelict Wisconsin farmhouse, legs outstretched, a closed door behind him.¹ One can easily imagine that young man writing the following words of defiance in the late 1960s:

despite discouragement,
uneven sales, opposition,
financial catastrophes,
frowns, etcetera, the ezra-
fakir press continues.
& joins vachel lindsay
in saying: if I cannot
beat the system, I can
die protesting.²

The above manifesto appears on the cover of *ezra 2*, the little magazine started by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. It could serve as explanation for the later cover of the *Collected Poems* (published in 2014), just as the philosophy behind the structure of the early little magazines foreshadows much of the later writing of the poets who started their careers in the pages of these ephemeral publications.

Much of the English poetry anthologized in India today owes its canonicity largely to the little magazines that proliferated around the various regions within India in the immediate aftermath of the newly independent moment of the nation. An examination of the poetry from the period of the 1960s/1970s in Bombay³ through the lens of the little magazines (the originary spaces of the canon) reveals larger social and literary contradictions that underlie the canon: the philosophy of the visible center versus that of the invisible and the marginalized, the status

of the poets as keepers of the tradition versus the peripheral rebels, and the textual content that is canonical and ordained versus a form which is transient and dynamic. Some of the best-known names in English poetry in India (Nissim Ezekiel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Adil Jussawalla, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre) have been intimately related to this movement in Bombay literature of the 1960s and 1970s. And yet the source of their literary rebellions, the renegade form of the little magazine that pegged its refusal of the establishment's guidelines onto its peripheral status and insurgent practices, has not been theorized.⁴

Today, the English little magazines of Bombay still face problems of invisibility similar to those they faced in the years of their emergence, when they faced multiple obstacles in their struggle for survival. Then, it was the lack of funding for their not-for-profit ventures that threatened their very existence; now it is the lack of appreciation of their role as the builders of the contemporary canon of poetry. Compared to the little magazines in Marathi, for instance, which have received far greater attention, English little magazines have been ignored by the English reader. These little magazines are the archives of the periphery, and their structure helped shape the newer forms of poetic writing which followed in their wake.

This period in the 1960s and 1970s was a time of mixed sympathies and alignments and most of the writers and editors of the little magazines were aware of each other's work and frequently teamed up across linguistic lines. It is therefore imperative to read the little magazines within the multilingual network of interactions that gave birth to their form, in Bombay as elsewhere. In Bombay, for instance, there was much creative synergy between the Marathi and English writers of the little magazines. It is interesting to note that initially this multilingualism was fueled by strong editorial and authorial personalities such as Nissim Ezekiel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Adil Jussawalla, and Ashok Shahane (Mehrotra calls himself "father, editor, seller, mimeographer, slogger, etc." of *ezra* in one of his editorials). Nissim Ezekiel collaborated with Vrinda Nabar to translate the poems of the Marathi poet Indira Sant, while the Marathi little magazine, *Rucha*, translated and published one of Ezekiel's essays. This collaboration between Marathi and English can be seen in Ezekiel's *Poetry India*. There is also Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's incendiary rejection of the post-independence state of things in the poem "bharatmata," which first appeared as a mimeographed *ezra*-fakir publication. The poem was then published in *Poetry India* in its sixth (and final) issue, and the issue of the magazine was printed at Mohan Mudranalaya where the Marathi little magazine editor Ashok Shahane used to work.⁵ Noticing the immense

rebellious irreverence of Mehrotra's poem, Shahane (who was very active in the Marathi little magazine scene) made a hundred stand-alone copies of the poem (they looked a little like chapbooks) and gifted them to Mehrotra to distribute to readers free of charge. Santan Rodriguez's *Kavi* published reviews of Marathi literature, and in *Dionysus*, there is a piece by "Cain Abel" that uses both Roman and Devanagari script when switching from English to Marathi.⁶ There were bilingual poets such as Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre who persistently crossed linguistic boundaries and published in both English and Marathi little magazines.⁷ Arun Kolatkar was involved with and published in *Shabda* and *Aso* in Marathi, for instance, and he also published in English little magazines such as *Dionysus* (1965),⁸ *damn you* (1968), *Opinion Literary Quarterly*⁹ (1974), and *Vrischik* (1970) in English.¹⁰

The little magazine became the meeting ground where a more radical Bombay took shape. The Bombay thus conceived (in both Marathi and English little magazines) was a different one than the political city that was mapped as the capital of the newly monolingual state of Maharashtra in 1960. The late 1950s witnessed protracted agitations, public burning of state directives, and street rioting, all geared toward an irrevocable demand for a Marathi state of Maharashtra with Bombay as its capital.¹¹ But while this was unfolding on the political level in the street, there was a simultaneous insistent effort to forefront the multilingual nature of Bombay in the pages of the Marathi and English little magazines.

Santan Rodrigues's *Kavi* (translated as "poet" in Marathi and Hindi) deliberately referenced a vernacular title for an English magazine (even the title on the front page was composed of a hybrid font of Devanagari and Roman letters). But more important was the championing of translations from Indian literatures into English as a mode of domesticating English writing in the Indian context and marking English as one of the many languages of the nation. Bhakti poets such as Tukaram and Kabir were translated by Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar, and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (see *Vrischik* 1970, *Fakir* 1968), Indian poetry from most major Indian languages was translated or reviewed in Ezekiel's *Poetry India*, Gujarati poetry appeared in translation in Pavankumar Jain's *Tornado* (1967–71), and Marathi poets such as B. B. Borkar, Sadanand Rege, and Indira Sant appeared in the poetry reviews in *Kavi*. These little magazines encoded within them the multiplicities that formed the world of modern Bombay and have preserved for us the material sense of the moment of the post-statehood of the projected monolingual Maharashtra (with Bombay as its prized capital), a literary Bombay different from the politically imagined space at the time. I therefore read the little magazines not just as empty

containers for rebellious texts, but as generators of that rebellion through their very structures, through their material interface with the readers, the processes of circulation in which they embedded themselves, and the poetics of ephemerality they espoused.

In Anglo-American literature, Ezra Pound was one of the first to take such “small magazines” seriously: he described such publications as “the free magazine or the impractical or fugitive magazine.”¹² And later, with the involvement of major scholars in the field in archiving and studying little magazines in the United States and in Great Britain, this category of publication has been closely analyzed, classified, and documented in the western world.¹³ Their classification of such “fugitive” publications into categories such as bibelots, chapbooks, little magazines, and ephemera, does not fit the Indian context where the publications share elements of these different taxonomies all at once. I will therefore take the self-classifications of the poets and publishers as a guide in this essay.

The little magazines showcased in their pages all forms of writing, in publications that looked like the most august periodicals of their time as well as others that looked like the junk one gets in the mail; some that lasted a few years, others that folded after two issues. The magazines contravened readerly expectations on multiple fronts, sometimes of format, at times of size and appearance, of periodicity, of content, of practices of dissemination, and, most importantly, of language and of profit. And the experimentalism they ushered in through their own structural rebellion against institutionalized writing practices was mainly in the genre of poetry. These little magazines were published outside the mainstream network, and/or without institutional support, publishing content that was radically different for the time and with a very limited circulation. These were also magazines that did not survive the market realities for very long even if they published poets who would eventually comprise the canon in poetry (and a few canonical writers in fiction) in their respective languages.

The magazines vary in appearance – some, such as *Poetry India* (1966–67), look like most mainstream magazines (except in terms of its size), orderly in appearance and classical in the use of font and white space on the page. Others, such as *Tornado*, have the deliberate appearance of the hastily handmade, complete with hand-drawn images along with the poems. In Delhi, *Vagartha* (1973–79) was mostly intermittent in its publication schedule. It would qualify as a little magazine not only because of the practitioners who were involved in the magazine and their anti-establishment attitude, but also due to the not-for-profit, market-circumventing

approach taken by them. In Bombay, *Poetry India* was a periodical in the sense that it brought out its issues regularly, but it lasted just a little over a year. Its deviation from the standard approach of making money in publishing projects determined its fate, as it did for the later *Opinion Literary Quarterly*. The common elements among these otherwise diverse set of little magazines were multiple: a broad-based interest in publishing translations from Indian regional literatures, a disregard for profit-making methods, a focus on popular life and its language, and a relatively short-lived existence.

However, this is not a homogeneous set of publications or a unified group of writers under a common agenda. People ended up in this convenient format of publication after having started with differing politics and with desires for separate outcomes. The structure of the little magazine matched the need of the time and allowed disparate writers to assert their rebellious agendas effectively in a readily available format and method. As an illustration of the common methods used as well as the divergent poetics of the editors (the shared use of translation as insurrection but also the different format, appearance, and literary values of the publications), there follows a close analysis of little magazines edited by two important poets: Nissim Ezekiel's *Poetry India* (1966–67), and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's *ezra* (1967–71) and *damn you* (1965–68), all appearing in the same period, but edited by poets belonging to different generations in age as well as reading taste. This comparative reading will highlight the common aims of the little magazines of the period and also show the internal diversity of the form through the differing philosophies of publication and of literature projected by these little magazines.

Poetry India

Bruce King was one of the first to catalogue the publishing scene in the '60s and '70s in Bombay in his book, where he gives one of the few detailed references to Ezekiel's little magazine, *Poetry India*.¹⁴ There are many literary analyses of Nissim Ezekiel as a poet, and a broad consensus about his central role as mentor, publisher, editor, and friend to most of the poets of the 1960s and 1970s in Bombay. But there is hardly any serious consideration of the role of his publications such as *Poetry India* in the making of modern Indian poetry. This little magazine had just six issues in 1966–67 but, with Ezekiel's vast connections in the field and his enormous knowledge of the craft, in its pages appeared most of the canonical poets

and writers from English, Marathi, Hindi, Kannada, Punjabi, Bengali, Oriya, Maithili, and other Indian languages.

English little magazines in Bombay did not start with *Poetry India* (there were earlier short-lived projects such as *Bombay Duck* in 1964 and *Dionysus* in 1965, for instance), but with this little magazine it was not just Bombay poetry but the larger English poetry and poetry in translation which found a congenial home during this brief period. *Poetry India* reflects the twin motivations of Ezekiel's engagement with Indian poetry: on the one hand, it provided the literary space he had always wanted, one that was dedicated solely to poetry as opposed to the structure of the previous publications with which he had worked (*Quest, Illustrated Weekly of India*); on the other hand, it was also a space where Ezekiel could freely exercise his editorial ideas and showcase his choices more selectively than in the Writers Workshop publications under P. Lal in Kolkata, with whom he had a close professional association as well.

The physical appearance of *Poetry India* was not radical at all: the classical font used for the title and the editor's name as well as for the contents of the magazine denotes a certain seriousness of poetic intent in its acceptable visual style. The editor's name, "Nissim Ezekiel," is in large font on the front cover under the title of the magazine, and that is the only overt manifestation of the editor's presence in the text.¹⁵ There are no editorials in the issues and the reader gleans the editorial preferences through the appearance, format, and contents of the issues. The magazine does not shock the reader through its format; rather, it demands a place next to the traditionally published books through its visual values. The somewhat conformist appearance hides the ground-breaking work done in these pages.

The title, *Poetry India*, mentions the newly formed Indian nation, but the contents of the magazine are at odds with this seemingly patriotic sentiment. For instance, in its last issue (2.6, 1967), *Poetry India* published the provocative poem "bharatmata" by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, a poem that also refers to the patriotism of the time in its own title, but laced with extreme sarcasm:

India, my beloved country, ah my motherland
 you are, in the world's slum the lavatory
 . . .
 i am so used to your cities . . .
 where whole families live in bathrooms
 and generations are pushed out of skylights

(16)

Here, Mehrotra's rejection of the nationalist fervor of the time matches the critical stance of *Poetry India* toward expressions of regional and national parochialisms.

The contents of *Poetry India* appear on the cover of each issue and they categorize poetry by its language of origin: Oriya, Marathi, Hindi, Panjabi, Tamil, and so on. A fascinating element of this classification is the separation between English poetry from India and the poetry submitted by poets from outside India, such as Roy Fuller, Howard Sergeant, and Linda Hess. Without overtly stating its agenda, the little magazine thus stakes a claim for English writing as Indian writing by having English poetry from India sitting in a cluster of writing from other Indian languages in the contents. Later, Ezekiel's one-time student, poet Santan Rodrigues, would re-emphasize this philosophy in his own little magazine, *Kavi*, where the editorial to the first issue states that "KAVI is a journal of Indian poetry by which we mean poetry written by Indians in an Indian language, including English in which KAVI is published and into which Indian language poems will be translated."¹⁶

The little magazine venture brought together a community of writers and artists not only across linguistic lines but also across generic divides. In the third issue of *Poetry India*, the editor includes a long list of thanks to all who contributed in some way to the magazine, including the magazine subscribers. That list also has a thank-you note to two painters: M. F. Husain for the gift of a painting (which was yet to be sold), and Akbar Padamsee for donating the proceeds of the sale of one of his paintings; the close connection between visual arts and literature gets corroborated here.¹⁷ Despite having just six issues of the magazine, *Poetry India* became a literary landmark with a roll-call of some of the finest poets in the Indian languages and English appearing in its pages: A. K. Ramanujan, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel, Dilip Chitre, Kamala Das, Arun Kolatkar, P. Lal, Sitakanta Mahapatra, Benoy Majumdar, Amrita Pritam, Gopalkrishna Adiga, Ashok Vajpeyi, Sadanand Rege, Keshavsut, P. S. Rege. Scholarship on Ezekiel revolves exclusively around his poetic work, but his remarkable literary taste and mentorship that is in evidence in *Poetry India* deserves equal acknowledgment.

ezra, damn you

Poetry India and Nissim Ezekiel represent one kind of little magazine that ushered in a new modernism in Indian poetry. But there was another viewpoint on little magazines in Bombay, two separate publishing

philosophies in existence. If, on the one hand, there was Nissim Ezekiel and his star project, *Poetry India*, then on the other hand there were Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's multiple little magazines: *ezra* (1967–71), *damn you* (1965–68), and *fakir* (1968). Adil Jussawalla voices the critical sentiment against Ezekiel's editorship that was also in existence during the time: "Some people who developed a very lasting dislike of Nissim, it's been during their student days, when they've gone to him with their poems, and he has not been as enthusiastic as they would like him to be. This also happened."¹⁸ Mehrotra's little magazines appeared around the same time as *Poetry India* but they supported a much more overtly radical agenda and they were embraced by one section of readers as the better alternative to traditional writing. In his disapproving review of the older periodical *Quest*, which was also edited by Ezekiel for a few years, Lawrence Bantleman says,

Quest needs to come across a few dragons, real, live, biting things. It needs to tape-record the ideas of the starving peasant, not well-fed "intellectuals." It needs a dose of life, raw, honest stuff. It needs a bit of pornography in its stories. Its poems need a stick in their backside. Its editors need to crawl out of their wombs and realize that things are jumping.¹⁹

Bantleman rejects what he sees as the establishment perspective of journals edited by Ezekiel and he holds up *ezra* and *damn you* as the promising new voices that would indeed provide such a resurgence. And both in terms of format and appearance as well as the contents of the magazine, *ezra* represents a more youthful, spontaneous, and abrasive revolt.

In his autobiographical essay "Partial Recall," Arvind Krishna Mehrotra notes that his first little magazine, *damn you*, was inspired by and modeled upon the American little magazine *Fuck You*, a reference to which he came across in the *Village Voice* at his friend Amit Rai's house.²⁰ The magazine was the joint effort of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and the brothers Alok and Amit Rai, but it was Mehrotra who continued the literary work started here. The visual departures from accepted publishing conventions in *ezra* and *damn you* match the textual and philosophical differences the editors of the magazine had with older traditions of writing in English. The material and textual intent of *ezra* (which was edited by Mehrotra alone and was inspired by the explosive poetics of the American modernist Ezra Pound) is to bring the life of the street into the site of art. The little magazine has a cover page that has a handwritten title (one of the issues has a wonderfully multicolored tiger mask pasted on the copy); there are unexpected and

ambition to be free of profit-making pressures – there were advertisements in some of these magazines, but on the whole they supported themselves on the basis of the subscriptions of readers and donations by patrons.

More than anything else, the little magazines grounded English poetry in a network of material publishing processes, of readers and writers, that placed English poetry (frequently seen as opposed to a nationalist understanding of Indian writing) side by side with other Indian writing through the multiple translations that were published in their pages. Whether it was the more classically restrained page of *Poetry India* or the more youthfully disorderly page of *ezra*, the pages of these little magazines created a new sense of the cosmopolitan localism that was grounded in the realities of post-independence Bombay. This is not a simplistic divide of home-grown versus foreign, though both *Poetry India* and *ezra* have clear ambitions to reach readers overseas: on the cover page of *Poetry India* the price of each issue is mentioned (“Rs 1.50 75 cents 2s. 6d”), and the editorial and directions for submission of work to *ezra* also address readers and writers outside India. Through the emphasis on multilingual engagements, however, and through the deconstruction of the writing space, form, and style, the little magazines created a new sense of the local that did not adhere to geography and language in narrow identitarian ways – it marked the writer’s voice as emerging out of a complex but grounded cosmopolitanism that stood at an angle to contemporary politics of monolingual and mono-ethnic concerns.

This was a revolt against the monumentality of received history, an attempt to fracture the monolith of tradition. Consequently, the form of the little magazine, one that was hastily put together, frequently printed by hand, and circulated in informal networks, seemed to embody the very essence of that rebellion. It emphasized the exigency of that revolt in its ephemeral materiality. As Glazier states in his comment about American little magazines of this period, “There was also a sense of urgency to these productions. The mimeo allowed fast production and immediate circulation to a small audience . . . The ability to control production was key.”²³ Today, the poets who emerged from such publishing locations are canonized. Nevertheless, their poetry still lies on the margins of South Asian studies and discussions of postcolonial literature. By reading the form of the little magazine into this poetry, however, one can see how this poetry connects the rebellion in the margins to a thematic of the ephemeral in the texts, thus providing a more unfixed and volatile alternative to the centrality of fiction in current literary debates. This poetry is still elusive in many ways, and that sense of unpredictability is a continuum that runs

through its material locations and its thematic articulations. It is not surprising that a poet such as Arun Kolatkar, for instance, so fully invested in the little magazine movement, wrote a poem like “The Butterfly” in *Jejuri* (1977), where the delicate and transient creature literally vanishes off the page before the reader can comprehend its existence.

A year after Kolatkar passed away in 2004 there appeared a collection of his drawings titled *The Policeman: A Wordless Play in Thirteen Scenes*.²⁴ The book opens with a line drawing of Kolatkar’s own image, with his trademark moustache over the mouth that holds a cigarette; the graphic line that traces the smoke of the cigarette transforms itself into the nose, the eye, and the eyebrow of the poet as it reaches the corner of the page. This is a continuous unbroken line that snakes its way into the creation of the poet’s profile. The center of attention here is the rising smoke that uncovers the poet’s face across the dancing line on the page, indicating the transitory nature of that self and that image. With the puff of smoke gone, one can imagine the face also dissolving into the blankness of the page surrounding it. This attempt to tentatively secure a demarcation of a face or a person, of something that immediately dissolves upon the hint of a definition, is the concept that lies also at the base of the little magazines’ endeavor to emblemize the passing instant of the present and to capture the transience and the complexity of that moment. In visual terms it speaks to the contemporary photograph of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra that graces the cover of *Collected Poems 1969–2014*. It also echoes in graphics what Mehrotra says in one of the editorial statements of *ezra*: “as a coin I am melted out of circulation,” melted out of the used and predictable circuits of writing and into an indefinable materiality of the handmade, personally crafted pages of poetry that appeared in the little magazines. The little magazines made this ephemeral present the center of their work and their worldview.²⁵

Notes

1. The picture was taken on a trip to Wisconsin in 1973 when Mehrotra was a visiting writer at the University of Iowa’s International Writing program.
2. *ezra* 2 (1968), np.
3. By “Bombay” here, I mean an extended and nebulous sense of the urban location; not what is mapped on cartographic surveys of the city, but, rather, the node of the various networks of writing and living that find its center in this urban location, literary networks which extend the idea of the Bombay urban sometimes into Allahabad (with Mehrotra’s little magazines and his poetry) and at other times into Pune and the neighboring mapped regions where

- Kolatkár, Chitre, and other little magazine writers and editors also worked. See Anjali Nerlekar, *Bombay Modern: Arun Kolatkár and Bilingual Literary Culture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming) for this discussion of an expansive Bombay modern and also for the multilingual little magazines of Bombay.
4. Bruce King was prescient in first writing in 1987 about the little magazines and providing a starting point for all future scholars on this topic (Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987]). But besides the accounts of the poets themselves, there has been a perceptible lack of scholarship on this issue until recently.
 5. Ashok Shahane is seen as the father of the modern Marathi little magazine and he also started the small press Pras Prakashan, which has published, among other books, all the books by Arun Kolatkár in both English and Marathi.
 6. In the notes on contributors, at the back of the issue (1: 1, 1965, np), it says "Cain Abel had a mental breakdown verging on paranoid Schizophrenia. Writing was recommended as a psycho-therapeutic measure." Arun Kolatkár published two poems in the same issue and also designed the cover of the magazine. His biographical note reads thus: "Arun Kolatkár is a visualizer with The Press Syndicate. He will shortly bring out his volumes of English and Marathi poems, as well as a volume of his translations of Tukaram."
 7. Later, Vilas Sarang was the prominent younger poet who followed in their bilingual footsteps and who edited a prominent but short-lived magazine, *The Bombay Review*, which published extensively on and by Marathi writers as well as English writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s.
 8. Arun Kolatkár also designed the cover of these issues.
 9. Kolatkár's *Jejuri* (Bombay: Clearing House, 1976) first appeared as a long poem in this little magazine in 1974.
 10. The little magazine was started by the artists Gulammohammed Sheikh and Bhupen Khahar from Baroda, but both the editors had close rapport and repeated collaborations with the artists and writers from Bombay. Kolatkár, Mehrotra, and Gieve Patel published their translations of Bhakti poetry from Marathi and Hindi here in 1970.
 11. See Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *History, Culture and the Indian City: Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
 12. Ezra Pound, "Small Magazines," *The English Journal* 19.9 (1930), 702.
 13. Book history and periodical studies are taken much more seriously in the United States and Britain than in India. See Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman, *Modernism in the Magazines: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); also, Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, "The Rise of Periodical Studies," *PMLA* 121. 2 (Mar. 2006), 517–31. In India, Supriya Chaudhuri called for a study of the little magazines in *Literature Compass* 9.9 (2012), 593–98.
 14. Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

15. A. K. Ramanujan's name appears as the associate editor on the last issue (2.2). Ramanujan was also a contributor to previous issues of the magazine.
16. Santan Rodrigues, ed., *Kavi*, 1.1, p. 1.
17. The painters and poets in this period extended each other's craft by inserting themselves in the other's field and through their collaborations. Painters such as F. N. Souza and Gulammohammed Sheikh published poetry and prose; Gieve Patel, a part of the important Clearing House Collective, is an important artist as well as a poet; Arun Kolatkar trained as an artist at J. J. School of Arts, worked as graphic artist in advertising and also designed many book covers for poetry collections in Marathi and English; Dilip Chitre also painted extensively, especially in his final years.
18. *Almost Island* (Monsoon 2012), p. 36.
19. *The Century*, ed. Laurence Bantleman, Dec. 31, 1966, p. 16.
20. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Partial Recall: Essays on Literature and Literary History* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), p. 60.
21. Mehrotra states that at this time, he and his friends were reading contemporary American texts that were also iconoclastic in form and theme, like Gregory Corso's "Marriage," Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Underwear," and Allen Ginsberg's "America," all of which left him in "in a state of euphoria." (*Partial Recall*, p. 59).
22. Pound, "Small magazine," *The English Journal*, 19.9, Nov. 1930 (689–704).
23. Loss P. Glazier, *Small Press: An Annotated Guide* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 2.
24. This was composed by the poet in the 1960s but, like much of his work, he did not publish it until decades later. Laetitia Zecchini refers to this image in the preface to *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
25. I am grateful to Arvind Krishna Mehrotra for valuable help in writing this chapter.

SECTION III

Poetry: 1950–2000

*Nissim Ezekiel: Poet of a Minor Literature**Amit Chaudhuri*

It might be best to begin by explaining what I understand by the word “minor.” The word is out of serious use, since the value-judgment implicit in the dichotomy of “major” and “minor” has long been out of favor. Better, usually, to speak of “minority,” a term with political resonances that many can work with. And yet to approach the provenances of Nissim Ezekiel’s work, we probably need to go back to those value-judgments and enquire into how they affected, and were even appropriated by, Ezekiel, and rewritten as a particular aesthetic.

How conventional literary history or criticism decides who is a major or a minor poet depends partly on subjective assessment and partly, as present-day wisdom would say, on culture-specific biases. But let’s second-guess what the assumptions of “being major” are. A major poet appears to be a practitioner who’s crucially related to an epoch and to the zeitgeist, and our vocabulary formulates this relationship in a number of ways: that the major poet embodies the zeitgeist; that he or she actively contributes to shaping it; that he or she subverts or transgresses it; that the major poet occasionally remains unrecognized in the epoch they live in and anticipates a zeitgeist that’s to come. The minor poet performs none of these tasks; he’s not to be confused with being a *bad* poet – instead, he’s one who is, in a sense, solely an aesthetic or literary figure, a faithful, competent, even accomplished adherent of the literary rulebook of his age, a practitioner who’s content to be a producer of good poems. The minor poet doesn’t aim – it would seem – to question the literary (or the assumptions surrounding it in the time he lives in) or put it to test. As a result he doesn’t engender an oeuvre but writes good poems – at most, her or his oeuvre might be an agglomeration of individual good poems. The minor poet’s oeuvre is not – unlike the major poet’s – a mini-tradition or a parody of a lineage, a competitor with or a version of literary history and tradition itself. The great poets in the English and American traditions explore a range of form and material as well as pursue unwieldy, risk-prone

projects – such as *The Prelude*, the *Cantos*, or *The Waste Land* – so that the oeuvre not only aims to be a sum of great works or comprise a significant legacy, but also to mimic the shifts and unwieldiness of literary history. The excellent minor poets, such as Housman, display no such hubris; they are remembered for individual offerings. These, at any rate, are some of the explicit or unspoken assumptions that underlie the distinction.

This is not to say that the minor poet might not embody an epoch. Conceivably, there are always going to be minor poets around the time that major poets are predominantly at work. But certain poets might also come into their own, or become productive, during a cusp – between one age of major practitioners and another. The exemplary group in relatively recent English literary history in this regard is the Georgians, including figures such as Lascelles Abercrombie, Rupert Brooke, G. K. Chesterton, Walter de la Mare, John Drinkwater, and John Masefield – all contributors to the *Georgian Poetry* anthologies from 1912 and 1922, writing after the waning of the prominent Victorians and before the breakthroughs of modernism were properly recognized or absorbed. The Georgians epitomize – and, in fact, the name was shorthand in English literature for – “being minor.” Closer to our time, and still staying with the English, there is “the Movement.” As with any grouping, certain figures were recruited into these constellations who sooner or later broke away, or came to have an independent significance – for example, D. H. Lawrence, also a contributor to *Georgian Poetry*. Thom Gunn, similarly, was an escapee from the Movement. In fact, in the end, the Movement had very little to show except for Philip Larkin, while the Georgians never had a poet of Larkin’s significance in their group. If they did – for example, Isaac Rosenberg or Lawrence – those poets became far better-known for other reasons, events, and allegiances. Larkin is an exception, precisely because he’s the one poet among the ones I’ve mentioned so far that openly and sustainably makes a case for “being minor,” turning it, subtly, into the *raison d’être* for an oeuvre. Studying him, we find how a poet who seems to self-consciously pursue a minor practice might come to articulate the zeitgeist in an age in which, apparently, ambition is suspect for specific political and aesthetic reasons.

Let’s stay with Larkin for a while to deepen our contact with the importance and tone of the “minor.” The poet-critic A. Alvarez, a champion of the poetry of extremity, of Sylvia Plath, and of the sub-mythopoeic poetry of Ted Hughes, made no secret of the fact that he thought Larkin circumscribed by his middle-Englishness, by being educated and “less deceived” – by inhabiting the median in every sense. Following the

publication of his first book of verse, *The North Ship*, in 1945, Larkin positioned himself against romanticism and “greatness” by excavating a minor tradition in English literature, by exchanging the music of W. B. Yeats, his first poetic mentor, for the “tunefulness” of Thomas Hardy (a major novelist who was long held to be a good but minor poet): “He’s not a transcendental writer, he’s not a Yeats, he’s not an Eliot; his subjects are men, the life of men, time and the passing of time, love and the fading of love.”¹ By the close of his career, it was clear that the sort of fulfillment or “happiness” that made Larkin uneasy was a “happiness” jettisoning a humdrum (possibly Protestant) continuity in favor of absolute, epoch-changing rebellion and sex:

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he’s fucking her and she’s
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
Like an outdated combine harvester,
And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. (“High Windows”)²

Fulfillment, in keeping with Larkin’s relationship to the zeitgeist, his attempts to fashion a poetry adequate to it, and his poker-faced revisionism, must have to do with a deliberate self-curbing and an apparent sociability (the tension between the sociable and the unsociable, the humanistic and the misanthropic is constant in Larkin), as in this address to his friend Kingsley Amis’s just-born daughter:

May you be ordinary;
Have, like other women,
An average of talents:
Not ugly, not good-looking,
Nothing unc customary
To pull you off your balance,
That, unworkable itself,
Stops all the rest from working.
In fact, may you be dull –
If that is what a skilled,
Vigilant, flexible,
Unemphasised, enthralled
Catching of happiness is called. (“Born Yesterday”)³

Here, then, is a catalogue of characteristics for poetic diction in an age that is post-imperial, post-modernist (in the literal sense of following modernism), in a time of curtailed desire, rationing, and intelligent practicality before Margaret Thatcher would eventually transform Britain: “skilled,/ Vigilant, flexible,/ Unemphasised, enthralled.” There is also the veiled rejection of modernism’s hubris and aesthetic mode: “unworkable itself,/ Stops all the rest from working.”

Alvarez’s anthology, *The New Poetry*, is a refutation, among other things, of the “minor” as a poetic strategy in the aftermath of modernism – or, for that matter, of Empire and the Second World War. Auschwitz caused the idea of poetry to self-destruct; in response, Alvarez seems to want poets to self-destruct, either in a disciplined, ironic way, by rehearsing suicide (as Plath did), or by disappearing into nature (like Hughes), the subsequent transmutation paradoxically ensuring the continuance of poetry by making the poet iconic. Larkin’s rebuttal of the “major” begins with his decision not to die, to be obsessed with death but choose to live with boredom, to not travel, and situate himself neither in the metropolis nor in the countryside (in whose proximity Hughes lived in Hebden Bridge). Larkin locates himself, as a librarian, in Hull, a town neither important nor deprived, among the “cut-price crowd” he describes in “Here,” not far from, but not too close to, “unfenced existence, out of reach.”⁴ His *métier* is boredom (“Life is first boredom, then fear . . .”); not the cosmic boredom of Beckett, but a dogged, almost virtuous, cultivation of bourgeois dullness. Ezekiel’s shrewd assertion in “Background, Casually” (“My backward place is where I am”⁶) could do equally for Larkin (who said in 1982 to an interviewer from the *Paris Review*: “Hull is a place where I *have* stayed”⁷). Larkin’s formulation – that Englishness is synonymous with the minor, and is cherishable precisely for this reason (see, for instance, “The Whitsun Weddings,” “An Arundel Tomb,” “Going, Going,” and “MCMIV”) – has had its activists, such as Alan Bennett and John Betjeman, and its historians, such as E. M. Forster, who notes, in *Howards End*: “Why has not England a great mythology? . . . It has stopped with the witches and the fairies.”

Larkin’s manner is a deliberate low-level, petty caviling against monstrosity, ambition, and foreignness; a caviling, indeed, against modernism and the avant-garde which includes his hostility to “the three P’s” – Ezra Pound, Charlie Parker, and Picasso – in the name of common sense, rationality, rationing, and a sort of decorum. Larkin’s repeated attacks are made on behalf of the minor. They also entail a curious turn homeward: home, the familiar, the boring, and the minor

are, in Larkin's reading, interchangeable – or should be. Confronting his origins on a train journey passing through Coventry, his birthplace, the speaker concludes the poem "I Remember, I Remember" with an observation – "Nothing, like something, happens anywhere"⁸ – that anticipates the stoic illumination upon which "Background, Casually" ends.

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I've discussed Larkin because he's almost an exact contemporary of Ezekiel, who was born two years after Larkin, in 1924, but also because both poets emerge at a particular moment in literary history in which they have to grapple with and reshape, from within, the category of the minor. Larkin's first collection, *The North Ship*, hadn't come to terms with what it means to be a practitioner in an age succeeding modernism, but the title of his first mature collection, *The Less Deceived* (1955), announces the nature and tone of the new project. Ezekiel's first book, *A Time to Change* (1952), has a title that's quasi-revolutionary in its echo of Ecclesiastes 3:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
 A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that
 which is planted;
 A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
 A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance . . .

The title of Ezekiel's first book simply adds to the long list of antinomies: Ecclesiastes does not mention "change," perhaps because it doesn't fit into its pairings – for what is the opposite of change but death? Five years after Independence, having returned to India after reading philosophy at Birkbeck College, London, Ezekiel knows change is at hand for those who, like him, fit in neither half of an antinomy – but change of what sort? He is, of course, also echoing T. S. Eliot's adaptation of Ecclesiastes 3 for the purposes of expressing, through the persona of J. Alfred Prufrock, the stirrings of belatedness, of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, of *not*, despite the repetition of the word, being on "time": "There will be time, there will be time/ To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet . . ." Despite the assertive, quasi-revolutionary title, Ezekiel is closer to Prufrock's sense of having missed his calling – "Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?" and "I am no prophet – and here's no great matter: / I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker." This is exactly the kind of tone Ezekiel will inhabit – comically self-questioning, urbane, seemingly under-confident, sly. To be minor is to be without a history; it is to possess, programmatically, a faux-seriousness and dignity that invites mockery:

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
 Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
 At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
 Almost, at times, the Fool.

(“The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock”⁹)

“Politic, cautious, and meticulous” could well be adjectives chosen by Ezekiel to define his distanced cultivation of a particular manner; but, in “On Meeting a Pedant” (from *A Time to Change*), Ezekiel also alerts us to the fact that the “politic” defense of cautiousness that will mark his work is also to be constantly challenged – in others and, secretly, in oneself: “Words, looks, gestures, everything betrays / The unquiet mind, the emptiness within.” This leads to an invocation, in “On Meeting a Pedant,” of the social situation in “Prufrock”, reprised in the terms of ’50s Bombay:

Give me touch of men and give me smell of
 Fornication, pregnancy and spices.
 But spare me words as cold as print, insidious
 Words, dressed in evening clothes for drawing rooms.¹⁰

To be minor is to be unsure, like Prufrock, whether the pedant is the person one meets at the party or oneself; it’s to risk being too serious or not serious enough. The very means of survival and of singularity – being “politic, cautious, and meticulous” – lead toward the “ridiculous.” To be minor is to occupy yet another median, between serious and comic endeavor. It’s to practice an irony of diction that’s partly self-sabotaging.

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Eliot’s first major poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, is an enactment of what it means to “be minor.” But Eliot, in the poem, as in his oeuvre, transcends minor writing by fashioning, and inventing, a relationship with European literary history – a relationship at once political and aesthetically productive, if often dubious. *Prufrock* gestures toward this project – which is Eliot’s principal intellectual achievement – via the epigraph from Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, situating London (“unreal city”) both in purgatory and in the literary-theological European imagination. Part of Larkin’s eschewal of the “major” involves his rejection of what he contemptuously called the “myth-kitty”.¹¹ But what kind of lineage, mythology, or precursor text could Ezekiel have turned to as a route to composing major poetry? According to Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in his introduction to his anthology, *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) – “The origins of modern Indian poetry in English go no further back than the poets in this anthology”¹² – Ezekiel

being the oldest of, and the earliest to publish among, the poets he'd selected. Unless he chose to be a parody of a "great" poet, either by invoking a utopian Indian past or by wishing to himself be a canonical "English" poet (as Michael Madhusudan Dutt did before he turned to the Bengali language), it seemed that Ezekiel had no choice but to shrewdly embrace the minor. Of Ezekiel's location at the "origins" of a tradition whose very existence was often in doubt, Mehrotra said:

In the absence of a good literary history, it is difficult to say what sustained this heir to Sarojini Naidu's mellifluous drivel when he started out as a young poet in the mid-forties. The espousal of the self in his work is perhaps one consequence of the realization that he must create his own life-support system. There was nothing in the literature then, or even in the following decade, that could have sustained him.¹³

No "myth-kitty," then, to fall back on. And, despite coming along consciously (thus, as Mehrotra says, the studied gesture of the title, *A Time to Change*) at the beginnings of a tradition, Ezekiel makes no attempt to present us with a creation-myth. For a creation-myth in English in India that's at once literary and political, we will have to wait for 1981 and *Midnight's Children*. For Rushdie to pull this off, he had to have recourse to arguably the most powerful mythology of Anglophone, independent India: the mythology of the nation. To be minor, for Ezekiel, is also to be politely distanced from the national. In 1973, in a remark to his interviewer Suresh Kohli in *Mahfil*, Ezekiel concedes that the socialist, Congress-led India of the "mixed economy" can still perform no large metaphoric function: "Post-independence India is not 'big' enough to produce a major poet, but may surprise us by suddenly throwing up one, as Nature creates freaks."¹⁴ The mention of abnormality is prescient of the unthinkable change created by deregulation, as it is of *Midnight's Children's* conviction that the supernatural is a way of accessing the nation's history.

There are important differences between what the "minor" means to Larkin and what it means to Ezekiel. But I suppose the significant difference has to do with Larkin positioning himself, self-consciously, as a minor poet within a major literature: this is what gives his work its anomalous distinction. Indeed, it isn't clear that *any* literature views itself as minor. There are literatures that are, for one reason or another (usually political ones), obscure, but few that see themselves as semi-legitimate and, as a result, congenitally minor. Even the more obscure literatures have their canon, their constellation of lesser and greater writers. Deleuze and Guattari recognize that the use of a second language – a language that

one has, morally and politically, relatively little ownership of – constitutes a characteristic of a minor literature, and the example they provide us with is a Czech, Franz Kafka, using a language for his fiction, German, that is not by rights his.¹⁵ Here, the idea of the minor overlaps with that of the political notion of minority, so that, for instance, in Deleuze’s reading, Joyce’s works should qualify as some of the greatest examples of a minor literature, especially the Joyce who, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, has Stephen Dedalus inwardly fulminate as he converses with an English priest: “The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine!”¹⁶ Yet there can’t be much of a quarrel with the fact that Joyce – like Kafka – is primarily engaged in fashioning major works and a major oeuvre; those fictions may comprise instances of a “minor literature,” but Deleuze and Guattari don’t argue with the fact that Kafka is a “major” figure. It’s only with Ezekiel that we find the convergence of a particular kind, a specific form, of creative opportunism, and an acknowledgment that not only will minor writers generate a minor literature, but that a literature once recognized as minor can only be fully addressed and interpreted by a minor writer and by minor works.

*

What would have made Indian writing in English, at the moment at which Ezekiel embarked on his career as a published poet, “minor”? Firstly, this “tradition,” or practice, which had been inaugurated in the early nineteenth century and then either gone underground or become incompatible with serious literary attention, stood at the crossroads of two “major” lineages or ideas. The first of these was English literature, itself designed, of course, as a post-classicist pedagogy for the benefit of the colonies. Ezekiel would have considered this literature to be one of his principal inheritances, but would have known that the relationship of the “Indian” – which was itself a relatively new category – to the language and the literature of the English was never a wholly legitimate one.

The other major idea that would have dwarfed the Indian poet in English in the fifties and sixties, when Ezekiel published his first four collections, would have been the idea of Indian literature, or literatures. One of the reasons that this lineage had become subterranean from the 1860s onwards had surely to do with the fact that some of its most dogged adherents and practitioners, from Kasiprasad Ghosh to members of the Dutt family, lived in Calcutta, where, by 1861, a turn had taken place toward the mother-tongue: in this case, the Bengali language. This turn

was enacted by a former Anglophone poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, in sonnets composed in the early 1860s in, and sometimes addressed to, the Bengali language. From being a failed English poet, Dutt went on to become the author of Bengali's first modern mock-epic. By the time Ezekiel began to write, it was a truism that "major" literature must be culturally authentic, and that it was probably impossible to undertake major literary productions in another's tongue.

*

The difference between the "major" and the "minor" isn't that the former represents success and the latter tragic failure. In fact, the tragic note, the spectacle of the grand failure, is necessarily unavailable to the minor tradition and minor poet. The tragic failure captures the agonistic, Bloomian battles of the major literatures, causing the renewal or the creation of significant canons by greatly gifted and recalcitrant artists. So, Dutt explores the tragic in two ways as a means of establishing the intensity of a major lineage and art: firstly, he writes a mock-epic based on the *Ramayana* in which he makes Meghnad, the son of Ravana (Rama's traditional adversary), the tragic, Miltonic protagonist. What we have in Dutt's mock-epic is an aestheticization of the struggle to create the "major." Secondly, Dutt leads a tragic life himself, and dies young. He is consumed, as it were, by the great lineage he helps create.

In the case of the minor poet writing in the minor tradition, there is no possibility of grand failure; there is only inconsequentiality and decorum. Even death must become an occasion for comedy; the only way to approach such themes, for the minor poet, is without afflatus and with self-reflexivity, as Kasi Prasad Ghosh, one of the first Indian poets in English, does in 1830 in his "To a Dead Crow." (I should point out here that Ghosh's poem and his work were brought to my attention years ago by Rosinka Chaudhuri.) Ghosh deliberately argues for the crow as a peculiarly Indian bird, and its death becomes an occasion for elegy that must inevitably lapse, in the minor tradition, into the comic and the apologetic; the minor poet, then, must use platitude to fend off platitude, and throw light, at the same time, on the historical situation on which the "minor" rests:

Gay minstrel! ne'er had Death before
 Its dart destructive, sharpened more
 To pierce a gayer, mortal heart
 Than thine, which ah! hath felt the smart!
 Though life no more is warm in thee,
 Yet thou dost look as though't may be

That life in thee is full and warm;
 Not cruel death could mar thy form;
 Thy features, one and all, possess
 Still, still their former ugliness.

...

Stretched at full length I lie like thee,
 On mother earth's cold lap, so ne'er
 To spin such verses out I'll dare.
 And please the public ear again
 With such discordant, silly strain.
 As thou didst once delight to pour
 At morn or noon, or evening hour.¹⁷

Compare, too, not just the death of protagonists in the major and the minor poem, but the death of the major poet to the minor one. Dutt died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-nine in a way that at first seems wasteful, and later, in the sort of rereading the major tradition provides, appears exemplary and symbolic. On the other hand, the lives of Henry Vivian Louis Derozio, a predecessor of Dutt's who died when he was twenty-two, and Toru Dutt, who died when she was twenty-one, are seen to be abortive rather than tragic. Their deaths pose the question: "Who knows what they would have written had they lived?" The great works were yet to happen. Their remarkable oeuvres lack the shape and the sense of culmination that's imparted by a major tradition even to those who die early. The question, "Who knows what they would have written had they lived?" is a version of Mehrotra's speculation about Ezekiel's oeuvre: "[I]t is difficult to say what sustained this heir to Sarojini Naidu's mellifluous drivel when he started out as a young poet in the mid-forties." It's a form of speculation pertinent to the practitioner within a minor literature, just as it is, in a slightly different formulation, to those who didn't survive long enough to produce their major work. Ezekiel lived to the age of eighty. He died of Alzheimer's disease, thereby uniting himself again with the mysterious historical nullity ("There was nothing in the literature then"¹⁸) from which Mehrotra says he temporarily escaped. With the minor poet, it would seem there would be no clear explanation for the oeuvre that had occurred in the interim, between the absence of antecedents and the absence of memory. This, too, must not be confused with a tragic ending, for it is really a meandering, a drifting off.

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No clear literary history precedes Ezekiel; but the self-reflexive gesture, to do with writing in the minor tradition, is sounded early on, and it recurs.

More than one writer is fitfully aware of working in a space without forbears or history – or without readers, for that matter. There is Kasiprasad Ghosh, in his poem to the dead crow, acknowledging the ontological absurdity of an Indian versifying in English: of producing a “silly, discordant strain” (here, the elegist becomes one with his subject) that is a nuisance to the “public ear.” There is Toru Dutt, who, at the conclusion of a narrative poem reminiscent of Christina Rossetti, “Jogadhya Uma,” apologizes on behalf of the triviality of the story, but also, in an energizing, self-conscious turn, on behalf of the provisional tradition she inhabits:

Absurd may be the tale I tell,
 Ill-suited to the marching times,
 I loved the lips from which it fell,
 So let it stand among my rhymes.¹⁹

Mehrotra has alerted me to the title of a collection published by the poet Fredoon Kabraji in 1944 – *A Minor Georgian's Swan Song*. There are fifty-one poems in the book, of which Kabraji says, in one of the short sections that make up the introduction:

I have brought together in these pages a variety of poems forming a variety of experiments. . . . The fact that the majority of the poems have been rejected during a number of years by a number of periodicals clearly establishes that they are “unsuitable” – as judged by editors – for a large number of potential readers. Why then have I assembled, of deliberate intent, a small body of work that has found approval with a bigger body of work that has failed?

I believe that this “failure” by the same standards by which a few of my poems have been moderate “successes” might be converted into the same moderate success if the work in these pages could be judged as a single contribution, in its entirety.²⁰

It seems to me that the word “Georgian” – combined tautologically with “minor” – is being used not to periodize a body of work or to identify a lineage, but to suggest, figuratively, a twentieth-century Anglophone Indian’s middle-class sense of being on the periphery. I say “middle-class” because to be a “Georgian,” or to belong to a minor literature, is different from being a proponent of the low, the popular, and the folk (or even the postcolonial), wherein one would have been in a parodic or subversive relationship to “high” culture; it is, in fact, to be outwardly timorous, seemingly unfrontational, and at once “politic, cautious, and obtuse.”

The desire to transcend individual “moderate” (the word anticipates Ezekiel’s strategic containing of ambition) successes by creating a body of work that constitutes a “single contribution, in its entirety” is connected to a desire to temporarily abandon the impulse to compose single poems in favor of fashioning a literary history. This is possibly what Mehrotra is referring to when he says of Ezekiel: “The espousal of the self in his work is perhaps one consequence of the realization that he must create his own life-support system.” The creation by the poet of his own “life-support system” is akin to the nostalgia for the “single contribution, in its entirety,” a quasi-tradition brought into being perhaps by an intervention, a critical act of “conversion.” Otherwise, the minor poet is doomed to a series of fresh starts, to writing, again and again, solitary Indian poems in English, the earlier poems never forming a “background” to the current production, the oeuvre never tracing a “development,” the output remaining the sum total of individual “successes” and “failures.”

*

Ezekiel not only came to terms quite early in his career with what it meant to be writing at the crossroads of “major” traditions: he decided to become a commentator on the minor, to constantly, through his poetry, illuminate its position and to declare its constraints. The position was a moral one: to fight against vanity, delusion, and excess, to commit oneself to a rationality and “balance” that was a justification of the act of steering clear, deftly, of ambition:

The image is created; try to change.
 Not to seek release but resolution,
 Not to hanker for a wide, god-like range
 Of thought, nor the matador’s dexterity.
 I do not want the yogi’s concentration,
 I do not want the perfect charity
 Of saints nor the tyrant’s endless power.
 I want a human balance humanly
 Acquired, fruitful in the common hour.

(“A Poem of Dedication”)²¹

This list of ideals that a minor poet who belongs to a minor literature – Indian writing in English – must *not* aim for appears in “A Poem of Dedication,” addressed to “Elizabeth” – “This, Elizabeth, is my creation” – from *Sixty Poems* (1953). What exactly *is* Ezekiel’s creation? It isn’t clear. Can a desire for a “human balance humanly/ Acquired” be termed a creation – or is the “creation” in question the catalogue itself: a guide to

how *not* to create? Here, we see that Ezekiel's critical impulse – so important to subsequent generations of Indian English poets – is directly related to his self-appraisal and self-assessment to do with being a minor practitioner within a lineage that must, too, inevitably, be minor: an aesthetic of intelligent curtailment rather explosive dissolution; a strategy, then, for low-key, long-term survival. The romantic or modernist epiphany or spot of time must be rejected (“not to seek release but resolution”); Renaissance auteurs such as Tagore must be viewed with skepticism (“Not to hanker for a wide, god-like range”); so must any notion of a synthetic Indian heritage (“I do not want the yogi's concentration”) and the hubris of being an acknowledged legislator (“the tyrant's endless power”). Not “endless power,” then, but power of a particular kind, which comes from knowing that you must not ask for too much, for it is not your place to do so. In this way, Ezekiel begins to situate precisely the Indian poet in English, and also to construct his or her biography.

Ezekiel's strongest account of the experience of the minor and of how one might inhabit its definition usefully as an Indian poet in English comes a decade later, in *The Unfinished Man* (again, a loaded self-definition), in the poem he called “Enterprise.” The narrator who describes the sequence of events related to the “enterprise” has been around from the beginning:

It started as a pilgrimage
 Exalting minds and making all
 The burdens light. The second stage
 Explored but did not test the call.
 The sun beat down to match our rage.²²

The word “pilgrimage” and the phrase “exalting minds” might well refer to the ingenuous originary excitement of the Indian poet in English, to, for example, whatever it was that seized Ezekiel in 1948 and took him to London and to Birkbeck College to read philosophy, or would later drive Jussawalla to London and Oxford. Or it could be a way of mocking the faux romantic background of Indian writing in English, the “mellifluous drivel” that Sarojini Naidu composed, Aurobindo Ghose's Miltonic long poem *Savitri*, all meant to “exalt minds.” By the second stage, the group involved in the enterprise are in a less exalted location, where the “sun beat down” (Ezekiel returned to Bombay in 1953). “We stood it very well, I thought,” says the narrator of this second stage, “Observed and put down copious notes/ On things the peasants sold and bought.”²³ This phase, then, is not just to do with travel; it concerns being among the people of the land, the process of being re-assimilated. It's now that there's

discord in the group, perhaps with the realization that assimilation is impossible; the group splinters:

We noticed nothing as we went,
A straggling crowd of little hope,
Ignoring what the thunder meant,
Deprived of common needs, like soap.²⁴

The minor tradition is never entirely a finished tradition, in that its works seldom wholly cohere into a body: it is an agglomeration of works. Similarly, the poets of a minor literature always threaten to become dislodged from tradition and turn merely into individuals who write poems (“We noticed nothing as we went”) rather than carriers of a history. The outcome of such an adventure is ambiguous:

When, finally, we reached the place,
We hardly knew why we were there.
The trip had darkened every face,
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.
Home is where we have to gather grace.²⁵

It’s unclear whether “Our deeds were neither great nor rare” is an admission of failure or a utterance emerging from self-knowledge and an awareness of limitations, which, in Ezekiel’s writing, is seen to be a virtue: in the context of a minor tradition, the line has a double resonance. “Home” is similarly ambiguous; “away” might present the minor tradition with the possibility of excitement, but, in the end, it must be rejected on behalf of the familiar, which itself becomes an event: thus, Larkin of Coventry – “Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.” At any rate, the nature of the “enterprise” was still exercising Ezekiel more than a decade later, when he described, in *Mahfil*, the “we” – the group – portrayed allegorically in the poem to his interviewer Suresh Kohli: “There are no *major* poets in post-independent India writing in English or in any of the Indian languages. Among these writing in English the *notable* ones are A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarthy, Gieve Patel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Kamala Das and Saleem Peeradina.”²⁶

Ezekiel’s most explicit assertion after “Enterprise” to do with being a practitioner of a minor literature comes five years later in the short poem “Philosophy,” which opens *The Exact Name* (1965). “There is a place to which I often go,” says the speaker, “Not by planning to, but by a flow/ Away from all existence, to a cold/ Lucidity . . .”²⁷ “Cold lucidity” recalls the hauteur of middle-period Yeats (the ambition of writing “a poem as cold/ And passionate as the dawn”²⁸): the first half of the poem moves

toward a dream of control, a “final formula of light,” and then it retracts and withdraws: “I, too, reject that clarity of sight:/ What cannot be explained, do not explain.”²⁹ Control and overview (“clarity of sight”) are forfeited; inconsequentiality and the rejection of ambition are embraced deliberately in the final stanza, which states, in effect, that the principal vocation of the minor writer is not to be annihilated by the idea of the major – it is to seek survival:

The mundane language of the senses sings
 Its own interpretations. Common things
 Become, by virtue of their commonness,
 An argument against the nakedness
 That dies of cold to find the truth it brings.³⁰

The word “virtue” is important; its presence is neither simply idiomatic nor inadvertent – it is directly related to the minor poet’s morality, his studied resistance to delusion, his persistent training in withdrawing from excess, or from the “major.” The training, by the time this collection is published, is more in evidence than before: it expresses itself repeatedly. In “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher,” a poem describing three types of pursuit of desired objects, we are told: “The slow movement seems, somehow, to say much more.”³¹ This, after another rebuttal of restiveness or ambition: “To force the pace and never to be still/ Is not the way of those who study birds/ Or women. The best poets wait for words.”³² In “The Visitor,” this training and self-discipline permit the speaker to set aside the mythic: “Three times the crow has cawed/ At the window,” and this is initially taken to be a sign:

All day I waited, as befits
 The folk belief that following
 The crow a visitor would come.
 An angel in disguise, perhaps,
 Or else temptation in unlikely shape . . .³³

To belong to a minor tradition is to learn that one is often wrong about what is significant – “It was not like that at all,” begins the next stanza – and that the minor poet is hardly ever privy to signs, prophecies, and portents: “His hands were empty, his need:/ Only to kill a little time.”³⁴ The minor poet’s training, his or herself-discipline, transforms error and disappointment into a kind of knowledge: “I see how wrong I was/ Not to foresee precisely this:/ . . . The ordinariness of most events.”³⁵

Ezekiel’s poems continue, fundamentally, to be a record of a sort of education, a description of an unlearning which is also a form of learning, a relentless attempt to rectify wrongs – for the discipline of the poet of the

minor literature involves a relentless reassessment of what one knows. Thus, in “Lawn,” written in 1965:

My knowledge
 never looked
 beneath its nose
 to learn
 how lawns are made.
 I thought
 grass grows
 as Topsy grew.
 Not so.³⁶

The soil requires “not only water/ and the seed,” says the speaker, “but patience at the root – / the gentle art/ of leaving things alone.”³⁷ By now we have become familiar with this advice, its call for temperance, its distrust of signs and prognoses:

For weeks
 this earth
 is like a prophet
 who will not give a sign.³⁸

Not only the unlikelihood of a great outcome, but also the meagerness of output has been a problem for Indian poets in English (it wasn’t one of Ezekiel’s problems though). Or the lineage has had in its ranks poets who simply refuse to publish – such as Arun Kolatkar, a prophet who often stubbornly gave no sign at all. Nevertheless, there’s a “stir of growth/ an upward thrust/ a transformation”:

At last
 a thin transparent green appears
 and there you have the lawn.
 That is all.³⁹

The two very short lines – “At last” and “That is all” – remind us that epiphanies are unavailable within a minor literature; in lieu, you make do. Understanding this (“Not so”) is key to Ezekiel’s repeated invocation of his discipline, his continuing attempts to educate himself.

In “Background, Casually” from *Hymns to Darkness* (1976), Ezekiel composed his most powerful statement about the types of education he’d had – as a Jewish boy of “meagre bone” in a Roman Catholic school dominated by “strong but undernourished” Hindu lads; reading Philosophy as a student in London; scrubbing decks on the ship as he returned to India; apprenticeship as a poet (“The later dreams were all of

words”⁴⁰); and, of course (here we move toward the minor poet’s sense of what’s moral), the recognition of error and the consequent decision to reject a “god-like range”:

I did not know that word betray
But let the poems come, and lost
That grip on things the worldly prize.
I would not suffer that again.

I look about me now, and try
To formulate a plainer view:
The wise survive and serve – to play
The fool, to cash in on
The inner and the outer storms.⁴¹

“To play/ the fool”: this returns us to *Prufrock*, to the minor poet as comic player, the enjambment after “play” instructing us that the role cannot be undertaken entirely seriously, or even without a kind of delight. “The wise survive and serve”: here are the two aims of the minor writer and his tradition – to not challenge, to not ask for independence or mastery, and thereby to continue to be able to write, to produce, to “survive.” To know this is, in Ezekiel’s lexicon, and in a manner that has informed much Indian poetry in English after him, to be “wise.”

* * *

Notes

1. Philip Larkin, *Required Writing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 175.
2. Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber 1988), 165.
3. *Ibid.*, 84.
4. *Ibid.*, 136.
5. *Ibid.*, 152.
6. Nissim Ezekiel, *Collected Poems 1952–1988* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1989), 181.
7. Larkin, *Required Writing*, 65.
8. Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 81.
9. T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber 1974), 13.
10. Ezekiel, *Collected Poems*, 8.
11. D. J. Enright (ed.) (1955), *Poets of the Nineteen-Fifties* [additional publication information unavailable].
12. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (ed), *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1992), 9.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Mahfil*, Vol. 8, No. 4, *English Poetry from India* (Winter 1972), 8

15. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota 1986).
16. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Jonathan Cape 1924), 172.
17. Theodore Douglas Dunn (ed.), *The Bengali Book of English Verse* (London: Longman, Green, and Co. 1918), 5.
18. Mehrotra, *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*.
19. *Ibid.*, 82.
20. Fredoon Kabraji, *A Minor Georgian's Swan Song* (London: The Fortune Press 1944), 8.
21. Ezekiel, *Collected Poems*, 41.
22. *Ibid.*, 117.
23. *Ibid.*, 118.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Mahfil*, Vol. 8, No. 4, *English Poetry from India* (Winter 1972), p. 7.
27. *Ibid.*, 129.
28. "The Fisherman," W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poetry* (London: Macmillan (1974), 71.
29. Ezekiel, *Collected Poems*, 129.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, 135.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, 137.
34. *Ibid.*, 138.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, 161.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, 162.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, 181.
41. *Ibid.*

*Dom Moraes: A Poet's Progress**Jeet Thayil*1. **Against Facility**

In 1957, a small London imprint called The Parton Press published a first book by an Indian poet who had just turned nineteen. The press's unlikely proprietor was David Archer, a Soho habitué whose literary bookshop on Parton Street had become a meeting place for the British Modernists of the thirties. Editors and writers met there, and innovative literary projects came to life on the premises, including the incendiary left-wing journal *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*. More importantly, Archer published three of the decade's best poets, each destined for early fame: Dylan Thomas, George Barker, and the mercurial surrealist David Gascoyne, whose descent into amphetamine psychosis and institutional care was still some years away. Archer published Graham Greene's first novel, and he also published W. S. Graham, yet there has been no scholarly study of his contribution to British letters. This may have had everything to do with his personality. Even the carefully eccentric – in the quaint British sense of the word – citizens of Soho thought him strange. He liked to claim that he read only detective thrillers. He did not actually read the poets and writers he published; he went, he said, by smell. If his taste in poets was infallible, his accounting practices were less so. He used most of the inheritance his father had left him to rent the premises for his bookshops. Sometimes he would refuse to accept money from customers, and often he would empty the till to help an impoverished or thirsty friend. He had an unusual way of paying the poets he published: a five-pound note folded into a matchbox. Archer shut down the Parton Street bookshop during the war and reopened it in the late fifties on Greek Street in the heart of Soho. This is the establishment he is remembered for, if he is remembered at all. It was so radical an experiment in bookselling, and book-keeping, that it held the attention of an exuberant post-war generation of writers and readers. But it was no surprise that the shop went bankrupt, or that Archer ended up in a

Salvation Army hostel, or that the trust fund his friends set up did not save him, or that he killed himself in 1971. Before his decline and inevitable fall, his nose led him to a late triumph: the publication of Dom Moraes's *A Beginning*, which became a celebrated debut at a time when some of the most distinctive poetic voices of the twentieth century were appearing in the world for the first time.

The book's effect on Britain's poetry-reading public was electric and immediate. This may have had something to do with the poet's youth and his facility with the cellular structure of English verse, an immersion that went all the way back to the seventeenth-century lyric, but it was also a matter of timing. Ten years after the end of Empire, here was a poet steeped in the work of the Romantics and the Modernists, English military history, traditional folklore, indigenous paganism, and the Brythonic-inspired Arthurian legends. In short, it was hard to believe that *A Beginning* was the work of an Indian writer recently arrived in England. The poems were polished to a high formal gloss, in which the English poetic line of the nineteenth century was clearly visible. Line lengths were precise, stanza lengths regular. The sonnet was favored, as was the quatrain. The poems could not have been more English in rhythm, syntax, and imagery. There was a proliferation of wizards, warlocks, princesses, and dwarfs; doves pursued by archers; golden maidens pursued by dragons; flutes, pipes, and meadows; the "silken figure in a sylvan rhyme" and the "leaf-cold sea." Even the most contemporary seeming poems evoked a vivid English cityscape.

His first book of poems won Dom the Hawthornden Prize, a rare, highly regarded honor that made him famous while he was still a student at Jesus College, Oxford. The prize had not been awarded for fourteen years, and never to someone so young. He was lionized in the popular press. The *Daily Mail* offered dinner with Dom as a prize to its readers. His social life expanded, or unraveled, into Bohemian revelry and chaos, a lifestyle that the London of the late fifties and early sixties embodied like no other city in the world. It was a wonder that he continued to write and that he was able to follow *A Beginning* with two more books in much the same vein: *Poems* in 1960, and, five years later, the drink-sodden *John Nobody*, his most masterful collection to date. Then came disaster. Some forty years later, in the brief preface to his *Collected Poems* of 2004 (the year of his death), Moraes wrote about the time in a passage that is notable for its air of pointed literary self-criticism: "After I had published my first two books of verse, I decided that my facility was my own worst enemy. This problem resolved itself

in a way I would not have wished. Between 1963 and 1982 I ran into a writer's block, but only about poetry."¹ He went seventeen years without a poem, which makes it one of the longest blocks in the history of Indian poetry, though not the longest: Adil Jussawalla's lasted thirty-five years. How did the poetry return with a late flowering of extraordinary new work? What specific circumstance or set of circumstances ended the dry spell? I believe it was something no early reader of Moraes could have predicted. After decades of wandering the world he returned to India, where he immersed himself in the country's politics and sensibility. Toward the end of his life, he became an Indian writer, at least in terms of subject matter. This transformation had everything to do with the woman with whom he spent his last years, Sarayu Srivastav.

The question of Indianness – a vexed, impossible, even irrelevant question – becomes pertinent in Dom's case because for many years he was considered a British poet. When India annexed Goa in 1961, Dom publicly criticized the government. He suggested a plebiscite for an independent Goa. Following this, he was told that his passport would be withdrawn and he would not be allowed to leave India. Working in London at the time, he declared himself British and acquired a British passport. Because of this topical and ultimately obsolete circumstance, for many years Indian writers called him a British poet, an epithet they used with barely concealed ill will. He was excluded from anthologies of Indian poetry and did not figure in Indian academia in any way: he was not taught in English Literature courses in India, and there were no scholarly studies or dissertations of his work. But the fact remains that he was born and died in India and lived there longer than in any of the other countries he visited. And in the last decade or so of his life, when he was more prolific than he had ever previously been in both prose and poetry, most of his work involved India in a way that was unprecedented for Dom. The dreamy young Romantic of *A Beginning*, whose mellifluousness and facility were his own worst enemies, had been replaced by the hard-boiled, fearlessly engaged writer of the *Collected Poems* (2004), the later travel books, and the hundreds of newspaper and magazine columns with which he supported himself. The journalism has never been collected, but even a cursory look at some of the material reveals a political engagement with India, particularly with those unknown Indians who are rarely given voice in the English press, that distinguished Dom from many other commentators of the time. In his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Indian Journeys* (2001), which he edited, Dom wrote:

As a young man I lived in England and America, and when I wrote about India, I did so as an observer from outside, almost from another planet. I exulted in atmospheric descriptions of unfamiliar places and extraordinary events. Later on I found much richer material in the lives of ordinary Indians who lived, suffered, and endured. Neither they nor their ancestors had ever, over thousands of years, been asked for their opinions.²

This extraordinarily self-aware paragraph is a comment on his own youthful estrangement from Indian life and on the many English-speaking Indian writers who rarely (if ever) traveled outside the comfort zone of the city to report on the vast and impoverished nation of which they considered themselves an essential part. Also, it is a description of exactly the kind of task he set himself in *Out of God's Oven: Travels in a Fractured Land* (2002). It was a late awakening and it became a mission, to show "that there is not only a second, unexplored India, but another, larger nation of Indians whose views, unreported by the media, are largely unknown."³

2. "See You in About Ten Minutes"

I am too often silent
 And I often think that rivers, streams, the sea
 Owe their wholeness to their never being silent. ("Shyness")⁴

Dom Moraes was many things to many people, but no study of him can be complete without looking at the way the women in his life informed his work. More than most men, Dom was susceptible to the women he lived with and the men he befriended. They affected his disposition, his work habits, even his choice of subject matter. His first travel book *Gone Away* (1960) was dedicated to the actress Dorothy Tutin, as was his second poetry volume, *Poems* (1960). In his early twenties he lived in London and Oxford with his first wife, Henrietta Moraes, and traveled with her to Israel and Greece. Many of the early poems concern her. They were married in 1961 and split up in 1963 (the year his drought began), when he began a five-year relationship with Judith St. John, the mother of his only child, Francis Moraes. The dedicatory sonnets that open *John Nobody* are to Judith. He married his second wife, Leela Naidu, in 1971, ten years after his marriage to Henrietta, and most of the poems he wrote immediately after the dry years ended were for Leela. They lived in New York, Hong Kong, Delhi, and Bombay, visiting many parts of Asia on assignment, jobs on which he and Leela collaborated. With Sarayu Srivatsa he went to England, to

remote parts of India, and finally returned to Bandra, the Bombay suburb where his mother's family had always lived. In the last fourteen years of his life, Dom and Sarayu collaborated on two travel books, *Out of God's Oven* and *The Long Strider* (2003). All of the later poems are love poems to her.

Each new life and each new environment affected the work in profound ways. During the years when the poetry dried up there was a constant stream of journalism, autobiography, travel writing, and commentary. Throughout, the poetry refers to the women who fired his imagination. The travel books he wrote with Sarayu revealed a new side to the world traveler who called nowhere home. So did the poetry he wrote during this period. There was an urgent new awareness of and engagement with India and his own mortality that vitalized the writing. Bruce King, in his groundbreaking studies of Indian poets, writing in the introduction to *Three Indian Poets*, makes the argument that the women in Dom's life may be seen as a symbol of a gradual rapprochement with the country of his birth: "His changing relationship to India might be said to be symbolized by his women. Henrietta and Judith were white British, Leela had an Irish mother and Indian father and was educated in Switzerland, Sarayu is Indian."⁵ This is material for a full-length book; but for the purposes of this essay, I'd like to look at the first and last of his romantic connections and think about how they influenced his work.

In the poems and memoirs there are references to numerous "lives" – discrete selves that rarely overlapped, contiguous lives lived in five continents, with three wives, in untold numbers of houses, apartments, hotel rooms, and student accommodations. But the autobiographical details do not always add up. Dom's version of events was always subject to change and the poet's rewrite. The story of his first marriage, told in varying versions, has acquired the heightened quality of mythology. Henrietta Moraes's own version, available in the memoir *Henrietta*, gives the tale an unexpected new perspective. When they met, Henrietta was already a Soho presence, already part of a hard-living London set that would welcome Dom as one of its own. Born in Simla and raised in England, she was twice married, to the filmmaker Michael Law and to the body-builder Norman Bowler. Pregnant with her second child, she was working as the coffee bar manager at David Archer's newly opened Greek Street bookshop. In her 1994 memoir, with a few quick lines she provides a vivid picture of her boss: "Archer was a man the like of whom will not be seen again: gently born, eccentrically orientated, altruistically minded, hysterically tempered, kind, perceptive, a left-wing Fascist and patron saint of the Forties and Fifties poets," she writes, ". . . with a fastidious nose and a total

lack of interest in anything that was less than first rate.”⁶ The last phrase is telling. Whatever Archer’s eccentricities, he recognized talent and did what he could to promote it. One day, he showed her some crumpled sheets of typescript, poems by a young Indian named Dom Moraes. What did she think of the work? It was typical of Archer to ask his coffee shop manager what she thought of a poet he might publish: he was nothing if not egalitarian. Henrietta said she liked the poems, which pleased Archer. Some days later, when the young poet turned up at the bookshop, the first thing she noticed was his shyness – so extreme a shyness that he seemed incapable of speech. The lines that begin this section are from the poem “Shyness,” which links the act of writing a poem to the sexual act and to death, the lifelong themes of his poetry. Henrietta’s portrait of the teenage Dom Moraes is in keeping with the self-portrait in this and other of the early poems. Again, it is economical and terrifically accurate: “He had long eloquent hands, smoked continuously and remained totally silent.”

Very soon, in Henrietta’s version of events, Dom was coming by early enough to help with the shopping for the coffee bar. After some days of wordless companionship, he asked if she would like to have lunch. It was the first full sentence she had heard him utter. They ate and drank in complete silence, though Henrietta experienced “the strongest emotional vibrations and tensions” coming from him. When *A Beginning* won the Hawthornden Prize, it was Henrietta who accompanied Dom to lunch at the Ritz with two of the judges, Lord David Cecil and L. P. Hartley. Later, there was a ceremony and a party and Dom was given one hundred pounds in prize money. They were married in the Chelsea register office in 1961; Dom was twenty-one and Henrietta thirty. They honeymooned in Greece, joined for some of the time by the poet Gregory Corso. In Mycenae the trio stayed at the inn La Belle Helene, whose owner was named Agamemnon. As they signed the register, Henrietta flipped back and found a page full of signatures from the Third Reich, the name “Hermann Goering” in dainty cursive. They visited Clytemnestra’s beehive-shaped tomb and Corso jumped from the top of the towering stone lion gateway, roaring like a beat king of the jungle. From Athens the honeymooners flew to Tel Aviv, where *The Times of India* had commissioned Dom to cover the Eichmann trial. Eichmann, in a bulletproof glass box on a stage, sat at an oak table in a pair of old carpet slippers. He denied every charge. He had not signed the extermination plan, he said. The witnesses who identified him were mistaken, he said. He had not kicked a boy to death for stealing a peach, he said. The only thing he admitted was that he had obeyed orders from above. According to Henrietta, there was only one moment in the trial

when the German seemed human. The lights failed one morning and when they came back on Eichmann was cowering under the table, his carpet slippers kicked off in panic. Henrietta and Dom went back to England on a cargo ship carrying cans of Israeli tomato juice, a three week voyage that took longer than it should have because, more than once, the ship broke down and drifted off course. Back in London, the marriage unraveled. Henrietta wrote that she could not understand Dom's "need to tell lies, or at best to evade the truth." Of interest is her account of the last act in their story, an incident that has been retold many times but never from the point of view of she who was most affected:

One fine morning Dom said, "Look, darling, I'm off to the pub, just going to get some cigarettes. See you in about ten minutes." He didn't come back and I couldn't find him anywhere. For the next few months I heard his voice everywhere, I heard him talking to Nanny in the kitchen, I heard his footfall on the studio stairs and the sound of him crossing the room but he was never there. I passed through all the stages of desolation through to anger and madness. Dom had vanished, completely. He closed the front door behind him and disappeared.⁷

Dom's own account of the time is available in autobiographical prose, but it is the poetry, unsurprisingly, that tells the true story of their courtship and what his early success meant in real terms: more drink, more revelry, fewer poems:

Three winters I was drunk: one early spring
Brought me first love for you, my great good news:
Then my excuse to play the drunken king,
Staggering through bars, became a bad excuse. ("A Letter")⁸

And then there is a poem written when he was fifteen, which mocks the very idea of marriage and the possibility of any real union between a husband and a wife. Reading it today, the reader may wonder, what comes first, the word or the deed? The opening lines are a kind of premonition, and certainly a provocation:

When I awake (he said) I shall be lonely,
O feel my loneliest ever by your side ("Being Married")⁹

For those of us who knew him in Bombay in his last decades, it was difficult to reconcile the venerable white-haired man with the wild young poet who had dazzled London. But in some ways he was the same person whose self-absorption was a kind of pathology, whose devotion to poetry surpassed his compassion and cruelty, who protected his art at the cost of everything. His

last marriage, to Leela Moraes, ended in much the same way as his first, but instead of going out for cigarettes, he left the city on a business trip, making sure to place two hundred poems in a drawer he knew his wife would open. The poems were addressed to his new lover. When he returned from the trip it was not to the Colaba home he shared with Leela but to a room at a friend's house in Bandra, the suburb in which Sarayu lived. The poems left in the drawer would appear in *In Cinnamon Shade* (2001) and in the *Collected Poems* (2004), and they are remarkable for their shift of tone, their subject matter, and their unprecedented urgency and directness. (He had been diagnosed with cancer and knew he had very little time. He underwent an operation but refused chemotherapy and decided that he would continue to drink and smoke. All of this is echoed in the poems.)

In the last year of his life, his closest friends were Indian, his publishers were Indian, and he was in love with a woman who led him to his own discovery of India, which, in turn, resulted in poems unlike any he had written before. The work had evolved from the fantasy-laden Romantic, even Chivalric poems of his early period, to the masked poems of his middle period – in which he spoke through the voice of useful historical constructions such as Merlin or Babur or Sinbad; or through recurring invented characters, such as Craxton, butler to an aged writer who feeds on bowls of blood, or the war poet Beldam, killed in World War One, whose hands scabble at his tombstone in a vain attempt at escape, or the imaginary friend, Fitzpatrick, whose hands are deformed by the iron nails with which they were crucified – to something nobody could have foreseen: poems in which the autobiography was undisguised and center-stage. *In Cinnamon Shade* was his first collection in more than a decade; it told the story of what had happened to his marriage to Leela and it presented the first fruits of his collaboration with Sarayu, who had suggested the title and whose image adorned the front cover. In one of the opening poems, “What Mother Left,” wife and mother are inseparable:

Too many women share one tomb.
A curious squalor, for their bones,
curious with time, have come apart:
femurs and ribs so intermixed
God only knows which ones are whose.

And mixed with them is someone else,
her fragrance, once acquired from France,
exchanged for less expensive smells.¹⁰

Each reference is unmistakably direct and devastating, in particular the reference to Chanel No. 5, Leela's favorite perfume. Here is a stanza from "Disguises," which crystallizes an attitude to be found throughout the love poems – a compulsion to dismiss all previous affairs as irrelevant in comparison to the current one:

Always they disguised themselves as you,
came with delicate hands, with long hair,
effervescent eyes and liquid lips
into my arms: their names escape me.¹¹

The vast, casual cruelty of that last phrase, left in a drawer for a wife to find!

In Cinnamon Shade and *Typed with One Finger* (2003), the volume that followed, were departures in style. They had a directness that his previous work had lacked because the speaker of the poems was not concerned only with himself, he was looking, very closely, at someone else and at his surroundings. The manner is contemporary, prosaic rather than "poetic." In both books, the speaker addresses Bombay, which becomes a character in these poems – for example, the prophetic "Meetings in Mumbai," in which he addresses his own ghost. Though India is portrayed in an unforgiving light, she is always present. The wizards and warlocks of his earliest poems are gone, never to return. It is in the sonnet sequence "After the Operation" that Dom's new Indianness finds its most original voice. Written and revised in the very last weeks of his life, the sonnets are set in Bandra, and the suburb is evoked so vividly that no one who has lived there will fail to recognize it. There is engagement with the world and with India, an unexpected development for a poet who once seemed to take pride in seeming far removed from his immediate environment. There is continuing ambivalence toward India, in particular to Bombay, with its slums and "putrescent" sea. There is rage against God, for taking him away too soon and for giving him a tumor in his throat that no operation can heal. But there is also acceptance and a kind of peace-making. Most remarkably, these poems aim for a kind of plain speech he had not attempted before. They are unadorned and confessional, the autobiography is stark, unapologetic, relentlessly unsentimental, and the poet's portrait of himself is not glossed or romanticized in any way – in fact, much the opposite. In the Rimbaudian phrase, these poems are absolutely modern. Very possibly, they are his best work, and they established one thing if nothing else – that in terms of singing voice and purity of tone, in cadence and line, Dom was India's best poet working in English.

3. At The French with Naipaul

Six years after his death, I was given a vivid glimpse of the young man Dom had been, a man, as it turned out, who was unlike the gentle, unfailingly generous writer I knew. In 2010 I was invited to London to take part in the Book Fair. At Earl's Court, I happened to run into my friend Farrukh Dhondy, who was driving to Wiltshire the next day to lunch with V. S. Naipaul. I asked if I could tag along. After lunch, which was crab cakes and salad, Naipaul gave me a guided tour of his garden. Back in the house I gave him a copy of an anthology I had edited, *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*. The dedication page was a list of poets who had died in the preceding years. Dom Moraes was among the last names. Naipaul said, "This dedication page gives one the impression that poetry is an extremely dangerous occupation." It was a joke. I smiled obligingly, though I was unable to laugh. I asked if he had ever met Dom. They had met, of course, in 1959, on Dean Street in Soho, for lunch at a pub officially called the Yorkminster. Its unofficial name was the French Pub, because the owner was French and the restaurant upstairs served very good French food. The French was Henrietta's favorite pub. "How did the meeting go?" I asked. Naipaul shook his head, his famous eyes hooded and cold. "He wasn't interested in me," he said, the hurt still fresh in the words. "He was only interested in English writers."

In his recollection of the meeting at the French, Dom wrote: "He was very shy – so was I – and as I had told Francis [Wyndham] we had nothing whatsoever in common."¹² Dom, in his comments on Naipaul, tended to be critical. But writing about *An Area of Darkness* during its period of controversy in India, he was unexpectedly complimentary. Naipaul is "a writer of our times" and *An Area of Darkness* was "not only a brilliant piece of literature, but an interesting psychological study of Naipaul by Naipaul."¹³ Dom said he was sorry that the book "has come in for much unwarranted criticism in India." This was Dom in Englishman mode. Hear him twenty years later, writing about *Half a Life*: "[P]erhaps he is trying to say that to live in post-colonial countries addles people's minds. This is possible, but it is not a great discovery. And if, as the title suggests, Naipaul is saying that most people, in the true sense, only lead half a life, it is a statement of the obvious."¹⁴ The title of the review was "Half a Novel" and the tone is dismissive to the point of contempt. The following year, the two men met again at a literary festival at Neemrana. "He is a very wise and witty man, when he allows himself to be," Dom wrote about meeting Naipaul, the Nobel Laureate. "A great change had taken place in the shy

young writer I first met in the French pub. Change isn't always for the better."¹⁵

The connection between the two is interesting when you consider their similarities. When they met, Dom, celebrated for his youth and his poetry, had just received the most prominent poetry prize in the country. Naipaul was a noted novelist and short story writer, but also a failed poet, in that the first work he submitted for publication was poetry and it was rejected by the London publisher to whom it was sent. (Perhaps because of this, Naipaul took pleasure in deriding poets and would nurse a lifelong antipathy to the craft.) Both went up to Oxford in their late teens. Both converted to Englishness as if to a new religion, adopting the clipped, class-inflected speech of the upper classes. Both were born in the thirties, and both started to publish at around the same time. Both felt themselves to be outsiders in a land of privilege. They thought and spoke and wrote in English, and did so better than many Englishmen, but were treated as immigrants because of their skin color. Both were cruel to the women in their lives.

But it is in the difference between them that true significance resides. Both went to England in their teens and took to Englishness as a means of literary and personal salvation. But where Naipaul never changed and remained an Englishman until the end, becoming a kind of Wiltshire squire, Dom left his English life, his wife and son, to return to a terrifying life in a country characterized by disorder. The return vivified him as a poet and changed him as a man. The final argument to be made when looking at this poet's life – a life defined by loss, dislocation, and disillusion – is that the only thing he never lost faith in was poetry, that whenever his marriages or relationships threatened the work he would disappear, however cruel or difficult the disappearance, and that the only country to which he felt he owed allegiance was the poet's unacknowledged republic.

Notes

1. *Dom Moraes: Collected Poems 1954–2004* (Penguin Books India, 2004), Preface, xiii.
2. *The Penguin Book of Indian Journeys: Edited with an Introduction by Dom Moraes* (Penguin Books India, 2001), Introduction, xi.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Dom Moraes: Collected Poems 1954–2004*, 6.
5. Bruce King, *Three Indian Poets* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005), Introduction, 27.
6. Henrietta Moraes, *Henrietta* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1994), 40.

7. *Ibid.*, 65.
8. *Dom Moraes: Collected Poems 1954–2004*, 43.
9. *Ibid.*, 15.
10. *Ibid.*, 252.
11. *Ibid.*, 269.
12. Dom Moraes, “Clash at Neemrana,” *The Hindu*, March 2001.
13. Dom Moraes, “A Writer for Our Times,” *Gentleman*, February 1984, 34–39.
14. Dom Moraes, “Half a Novel,” *The Hindu*, November 2001.
15. Dom Moraes, “Clash at Neemrana,” *The Hindu*, March 2001.

Interpretative Testimony: Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza

R. Raj Rao

Kamala Das was neither a precursor of “women’s writing in India” in general, nor of “poetry by Indian women” in particular. Indian Writing has been indelibly marked with writings of Indian women, as a cursory glance through the voluminous *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present* would show.¹ Why is Das, then, accorded such importance in modern Indian Literature? There have been women poets in India before and after her, but for none of them were their lives and their writing as closely interwoven as in the case of Das. Das’s life and her writing flow into, and are an extension of, each other. They are two sides of the same coin. While the life that she lived fed her writing, the writing, in turn, may be said to have fed the life. That is to say, Das chose to live her life in a way that notoriously earned her the label of “confessional poet” and caused her readers (especially heterosexual male readers) to focus on her sexual life. However, while Das has occasionally maintained that her poems have nothing to do with her, but merely a poetic persona that resembles her, she has, in truth, vacillated on the issue, and has sometimes willfully suggested (especially in her autobiography *My Story*)² that the poems are factual and autobiographical.

Kamala Das was born in March 1934 in South Malabar, Kerala, India. She belonged to a matrilineal (if not matriarchal) family, with her mother, Balamani Amma, descended from the royal Nalapat clan. Both Balamani Amma’s father and grandfather were maharajas. Das’s father, by contrast, was a Nayar, a peasant whose family tilled the soil. The fact that she came from a matrilineal family, with royal blood on her mother’s side, would have a bearing on the later Das who always chose to be in control, both as a poet and a human being, except when she voluntarily relinquished it. Das lived her life in Kerala, and in the metro cities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi, alternating among these four locations at different times of her life. She never lived abroad. Her early childhood was spent partly in Calcutta,

where she studied at a Roman Catholic boarding school, and partly in Kerala. Marriage, which happened early, and, in a sense, triggered much of the poetry she wrote, took her first to Bombay, then to Calcutta again, and finally to New Delhi where her husband held job in the Planning Commission; when he retired, the couple returned to Bombay and lived in a luxurious flat by the sea. Middle age saw Das return to Kerala with her son Monoo, heralding a sort of separation from her husband who continued to live in Bombay. Her later years, following the death of her husband, were spent in Pune, Maharashtra, where she lived with Monoo, who worked in the corporate sector. Das, who by then had changed her name to Kamala Suraiya and converted to Islam, died in Pune on May 31, 2009. Taking stock of the various places where she lived, it seems ironic that Das, given her individualism, had little choice when it came to choosing her residence: inevitably, she followed first her husband, and then her son, wherever they went. It was only in returning to Kerala in the 1980s, and changing her name and her religion, that Das displayed some agency.

My Story charts the tumultuous course of her life and provides the genesis for many of Das's interactions with the opposite sex in the poetry. The men here include her husband, as well as other random lovers, and if one reads the poems first and follows this with a reading of the autobiography, one is able to see that the relationships that she writes about are not merely imaginary. Her autobiography, then, comes across as a fleshed-out form of her poetry, and her poetry as an elliptical form of her autobiography, which edits out many inessential details. In later years, Das seems to have felt suddenly exposed and vulnerable by all that she revealed to the world about her sexual life. She thus tried to introduce a measure of damage control by denying that her life had anything to do with her books, including her autobiography. But by then much water had flowed under the bridge. Today, it is difficult to see Das's poetry as anything but "confessional."

Das's main collections of poetry are *Summer in Calcutta* (1965),³ *The Descendants* (1967),⁴ *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973),⁵ and *Collected Poems Vol 1* (1984).⁶ Her most characteristic poems, however, are to be found only in *Summer in Calcutta* and *The Descendants*. *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* has only thirteen new poems, the other twenty poems here being reprinted from the first two volumes. *Summer in Calcutta* contains fifty poems, all of them in free verse. The most widely read and widely anthologized poems in this collection include the legendary "An Introduction," "The Sunshine Cat," "The Freaks," and

“My Grandmother’s House.” The confessional element here goes beyond the merely sexual, and covers themes such as nostalgia. In “My Grandmother’s House” the poet rhetorically writes:

. . . you cannot believe darling
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved . . . I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?⁷

Das here glorifies the kind of idyllic life she led in her grandmother’s house in Malabar, in stark contrast to the sordid life that she led with men in India’s corrupt cities. Rarely credited with originality of expression as compared to her male contemporaries, it must be placed on record that Das was the first to use the “small change” image in “My Grandmother’s House,” before Arun Kolatkar made it famous in another poem about a woman in *Jejuri*, where he ends the poem with the lines: “And you are reduced / to so much small change / in her hand.”⁸

Several poems in Das’s first (and subsequent) volumes bear lines that end in unstressed syllables, also known as “feminine endings.” If the sun is a central image in the poems in *Summer in Calcutta*, the sea takes its place in *The Descendants*. Das has always been a poet of the sea, with her native Kerala and Bombay, where she spent some of the best years of her life, both being coastal places on the Arabian Sea. This fondness for the sea continues in *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*. So do other recurrent themes: the grossness of the body; boring marital love versus titillating extra-marital lust; the loss of childhood innocence; gender politics. There is no change in poetic diction, the rhythms still being stress-based and conversational. “An Introduction” is notorious for this kind of thing, as the following lines show:

. . . I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.⁹

Das’s own defense of such “awkwardness” in her verse is that it is the number of syllables in the words that determine the length of her lines. What this implies is that, the moment Das thinks that a line has too many syllables, she arbitrarily (and indiscriminately) ends it there and then, in order to move on to the next line. Thus, she says: “When I compose poetry . . . my ear helps to discipline the verse. Afterwards, I count the syllables. I like poetry to be tidy and disciplined.”¹⁰ Her critics find her claim to be “tidy and disciplined” so hilarious (given the utter lack of

discipline in her work) that Vrinda Nabar actually goes on to rewrite the randomly broken up lines in “Composition” (from *The Descendants*) to “improve” the poem.¹¹ This is not merely critical license but critical arrogance. As a woman critic, Nabar jettisons the opportunity to justify Das’s line breaks and feminine endings in terms of an alternative aesthetic that resists and de-centers the inherent phallogentrism of (poetic) language through deliberate subversion. Such linguistic radicalism is evident in other poems in *The Descendants* (such as “Substitute”)¹² where the definite and indefinite articles are purposely dropped; here, the radicalism may be said to extend to the business of “creolizing” English.

The majority of Das’s critics, with a few notable exceptions, have been heterosexual men. While all of them, as modernists, tend to subscribe to T. S. Eliot’s theory of impersonality, which seeks to separate “the man who suffers and the mind which creates,”¹³ they condescendingly use a different yardstick when it comes to Das’s poetry, driven by political correctness. (But this is also, possibly, because as straight men they *want* Das to continue to write about sexual love as explicitly and graphically as she does.) Das’s male critics include an assortment of poets and academics: Keki Daruwalla, Dom Moraes, Bruce King, E. V. Ramakrishnan, Devinder Kohli, Rajeev Patke, and Vilas Sarang. These critics are “sympathetic” toward Das because unlike them, who are hyper-educated, Das did not go to college and does not possess a university degree. This is reflected in the following statement by Vilas Sarang: “As [A. K.] Ramanujan’s poetry suffers from an excess of intellectual control, Das’s poetry is harmed by a lack of intellectual moulding.”¹⁴

Vrinda Nabar and Eunice de Souza, both Bombay-based professors of English, are two prominent women critics of Das who both make Das a scapegoat in their respective books. While Nabar concedes that Das is an influence on de Souza as a poet, she argues that de Souza’s personality, which is intellectual, literary, and self-confident, but also unforgiving, rigid, and dogmatic, makes her at best a poor country cousin of Das. In Nabar’s words, “Even when she [de Souza] talks about suffering, failure, defeat and frustration, she is not being confessional but assertive.”¹⁵ On her part, de Souza rejects much of Nabar’s criticism of Das as “school marmish.”¹⁶ Which it is, in a sense, for Nabar is so hyper-critical of Das, and sees so little merit in her work, that one wonders why she wrote her book in the first place. Nabar implies that in the end Das is a poet in spite of herself. She ends her study with the following cryptic remark: “Even when critics of the future expose the weaknesses of Das’s poetry she will *miraculously* transcend the criticism and appeal directly to her readers” (emphasis

mine).¹⁷ On the other hand, Eunice de Souza, usually uncharitable, is ready and willing to read Das against the grain. She says:

Women writers owe a special debt to Kamala Das. She mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms. Whatever the vernacular oddities [*sic*] she has spared us the colonial cringe. She has also spared us what in some circles, nativist and expatriate, is still considered mandatory: the politically correct “anguish” of writing in English. And in her best poems she speaks for women, certainly, but also for anyone who has known pain, inadequacy, despair.¹⁸

Eunice de Souza’s concluding statement points toward a coalition of disempowered people that would include, apart from gender, categories such as caste, class, race, and sexuality. While gender has dominated the ways in which Das’s poetry is read, scant attention has been paid to sexuality. However, in two recent articles, Rosemary Marangoly George, a University of California professor of literature, attempts a queer reading of Das that revolutionizes the way in which her poetry has so far been received.¹⁹ Although Das’s poems are not as explicitly lesbian as her story “The Sandal Trees,”²⁰ there are frequent references to homosexuality and queerness in poems such as “An Introduction,” “Composition,” and “The Doubt.” In George’s view, “Das has always considered homosexuality a very viable option to those women and men who are in search of sexual fulfillment.”²¹ Yet George also cautiously points out that while “Das consistently encodes the homoerotic into her work . . . [she] just as consistently devalues its purchase . . . Homoerotic situations are depicted only to be repeatedly put aside.”²² In support of her contention, George quotes from an interview in which Das says: “I do not think I am lesbian. I tried to find out if I were a lesbian, if I could respond to a woman. I failed.”²³ Referring to a passage in *My Story* where Das confesses to an affair with a college girl, George argues that the relationship was played down “because Das’s feminist readers have a very strict notion of why she indulges in socially unsanctioned sexual relationships – she is *driven* to it by a cruel husband’s numerous infidelities” (emphasis original).²⁴ In other words, Das’s dalliance with lesbianism is on the rebound. This is substantiated by an incident that took place on one of her birthdays, described by her in the following words in *My Story*:

At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. They behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday, they shoved me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while, wondering what

two men could possibly do together to get some physical rapture, but after some time my pride made me move away.²⁵

One way of viewing Das's lesbianism, then, is as a means of retaliation: if the husband could be homosexual within the marriage, then so could she. This is also established by Das's own skepticism about marriage:

I have watched the slow decay of personalities, the gradual degeneration of minds and the death of the spirit that occurs in ideal marriages. The ideal marriage, continued according to the desire of our society, is a bond in which both become mental cripples and cling on to each other until death. Everybody marries only to please society. To please oneself, meeting your mate now and then in the privacy of his flat or yours is more than enough.²⁶

Rosemary M. George writes:

In the literary criticism on Das . . . homosexuality is differently played out according to gender. When men are portrayed as engaged in same-sex relationships, this is interpreted as part of the sexual licence available to men in patriarchal societies. A husband's indulgence in same-sex activities is presented as one more sign of his voracious sexual appetite. When women indulge in same-sex pleasures, it does not always register as sex . . . what registers as sex for women must involve men.²⁷

Thus, "the affair with the college girl is given scant critical attention since it takes place prior to Das's marriage and also because it is not accepted as a sexual relationship."²⁸ Marriage is a powerful heteronormative institution. Naturally, Das's lesbian affair would stand no chance against an all-pervasive heteronormativity that it unwittingly sought to destabilize. In "Composition," Das says forthrightly:

I asked my husband
 am I hetero
 am I lesbian
 or am I just plain frigid!
 He only laughed
 . . .
 I have lost my best friend
 to a middle-aged queer,
 The lesbians hiss their love at me.²⁹

The poem seems to be political because normative heterosexuality is pitted here against lesbianism; normative (non-sexual) friendship against (queer) love. Das may or may not have been a practicing lesbian in terms of sexual preference, but she was queer in terms of identity. In other words, she was a political lesbian; the sheer binarization of hetero/lesbian and friend/queer

in the poem above establishes that. In “An Introduction” Das uses the awkward expression “queernesses” in the following line:

The language I speak

Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone.³⁰

“Queerness” here goes beyond the merely sexual and encompasses language, that human means of communication. It corroborates a point I made earlier about Das’s radicalization of language through a flouting of rules – the rules of grammar and the rules of poetry. Das’s individualism here responds to queer theorist Jonathan Dollimore’s reading of Wilde, where individualism generates disobedience, and disobedience and rebellion lead to progress. According to Dollimore, “far from reflecting, or prescribing for, the true nature or essence of man, individualism will generate cultural difference and diversity which conventional morality, orthodox opinion, and essentialist ideology disavow.”³¹ Calling it her “resilience,” Vrinda Nabar remarks on the young Das’s ability “to move from one emotional experience to another, without being affected [by them] in any essential sense.”³² Such anti-essentialism is borne out by Das’s imagery. In “An Introduction” she writes:

In him . . . the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me . . . the ocean’s tireless
Waiting.³³

If this deceptively suggests that man is active while woman is passive, Das constantly disproves this essentialist thesis in her poetry, her autobiography, and, indeed, her life. She wants to be both active and passive, seducer and seduced, at the same time. At the end of the day, there is no essential male and essential female; this is best brought out in her poem “The Doubt”:

Then the question is, who
Is the man, who the girl,
All sex-accessories being no
Indication. Is she
A male who with frail hands
Clasps me to her breast, while
The silences in her sickroom, turning
Eloquent, accuse
Me of ingratitude!
And, is he female who
After love, smooths out the bed sheets with

Finicky hands and plucks
From pillows strands of hair?³⁴

Likewise, in her poem “The Suicide” Das writes:

But
I must pose,
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife.³⁵

Commenting on these lines, Vrinda Nabar remarks that the compulsion on Das to pretend is a theme that recurs in her work endlessly.³⁶ Analyzing the poem “Composition,” she says:

[T]here is the suspicion that the poet perpetually plays a “double” role. She claims over and over again that she is only “acting” a part and that she is doing so because it is expected of her. However, her claim itself begins to appear like an act. In other words, she seems to act a role which calls upon her to act a role.³⁷

Some of Das’s lines betray a joy triggered by perverse sexual practices such as S/M. “An Apology to Goutama,” for instance, indicates that the poet prefers the “hurting arms” of a gross lover that embraces her “very soul” to the gentle arms of a Goutama-like figure that only embraces her “woman-form.”³⁸ Similarly, in “Convicts,” the poet, describing the sex act, takes delight in:

This hacking at each other’s parts
Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
At noon.³⁹

Furthermore:
When he
And I were one, we were neither
Male nor female.⁴⁰

Sexual transgression in Indian culture does not instill guilt as much as it shames and dishonors one and one’s family, making for what has been called “shame culture,” as opposed to Western culture which is “guilt culture.”⁴¹ Thus, according to Vrinda Nabar, Das “says over and over again in her writing [that] her life has largely dishonoured the family. It has shamed them, alienated her from them and from the traditional ethics of her childhood.”⁴² This is brought out in her poem “Blood,” where she writes:

I have let you down
 Old house, I seek forgiveness.⁴³

Read in the twenty-first century, Das's verse calls for a paradigm shift from the hitherto feminist readings of her work to more nuanced queer readings. The two readings, of course, are co-extensive and enhance our understanding of Das's complex life and writing. Thus, as Rosemary George says, "In the coming years, as queer activists in India get increasingly vocal, they could turn to the work of Das, who, for the past four decades has been making literature out of her 'queernesses'."⁴⁴

*

Eunice de Souza's first collection of poems, *Fix*, published in 1979, gives the impression that she is a Goan rather than Indian poet in English.⁴⁵ All twenty-four of the poems in this slim volume revolve around life in the Goan Christian community of which de Souza is a part, although the setting of the poems is not Goa but the city of Poona where de Souza was born and raised. Indian English poetry has always been treated as a monolith, with regional cultural variations in the writing rarely accounted for, and this is a fallacy, as the region that they come from often gives the work of the poets its special flavor. It is only Jayanta Mahapatra who has frequently proclaimed that he is an Oriya, as opposed to an Indian poet who writes in English.⁴⁶ Thus, to call de Souza a Goan poet is not to ghettoize her, but to credit her with the starting of a Goan school of poetry, comprising herself and other younger Newground poets such as Melanie Silgado, Santan Rodrigues, and Raul de Gama Rose.⁴⁷

In *Fix*, the people de Souza writes about are all Goan Christians, with names such as Elena and Robert and Louise and Fred and Dominic and Mabel and Hetty and Lobo and Lopez and Alleluia D'Souza and Hermione Gonsalvez. Their names are Portuguese, and so are their values. "Conversation Piece," one of the iconic poems in the volume, proves how alienated the people of her community can be from the culture of the Indian majority:

My Portuguese-bred aunt
 Picked up a clay shivalingam
 one day and said:
 Is this an ashtray?
 No, said the salesman,
 This is our god.⁴⁸

In "Sweet Sixteen" de Souza's use of a word like "preggers,"⁴⁹ commonly used by a certain class of Indians, gestures toward what Arvind

Krishna Mehrotra refers to as a use of “English [that] keeps the flavor of natural idiom without sounding picturesque or ‘babu’.”⁵⁰ The poems in *Fix* are not just written from the point of view of Goans generally, but specifically from the point of view of Goan women, whom de Souza sees as doubly marginalized: first, by virtue of their religion, and second, by virtue of their gender. Thus, while Francis X. D’Souza, “Pillar of the church” gives his sermons, “the pillar’s wife/says nothing.”⁵¹ In “Marriages are Made,”⁵² the poet-narrator’s cousin Elena, who is to be married, is examined not just for dental cavities, tuberculosis, and madness, but also has her stools examined “for the possible/non-Brahmin worm.” This poem complicates the politics of the personal by introducing another category – caste – in addition to the categories of religion and gender. There’s a reference to Francisco X. Noronha Prabhu in the penultimate line of the poem, and the Hindu name Prabhu comes up again in “De Souza Prabhu,” where the poet says:

No, I’m not going to
Delve deep down and discover
I’m really de Souza Prabhu
even if Prabhu was no fool
and got the best of both worlds.
(Catholic Brahmin!
I can hear his fat chuckle still).⁵³

Other poems introduce the category of race. In “Mrs. Hermione Gonsalvez” the protagonist laments that her parents “married me to a dark man/on my own I wouldn’t even have/looked at him.”⁵⁴ When Maharashtrian (Hindu) ladies say to her, “Mrs. Gonslavez how fair and/beautiful you are your husband must be/so good-looking too,” we are told that “when Gonsalvez came/they all screamed/and ran inside their houses/thinking the devil had come.” The last poems in *Fix* are intense psychological poems that revel in what some may call the Electra complex. In “My Grandfather’s Death”⁵⁵ the speaker recalls her *father’s* death thirty years ago, when she would innocently ask, “What have they done to my daddy?” In “Forgive Me Mother,” the speaker tells her mother, “In dreams/I hack you.”⁵⁶ “Autobiographical” opens with the lines, “Right now, here it comes/I killed my father when I was three.”⁵⁷ And in “One Man’s Poetry” de Souza says:

Chances are
my father himself
didn’t wish to die.⁵⁸

Mehrotra calls these poems “theatrical” and argues that the poet-narrator’s father is central to the release of the personal voice that so much of de Souza’s work is concerned with.⁵⁹ The poems de Souza writes for her father are the only poems in which a man is spoken about with love. In all her other poems, both in *Fix* and *Women in Dutch Painting*, men are the enemy. Men may be church fathers and parish priests, or they may be husbands and lovers, but they are all the same. They are exploitative, chauvinistic, patriarchal, and misogynist. In “Poem for a Poet” de Souza says:

It pays to be a poet.

You don’t have to pay prostitutes.⁶⁰

The opening lines of this poem, quoted above, are about a famous male poet who sleeps with many young women poets. “He Speaks” gives the impression of being written from a man’s point of view, but the man here, as everywhere else, comes in for sharp (ironic) criticism at the end, as he decides to “fix” his lady love by saying to her during copulation, “I hope you realize I do this/with other women.”⁶¹

These concerns recur in de Souza’s second collection, *Women in Dutch Painting*,⁶² published nearly a decade after *Fix*. Two poems – “I Choose Not to Marry You, Love” and “Alibi” – refer to her “love,” and in “For S. Who Wonders If I Get Much Joy Out of Life” she writes, “I contemplate, with a certain/ grim satisfaction/ dynamic men who sell better butter.”⁶³ All three poems, however, are devoid of passion. In “I Choose Not to Marry You,” she tells her lover, as if she’s a snake, “There is poison in my tongue,”⁶⁴ while in “Alibi,” her lover drably says to her,

for god’s sake
don’t write poems
which heave and pant
and resound to the music
of our thighs.⁶⁵

This reference to their thighs is one of the very few (if not the only) references to body parts anywhere in de Souza’s work, in stark contrast with Das. The friction between lover and beloved (pun intended) reaches its high point with the lover abusively calling his beloved “a sour old puss in verse.” In “Advice to Women” de Souza openly draws the battle lines by referring to “the otherness of lovers.”⁶⁶ If lovers are the “other,” it means there is no difference between everyman and every lover. Women, then, are left with no alternative but to turn to each other for comfort and

solace, though comfort and solace can never be a substitute for sex. Das wonders if she is frigid, not only because of her ambivalent attitude to men, whom she wants to dominate and seduce, but also because she wants to be dominated and seduced by them, or at least guarantee that she has an active sexual life.

Women in Dutch Painting isn't a radically different book from *Fix*. In fact, it can be called an extension of it, both in terms of form and theme, as we return to the same subjects, leading to the impression that de Souza's oeuvre is limited. Women-centric poems reappear. In "Return IV" the female narrator identifies with women of easy virtue; what matters to her is that they are women:

Sarla Devi, Kusum Bala, Rani Devi,
 all of ill fame.
 I read your story in
 the morning paper:
 you refuse to wear ankle-bells
 worn for generations
 you study law
 you hear catcalls in the street
 drums and bells behind your books.
 Sitting alone in a Bombay restaurant,
 listening to the innuendoes of college clerks
 and a loose-lipped Spanish priest,
 I know something
 of how you feel.⁶⁷

Likewise, in "Transcend Self You Say" she takes up the cudgels for another woman, Padma:

Remember Padma, widowed at seventeen,

Forbidden to see the sun for a year,
 allowed to crap only at night
 when the pure were out of the way?⁶⁸

Eunice de Souza's aesthetics and her poetic credo are different from those of Das, both in terms of her attitude to love and in terms of the economy and sparseness with which she uses language. Yet, a couple of instances of intertextuality with Das's work may be cited. The last stanza of her poem "de Souza Prabhu," discussed earlier, is reminiscent of Das's "An Introduction":

I heard it said
 my parents wanted a boy.

I've done my best to qualify.
I hid the bloodstains
on my clothes
and let my breasts sag.

Similarly, lines from "The Road"⁶⁹ remind us of Das's poems about her grandmother: "I remember/only my grandmother/smiling at me." In "Return V"⁷⁰ de Souza's intertextuality, however, extends also to correspondences with the work of a male poet such as Dilip Chitre, who has a different credo from de Souza's. Here, she addresses the Marathi saint-poet Tukaram, whose *abhangs* or devotional hymns Chitre translated from the Marathi into English.⁷¹ Of course, she writes the poem from the point of view of Tukaram's wife, rather than of Tukaram himself, as these lines show:

You made life hard for your wife
and I'm not sure I approve of that.
Nor did you heed her last request:
Come back soon.⁷²

Yet, she acknowledges to the saint-poet that "I have loved your pithy verses," and refers to the annual pilgrimage on foot of the devotees of Tukaram (known as *warkaris*) to the holy town of Pandharpur in July every year. One particular line in the poem, "but I'll offer a coconut anyway," is also reminiscent of the work of Arun Kolatkar, specifically the poem "Between Jejuri and the Railway Station" in *Jejuri*.⁷³ Commenting on de Souza's Tukaram poem, Vilas Sarang says: "The address to the Marathi poet-saint Tukaram, who is acknowledged to be foreign to the poet's personal world, is indicative of a new willingness [on her part] to establish wider points of reference, reaching out of the circular well of the self."⁷⁴

As a poet, Eunice de Souza's aesthetics and politics are in conflict with each other. Her politics are feminist and womanist, as well as radical, while her aesthetics are masculine and canonical, as well as conservative: even when she writes poems about marginalized women, the shape and texture of the poem takes precedence over the women's victimization. This, of course, is typically twentieth century and modernist, and does not incorporate varieties of postmodernist and poststructuralist discourse that emphasize the need to "defer" judgment, especially when it comes to subaltern voices. Nevertheless, de Souza, in fighting against the oppressor who victimizes women, becomes something of the oppressor herself, her gender notwithstanding. This is best brought out in her self-reflexive poem "Autobiographical," quoted earlier, that ends with the following lines:

I thought the whole world
 was trying to rip me up
 cut me down go through me
 with a razor blade

then I discovered
 a cliché: that's what I wanted
 to do to the world.⁷⁵

The poetry of de Souza involves, to some extent, modernist pre-existing significations. These can be imagined as legible in terms of decipherment both in form and content. Yet, a thematic residue exists in the form of regional and gendered inflections, which is not the accomplice of modernist knowledge. Her poetry occupies an ambiguous position between the two poles of modernist conformity and subaltern expression. This unresolved tension determines the unique texture of her poetic voice that captures well the moral predicament of the twentieth century – a desire to arrive at an ethical truth determined by interpretative testimony.

Notes

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3. Kamala Das, *Summer in Calcutta*. New Delhi: Everest Press, 1965.
4. Kamala Das, *The Descendants*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1967
5. Kamala Das, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*. Madras: Orient Longman, 1973.
6. Kamala Das, *Collected Poems Vol. I*. Trivandrum: Navakerala Printers, 1984.
7. *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, p. 32.
8. Arun Kolatkar, "An Old Woman" in *Jejuri*. Bombay: Clearing House, 1976, p.22.
9. *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, p. 26.
10. Quoted in Vrinda Nabar, *The Endless Female Hungers: A Study of Kamala Das*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1994, p. 29.
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13. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. Bombay: B. I. Publications, 1976, pp. 47–59.
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16. Eunice de Souza, ed., *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.8.

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19. See Rosemary Marangoly George, "Calling Kamala Das Queer: Rereading *My Story*," in *Feminist Studies* 26, No. 3 (Fall 2000), pp. 731–63; and "'Queernesses All Mine': Same-Sex Desire in Kamala Das's Fiction and Poetry," in Ruth Vanita, ed., *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*. New York: Routledge, 2002, pp. 111–26.
20. Kamala Das, "The Sandal Trees," in *The Sandal Trees and Other Stories*, trans. V. C. Harris and C. K. Mohamed Ummer. Bombay: Disha Books/Orient Longman, 1995, pp. 1–27.
21. "Queernesses All Mine," p. 113.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.* For the original interview, see P. P. Raveendran, "Of Masks and Memories: An Interview with Kamala Das," in *Indian Literature* 155 (May–June 1993). pp. 145–161.
24. "Queernesses All Mine," p. 118.
25. *My Story*, p. 104.
26. See *Blitz*, January 22, 1977, p. 23. Quoted by Vrinda Nabar in *The Endless Female Hungers*, p. 86.
27. "Queernesses All Mine," p. 119.
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29. *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, pp. 3–5.
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31. See Jonathan Dollimore, "Wilde and Gide in Algiers," in *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, pp. 3–18.
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42. *The Endless Female Hungers*, p. 67.
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44. "Queernesses All Mine," p. 124.
45. Eunice de Souza, *Fix*, Bombay: Newground, 1979.

46. See, for example, my interview with Mahapatra in R. Raj Rao, ed., *Ten Indian Writers in Interview*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1991, pp. 13–26.
47. Newground was a small publishing house started by Melanie Silgado in Bombay in the late 1970s.
48. “Conversation Piece,” *Fix*, p. 20.
49. “Sweet Sixteen,” *Fix*, p. 12.
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51. “Catholic Mother,” *Fix*, p. 9.
52. “Marriages are Made,” *Fix*, p. 10.
53. “de Souza Prabhu,” *Fix*, p. 32.
54. “Mrs. Hermione Gonsalvez,” *Fix*, p. 14.
55. “My Grandfather’s Death,” *Fix*, p. 29.
56. “Forgive Me Mother,” *Fix*, p. 30.
57. “Autobiographical,” *Fix*, p. 34.
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65. “Alibi,” *Women in Dutch Painting*, p. 21.
66. “Advice to Women,” *Women in Dutch Painting*, p. 22.
67. “Return IV,” *Women in Dutch Painting*, p. 44.
68. “Transcend Self You Say,” *Women in Dutch Painting*, p. 32.
69. “The Road,” *Women in Dutch Painting*, p. 24.
70. “Return V,” *Women in Dutch Painting*, p. 45.
71. See Dilip Chitre, *Says Tuka*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1991.
72. Dilip Chitre, *Says Tuka*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1991.
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Adil Jussawalla and the Double Edge of Poetry

Laetitia Zecchini

Adil Jussawalla was born in 1940, seven years before Salman Rushdie. They were delivered in Bombay by the same doctor, went to the same school (Cathedral School), lived on the same street, and finally, as the poet acknowledged with the elegant (self)mockery and wry disenchantment that sets the tone for many of his essays: “he wrote my novel, *Midnight’s Children*.”¹ This statement reflects one of the common threads of Jussawalla’s life and oeuvre: the struggle to find his own voice, which also speaks of the anxiety of belatedness (“you’ve nothing left to say”²), the tensions of belonging, and the temptation of silence. A precocious poet who published his first collection, *Land’s End*, in 1962, his influential anthology, *New Writing in India*, in 1974, and his second book of poems, *Missing Person*, in 1976, Adil Jussawalla did not publish another collection for thirty-five years.

But the poet has also been a prolific prose writer. Jussawalla, who initially wanted to be a playwright, wrote two unpublished plays in the late ’50s (*Jian* and *Floodwaters*), and worked on an unfinished and partly autobiographical novel (*Dolly Cobra*) in the ’70s. He also wrote several short stories and penned the English verse narrative of a play (*Chyavravuya*) by Manipuri director Ratan Thyam, which was broadcast on Channel 4 in 1989. A book review, literary, or copy editor for different journals and magazines (such as *Indian Express*, *Debonair*, and *Science Age*), he was also a regular columnist and contributor for *Gentleman*, *Deccan Herald*, *The Daily*, and *The Observer* and wrote a fortnightly column for Associated News Features. His volume of collected “essays and entertainments” was recently published (*Maps for a Mortal Moon*, 2014), and reveals that his poetry had not dried out in the last thirty years; it was only hiding in the folds and creases of his prose.

It is impossible to write about Jussawalla’s place in the field of Indian poetry in English without also discussing his defining intellectual presence and his role as the living memory of Bombay. His apartment in the South

Bombay area of Cuffe Parade has been described as “Noah’s archive,” a fitting depiction for a poet who also spent a lifetime rescuing and recollecting the neglected stories of India’s cultural and literary history, resurrecting its forgotten voices and figures, and inciting others to do so. Writers, editors, scholars, journalists, and anthologists from India and other parts of the world soar to his eighteenth floor “ark” and are welcomed with the same mixture of generosity and reserve, extreme courtesy and sudden bouts of melancholia, laughter and despair, which is also representative of his work.³ His soft and careful voice, unhurried pace, and delicate gestures betray the poet’s gentleness, but it is a gentleness that is offset by sturdy hands and an imposing presence. There is a “light touch” and gravity about Jussawalla and his poetry.

From the treasure troves of his huge and battered suitcases, he exhumes hundreds of newspaper articles and clippings, obscure magazines, unpublished letters, interviews, photographs, and a wealth of other precious documents. Somewhat like Nissim Ezekiel before him, he has become a kind of mentor or father figure for a lot of aspiring poets and writers. He has also given his advice and his texts freely and generously, to encourage the creation of publishing collectives, journals, and collections.

“Fighting the Sand for Speech / Fighting the Stone” (Dom Moraes)

As a reviews editor, journalist, anthologist (in *New Writing in India*, for which Jussawalla traveled to different parts of India and started collecting material in 1967, he did not include his own work), and also as a charismatic teacher and founder-editor of two small presses (Clearing House and Praxis), Jussawalla gave voice to others, became a facilitator, a commentator, or a translator of their words.⁴ Acknowledging in the course of a conversation in Bombay that he had to be soaked in poetry to be able to write it, Jussawalla may have long restricted himself to being an exact and at times passionate reader of other poets. In the ’70s, he organized poetry readings at St. Xavier’s College, which he called “Dangerous Animals” because the writers involved (Rimbaud, Ginsberg, and Baldwin) appeared suspect to many people at the time, and he renewed the experiment in 1999 with informal weekly poetry sessions called “Loquations.” Characteristically, Jussawalla did not want poets to read their own work, but to share the work of others.

Jussawalla seems to have been haunted by the difficulty and the desire to speak for himself. The poems of *Land’s End* were, by his own admission, highly influenced by Christian imagery, Rimbaud, and T. S. Eliot, and he

has called *Jian* an “Ibsen” play. The poet has spoken about his struggle to decolonize himself and recover a sense of self amidst the chaotic patchwork of influences that made – and nearly destroyed – him.⁵ This struggle is at the heart of *Missing Person*, which Jussawalla described on the Clearing House marketing slip as “poems of exile, cultural displacement and loss; a voice that is both angry and lyrical; a focus on post-Frantz Fanon man, at odds with his real and historical selves.”

The long “Missing Person” sequence presents itself like a collage of literary, musical, and cinematic references; colonial, racial, and sexual stereotypes; puns, flashbacks, and commonplaces taken from Marxist ideology, Western and popular culture, advertising, Hollywood, and “Eng. Lit.” It also registers the clichés of a generation that “sees the world in twos,” and runs “from acid to Marx” (*MP*, p. 16). The narrative poetic flow is constantly broken by abrupt and stammering lines, disconnected images, elliptic statements, and dictionary-like entries, as well as unidentified voices. Reading parts of the poem, argues Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, feels “like entering an echo-chamber.”⁶ What’s missing in the “missing person,” who fails to weave his story into history and string words into speech, is a voice of his own. The question of (missing) history is time and again connected to the question of (missing) language, which is reduced to a hieroglyph, a cough, a riddle, a giggle, and to “drabs and dribbles.” His thoughts are bookish, his hands are slavish, his words “turn to sand,” and his tongue breaks out in “rash of yowls.” The sequence ends with the ripping apart of the missing person, whose untellable tale is reduced to an ad or comic book, and dissolves into derision: “And this is how you will end: / before the final fade-out, like an ad: / ‘Here’s our smug little watch that’s lost his hands. / Here is our own bugs bunny who acted funny” (*MP*, p. 24).

Like Arun Kolatkar, Jussawalla wrote and rewrote his poems for years. He also admits having written many things that he never wanted to publish because they were written out of the wrong kind of impulse. But this struggle for expression has still more complex roots. Anand Thakore sees in Jussawalla’s poetry “the craft of despair,”⁷ and the poet has talked about feeling doomed to perpetual defeat. His oeuvre demonstrates an extreme vulnerability to the suffering of the world. “The horror of bad things happening all the time, of living in a cruel present, often leaves me speechless,” Jussawalla acknowledged in an interview.⁸ “Face more terror than you can take. / And this is how you will end” (*MP*, p. 24), like the “missing person” whose story presents itself like a cautionary tale.⁹ Acutely aware of the powerlessness of words and art both to change the world and

himself, Jussawalla retreated into silence. "All our good words have been unable to get that sentence lifted," wrote the poet in the context of Salman Rushdie's fatwa, against which he vigorously and repeatedly positioned himself.¹⁰ Like other Indian intellectuals, he deplors hostile anti-literary surroundings and writes of the fierce despair of Indian writers in a "culture of shortages": shortages of literary history, criticism, and recognition, of publishers, readers, and audience. He has also spoken of the guilt associated with his position of privilege as a "bourgeois intellectual": "I think the situation of the poet in India is such that being misunderstood is part of his function."¹¹ In a dog addressing the moon as the chains bang and the whips get worse, Jussawalla sees an alter ego of muzzled poets like himself, "unintelligible / to the earless multitudes" ("Dog," *MP*, p. 49).

Struggling with a "mouth fouled / with clotted silence" ("March," *Land's End*) Jussawalla has also wrestled with unruly or unhomey tongues.¹² Like many Indian writers, he grew up in a multilingual background and was exposed to Gujarati (the language he spoke with his mother); to Marathi and Hindi, both *lingua franca* of Bombay; to Urdu, which he learned at school; and to Old Persian, the language of Parsi prayers. In interviews he has spoken about the different languages and scripts crawling inside his head, and acknowledged that his English had developed on a heap of lost or destroyed languages. English was a language that he had to learn to master, or feel at home in. He has also described it as a "problem" at school and later in London. In a short article eloquently titled "The Double Edge of Silence" (2006), which Jussawalla had been asked to write on a poem by Dom Moraes, he chose to discuss the poem "Autobiography," which speaks about the difficulty of communicating. Both he and Moraes shared a "distinctly anti-social handicap" that was eased by the disinhibiting virtues of alcohol. Speech dried up among other people. The double edge of silence is both "the need for it and the need to break it." Jussawalla also comments on the truth of the poem's last line ("fighting the sand for speech, fighting the stone"), which speaks to all those who find it difficult to express themselves.

And yet, if Jussawalla has long been known more as a journalist or an editor than as a poet, or else as the poet of one influential collection, *Missing Person*, this can no longer be the case. Since 2011, two new collections (*Trying to Say Goodbye* and *The Right Kind of Dog*) have been published, and there are more to come. Jussawalla seems to have found his voice again. "The sentence passed," as the first line of one of his most beautiful poems suggests ("The Pardon," *Trying to Say Goodbye*, p. 60).

Recollecting and Reconnecting

The same impulse lies behind Jussawalla's poetry and his work as editor, anthologist, and informal archivist of India's literary culture. The poet has long been waging a war against the amnesia also diagnosed by other Indian writers and intellectuals.¹³ Poetry is about salvaging what has been damaged, ignored, or bleached out, about resurrecting lives presumed lost. *Trying to Say Goodbye* opens with an author's note that describes the poems in the first part of the collection as attempts to reclaim areas and memories that had been neglected. The old pen he used as a student in London becomes his guide dog and cane that deals with things he's lost ("I Recognize the Graphos after More than Fifty Years," p. 3). Writing implies another form of vision, and it is connected to remembrance. "To see' means not only to have before one's eyes. It may mean also to preserve in memory," writes Jussawalla, using Czeslaw Milosz's words. The writer is someone "who doesn't flinch from seeing," but sets it down.¹⁴

Recollecting and reconnecting go hand in hand. Jussawalla's creative, editorial, and journalistic work has grown from the same desire to "come to terms with," "get back to," or (re)connect. *Land's End* describes a wasteland abroad, while also representing the poet's failed or ambivalent recovery of England, the "mother country"¹⁵ to which he had longed to relate. Years later, it was the urge to recover lost – Indian – ground, and to come to terms with his native country, which had become vital for the poet. This also accounts for the project of the anthology, *New Writing in India*, which was meant to challenge the neglect of Indian writers on the global literary map, but must also be understood as a self-discovery through the words of others: "I needed to almost angrily and vehemently go deeper into my Indian side."¹⁶ His poetry and his prose are haunted by the desire to bring together his many disconnected worlds, loyalties, times, and voices, and to reconnect with his childhood and family.¹⁷ There is also a constant longing – often tinged with guilt, since the poet is acutely aware of the hopelessness of the enterprise – to bridge the gap between the invisible ordinary men living on the footpaths of India's metropolizes and himself. His experience of the country liquor bars and speakeasies¹⁸ where, especially during the Prohibition days in Bombay, people from all backgrounds, classes, and castes (artists, advertising men, laborers, fishermen, and others) came together, may have given him a provisional sense and illusion of community.

Jussawalla's texts are imbued with a feeling of marginality and foreignness, which also accounts for the poet's longing "to connect." "The Poet as

An Outcast" (1977) is a title of an interview he gave on Clearing House, where he explains that the collective was born as a reaction to the climate of indifference, disapproval, and hostility that had consigned his generation to invisibility.¹⁹ Like other modern Indian poets, especially those who write in English, and who have often asserted their oblique or defiant relationship to the Indian nation and to the mainstream,²⁰ Jussawalla has always felt like an *outsider*. But this experience seems to have been more painful than for writers such as Kolatkar, Chitre, and Mehrotra. The poet recalls the violent culture shock he experienced in London, his dismay upon discovering the crass ignorance of people about India, and realizing that he remained a *missing person*, overlooked, misunderstood, or misread: "How is it that I am not being seen?"²¹ Some of his essays and poems convey his outrage over racism: "I hear every sound: / Blackie, Wog, Paki, / But pretend I don't / How else keep evil out?" ("Rudy and Guitar," *TSG*).

Since Parsis are identified with a highly exclusive, anglicized, or Westernized elite, and are often considered to be outsiders to the real, *authentic* India, Jussawalla's religious identity also accounts for his feeling of being an "outcast." The poet, who left for London when he was seventeen years old, spent more than ten years abroad, and married a French woman, Veronik, may have always felt "out of place," as the title of one of his essays suggests.²² In Bombay (now Mumbai) he is often asked about his nationality by inquisitive taxi drivers who tend to be suspicious of his reply: "one aggressively said I was lying, insisting that I had to be a foreigner. It led to a row."²³ It is no coincidence that his poetry is peopled by misfits, dropouts, good-for-nothings. The unwanted "missing person" is an object of revulsion and disgust, a mock-heroic freak relegated to the dustbins of history and humanity. *The Right Kind of Dog* takes its title from a statement made by the photographer Don McCullin, who remembers feeling like the wrong breed of dog as a child. The first part of *Trying to Say Goodbye* is filled with men and women who don't belong to London, are homeless or marginalized in various ways. The "Londoners" are a strange breed indeed. They are Londoners by chance, by exile, or by fate—Londoners in spite of themselves (since many would like to leave) and in spite of others (who would like them out).

Poetry, Hurt, and Violence

"Pleasure became pain very quickly. Everything was charged with a certain violence,"²⁴ remarks Jussawalla about the writing of his contemporaries, where he notes the prevalence of metaphors of dismemberment and

dislocation. Many of Jussawalla's texts are charged with the same kind of violence and pain. *Missing Person*, which opens with images of a dog with his eyes pulled out and of blood crawling from a crack, articulates the intolerable inner and outer pressures faced by someone doomed to turn an impossible-to-channel violence against himself. "I couldn't go on writing poems like that" Jussawalla acknowledges, "I had to pull myself back from the brink."²⁵ This violence also harks back to the poet's childhood, and to the memories of Independence and Partition that still haunt his poetry. "I was delivered to a violent time. I remember photographs of suburban trains set on fire."²⁶ *Missing Person* is situated in such a context: "there's trouble outside: crowds, stammering guns, the sea / screaming from side to side." In *The Right Kind of Dog*, children are often ground down and defenseless before the violence of the adult world. The poet, who describes himself as an introverted young boy, "a sick child in a sick city,"²⁷ and who grew up in an ethos where "weakness was a crime" (the title of a short article where Jussawalla recalls the Parsi body-builders who were his father's heroes), must have felt painfully unfit.

Many of his interviews, essays, and poems are haunted by the insane cruelty of contemporary India. The poet time and again speaks about the impossibility of reconciling the extremes to which one is subjected in the country, and of the poverty that "clings to you, drags you down, immobilizes you."²⁸ In the poem "Coming Home" (*TSG*), the image of a puppy pushed under the wheels of a car stands for homecoming, and for Bombay. As always, violence outside mirrors violence "inside," and Jussawalla connects it to the violence of his own class: "I cannot get away from the fact that, whatever I do, I will be a kind of oppressor, a parasite, living off the fat of the land."²⁹

There is also an extreme vulnerability, which often translates as empathy, about the poet and his poetry. In several interviews, he associates the art of writing both with the act of salvaging, and with trying to deal with the hurt, to prevent further damage. In the poem "A Place," the poet sees "a friend held to a wound" (*TSG*, p. 30) and in "An American Professor in the Seventies," every lit window becomes a cry for help (*TSG*, p. 47). The poems on alcohol in *Trying to Say Goodbye* have nothing of the jazzy humor and cool irreverence of Kolatkar's "Drunk & Other Songs"; they are dark and painful texts. Every drink is like a nail on a coffin. Jussawalla's poetry is literally "squatted" upon by violence and by suffering. In the prose poem "Wondering" it is the poet's voice that you hear: "That woman stumbling from a Christmas pub in tears, her spectacles broken, that girl cringing outside Harrods, that black man wiping tears with fistfuls of snow, are

squatters. They enter my body, so long an empty house. They take possession of its floors” (*TSG*, p. 21). As often in Jussawalla’s texts, a series of sharply sketched vignettes evoke an ocean of stories and emotions. In the poem “Fire Temple” in *The Right Kind of Dog*, every detail, this time, seems a cry for help. Hurt is mediated through physical detail: the frayed cuffs, stained nails, and pressed palms of an old woman, or the swollen foot of a pink and white adenium compared to an ailing ballerina’s. In the bold, moving and almost unbearably honest autobiographical piece “Shikast I: When Earth Rose up to Get Me” (2014), pleasure inevitably becomes pain. The essay starts as slapstick comedy (a cow galloping straight at the poet turned toreador), but turns into a very painful text, which is haunted by the vision of a cow maddened by grief, by the deaths of construction workers and domestic servants crushed under lorries, and by the inconsolable ache of the writer himself. “Through the suffocating night, take me in the sky of your hands,” is the closing prayer of “Shikast II.”³⁰

Escape and Shelter: “Trapped Land . . . May You Find an Out”

The poem “Ajanta” ends on another kind of prayer: “Trapped land . . . may you find an out” (*TSG*, p. 38). The two alternatives or simultaneous “postulations,” to use a Baudelairian term, of escape and shelter, jailbreak and re-imprisonment, are defining features of Jussawalla’s poetry, and they often get mapped onto the foundational oscillation between exile and homecoming. Images of closure and entrapment alternate with images associated with the “great ship Liberty” of imagination.

The migrants, tramps, and misfits of *Trying to Say Goodbye* are solitary figures who are (made to stay) outside: there is Jenny, the woman painting in front of Nelson’s column, who has been turfed out by her mother; Marco, whom nobody will take in; and “Wolf” who is prowling the streets of London. All are trying to devise means of escape and refuge: Jenny through her paintings; Marco by contemplating thoughts of suicide or exile; Wolf in sex; Rudy in music; Anna with her bags that are also “boulders that shore her.” So too is the delicate figure of the aging mother, as frail as tissue paper, looking for shelter (see “Refuge” and “Her Safe House”). Houses are a recurrent motif in the collection, where they are described as “fall guys” that often come crashing down. Home is both a place you look for and a place to escape from. “I have tried to show the effects of living in lands I can neither leave nor love nor properly belong to,” acknowledged the poet in an interview.³¹ Home may actually be an impossible place. That is also the ambivalent relation which binds the poet

to Bombay; a “destination of the heart,” as the title of one of his essays suggests, which is also a destination of hurt; an impossible city which is also the only city Jussawalla can live in: “Skyhigh the pain / blazes, its blade burst deep in the bone, / and not knowing what to call it, call it home” (“A Place,” p. 30).

In *The Right Kind of Dog*, children strive to escape from the violence of the world; from the authority of adults, parents, teachers, and doctors, but also from the “Great Indian Family” in the delightfully iconoclastic poem “Thoughts of an Eight-year-old Girl”: “I wish the Great Indian Family / Like the Great Indian Bustard / were nearly extinct.”³² They also escape and defeat the somber predictions of adults, and find refuge in imagination, fables, and fantasy. In the opening poem of the collection, the silver screens peopled by “apaches, Zulus, prophets,” and by stories of king’s ships, captains and slave-girls, Marx Brothers, and Zorro, provide escape and shelter (“A Boy in the Forties”). In “When First I Walked,” the rickety boy defies gravity. By the strength of his imagination, he soars to the sky, turns the tables on his handicap, and defeats the louts who want to ground him. Poetry turns the world upside down in a sense – or, rather, sets it right by restoring balance. The wrong kind of dog has obviously become *right*, and the outcast is transfigured into the poet-artist.

“There are other silences . . . whether in music, poetry, regions of the past or elsewhere; we need them desperately,” acknowledged the poet.³³ Jussawalla found shelter in these other silences; in music, poetry, and beauty, as well as in imagination, which he defines as a “glass of rum” and as “a fuel that burns the rags/ tied around wounded heads” (“Imagination,” *TRKD*). For more than twenty years, Jussawalla also numbed the pain of living with alcohol and drank himself to silence. It was when he stopped drinking that he returned to poetry, replacing alcohol with a far more creative asylum.³⁴

His poems record flashes of beauty, which in turn become places to dwell in, however provisionally. They expose the beauty of a work of art, a landscape, a vision, or a few lines; the beauty of birds, trees, flowers, and insects. Ordinary objects are suddenly epiphanized, like an old card “with its silverfoil snowflakes sparkling in the sun, sparkling and sparkling as though trying to tell me that they and I are deathless” (“Christmas Card,” *TRKD*). These flashes of beauty provide a sense of refuge, anchor, and wonder, as well as a form of redemption. Even in *Land’s End*, the “wasteland” is redeemed, at least in part, by the disquieting but formidable presence of nature. In the exquisite poem “Ellora” (*TSG*, p. 40), enlightenment *suddenly* comes like a picture falling from an unlikely envelope. In “Jenny,” the red-haired woman talking to the pigeons in a cockney accent

is redeemed by the gaze – and the poem – of the artist-observer who likens Jenny to a painting. Wonder springs from close observation of the here and now of immediate experience, and also from the pleasures of loitering (see “In Praise of Straggling,” 2014). The poet is a street-writing man. As Mehrotra remarked in his sensitive review of *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, Jussawalla, like Kolatkar, is another flâneur of the streets and lanes of Colaba. In “Ave Cumulonimbus,” he addresses the angry cloud and asks him to spare a few flowers: “I’ll pick them up when nobody’s looking / and bring them to light when you’ve gone” (*TRKD*). As the last poem of *Missing Person* suggests, you can find a sense of transient belonging in the contemplation of a concrete present, as well as in the stark quietude of a poem’s lines: “Children swing / kites dip / waves trail . . . the sun flickers / pops” (*MP*, p. 58). This sensitive attentiveness to immediate surroundings is also conveyed by the sensuousness of Jussawalla’s writing: “I let myself be led by the smell of a ship / waiting for me to board. / In passing, brushed the red lives of flowers / clutched in a glass” (“The Pardon,” *TSG*, p. 31).

“I would like to see other things talk,” acknowledged the poet in the course of a conversation in Bombay.³⁵ These “other things,” such as a wristwatch, a radio, a swimming pool, a plant, and a photograph do come to life and speak in his poetry. “One by one / as candles are lighted / things unseen before / came to life / and communicated,” writes Jussawalla in the opening poem of *Land’s End* (“Seventeen”). Houses and buildings reflect who we are, or take upon themselves our pain, desires, and memories. In the poem “Government Country” the liquor bar has walls with multiple bruises, and they absorb the hurt of the men who enter (*TSG*). The poet also listens to flowers and plants, the many bougainvilleas, adenia, and red cannas of which Adil is such a keen, almost amorous observer. They too, sometimes seem to speak, though with “unintelligible scripts” (“Artist,” *TSG*, p. 34).

The poet-observer perched on his 18th floor balcony can escape the freezing sound of screaming brakes that gesture toward over-powering violence at ground level by contemplating birds in flight. The essay “Visibility Zero, 1994” may be a dark text on a dark and violent year in Maharashtra, but it nonetheless ends on the sense of wonder before the chink of light produced by an ant carrying a grain of sugar glistening in the sun. “To change our angles of perspective’ . . . that is . . . what all good poetry tries to do . . . Evil is temporarily diminished. Vision begins to reappear,” writes the poet.³⁶ In the riddle-like, telegraphic, and almost automatic poem “Materials,” wonder springs from the demiurgic power of art, creator of forms, shapes, lives, and emotions. Marble, a “difficult

partner,” becomes a bird. It “stays its wing in its shoulder/ Till finished. / Then rises, moved.” (*TSG*, p. 33)

The Duality of Earth and Sky: “I Am Returned to the Ground” (Rimbaud)

As the lines from the poem “Materials” reveal, Jussawalla’s poetry is torn between the “aerial” and the “material”; between spirituality or mysticism and what he calls the underworld, the entrails and even anuses of Bombay; between escapism and a “rough reality to embrace.”³⁷ I would suggest that these lines from Rimbaud’s poem “Farewell” in *A Season in Hell* perhaps encapsulate the spirit of Jussawalla’s writing. Returned to the ground, or to the “coarser things” the poet advocates in the closing poem of *Land’s End* (“White Peacocks”), Jussawalla has never stopped looking for the sheltering sky.

The poet has talked of Marxism as “ballast” against a tendency to dreaminess and mysticism that came from one side of his family, especially from his guru-uncle Dinshaw Mehta, who renounced everything and set up an ashram. He fascinated his nephew. In “Shikast II,” Jussawalla also records his own mystical experience as a young man in a London park, and ends the text with a lapidary line which reconciles the seemingly irreconcilable: “My soul’s deep in shit.” The first part of the essay (“Shikast I”) revolves around this opposition between Jussawalla’s position of privilege, eighteen floors high, with his asylum of sky, birds, books, paintings, and plants versus the earth on ground level, which “demands you to be hurt and hurt again, if only to acknowledge how much you’ve been responsible for hurting other people,” and rises up to get you.³⁸ The text ends on a literal and metaphoric collision of earth and sky, a brutal return to the ground: “I was dreaming, I was flying . . . when I felt the taste of steel in my mouth” (p. 309). Literature that doesn’t recognize the “beast” is a literature of dangerous escapism, Jussawalla once wrote (1992). The poet no doubt needed to confront the beast, and does not flinch from seeing the corpses on the footpaths, the children dying in a smoked-filled slum, or the contracted tribal breaking stones on the road. His earlier writing was tormented by the question of its usefulness, and by the urgent need to confront the political and social realities of the time. Politically active in the ’70s, Jussawalla has only recently come to terms with the idea that literature cannot bring about *radical* change.

Opacity and Visuality

Like the dog “unintelligible to the earless multitudes” (*MP*, p. 49), his poetry is not immediately transparent, but oblique, complex, and, at times, enigmatic. Opacity was intentional in *Missing Person*, where the poet wanted to suggest the *chaos* of a postcolonial conscience. But that is also, at least to a certain extent, the case in his other collections, even in his “poems for young people” (*TRKD*).³⁹ His poetry leaves a lot unsaid and keeps the imagination open. It is suggestive, sensuous, and economical, rather than explicatory. Words are often bounded by mystery and by silence. In the opening letter to his readers (*TRKD*), Jussawalla insists on the irreducibility of poetry to meaning. The poet claims that no one can fully comprehend a poem, and that he himself doesn’t have a special understanding of it. Lines and visions *happen*, and speak for themselves. Ideas make way for images.

Jussawalla is a visualizer. In his poems, he often stages himself as an observer, and sometimes a photographer (see “Woman in a Landscape” and “Ellora” in *TSG*). He is absorbed by detail, by the sounds, forms, shapes, and the near-imperceptible life of the sensible world. He looks at what others fail to notice; the “one-armed man” for instance, in the eponymous poem of *The Right Kind of Dog*, who is not only recorded, but seen differently and regenerated by the power of observation and imagination, which must also be understood literally, as the power of *making* images: “I’ve seen him stand on one hand / for hours, his legs apart, / like a wineglass in an empty square.” As I suggested earlier, Jussawalla’s poems are constructed by a succession of extraordinarily sharp, vignette-like images that often mix the abstract and the concrete. In a few chiseled and highly visual lines, all the more evocative for their economy, he opens up a whole world. In “Visiting Relatives” (*TRKD*), the initial snap shots convey the suffocating feeling in the room far more suggestively than any lengthy description: “the Limca’s tepid, / the servants stare, / my mother keeps blowing her nose.” If there is so much left unexplained, in that collection especially, it’s because children are left with their tormenting questions. They strive to make sense of the adult world without understanding or intellectualizing it. But children are also defined by the capacity to see, feel and hear what others miss out on: the hurt, wonder, and expressiveness of the world, and the rustle of language. Childhood is characterized by a heightened – almost painful – sensitivity, which is embodied in the little girl of “Fire Temple”: “When was the little girl last cast down so low as to hear the fire at her elbow hiss like acetylene . . .” (*TRKD*).

Jussawalla has often acknowledged that he didn't see himself as a writer when he was younger, but was interested in paints, colors, shapes and forms. The poet, who trained as a student of architecture in London, also practiced photography and painting. He wrote defining essays on Bhupen Khakhar, F. N. Souza, and other painters, and was close to the artist community in London and in Bombay. Some of his poems are tributes to artists and others were written to illustrate photographs or paintings. In a moving article on Nissim Ezekiel, to whom Jussawalla was close, the poet dispatches his words like the quick strokes of a painter's brush: "The House: ochre. Trees behind it and along its side: deep green, lemon-yellow, Vandyke brown."⁴⁰ His oeuvre has also maintained a dialogue with other media such as theater, cinema, and music. Jussawalla writes a highly resonant, rhythmic, and consonant poetry, full of assonances and alliterations. He has called his poems "songs," which he understands in a loose way, as Yeats had used the term, to imply a form of lyricism.

*"Bring on the Clowns"*⁴¹

And yet Jussawalla's writing often displays an uncompromising and savage honesty. In columns such as "Jantar Mantar" (for *Debonair*) or "The None O'Clock News" (*The Sunday Observer*) he also let loose a devastating humor. The poet tirelessly challenges stereotypes, lays pretenses bare, and derides hypocrisy. In a 1988 article published in *The Indian Post*, he deplores the power of an unofficial extended "family," eager to chastise and re-educate Indian writers about their country and bound "by a tie thicker than blood – an absence of laughter."⁴² He also speaks about the child-like playfulness so essential to all writers, but which falls silent in front of "The Hushing Finger" (1991). That is precisely the part Jussawalla has *not* hushed. Every truth that is too "massive" or that goes unquestioned is debunked; every conceit is overturned, every cliché exposed. There's something of the jester in Jussawalla, whose anxiety "not to falsify, to witness authentically, to truthsay"⁴³ is similar to the child who *speaks out* and divulges what's repressed or censored. Common labels and perceptions are reversed, and the accusations are turned toward the self. The coward or the hit man is within us; the devil lodges in our own hearts; and in "the murderer, the thief, the conman, the hooker, the sex offender," the poet sees an alter ego of himself.⁴⁴ In many texts, Jussawalla also demonstrates a certain reluctance to impose his own voice and weight on reality, to take his feelings or opinions too seriously. Emotions are often held back, kept at bay. His poems and essays veer unexpectedly from tragedy to comedy; or

from quietude to terror. There are destabilizing digressions or inversions, sudden changes of perspective and emotional “gears.” If they “turn your world into a surprising place, even for a little while, they’ll have done their job,” Jussawalla wrote in the letter to his readers (*TRKD*).

In his poetry of suffering and song, gravity and lightness, farce and fable, lyricism and harshness, empathy and detachment, Adil Jussawalla is also the “master of mischief” – an expression he used for the painter Bhupen Khakhar. His unsettled texts both break and build defenses. But there’s a common thread. They all fight “images of lasting despair”; words that appear in an enchanting uncollected poem which closes on these haunting lines: “Death, interruptless, can be made to falter / By a vision on the road. If you stumble / On this picture, look and look again, past / The political lie, the expert’s mumble. / The crooked tree above you isn’t dead / But waiting to burst to leaf, guarding your brave / Dream of a shared life and shelter.”⁴⁵

Notes

1. Adil Jussawalla, *Maps for A Mortal Moon, Essays and Entertainments*, edited and introduced by Jerry Pinto, New Delhi: Aleph, 2014, p. 283.
2. A line from *Missing Person*. In *Land’s End*, Jussawalla also mentions his “counterfeit” songs (“Two Postcards”).
3. Myself included. This article has immensely benefited from Jussawalla’s generosity and from our frequent conversations in Bombay. I also thank Arvind Krishna Mehrotra for his insightful suggestions after reading a preliminary version of this chapter.
4. There was a lot of editorial work involved in the 1974 anthology, partly to “English” the translations. Jussawalla taught English as a foreign language in London, and when he returned to Bombay in 1970, he started teaching at St. Xavier’s College. On the Clearing House publishing collective founded in 1976, see Jerry Pinto, [Chapter 11](#), this volume.
5. The poet experienced a nervous breakdown in London: “If you attempt to completely smash the structure of English culture or Eng. Lit., a very fundamental personal disintegration takes place too” (Peter Nazareth, “Adil Jussawalla Interviewed,” *Vagartha*, 1979, p. 4).
6. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed. *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 126.
7. Anand Thakore, “On the Music of the Missing Person: Adil Jussawalla and the Craft of Despair,” 2004, www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou_article/item/2690
8. “Poetry is always worth something, whatever people say,” Adil Jussawalla interviewed by C. P. Surendran, January 7, 2012, *Time Crest*, 2012.

9. See the two last lines of Auden's poem "Letter to Lord Byron," which Jussawalla uses as an epigraph to the first part of "Missing Person": "What follows now may set him on the rail,/ A plain, perhaps a cautionary tale."
10. Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, p. 16.
11. "Adil Jussawalla Interviewed," 1979, p. 5.
12. "Get back to your language" is the injunction given to the "missing person." But which language is *his*? *Land's End* does not have page numbers.
13. "The story of Indian literature in English, if not of Indian literature as a whole, is a story of forgetfulness" (Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Partial Recall, Essays on Literature and Literary History*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012, p. 253).
14. Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, p. 266.
15. "Before and After: An Interview with Adil Jussawalla" (with Vivek Narayanan and Sharmishta Mohanty), *Almost Island*, Monsoon, 2012, p. 14, http://almostisland.com/monsoon_2012/interviews/pdfs/before_and_after.pdf
16. Jussawalla, "Before and After," 2012, p. 12.
17. Jussawalla wrote at least three articles on his father and commissioned a book on him. He also wrote several poems and an essay on his mother.
18. The word was used in Bombay by poets such as Kolatkar and by advertising men, but comes from the United States where "speakeasies" referred to establishments that illegally sold alcohol during the Prohibition era.
19. Adil Jussawalla, "The Poet as an Outcast," *TransIndia*, May 1977.
20. For a discussion of these issues see Laetitia Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India, Moving Lines*, London / New York / New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014.
21. Jussawalla, "Before and After," p. 12.
22. Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, 2014.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
24. "Adil Jussawalla Interviewed," 1979, p. 6.
25. Jussawalla, "Before and After," p. 44.
26. Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, p. 284.
27. The line comes from Jussawalla's 1997 article "A Destination of the Heart," but it was deleted in the edited version of the article today included in *Maps for a Mortal Moon*.
28. Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, p. 285.
29. Jussawalla, "Before and After," p. 44.
30. Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, p. 312.
31. Eunice de Souza, "Interviews with four Indian English Poets," *The Bombay Review*, Number 1, p. 75.
32. *The Right Kind of Dog* has no page numbers.
33. "Poetry is Always Worth Something," 2012.
34. Adil Jussawalla started his "Loquations" poetry readings when he became teetotal in 1999.
35. This conversation took place during one of our numerous talks in Bombay in 2013 or 2014.

36. Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, p. 162.
37. "I, who called myself magus or angel, exempt from all morality, I am returned to the ground, with a duty to find and rough reality to embrace!" (Rimbaud, *Complete Works, Selected Letters, A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Wallace Folley, revised edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 303).
38. Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, pp. 307–08.
39. The collection is mischievously dedicated to two people who can hardly be described as young: his fellow poet Eunice de Souza and his brother Firdausi Jussawalla.
40. Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, p. 29.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
42. Adil Jussawalla, "Come Back Salman Family Serious," *The Indian Post*, Sunday October 28, 1988, p. 12.
43. Jussawalla, *Maps for a Mortal Moon*, p. 259.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 307.
45. *Science Age*, January 1985, p. 30.

*Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and the Interplay of
Languages*

Peter D. McDonald

I

What stands in the way of our recognizing the public force of this short poem?

अइ-कोवणा वि सासू रुआविआ गअ-वईअ सोण्हाए ।
पाअ-पडणोण्णआए दोसु वि गलिएसु वलएसु ॥

Looked at in this form, I suspect the answer for most of us is simple enough. Reading Maharashtri Prakrit, which was, like the more elevated Sanskrit, one of South Asia's most widespread ancient languages, is now an increasingly rare skill, and so, for many of us, what stands in the way is our own limited competence as readers. If, like me, you have a very rudimentary knowledge of the Devanagari script, you might even find it impossible to sound out the visible marks. Perhaps you do not even know where to start (it reads from left to right) or how to interpret the vertical lines at the end of each segment (they mark the breaks in the verse, not the syntax). No doubt encountering the poem in this more familiar form will diminish the challenges significantly:

When she bends to touch
Her mother-in-law's feet
And two bangles slip
From her thin hands, tears
Come to the cold woman's eyes.

At least we are now in a visual terra cognita: the Latin script with its readily identifiable punctuation marks, the English language, and English-language printing conventions for verse. Since you are reading a Cambridge *History of Indian Poetry in English*, you will also have no difficulty converting these familiar visual marks into no less recognizable

sounds almost automatically. Such is literacy's sometimes dubiously habituating power.

Of course, such basic competence only takes us so far. To recognize the public force of these words you clearly need much more than simple literacy. Taking my opening question to the next level, we could now say that the obstacles standing in your way have less to do with the words themselves than with the context in which you have so far encountered them. At this point it is perhaps too minimalist to be of much help. In the wider world of contemporary literary culture, you are likely to face the opposite problem. If you are an ambitious university student in the so-called West, particularly in the United States, who likes keeping up with the latest academic trends, then you are most likely to come across the English version of the poem in the first volume of *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* (2004). Like any anthology, this is an ornately structured exercise in framing and curation. To begin with, it identifies the poem as belonging to "The Ancient World," locating it historically and geographically in a section called "Early South Asia" under a sub-section entitled "Love in a Courtly Language," dating it from the second or third century CE and tracing its provenance to a two-thousand-year-old anthology, *The Seven Hundred Songs of Hala*.¹ In addition, it prefaces the poem with an informative headnote, which gives an account of Prakrit (a less refined language than Sanskrit it and it explains the principle of *dhvani*, the ancient poetic practice of "suggestion." Suggestive implication, setting the said to resonate with the not said, is, the headnote explains, "a hallmark of Prakrit poems" (938).

So far, so archaeological. Yet the *Longman Anthology* is more than a scrupulously arranged historical guide to a wide selection of the world's written heritage. It is also the most ambitious introduction to the idea of "world literature" not as Goethe or Marx understood it in the nineteenth century, or as Tagore or Zhen duo defined it in the early twentieth century, but as David Damrosch has come to redefine it over the past decade.² "World literature" in his sense is a twenty-first century venture, as he argues in the preface to his anthology, responding, on the one hand, to the "tremendous increase in the range of cultures that actively engage with each other" in today's world, and, on the other, to "the process known as globalization," which makes this kind of engagement all the more likely and consequential (xxi). He also acknowledges that his project is driven by narrower, specifically academic and U.S. imperatives, notably a need to refashion comparative literature and the "Great Books" tradition in less parochially Euro-American terms. "An extraordinary range of exciting

material is now in view,” he notes before inviting his largely U.S. student readership to explore the “embarrassment of riches” that is “the world’s literary heritage” (xxi). Decreeing a new global Xanadu for our individual aesthetic pleasure is not Damrosch’s only objective, however. By creating “remarkable opportunities for cross-cultural understanding,” he believes his project has an ethical – perhaps even a socio-political – purpose as well. In case this sounds a little too much like visionary UNESCO-speak, he quickly points out that such “cross-cultural” encounters always bring “new kinds of tensions, miscommunications, and uncertainties,” the most obvious of which center on the endlessly vexed issue of translation (xxi). Yet, here too, Damrosch has a solution. “One way to define works of world literature,” he says, citing the central premise of his project, is “that they are the works that gain in translation” (xxv). “Some great texts remain so intimately tied to their point of origin that they never read well abroad,” while others “gain in resonance as they move out into new contexts, new conjunctions” (xxv). As this suggests, “world literature” is, for Damrosch, an effect of translation and circulation, not a fixed canon of works or, indeed, a repository of universal human verities.

Damrosch’s ambitious project is, in my view, commendable, particularly in so far as it invites us to think beyond the national and Euro-American paradigms that continue to deform literary studies. His implicit call to provincialize the English language, or at least to reflect on its place within a wider multilingual literary heritage, is equally welcome. As many academic commentators have pointed out, however, “world literature” in the Damroschian sense raises as many questions as it answers.³ For my purposes here, I shall consider only one of its limitations: the weak (i.e., chiefly geographical) conception of public space on which it relies, and, consequently, the ways in which it threatens the public force of literature. We can begin to get a sense of this problem by picking at one small thread in the vast tapestry of the *Longman Anthology*. In the table of contents for the first volume, under the general title *The Seven Hundred Songs of Hala*, which frames the English poem with which I began, we have the following brief acknowledgment: “(trans. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra)” (xi). If you take the time to follow this up in the densely printed bibliography at the end of the volume, then you find the source specified as “Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, trans., *The Absent Traveller, Prākṛit Love Poetry from the Gāthāsaptasatī of Sātavāhana Hala*, 1991” (1334). This is the first volume of Mehrotra’s collection, which appeared under the imprint of Ravi Dayal, the most significant literary publisher in India at the time. Penguin Books India subsequently, and more globally, re-issued *The Absent Traveller* as a

Classic in 2008. These editions of course create their own frames, a point to which I shall return later. But to revisit my opening question from a new vantage, I would like to begin by stepping back from these bibliographical and paratextual details to consider Mehrotra's own project as a contemporary poet-translator and, above all, his very public, and often controversial, commitment to the English language as a medium for contemporary poetry.

II

As a first-language Hindi speaker who chose to write in English, Mehrotra could not have timed his literary debut more fatefully. He published his first poems in the *Allahabad University Magazine* and launched a little magazine called *damn you* in 1965, the year English was supposed to be abolished as an official language in India. As the constitution, adopted in 1950, envisaged it, the old colonial language would be phased out of public life over the course of fifteen years, making room for the twenty-two languages to which it granted official recognition and sponsorship. These ranged from Assamese to Urdu, and included Bengali, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Punjabi, and Tamil. More controversially, the constitution also made a commitment to promoting Hindi as a new culturally unifying lingua franca. It hoped Hindi

may serve as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India and to secure its enrichment by assimilating without interfering with its genius, the forms, style and expressions, used in Hindustani and in the other languages of India specified in the Eighth Schedule [the twenty-two named languages], and by drawing, wherever necessary or desirable, for its vocabulary primarily on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages.⁴

The future was another country, however. After a series of protests in the mid-1960s, particularly by non-Hindi speakers in the southern half of the country, English was given a second, indefinite afterlife, ensuring that it continues to have an official status in India today.

In Allahabad, where he was studying English literature, ancient history, and economics, Mehrotra was well aware of the larger language controversies of the 1960s. A major city in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, Allahabad was, as he later recalled, “the heart of the heart of the Hindi heartland,” and, during the language protests, “the cry of *Angrezihatao* [Throw out English] was everywhere to be heard, in the

streets, in the university, outside shops.”⁵ In this context, writing and publishing in English was risky at best, inflammatory at worst. To get along with his neighbors, and perhaps even to secure a place for himself in the nation’s future, Mehrotra ought, as a Hindi speaker with poetic aspirations, to have devoted himself to refashioning his “mother tongue” as a new national lingua franca. Instead, taking his inspiration from sources as diverse as the French Surrealists of the 1920s and the American Beats of the 1960s, he said “damn you” not only to “the world at large” – he was eighteen at the time – but “perhaps, more specifically if unconsciously, to the *Angrezihatao* Hindi mob” and the constitution that legitimized their linguistic fervor (27–28).

In the years that followed, his approach to the language question became more nuanced but, as an essay from the early 1980s indicates, he remained as uncompromising as ever. The essay, entitled “The Emperor Has No Clothes,” which languished in obscurity until Amit Chaudhuri included an abridged version of it in his *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001), first appeared in Jayanta Mahapatra’s literary magazine *Chandrabhāgā*. A critical tour de force, it is, on one level, a classic in the tradition of the poetic anathema, a genre that has always enlivened the fractious Republic of Letters where few would-be emperors remain confused about their state of dress for long. Mehrotra’s luckless target was his fellow poet, critic, and translator, Rajagopal Parthasarathy. Written in a style that recalls the testy, impatient voice of J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield – another of Mehrotra’s early heroes – it is a forthright critique, ostensibly damning one “phoney” poet. In reality, it is a manifesto-like defense of poetry. For Mehrotra, Parthasarathy’s long poem *Rough Passage* (1977), a focal point around which his argument turns, is not so much a mediocre literary effort dismally exemplifying “one kind of Indian English poetry.”⁶ It is a betrayal of poetry as such. In place of a poem, Parthasarathy presents only “a list of raw materials for a poem,” recycling a series of well-worn postcolonial themes. Written in three parts, moving from an account of a rough exile in England to a tale of disappointed love and ending with a story of equivocal homecoming, it focuses on “the fate of English-educated Tamil Brahmins” (which is how the Oxford University Press catalogue describes him); the “inner conflict” of everyone who has been “brought up in two cultures” (which is taken from the blurb); the fate of the Indian English writer; the fate of the “Orientalist’s Oriental” (187). Some of these details come from the cover of the first edition, which formed part of Oxford University Press’s self-consciously postcolonial “Three Crowns Series.”⁷ In short, addressing a number of abstractly generalized themes

in an “artificial language,” which has all the character of “an anonymous quarrier’s grave,” *Rough Passage*, according to Mehrotra, lacks all the distinctiveness of poetry (194). Parthasarathy has no “specific chain-mark on his tongue,” he says in one arresting figure (186).

“The Emperor Has No Clothes” does more than denounce a rival poet, however. On another level, it is a wide-ranging reflection on the poetics of multilingualism. Here, too, Parthasarathy was the catalyst. In 1979, he had defended A. K. Ramanujan from a crude attack in terms that, for Mehrotra, only made matters worse. This was, in part, because Parthasarathy predicated his defense on a suspicion of writers who referenced “British or American literature” – or, as he put it in *Rough Passage*, went “whoring/After English Gods.”⁸ If this betrayed a particular form of “provincialism,” it was, Mehrotra claimed, only a symptom of a more fundamental problem that had to do with the way he envisaged Ramanujan’s “multilingual sensibility” (162). From his debut volume *The Striders* (1966), Ramanujan had, according to Parthasarathy, offered the “first indisputable evidence of the *validity* of Indian English verse” because he drew on linguistic and literary “deposits” from “a tradition very much of this subcontinent,” showing that his “deepest roots are in the Tamil and Kannada past” (163). As his “roots” metaphor indicates, Parthasarathy figured cultural heritage in familiar organicist terms, but what concerned Mehrotra most was the “geological model” implicit in his reference to linguistic “deposits.” Following this model, “we have to agree that Ramanujan arranges Tamil and Kannada in the lower strata, English in the upper, and each time he chooses to write he descends, caged canary bird in hand, into the thickly-seamed coal pit of the mother tongue” (164).

Parthasarathy’s appeal to the antediluvian “deposits” of Tamil and Kannada was, of course, haunted by the colonial history of English as an imposed foreign language. It was also burdened by what Mehrotra called the “romantic theory that bound the writer to his native speech and language to a specific people.”⁹ More often than not, this theory came with the further trappings of linguistic relativism, according to which language in some powerful way influences thought or, on some stronger formulations, determines the worldview of a particular community. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German philosophers, notably Herder and von Humboldt, were among the leading proponents of this relativistic thesis, though, as Mehrotra indicated, it left its mark on later thinkers such as Heidegger as well. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, which Mehrotra cited, Heidegger claimed that “words and language are not wrappings in which things are packed for the commerce of those who

write and speak. It is in words and language that things come into being and are" (179). By admiring Ramanujan for assimilating Kannada and Tamil "deposits" into English, then, Parthasarathy was not simply appreciating his multilingual inventiveness. He was praising him for righting the wrongs of empire by bringing an authentically Indian way of thinking or sensibility into the old imperial language.¹⁰

Mehrotra objected to this endorsement partly because it was crudely politicized. "The whole question of multilingualism should be looked at less jingoistically if it is to have any meaning," he wrote (165). More worrying, however, were the unexamined assumptions about language on which it rested. To begin with, Parthasarathy made too much of the fact that Ramanujan "*spoke* a native language first and learnt English subsequently" (164, italics added). This was trivially true, Mehrotra insisted, given that "most Indian English writers *acquire* the language *they write* in and seldom lick it off their mother's teats" (164, italics added). Since this could be said of anyone learning to write, the claim can be taken further. As the linguist Thomas Bonfiglio has recently argued, "the written language is a formidable and foreign construct to the (native) speaker." In contrast to speech, which children generally pick up without conscious effort, it is a "kind of second language" that has to be taught. Consequently, it "estranges the speaker and is a source of linguistic insecurity."¹¹ In learning to write Tamil or Kannada in their various scripts, Ramanujan was, in this analysis, not excavating indigenous "deposits" but encountering another kind of foreignness. Yet, for Mehrotra, the principal problem with Parthasarathy's "geological model" was that it failed to address the infinitely complex "interplay of languages" characteristic not only of Ramanujan's poetry but of all languages, whether in their written or spoken forms (194). If we are to rethink multilingualism, Mehrotra suggested, we need to begin by moving beyond the commonplace distinction between the indigenous and the foreign implicit in Parthasarathy's idea of fixed linguistic strata, acknowledging that, since all languages exist interlingually, they are in a significant sense always partly foreign to themselves.

As an alternative to Parthasarathy's "geological model," Mehrotra proposed a series of other metaphors: "languages as sources of light, attended by eclipses and penumbral zones; languages as lightning conductors, earthing each other's electrical storms; languages as geological faults, sending mild tremors through each other; languages as conjugate mirrors" (174). While recognizing that "no single metaphor" would ultimately suffice, he saw most promise in what George Steiner in *After Babel* (1975) called "the

dynamic of interlingual osmosis” (174). This particular metaphor had a special appeal because it was central not only to Steiner’s theory of multilingualism, but also to Ramanujan’s understanding of Hinduism as a composite religion. In *Speaking of Siva* (1973), he argued that the many “great” and “little” traditions of Hinduism are “not divided by impermeable membranes: they interflow into one another, responsive to differences of density as in an osmosis” (175). Crucially, unlike the fixed strata in Parthasarathy’s model, these osmotic flows put all stable hierarchies and, indeed, identities in doubt. As Ramanujan remarked, “it is often difficult to isolate elements as belonging exclusively to the one or the other” (175). For Mehrotra, this offered a new way into the “whole question of multilingualism”: firstly, because it recognized the “porosity” of all languages, the interlingual currents that endlessly shape and reshape them, and, secondly, because it addressed the variousness of the “multilingual sensibility” (175). Through self-conscious acts of translation, interlingual parallelism, lexical pastiche, various forms of borrowing, and a host of other means, each multilingual poet, each multilingual poem, creates a singular “interplay of languages,” opening up a range of possibilities beyond the despondent cry in Parthasarathy’s *Rough Passage*: “My tongue in English chains.”¹² By constantly bringing new things and new connections into being, each multilingual poet and each poem also disrupts the self-enclosed worlds of the linguistic relativist.

III

Mehrotra’s robust response to Parthasarathy in the early 1980s did not, of course, come from nowhere. It emerged from his own developing project as a poet whose writing life progressed through a series of experiments in borrowing. Over the past fifty years, he has moved like a hermit crab from shell to shell, although, unlike an actual crab, he has never simply outgrown his various abodes since each borrowed idiom has left its mark on his own. He found his first temporary residence among the French Surrealists of the 1920s. As he put it in the “Author’s Note” to his *Collected Poems* (2014), “the discovery of surrealism helped resolve the awful contradiction between the world I wanted to write about, the world of dentists and chemist shops, and the language, English, I wanted to write in. How do you write about an uncle in a wheelchair in the language of skylarks and nightingales?”¹³ He had in mind the English Romantic tradition of Shelley and Keats, which had been a staple of his school and university training. The answer is that you do not. If you are a young Mehrotra in the India of

the 1960s, who chooses to write in English, you start by following the likes of André Breton, formulating lines such as “The air folds, a sheet of paper/ Countries turn in the wind as feathers” or “Lines on my palm, fish in an aquarium” (57–58). Having discovered an initial way out of the school (and still colonial) version of the English literary tradition – his *Collected Poems* pass over his early experiments with the idiom of the American Beat generation – Mehrotra then moved on to Poundian Imagism, where he found a more viable answer to his guiding questions about the English language and the world around him. A characteristic poem from *Distance in Statute Miles* (1982) describes a January scene as follows:

The gate wide open; chairs on the lawn;
Circular verandahs; a narrow kitchen;
High-ceilinged rooms; arches; alcoves; skylights.
My house luminous; my day burnt to ash. (98)

As so often in Mehrotra, an ordinary domestic scene is illuminated – transfigured, even – by history (here a legacy of colonial architecture) and by language (in this case the idiom of Poundian Imagism). In effect, what we have are nineteenth-century British remains, as seen by an Indian-born poet in the 1980s, through a cosmopolitan modernist language of the 1920s. In this way, the poem creates one of the many osmotic flows that run through Mehrotra’s oeuvre.

For many poets, such borrowing is usually short-lived. It is part of an early experimental phase, the period before they “find their voice.” For Mehrotra, the multiple displacements it made possible became a defining gesture not of some self-styled postmodern exhaustion, but of creative engagement, as he made clear in “Borges,” a short poem from the late collection *The Transfiguring Places* (1998). After invoking the great Argentinian-born fabulist, because “a borrowed voice sets the true one free,” the poem concludes with this appeal:

Lead me who am no more than De Quincey’s
Malay, a speechless shadow in a world
Of sound, to the labyrinth of the earthly
Library, perfect me in your work. (149)

The poem refers to an incident in *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) in which an itinerant Malay seaman, who speaks no English, turns up unexpectedly and frightens the natives at Dove Cottage in the English Lake District where De Quincey was then living. It is, among other things, an absurdist cultural encounter – De Quincey calls it a “picturesque exhibition” – centering on miscommunication, estrangement, and misplaced

hospitality.¹⁴ The broader significance of Mehrotra's witty self-identification as "De Quincey's Malay" in an English poem addressed to Borges is clear, especially if we recall that Borges was himself a leading proponent of literary eclecticism. In "The Argentine Writer and the Tradition" (1943), he rejected narrowly national conceptions of literature, insisting, as Mehrotra would decades later, on his freedom to embrace all of the world's literatures, "Western culture" in particular: "We cannot confine ourselves to what is Argentine in order to be Argentine because either it is our destiny to be Argentine, in which case we will be Argentine whatever we do, or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask."¹⁵ The argument applied equally to Indian poetry in English as Parthasarathy wished to define it. By borrowing Borges, and by playfully inserting himself into the English Romantic tradition via the ironic reference to De Quincey (and, if you know your history, Wordsworth), Mehrotra entered the labyrinth of the world's library, aligning himself with an alternative, non-national conception of the literary. At the same time, continuing his argument with Parthasarathy by poetic means, and creating another series of osmotic flows, he linked early-nineteenth-century England, mid-twentieth-century Argentina, and the India of the 1980s, East and West, North and South.

Yet it was not just as poet, but also as a poet-translator that he challenged Parthasarathy's nationalist idea of poetic authenticity, and, as I suggested at the start of this chapter, Damrosch's conception of world literature. Indeed, his challenge to the latter was all the greater in this instance because the "borrowed voices" through which he now sought to set his own free came not from France or Argentina but from the ancient literary heritage of South Asia, beginning in the early 1960s with his first translations of the medieval Bhakti poet Kabir. I return to these in my conclusion. Under the direction of his friend and fellow poet Arun Kolatkar in the 1970s, however, he looked even further back, to the two-thousand-year-old *Gāthāsaptasatī*, a discovery that eventually led to *The Absent Traveller* (1991). As Mehrotra's comments in the preface indicate, he does not see translation as an evaluative economy entailing either "loss" or "gain," as Damrosch puts it. He begins disarmingly by wondering if it involves anything more than mere repetition. "The *Gāthāsaptasatī* speaks the minute you open it," he notes, "and as its translator I felt at times I did little more than repeat in another language what it said."¹⁶ This is largely because the poems use a repertoire of images – "cupped hands, a pregnant woman, a man staring" – that function "like international signs" that "hardly seem to need translators" (*Absent*, x). This certainly gets at an aspect of the poems, the visual images of which are often almost iconic, but

we should not overlook Mehrotra's tentative language and obvious hyperbole. Though he refers arrestingly to "the script of their images," it is clear that, as verbal forms, the images in the poems do not exist independently of words (*Absent*, x). Moreover, as the poem with which I began this chapter indicates, many require explication. Though the poem focuses on a silent gesture – a woman touching her mother-in-law's feet – it presupposes a significant amount of cultural knowledge, as the headnote to the version in Damrosch's *Longman Anthology* rightly points out. Besides knowing the Indian social code of "absolute deference" between daughter- and mother-in-law signified by the act of touching the feet, we need to be aware that "a woman separated from her husband is often depicted as wasting away for sorrow: her wrists will become thin, and her bangles – the symbol of marriage, rather like a wedding ring in the West – will slip from her hands" (938). This kind of knowledge does not, of course, help us interpret the older woman's tears, which, following the conventions of *dhvani* or suggestion, remain enigmatic, but it does suggest we should not take Mehrotra's claim about the almost spontaneous "communicability of the poems" at face value (*Absent*, x).

His second claim about translation is, if anything, more radically at odds with Damrosch's metaphors of "loss" and "gain." While all translations "edit, highlight, and compensate," he remarks, "great translations go a step further": "instead of compensating for losses, they shoot to kill, and having obliterated the original transmigrate its soul into another language" (*Absent*, xi). Confronted by the stock binaries that dominate debates about translation – faithfulness/betrayal, foreignization/indigenization, primary/secondary, loss/gain – Mehrotra simply sidesteps them. Although his own beguiling metaphor of transmigration draws on one of the tenets central to many Indian religions, he is quick to point out that he is not offering a peculiarly "Eastern" model of translation. Looking back to Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubayait of Omar Khayyam* and Ezra Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," he notes that both became "immortal English poems whose Oriental origins have ceased to matter" via similarly radical process of transmigration (*Absent*, xi). Indeed, citing Pound on the role of translation as a means of reviving the English literary tradition, he remarks that "during its periods of ill-health, these 'exotic injections' helped put English poetry back on its feet" (*Absent*, xi). Mehrotra describes his own translations as "more modest, less homicidal," but, as is clear from the following example, his practice is deadly enough.

Lives in main street,
 Attractive, young, her husband away,
 A light wench her neighbour, hard up too,
 And, unbelievably, still chaste (*Absent*, 4)

With its arch juxtaposition of the quaintly archaic and the menacingly lecherous Middle English word “wench” and the twentieth-century American colloquial phrase “main street,” the slangy “hard up” and the chivalrous Old French word “chaste,” this example, like many other Mehrotra translations, “shoots to kill.” Playing fast and loose with linguistic and literary history, it transmigrates the soul of a two-thousand-year-old Prakrit poem into a uniquely composite, specifically deracinated English idiom and a contemporary form that might best be described as a free-verse epigram-cum-personal-ad.

The Absent Traveller as a whole signals the importance of such unpredictable osmotic flows from the very outset. Between the contents page and the “Translator’s Note” we find two brief epigraphs: one from Pound’s *Confucian Analects*, the other from William Carlos Williams’s poem “Classic Picture.” While these link the collection to Euro-American modernist, perhaps specifically Imagist, projects of the 1920s, which, as the Pound reference indicates, are in turn linked to ancient Chinese philosophy, they also point to Mehrotra’s own affirmation of a poetics of perception, which privileges direct observation above knowledge. Translating section 6.XVIII.1 of the *Analects*, Pound has Confucius say: “Those who know aren’t up to those who love; nor those who love, to those who delight in.” Developing this critique of knowledge, “Classic Picture” in its final lines invites readers to “look more deeply into” the portrait of a woman, noting “her maneuvers,” which, “puzzle as we will about them . . . may mean/anything” (*Absent*, viii). As we have seen in the “Emperor Has No Clothes,” and the poem “January,” this drive to put concrete observation before abstract interpretation, the thing before ideas of the thing, is as important for Mehrotra as a poet and critic as it is for him as a poet-translator. What the epigraphs effectively construct, in other words, is an interplay not just of languages (English, classical Chinese, and Prakrit), but of literary and philosophical traditions, geographies, and histories. If they associate the ancient poetic practice of *dhvani* with the even more ancient traditions of Confucian philosophy, they also draw a line from the modernist poetics of Pound and Williams to Mehrotra’s own project of remaking his poetic ancestors and the English language in terms that are at once contemporary, extraterritorial, interlingual, and intercultural.

The evolution, and increasing radicalization, of Mehrotra's use of translation as a way of borrowing other voices to find his own is particularly evident in his response to Kabir. Compare, for instance, the following two versions of the poem identified as KG 85 in Parasnath Tiwari's *Kabir-granthavali* (1961), one of Mehrotra's key source texts (though he used many). The first appears in *Distance in Statute Miles* (1982):

The kings shall go, so will their pretty queens,
 The courtiers and the proud ones shall go.
 Pundits reciting the *Vedas* shall go,
 And go will those who listen to them.
 Masochist yogis and bright intellectuals shall go,
 Fathers and sons, nights and days shall go.
 Kabir says, only those shall remain
 Whose minds are tied to the rocks.¹⁷

The second comes from *Songs of Kabir* (2011):

To tonsured monks and dreadlocked Rastas
 To idol worshippers and idol smashers,
 To fasting Jains and feasting Shaivites,
 To Vedic Pundits and Faber poets,
 The weaver Kabir sends one message:
 The noose of death hangs over all.
 Only Rama's name can save you.
 Say it NOW. (*Kabir*, 25)

Many of the defining features of Kabir, which attracted Mehrotra in the first place, are there in both versions: the outspokenness, the direct mode of address, the defiance of all "religious orthodoxies and social hierarchies."¹⁸ The difference is that by 2011 Mehrotra was willing to introduce new elements of historical anachronism and intercultural play ("dreadlock Rastas," "Faber poets"), while simultaneously creating a more supple idiomatic English, freeing himself of the sonorous Yeatsian repetitions ("shall go") and stilted syntactic inversions ("And go will") of the first version.

His version of KG 60, also from *Songs of Kabir*, shows just how far he was prepared to take this. From the opening lines "Friend,/You had one life,/And you blew it" to the unconsoling "Crying won't help/When death already/Has you by the balls," it is evident that, for Mehrotra, Kabir was not a proto-Imagist of the 1920s, like the poet of the *Gāthāsaptasatī*, but an archetype of the counter-cultural American Beat poet of the 1960s

(Kabir, 78–79). This is Kabir as Ferlinghetti or Ginsberg – or, rather, as Mehrotra performing Ferlinghetti or Ginsberg. The *OED* identifies the phrase “blow it,” associated with squandering money or bungling more generally, as U.S. slang, dating from the end of the nineteenth century; “have you by the balls,” meaning “to have at one’s mercy or power,” also U.S. slang, dates from the early twentieth century.¹⁹ This last phrase also shows Mehrotra’s shoot-to-kill policy as a translator. The line in the Hindi source translates more literally as “Has you by the hair/top-knot.” He deliberately misread the final word, however, because “the Hindi word for hair/top-knot, *jhot*, is very close to the Hindi word for the short and curlies, *jhat*, which then became ‘balls.’”²⁰ These disruptive interplays at the linguistic level are augmented by the epigraphs, at the head of the poem, which juxtapose Kabir’s frank comments on the undeniable finality of death with comparable reflections from the second-century Roman emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius (“And what was yesterday a little mucus, tomorrow will be a mummy or ashes”) and from the fifth-century Sanskrit poet and linguist Bhartrihari (“Birth is scented with death”). As we have seen, this kind of historical and linguistic incorrectness goes to the heart of Mehrotra’s project as an anti-indigenizing poet-translator, although, as he comments in his introduction to *Songs of Kabir*, it is, in this case, also all of a piece what he calls the “open-ended Kabir corpus.” “A Kabir song recorded in Rajasthan in the mid-1990s,” he notes, “compares the body to an *anjan* (engine), the soul to a passenger, who, his *taim* (time) on earth being short, is advised not to lose his *tikat* (ticket)” (*Kabir*, xxxi). For the singer, this Hinglish idiom and deliberate anachronism was a testament to Kabir’s prophetic status as a seer; Mehrotra’s own, less metaphysical liberties, by contrast, wrest the English language from any proprietary native speaker or national community, while giving new life to the “Kabir corpus” in the global Anglosphere.

IV

By refusing to indigenize the written language and by fashioning an eclectic, multilingual literary heritage for himself, Mehrotra clearly challenged Parthasarathy’s poetics of authenticity and the larger debates about postcolonial literary cultures of which his nationalizing arguments form a familiar part. By figuring translation as transmigration and by disrupting historical and geographic frames of various kinds, he represents, as I have suggested, an equally compelling challenge to Damrosch’s idea of world literature. (His emphasis on the labyrinthine quality of the world’s literary

heritage and his interest in the osmotic flows between cultures and languages also put him at odds with the earlier ideas of world literature, associated with Tagore and Zhendou, which are based on sometimes rhapsodic affirmations of the universal. “To know the soul as confined to itself is to know it only in a depleted sense,” wrote Tagore in 1907: “My soul finds fulfilment in all humanity.”²¹ True, Mehrotra’s own collections of translations include scholarly commentaries, which frame his work in much the same historical and geographical terms as Damrosch’s *Longman Anthology*. While *The Absent Traveller* has an afterword by the American scholar Martha Ann Selby, *Songs of Kabir* has a preface by Wendy Doniger. Yet, as we have seen, they also invite us to see the poems as radically contemporary. Far from enabling the Prakrit or Hindi originals to “gain in translation” by traveling “abroad,” thereby securing their place in Damrosch’s canon, Mehrotra’s translations, like his oeuvre as a whole, re-make “world literature” on their own distinctive terms. In so doing, they oblige us to rethink the relatively empty idea of public space on which Damrosch’s model relies – which, as I have suggested, threatens the public force of literature.

To develop ways of reading equal to this challenge, I would argue we need to see Damrosch’s essentially geographical world of circulations as a more intricate Borgesian labyrinth of public spaces, which both contains and fails to contain the osmotic effects and contestatory force of Mehrotra’s writing. We need to understand how the boundaries of these spaces, which are at once intellectual, legal, political and geographical, have been created and transformed both in India and across the transnational Anglosphere in the past half century; to describe the network of small publishers (Ravi Dayal, NYRB Classics, etc.) and magazines (*damn you*, *Chandrabhāgā*, and others) that has shaped the increasingly multi-centered Republic of Anglophone Letters; and to analyze the complex ways in which this smaller literary world has intersected, for better or worse, with a series of larger legal and political domains, including, for instance, the democratic Indian state and the popular language movements that have played, and continue to play, such a significant part in its history. Such historical elaboration would not simply produce a more richly detailed background for Mehrotra’s project; it would enable us to trace a path through the labyrinth that made his version of world literature possible and, consequently, to equip ourselves to understand its effects. Once we have a better grasp of these contextual factors, the poems that the *Longman Anthology* encourages us to see as archaeological curiosities from the ancient world acquire a new edgy public life of their own. They appear not as mere translations, nor as inconsequential aesthetic experiments, but, like all Mehrotra’s writings, as specifically literary interventions

in a series of often acrimonious, sometimes violent, public debates about communal identity, ideas of culture, and the status of the English language in the world today.

Notes

1. David Damrosch, et al. eds. *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, 2nd edn. (London: Pearson Education, 2004), x–xi. All subsequent references in the text.
2. See David Damrosch, ed., *World Literature in Theory* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).
3. See, for example, Emily Apter, *Against World Literature* (London: Verso, 2013); Stefan Helgesson, “Postcolonialism and World Literature,” *Interventions* 16.4 (2014): 483–500; and Peter Hitchcock, *The Long Space* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
4. P. M. Bakshi, *The Constitution of India* (Delhi: Universal Law, 2009), 288–89.
5. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, “The Closing of the Bhasha Mind,” *Biblio: A Review of Books* 17 (2012b): 27–28.
6. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Partial Recall* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012a), 194. All subsequent references in the text.
7. See Rajagopal Parthasarathy, *Rough Passage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
8. Mehrotra, *Partial Recall*, 161; Parthasarathy, *Rough Passage*, 17.
9. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed. *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 103.
10. For Ramanujan’s own subtle reflections on this question, see A. K. Ramanujan, “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n. s. 23.1 (1989): 41–58. It is reprinted in Chaudhuri, ed., *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001), 419–37.
11. Thomas Bonfiglio, *Mother Tongues and Nations* (New York: de Gruyter, 2010), 8.
12. Parthasarathy, *Rough Passage*, 49.
13. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Collected Poems* (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2014), xv–xvi. All subsequent references in the text.
14. Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1823), 135.
15. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” (1943), in *World Literature in Theory*, ed. Damrosch (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 397.
16. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *The Absent Traveller* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1991), x. All subsequent reference in the text.
17. Mehrotra, *Collected Poems*, 113.
18. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Songs of Kabir* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2011), xxi.

19. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), www.oed.com/, accessed June 30, 2014.
20. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, personal communication, May 29, 2014.
21. Rabindranath Tagore, "World Literature" (1907), in *World Literature in Theory*, ed. Damrosch (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 29.

*Arun Kolatkar: A Singular Poetry
in Two Languages*

Rajeev Patke

Arun Kolatkar has a singular poetic voice which finds expression in two languages: English and Marathi. All his work has the consistency of an antinomial sensibility: sporadic in print yet prolific in output, casual in manner yet serious in intent, demotic in register yet abstruse in reference, radical in temper yet immersed in tradition. The author was of a piece with his work: genteel in upbringing but subaltern in affiliation, shy in public but bold in practice, a professional publicist but a vocational hermit, urban in habit but solitary by disposition, reticent in company but gregarious among books, indifferent to possessions but caring for the dispossessed.

Kolatkar was a small-town boy who made it good in the big city: from provincial Kolhapur in the south of Maharashtra to the polyglot urban bustle of the metropolis that he knew for most of his active life as Bombay (renamed Mumbai in 1995). He was born in 1931, the eldest of several siblings in a large Hindu Brahmin joint family. His father worked in education. The language spoken at home and around him was Marathi. English would have been taught at school, along with some Sanskrit. Three traits were evident from early youth: an interest in the graphic arts, a passion for eclectic reading, and the temperament of an autodidact who did not take well to authority. This last trait brought him to the J. J. School of Art in Bombay in 1949, against his father's wishes; it also led to an impetuous marriage in 1954.¹

The determination to study art was interrupted during periods in which the would-be artist traveled restlessly from place to place within Maharashtra. A two-month walking-trip undertaken in 1953, in the company of a friend from art school, led to some misadventures and the earliest poems in English to have survived into print. A second trip proved more fruitful. In December 1964, he visited the village shrine of Jejuri near Pune, accompanied by his brother Makarand, and a friend, Manohar Oak, and wrote a few poems in English soon after the trip, of which all except one were lost; the trip also led, a decade later, to the poems of *Jejuri*.²

During the 1950s and 1960s, Kolatkar lived on the avant-garde fringe of the arts community in Bombay. His first publications in Marathi and in English appeared in little magazines in 1955.³ The life of a would-be artist proved stressful. From 1959, a career in advertising provided a livelihood at which the poet made good. The writing continued apace, but the marriage broke down in 1969; he remarried a year later. From the 1970s, career and vocation settled into a routine of hard work at the office, self-study, friendships, reading, and music: Indian bhajans and kirtans, as well as Western pop, jazz, and blues. This was the time of the hippies, Ginsberg, and the Beat poets. It was also a time during which the first generation of Marathi modernists – B. S. Mardhekar, P. S. Rege, and others – consolidated the assimilation of Western High Modernism into their poetry.⁴ It was also a time for cheap paperbacks, for breaking free from high canonicity, for pop music, and for the world's poetry in translation. And it was a time when the private circulation of one's work among friends was more satisfying than using mainstream publishers. Kolatkar retained the predilections of those decades for the rest of his life.

The interest in pop music led to the study of the guitar. He also tried his hand at composing and recording music. The musician with whom he studied the pakhawaj for a decade, Arjun Sejwal, introduced him in 1974 to the colorful octogenarian whom we encounter in the later poetry and prose as Balwant-bua: the singer of bhajans, raconteur, and the exemplar of some very Rabelaisian attributes. Long after the guitar and the pakhawaj had been laid aside, from 1974 and through the early 1980s, the old man used to perform bhajans and tell stories once a week at the Colaba apartment in South Bombay where Kolatkar lived from 1970 to 1980, and later at Kolatkar's one-room flat at Prabhadevi, where he moved in 1981. The poems of at least one volume, *Chirimiri*, would not have been written but for his anecdotes; a prose manuscript in English inspired by his experiences awaits publication.

Kolatkar's routine from the 1970s onwards involved the habit of frequenting a roadside café in Colaba, Wayside Inn, in which he often spent afternoons, mostly by himself, sometimes in the company of friends, once a week. A natural affinity for what Baudelaire in mid-nineteenth-century Paris and the peripatetic Walter Benjamin in 1930s Europe described as "flânerie," adapted for a metropolis such as Bombay, became a characteristic part of his life. Wayside Inn closed down in 2002, and an alternative café was frequented for a while, but the flânerie came to an end shortly thereafter as the effects of a terminal cancer set in. Kolatkar died in Pune, in his brother's family home, on September 25, 2004. The death was preceded

and followed by a spate of books brought into print with the help of friends.

Publication History

As of 2014, Kolatkar's publications total twelve books: six in Marathi, and six in English; of these, seven were published in his lifetime: four in Marathi and three in English. All his poetry in English can be accessed in the *Collected Poems in English* (2010), edited and annotated with meticulous care by his friend and fellow-poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. His first book, *Jejuri*, was begun after his visit to the village shrine in December 1964, and reworked in 1973–74. It was first published in a magazine, *Opinion Literature Quarterly*, edited by Kersy Katrak and Gauri Deshpande, in 1974, and appeared in book form from Clearing House, which was set up in 1976, to publish volumes of poetry by Adil Jussawalla, Mehrotra, Kolatkar, and Gieve Patel, with covers designed by Kolatkar. Meanwhile, a close friend, Ashok Shahane, set up a press, Pras Prakashan, for the purpose of publishing Kolatkar's poems in Marathi: *Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita* (*Arun Kolatkar's Poems*, 1977). In the following decades Shahane became the publisher of all his subsequent books, preserved the manuscripts, and has ensured that all the titles remain in print.

The work from 1977 onwards was not collected in book form until 2003 – a gap of twenty-six years. Three books in Marathi were published in 2003: *Chirimiri* (*Minor Bribes*), *Droan* (*Leaf-Cups*), and *Bhijki Vahi* (*Drenched Notebook*). Two books in English followed in 2004: *Kala Ghoda Poems*, and *Sarpa Satra* (*Serpent Sacrifice*). The latter consists of English versions of the penultimate section of the Marathi *Bhijki Vahi*. These books from 2003 to 2004 were followed posthumously by five more books: *Arun Kolatkarchya Chaar Kavita* (*Four Poems by Arun Kolatkar*, 2006) in Marathi, *The Policeman* (2005), *The Boatride and Other Poems* (2009), *Collected Poems in English* (2010), and a Marathi version of *Jejuri* (2011), edited by Shahane. Mehrotra reports that a novel in English and a collection of interviews await publication.

Some Bean-Counting

Kolatkar's reputation is still largely based on his first two books, although he wrote a lot more in the second half of his career. The work in Marathi adds up to almost five times the size of the published work in English. The total body of his published poetry in English covers three hundred pages in

Mehrotra's edition.⁵ Poems written first in English amount to about half of Mehrotra's edition; the self-translations and the translations from other poets account for the other half. The proportion of original work in English to self-translations to translations is roughly 5:2:1. The work in English from the later years comprises one book of original poems (*Kala Ghoda Poems*: 107 pages in the *Collected Poems*) and a book of translations from his Marathi (*Sarpa Satra*: 30 pages in the *Collected Poems*). In comparison to these 137 pages in English, the published Marathi work of the last thirty years amounts to approximately 650 pages.⁶

The contrast between the size of the output in English and Marathi is not an issue of mere quantity, though what the numbers do tell us is that from the late 1970s to the early 2000s – a period of more than thirty years – Marathi was the language of choice for the bulk of his writing. In the event, quantity was accompanied by greater variety: there are more variations of tone, theme, and register to the work in Marathi. Kolatkar's English is a synthesis of the language of comic books and American pop music, of thrillers and movies, and it is overlaid or underpinned by how English was adapted in post-Independence Bombay by a middle-class population for whom it offered a pragmatic variety of basic cosmopolitanism. It is fast-paced, matter-of-fact, and easy-going, and it can be racy and pungent when needed. It has nothing bookish about it, though its word-choice and allusions can accommodate a wide range within its contemporary register.

The Marathi, in contrast, is able to draw upon a colloquial as well as a bookish register. It plays all conceivable changes on word-choice: from arcane to vulgar, from learned to countrified, from formal to fustian to street-smart to playful and weird. Kolatkar's work thrives on word-play in English and in Marathi, but he can access more options in Marathi: a greater variety of rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, neologisms, and other effects that can only be described as ersatz kitsch. In both languages, a three-line free verse stanza is often preferred, but Marathi provides a feature for which there is no equivalent in his English. Class and caste distinctions are routinely reflected in the spoken forms of Marathi between Brahmin and non-Brahmin, urban and rural, or metropolitan and provincial speakers. At key moments, some of the monkeys in *Droan* (2003) speak like peasants, whereas the character of Sita speaks to them in chaste city-Marathi. In this riff on *The Ramayana*, the poet shifts attention from Rama and Laxmana to the monkeys' desire to emulate human beings, with Sita as their guide and patroness. The contrast in registers is immediately noticeable as a comic but sharp comment on class and caste distinctions corresponding to the hierarchy that separates

humans from monkeys in *The Ramayana*. There is somewhat less scope for such nuances in the register of Kolatkar's English, which does have its own differentiations, but which are confined to tone and genre rather than a correlation between speech habits and social distinctions.

The books in Marathi differ among themselves in style and register. *Chirimiri* captures the voice and personality of the aforementioned Balwant-bua. *Bhijki Vahi* underscores the note of pathos in its dramatization of women's stories: the victims of dispossession, oppression, abandonment, hurt, humiliation, and loss, whose voices are retrieved from many cultures and historical periods. This is where the vast and eclectic reading he did all his life paid rich dividends. This is where he gave voice to an anguish inflected with compassion at one end and implied anger at the other.

A Singular Poetry in Two Languages

The attempt to distinguish between Kolatkar's work in Marathi and in English is essential to any appreciation of his poetry in English, which would be incomplete without the claim that his writing constitutes a type of creativity which transcends the languages he used. This may sound paradoxical, since we generally think of poetry as precisely that which is lost in translation. Yet the example of music shows how the same melody can find expression through several instruments, or lend itself to transposition from one instrument to another, without losing its musical identity.

Others in Maharashtra wrote in Marathi and English before Kolatkar: for example, B. S. Mardhekar; and, before that, as Kolatkar notes, Ram Joshi in the nineteenth century and Eknath in the sixteenth century wrote in two languages (CP 346). The difference in Kolatkar's case is not simply that he wrote equally comfortably in Marathi and English, but that this potential was concurrent: which language a poem got written in was almost incidental in the sense that it could be written in either. Generally, the differences between the two versions of the same poem are not too great. Differentiation became necessary when an allusion, joke, idiom, or word-play that works well in one language has to be modified to create a parallel effect in the other language.

Ironically, when Kolatkar sticks closely to the details of one language in the other, as in his translation of "Takta" (*Arun Kolatkar's Kavita*, 146–47) into "Pictures from a Marathi Alphabet Chart" (CP 259), the result is less satisfying than a translation by Vinay Dharwadker (1994), which respects the spirit but not the letter of the original.⁷ Kolatkar's Marathi at

its best also shows how translation comes up with a limit to how much of the sound-world of the source language, and its scope for cultural allusions, can be recreated in the target language. The inimitable aspects of the linguistic pyrotechnics in “Aag” (*Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita*, 84–88), for example, prove insurmountable in the valiantly inadequate translation, “Fire,” by Dilip Chitre and Mick Fedullo.⁸

It would appear from the jottings titled “Making love to a Poem” (*CP* 345), that Kolatkar was self-aware yet unselfconscious in deciding whether a poem would be written in Marathi, English, or in the Bombay argot of Marathi and Bombay-Hindi which he ventriloquized so effectively both in the Marathi “Irani” (*Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita*, 56–57) and its English counterpart “Irani Restaurant Bombay” (*CP* 224) or “Mai manager ko bola” (*Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita*, 72) and “Three Cups of Tea” (*CP* 234–35). There seems to have been no issue of linguistic schizophrenia. Instead, Kolatkar aligns his alienation from Brahminism and his sense of personal vocation with folk poetry, the Bhakti tradition (*CP* 346), and the idea that a poet could practice deliberate estrangement (between self and society, between a language and its community of speakers), as when he cites the observation that Paul Celan submitted the German language “to so intense a reduction,” that he wrote it, in effect, “like a foreign language” (*CP* 346).

Kolatkar’s poetry may be described as the work of an ironist with a compassionate vision of life. Its habitual manner is oblique, as if to make you think that he was only half as serious as he meant to be, even though it undertakes the serious task of mediation between cultures and between time zones. It brings a sharply observed world of the contemporary into continual conversation with the past. The nature of this past, as evoked in poem after poem, is never personal. It is our stake in general humanity that the poet is after. And his evocations of the past make it seem as if every event, circumstance, voice, or predicament that he retrieves from a host of cultures and time zones is like a person asking us to return a gaze, so that the acceptance of what is thus proffered enacts a binding complicity between us and that which the poet mediates. This is more readily apparent when we read his work in English together with his work in Marathi.

The Poetry in English: Early Work

Kolatkar’s poems in English can be discussed in terms of five groups: (1) the early work (of the 1950s and 1960s), (2) *Jejuri* (written during late 1973–early 1974), (3) the *Kala Ghoda Poems* (written in the 1980s and ’90s), (4) the self-translations from Marathi (*Sarpa Satra* and other self-translations), and (5)

his translations from the Marathi Bhakti poets. The early work in English as well as Marathi is mannered and derivative: it shows a poet in search of a voice, who seems intent on density of expression, even when it leads to obscurity. The shift to a more relaxed tone and a colloquial idiom is evident in “Irani Restaurant Bombay” (*CP* 224), which is even more breezily surreal in English than in Marathi, and adopts a whimsical manner that is equally amusing in either language: “the loafer, affecting the exactitude of a pedagogue” (*CP* 224). Kolatkar shows himself to be more comfortable when not talking about himself, in the inflections he can give to what he observes.⁹

The most ambitious early work in English is the seven-page poem “the boatripe” (*CP* 329–35). The bare short lines show the advantage of a clarified syntax that needs little or no punctuation and can navigate the reading eye down its line breaks through an impressionist haze of simplified narrative to the adroitness of:

. . . the seagull
 who invents
 on the spur of the air
 what is clearly the whitest inflection
 known (*CP* 330)

The play on words and the delight with language is neatly sustained: “a swagger to a ketch” (*CP* 331). It is in such poetry that the inimitability of what his English can do is most clearly evident. Zany humor slips in, as when the only thing a young wife notices of her husband is “a hair in his right nostril” (*CP* 333). Lines such as “honoured among boots/ chappals and bare feet” (*CP* 333) has one wondering if an echo of Dylan Thomas is being registered, half in parody, with the rapt manner of the Welsh “Fern Hill” transposed to a setting that is both urban and urbane.¹⁰ The imagery is minimal but evocative, and lines such as the following make us perceive how the would-be painter now reappears as a poet:

sad as a century
 the gateway of india
 struggles to its feet
 wobbly but sober enough
 to account for itself (*CP* 334)

The Poetry in English: *Jejuri* (1976)

Jejuri is a modern classic. Its casual tone, ease of deportment, directness of address, dry humor, and easy mix of sardonicism and celebration combine

to create an effect that was startling for its time and remains unique to this day. Did the poet who acceded to every ritual proffered by temple priest and tout practice a form of self-decontamination here? Or did he proffer nostalgia in place of faith, along with an elegy for gods lost without their disciples, for rituals emptied of sense, for myths now fled which had animated stones and hillsides once? The complexity of the sequence is neatly balanced with its apparent lucidity.

We go by bus with the poet to a shrine where devotees now come in the guise of city tourists. We observe dereliction and ruin, abandonment and emptiness. We meet a beggar who dismantles our charity as devastatingly as she ruptures our guilt:

She won't let you go.

...

You look right at the sky.
Clear through the bullet holes
she has for her eyes.

And as you look on
the cracks that begin around her eyes
spread beyond her skin.

And the hills crack.
And the temples crack.
And the sky falls

...

And you are reduced
to so much small change
in her hand.

(CP 50)

We also meet the stones that once had been spat out as gods. We think of the stories that gave the shepherd folk their legends. We think of what we might worship instead: a butterfly. And we return home by train, bemused, amused, and musing. What was all that about? The sequence allows us to be serious without having to shed our sense of humor. Where have the gods now gone who accepted with gratitude the worship they received from our ancestors? Might we manage well enough without them, armed with our modern disbelief? What a bizarre thing religion looks like, from the wrong end of the telescope, except when all that diminution makes us wonder if that which once gave succor, fulfilled needs, and shaped commonality, is more plausible as loss or good riddance.

The sequence was written first in English. The poet worked, off and on, to create an equivalent set in Marathi, which remained incomplete and was

published posthumously. The Marathi volume gives bilingual readers a unique opportunity to see how the work of transposition proceeds. Here are the final two stanzas of the English poem “The Cupboard”:

you see a hand of gold
behind opinion
stiff with starch

as one would expect
there is naturally
a lock upon the door

(CP 63)

The Marathi version ends thus (in my translation):

bending to look out
from peeling editorials
energy ads

stiffened with paste
behind the editorial opinions
here and there, hands made of gold

(*Jejuri* 2011, 41)

The same poem met another day, in another language, and hence not quite the same poem, though a recognizable kin to its other.

The Poetry in English: *Kala Ghoda Poems* (2004)

Kala Ghoda Poems subsidizes a poetics of the urban through a series of portraits of the city underdog as the unsung hero of the modern metropolis. *Jejuri* took the poet to the countryside once presided over by Khandoba. Here, he gazes at the city tramps, waifs, peddlers, potato-peelers, and street-denizens who constitute the life of the ordinary and the down-and-out in his corner of South Bombay. The volume is a celebration of the marginal, the seemingly insignificant, and the apparently neglected. These are people impoverished in circumstance but not in the intentness with which they live life. Everyone and everything in this assemblage is oblivious to the observing poet’s gaze: crows, street-sweepers, and people who deal in garbage and rubbish. The city too is part of the dramatic cast. Its streets and shops and monuments serve as metonymies of its history, such as the black horse of the title, part of an equestrian statue of King Edward VII that used to provide Colaba with one of its colonial landmarks. The poet is keen to share with us his sense of why the ordinary lives, persons, and objects that he celebrates matter so much:

At this city that gets
 more and more unrecognisable
 with every passing year.

...

A cement-eating, blood-guzzling city
 pissing silver, shitting gold
 and choking on its vomit

(CP 173)

The daily routines of life around the streets of South Bombay are presented with a kind of inverted snobbery. We see the city from a dog's-eye point of view. In surreal mode, the narrative of a dog sprawled in a parking island merges with an invocation of other dogs that have populated the city in its British colonial past, and a dog from an even more distant, mythical past, from *The Mahabharata*, who had to be given access to Heaven, at the insistence of the last surviving Pandava, Yudhishtira, before he would agree to enter Heaven himself. Rubbish, a woman bathing, an old abandoned bicycle-tire: such entities become part of this unusual hymn to ordinariness. The volume also shows how the poetics of someone such as William Carlos Williams, who recognized that a lot depended on a mere red wheelbarrow glazed by rain and expressed simple gratitude for cherries in an ice-box, could be assimilated into an Indian habitation. The risk taken on by the book is that of empathy turning to sentimentality. To find redemptive strength where one might least expect it is the robust power of the book; to do so with a humor that is never blind to the actual poverty of the marginalized and the ordinary is its special charm. The book should leave one wondering: if beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, what sticks in our eyes of the cities we live in?

The Poetry in English: *Sarpa Satra* (2004) and Other Translations

Sarpa Satra (2004) is a narrative divided into three unequal parts, each a dramatic monologue by a character in Indian legend, written in Kolatkar's characteristic three-line free verse stanza, with lines of varying but generally short length, and the sense moving across line breaks in a style common to much modern free verse. The vocabulary and style is colloquial, as in all of Kolatkar's work in English, but the tone is different from what we hear in *Jejuri* or *Kala Ghoda Poems*: it is devoid of humor. What little irony we find here is deployed along the spectrum from dry to reproachful to bitter to indignant. That is because of the nature of the materials the poet takes up, and the attitude he brings to them. This is easier to pick up for the reader in

Marathi, since the section comes at the end of a long series of tragic narratives in *Bhijki Vahi*.

Sarpa Satra is unusual in a number of other respects. The characters could be said to be marginal to the main narrative of *The Mahabharata*.¹¹ The death by snakebite of Arjuna's grandson, King Parikshit, motivated his son, King Janamajeya, to perform a ritual that would destroy the serpent race. The narrative touches upon a convoluted genealogy of revenge that starts with the fire god Agni, whose desire to eat up the forest of Khandava is thwarted by the god Indra, because it is the home of his friend Takshaka, King of the Nagas. The myth, as Kolatkar sees it, deals with a sanctioned genocide. His poem constitutes a sustained critique of the epic, directed as much at its revered author Vyasa as its heroes Arjuna and Krishna, since it is the poet's artifice that glorifies the destruction they cause. Kolatkar's intention, we infer, is to question the authority of a narrative that has since become foundational to the religious and moral outlook of Hinduism through the ages.

Krishna and Arjuna exult in actions that the poet would have us recognize were irresponsible and cruel. Gifted with divine weapons, and for no reason except the desire to help Agni, they destroy the entire forest – “God's own laboratory on earth” (*CP* 196) – and all its inhabitants, from bees and ants and bears and deer and swans to men, women, and children. The poem is a lament on the destruction of the Khandava forest; more broadly speaking, it is a critique of human indifference to the natural environment. It questions the arrogance with which the human species has decimated other species in its assertion of mastery over nature, and as a mode of self-preservation or self-assertion. By implication, *The Mahabharata* need not be read as a narrative of heroic endeavor but as the glorification of a nasty family-feud that laid waste everything it touched.

Kolatkar's volumes in English differ from one another in tone, but they are held together by a consistent set of values. *Jejuri* and the *Kala Ghoda Poems* are relaxed in manner: the former gives greater scope to irony, the latter to the warmth of affirmation, but both maintain an emotional distance from what they observe. *Sarpa Satra* is unlike either of these volumes. In both versions, the poet is too upset to keep a distance between himself and his materials. His anger is preceded in the Marathi *Bhijki Vahi* by a sustained evocation of pathos: the poetic notebook is wet with the tears of a grief that would dissolve all writing if it could but teach compassion to humanity.

Kolatkar's *Droan* (“Leaf-cups”) reverts to the spectrum of serious irony in its oblique perspective on *The Ramayana*. It is a narrative in which

monkeys seek to emulate humans. The moebius-strip of a tale turns upon itself on a mischievously speculative note: what if the monkeys that play a seemingly subsidiary role in Rama's recovery of Sita had a narrative all to themselves, which allowed the poet to re-present *The Ramayana* in a deliberately skewed light? *Droan* continues the guerrilla-attack on the Indian epic tradition launched by *Sarpa Satra*, but in a lighter vein, and with a deft use of ambiguities. We lack an equivalent to the work in Kolatkar's English.

Kolatkar's translations from the Bhakti poets attempt to retrieve a devotional impulse that bypasses Brahminism and aligns medieval Bhakti with contemporary subalternity. They are fascinating for the transposition of qualities of cheekiness and forthrightness from the medieval and seventeenth-century Marathi of the Bhakti poets into a lively contemporary English idiom. Ashok Kelkar (1994) notes that the translations of Kolatkar (and Dilip Chitre) show more interest in the dramatic and dialogic aspects of the Bhakti inheritance than in their song-like attributes, which have made them the common property of the Varkari tradition of oral recitation in Maharashtra for several hundred years. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra observes, in a similar vein, that "we read Kolatkar's Janabai – 'god my darling' and 'i eat god' – to read Kolatkar, not Janabai."¹²

Reception and Significance

Kolatkar's publications stimulated curiosity, stirred controversy, and gained public recognition whenever they were published, though he and his friends liked to believe that his was a coterie reputation. The English *Jejuri* won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1977. The work in Marathi won the Kusumagraj Puraskar given by the Marathwada Sahitya Parishad in 1991, the Bahinabai Puraskar given by the Bahinabai Prathistan in 1995, and a Sahitya Akademi award for *Bhijki Vahi* in 2004. He also won an advertising award – the CAG (Communication Arts Guild) award – six times, and was inducted into their Hall of Fame. Kolatkar's "Black Poems" in Marathi were translated into German by Günther Sontheimer in 1978; *Jejuri* was translated into German by Giovanni Bandini in 1984; and a translation of *Kala Ghoda Poems* into French appeared from Laetitia Zecchini in 2013. Amit Chadhuri and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra have been eloquent and indefatigable in creating awareness that Kolatkar might represent a more viable role-model for the future of writing in India than the fraught work of Salman Rushdie. Within Maharashtra, for readers of Marathi not affected by the success of the English *Jejuri*,

Kolatkár has been seen for a long time as an avant-garde experimentalist, whose radicalism differs from the more effete or Eliotesque high modernism of the preceding generation almost as much as it differs from the far more politicized and pungent linguistic violence practiced by poets with Dalit affiliations, such as Namdeo Dhasal.

Skepticism about Kolatkár's work stems not only from the Maharashtrian bourgeoisie, but also from those, such as the distinguished Marathi novelist Bhalchandra Nemade, who promote the nativist argument that nobody can hope to accomplish much in a language not their own. Such criticism is not impressed by the occurrence of Conrad or Beckett. Even W. B. Yeats advised his Indian friends not to write in English. The counter to that argument has been around at least since the preface to *Kanthapura* (1938), in which the novelist Raja Rao declared: "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own."¹³ Kolatkár follows that logic: he uses whatever is at hand and domesticates it. But there is more to it than that: English reaches a wider audience. There is more to it than even that: English is an antidote to provincialism and narrow-mindedness; it is the language of translation and access to the world's literary cultures; it is the language of the most directly appealing lyrics in popular music. It is what we read in Raymond Chandler and Graham Greene. It is a global Esperanto. It is also the biggest window from which to access the lives and thought-experiences of other times and cultures. And if it is a language of empowerment and homogenization, which has killed more languages than any other imperial language, at least Kolatkár shows a way for our plurality of tongues not to become predatory.

His readers now face a twofold challenge and opportunity. The Marathi readership has to begin the task of annotation and assimilation without which the poignancy and power of *Bhijki Vahi* – his most ambitious work in either language – cannot be appreciated. The reader in English, if she won't learn Marathi, has to make room for the awareness that there is more to Kolatkár than the skepticism of the English *Jejuri* or the good cheer of the *Kala Ghoda Poems*, or the anger of *Sarpa Satra*, or the liveliness of his versions of Bhakti poetry. There is *Bhijki Vahi*, and there is *Droan*. The two readerships need to join forces in making sense of how and why Kolatkár battled so long with the Indian epics, against the grain of the culture that made him, so that our humanity could rest on a broader footing. Kolatkár would have appreciated the irony that if he was tardy in publishing, his readers might end up being just as slow in catching up with all that he had been up to for such a long time.

Notes

1. All biographical information is based on the annotations in Arun Kolatkar, *Collected Poems in English*, ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2010), supplemented by Dilip Chitre, "Remembering Arun Kolatkar" (September 25, 2005): http://kolhatkar.org/other_writings/Tribute%20to%20Arun.htm. Accessed May 1, 2014. Page references to Kolatkar's work in English refer to page numbers in Mehrotra's edition, and are preceded by the abbreviation *CP*.
2. Dilip Chitre's video documentary on Kolatkar (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2010) features a curious revelation from Kolatkar's brother Makarand. To his surprise, Arun insisted on participating in every ritual proffered by the temple priests and touts, rituals that evinced no interest from most visitors, including Makarand and Manohar.
3. Two books will be indispensable for all readers of Kolatkar: Laetitia Zecchini (2014) and Anjali Nerlekar (2016). Each gives a detailed scholarly account of his cultural and aesthetic milieu. Nerkelar also covers the Marathi. I am grateful to both scholars for help in this essay, as to Arvind Krishna Mehrotra.
4. Philip Engblom, "Reading *Jejuri* and *Aruna Kolatkarchya Kavita* in Tandem," *New Quest* 146 (Oct.–Dec. 2001): 389–409, provides an insightful reading of Kolatkar's work in Marathi and English, and its relation to Marathi writing of the period.
5. Using *Collected Poems in English* as the source, the work written first in English can be counted as follows: pages 42–182, 276–294, and 329–335; self-translations: pages 186–214, several poems from "Poems in English 1953–1967", and 233–274; translations: pages 297–326. The work in Marathi comprises six books (the first five comprise original work, the sixth is self-translations): the first covers the first quarter-century of Kolatkar's career (early 1950s to 1977), the other five represent work from the second quarter-century of his career (the late 1970s to the early 2000s). If the Marathi work is collected in a single volume, the total number of pages will work out to less than the sum of the current pages from separate volumes. The current total is approximately 740 pages of original work (and 44 pages of self-translations from English to Marathi) in Marathi, compared to 150 pages of work originally in English. The breakdown for the work in Marathi: *Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita*: 134; *Chirimiri*: 9; *Droan*: 77; *Bhijki Vahi*: 378; *Arun Kolatkarchya Chaar Kavita*: 62; Marathi *Jejuri*: 44. Dharwadker (2013) gives a count of 714 pages in Marathi and 304 pages in English.
6. The percentages might well change if everything he wrote in English that has survived were to be published.
7. See Rajeev S. Patke, *Postcolonial Poetry in English* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 158–63 for a comparison.
8. "Fire," translated by Dilip Chitre and Mick Fedullo, in *Bombay, Meri Jaan: Writings on Mumbai*, ed. Jerry Pinto and Naresh Fernandes (New Delhi: Penguin, 2003), 245–47.

9. Bruce King titles his 2014 survey of Kolatkar “The Art of Seeing.” The orientation becomes more viable once we recognize that the art of seeing is the art of refraction, not reflection. The poem is a translucency, never a transparency.
10. “Fern Hill” by Dylan Thomas begins:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
 About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
 The night above the dingle starry,
 Time let me hail and climb
 Golden in the heydays of his eyes . . .

Collected Poems (London: J. M. Dent, 1952), 159. Kolatkar’s transposition to Bombay, with its humbler footwear and bare feet, retains the tone but adds an element of irony that distances it from the rapturous tone of the Dylan Thomas poem.

11. *The Mahabharata, Vol. 2 (Sections 16–32)*, trans. Bibek Debroy (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010), 39–85. The relevant part of the text is Book 1, Adi Parva, 214–25 (Khandava-daha Parva).
12. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, “Translating the Indian past: The poets’ experience,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (May 29, 2014): 11, doi: 10.1177/0021989414533690.
13. Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* [1938] (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1970), 5.

Imagery and Imagination in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra

Ashok Bery

I

Jayanta Mahapatra's poetic trajectory has been an unusual one. A college teacher of physics throughout his working life, he came to poetry late (as he was approaching forty), and in a state of isolation that was both cultural and geographic. He had, he says, read no modern poetry when he started out, and indeed little poetry at all beyond the "few poems of Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth that had been incorporated into our school literature texts."¹ He has been based for his entire career in his home town of Cuttack, Orissa, away from the major national and regional cultural centers of Indian life, although increasing publication abroad, particularly in the United States, brought with it opportunities for travel, residencies, and fellowships, including a stint at the International Writing Program in the University of Iowa. The late start has not prevented him from becoming the most prolific and perhaps most written-about of all the post-Independence Indian poets in English. Since his first book, *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten*, appeared in 1971, there has been a steady flow of poems (sixteen volumes in English), as well as short stories, essays, and translations from the Oriya.² He also established and edited the well-regarded journal *Chandrabhaga*. The sheer energy, determination, and commitment required to carve a literary career out of his unpromising beginnings are remarkable.

Mahapatra has described his childhood as circumscribed and constricted.³ He was born into a lower-middle-class Christian family in 1928. His father, with whom he got on well, was a sub-inspector of primary schools, and was often away on work; his relationship with his mother, on the other hand, was strained and difficult – in part, Mahapatra seems to suggest, because of her rigidly dualistic morality: "Right and wrong, good and evil – she filed these thoughts, all acts, into two closed drawers of her life" ("JM," 139). The

world outside the house was also oppressive. Cuttack, then virtually a village, says Mahapatra, was a squalid, poverty-stricken environment:

This was Orissa then: the poverty of huts and hovels sunk into the red earth of squalid side lanes, and the bare needs of our people. The wild growth of vegetation around us, and the misery and disease. The beggars apparently everywhere: the crippled and the blind; miserable wretches with their fearful whines and epileptic fits; young girls and boys with eyes gouged out by the scourge of pox; and the ever-present lepers. . . All this was something, I realized then, from which there could be no escape. For there seemed to be no remedy for these people; they had to suffer their torn, maimed lives in apathetic silence. ("JM," 138)

This oppressive, claustrophobic Orissa, with its death, disease, decay, lepers, beggars, and poverty, pervades Mahapatra's work. A poem from the early 1980s, "The Lost Children of America" (*LD*, 30–34), is characteristic, taking us through "the dusty malarial lanes/of Cuttack," observing "river banks splattered with excreta and dung," "hard-eyed young whores," a "squint-eyed fourteen-year fishergirl" raped by a priest's son and then "over and over again by four policemen." Similarly grim figures and settings haunt his most recent book, *Land* (2013), with its references to such details as a girl lying "mutilated and dead" in a paddy field, to "the decomposing bodies of a young couple/on the hill slope behind the temple," to "half-starved mongrels" barking at the gate, to crumbling temples and murdered tribal youths, to a woman moving "from one night of rape to another."⁴

The family's Christianity went back only two generations. During a famine which ravaged Orissa in 1866, when "corpses by the hundreds were literally strewn on the riverbeds to be devoured by equally starving jackals and vultures," his grandfather, Chintamani, "then a mere seventeen, starving and in a state of collapse, staggered into a mercy camp run by white Christian missionaries in Cuttack, where he embraced a new religion urged by the Baptists" ("JM," 141). A number of poems from various stages of his career commemorate this incident, the most recent being "The Birthpains of Grief" in *Land*. Better known is the earlier "Grandfather" (*LD*, 23–24), which records its lasting impact on Mahapatra ("Now I stumble in your black-paged wake"). Physical survival, the poem suggests, came at the price of being cut off from an ancestral culture and community: "The separate life let you survive, while perhaps/the one you left wept in the blur of your heart." This sense of division seems to have marked Mahapatra's own sensibility. He describes his own childhood as one lived in tension between two worlds:

The first was the home where we were subjected to a rigid Christian upbringing, with rules my mother sternly imposed; the other was the vast and dominant Hindu amphitheatre outside, with the preponderance of rites and festivals which represented the way of life of our own people. Two worlds then; and I, thinking I was at the centre of it all; trying to communicate with both, and probably becoming myself incommunicable as a result through the years. ("JM," 142)

While his brother remained a faithful Christian, Mahapatra adds, he himself did not. Of the two worlds of his childhood, it is the "Hindu amphitheatre," the world of Orissan Hinduism, which has imprinted itself more strongly on the imaginative geography of his poetry. The pilgrimage town of Puri, with its eleventh-century Jagannath temple and its annual Rath Yatras (processions of giant chariots), is a constant presence in his poetry, as is the temple at Konarka dedicated to the Sun God Surya. Despite its importance for him, however, Mahapatra's relationship with the Hindu world is marked by the sense of conflict and isolation which comes from the family history, and by his own sense of a deprived and marginalized upbringing. He remains on the outside.

II

Mahapatra's sprawling body of poetry constitutes a paradox: it is at once both broad and narrow, enormously ambitious and yet restricted. His themes are undeniably significant ones, and his historical, social, and cultural range is extensive. The book-length poem *Relationship*, for instance, uses the Konarka Sun Temple as a starting point from which to explore the culture and history of Orissa. Another long poem, *Temple*, is concerned with the plight of the Indian woman, as embodied in an old woman named Chelammal, whose suicide Mahapatra read about in the newspapers. The Emperor Aśoka and the Kalinga massacre in Orissa (the event which is said to have brought about Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism) figure repeatedly in his work.⁵ Mahapatra's sensibility is highly attuned to the social, economic, and cultural evils of modern Indian life – whether in the form of specific events such as the Bhopal gas tragedy in 1984 or the terrorism of the 1980s (which are the subjects of sequences in the collection *Dispossessed Nests*), or in more pervasive day-to-day phenomena such as poverty, disease, and violence against the impoverished and marginalized – women in particular.⁶

Despite the undoubted scope and seriousness of his subjects and themes, however, there is a sense in which Mahapatra operates within fairly

circumscribed limits. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra describes Mahapatra's poetry as being "with some few exceptions. . . a meditation on a single theme: the pain of having to wake up in a sun-filled room."⁷ As I have suggested, he returns over and over to themes of deprivation and decay; and his imagination also circles obsessively round a number of symbols and images such as rain, dawn, stone, the door, silence.⁸ The tonal range and emotional palette are narrow, the dominant mood meditative, mournful, melancholy. His response to the suffering he notices everywhere is usually articulated with pathos rather than, say, irony, vehemence, anger, or satire. He rarely voices his poems through other personae, and when he does, as in parts of *Temple*, where Chelammal occasionally speaks for herself, the tone and language barely differ from those which one can read as being in Mahapatra's own voice (or that simulacrum of a voice which a poem constructs). Describing an emotional trauma from his childhood, he writes "my body has grown, a snake curling about its pain" ("JM," 138) and this is an image one might apply with equal justice to his poetry, which is, to an unusual degree, obsessed with victimhood of various sorts and with its own processes of perception and feeling.

The monochrome quality I have been describing is evident also in certain aspects of his style. In letters, essays, and interviews, he has given a number of similar accounts of the principles informing and structuring his work:

It was apparent to me that I was not writing the kind of poems in which meaning was stated clearly, explicitly; and that this poetry did not have a sharp focus was what the critic had in mind when he commented on my work. In other words, this poetry had no flat statements. What I was perhaps trying to do was to put together images and symbols so that the reader would draw the implicit connections for himself. (*DP*, 206)

My poems remain exploratory because when I start a poem with perhaps an image or a cluster of images, I do not know where I am heading to; the first image merely starts a *movement* of the poem. It is as if I am at the entrance of a cave and I have to proceed, not knowing where the exploratory path leads me. . .⁹

Exploration, groping his way to understanding through a juxtaposition of images and symbols – these, in Mahapatra's view, are the keys to his poetic method. A typical Mahapatra poem will indeed drift from metaphor to metaphor, symbol to symbol, image to image, embodying what Bruce King has called "the process of the poem," and tracking the movement of mind and emotion.¹⁰ It is, however, one thing to agree

with these comments as a general description of his work and quite another to assess and evaluate how the method works, or how successful it is in the context of individual poems. Mahapatra's comments on his method have tended to remain at the level of generalities, and many discussions of his poetry are content to follow in his wake, reiterating the gist of his remarks without subjecting the language of the poems to detailed analysis and evaluation.¹¹

Here, I want to approach this process of evaluation by looking at three poems (the first two of them deservedly anthology pieces): "Taste for Tomorrow," "Hunger," and *Relationship*. I will focus particularly on the imagery (a term I use here in its extended sense to include both the representation of sense experience and figurative language such as metaphor and simile). The first of these poems is set in one of the key places of Mahapatra's poetic geography:

At Puri, the crows.
The one wide street
lolls out like a giant tongue.
Five faceless lepers move aside
as a priest passes by.

And at the street's end
the crowds thronging the temple door:
a huge holy flower
swaying in the wind of greater reasons. (LD, 35)

Relatively unusually for a Mahapatra poem, traces of the self (in the form of a first-person speaker – often absorbed into the inclusive "we") and the mind's movements are not *explicitly* present, although, of course, they are made manifest in the imagery. The speaker is effaced; the poem keeps its attention almost entirely on the scene, gradually expanding its perceptions outward from the precise focus on the crows to the street, imaged in that brilliant simile of the giant tongue, then to the lepers and priest, and, finally, in a climactic epiphany, to the crowds and their sense of being absorbed in something living and creative, the "huge holy flower." On the way it takes in, without explicit comment, the physical and social condition of the lepers, whose facelessness is not only a description of the ravages of the disease, but also perhaps a reference to their lack of identity or value within the hierarchies of Hinduism, which in turn are embodied in their deference to the passing priest, who, one presumes, doesn't deign to notice them. In that final image of the crowds, which he observes from a distance, there may also be a sense of the speaker's own exclusion from the unity he

feels the believers possess. This, at any rate, is the impression given in a prose piece, "An Orissa Journal: July to November" which uses the same flower metaphor.¹² This essay concludes with an ambivalent account of a trip to Puri, where, after acknowledging the mysterious attraction the town has for him, he observes, amongst other things, the touts and thieves who throng to the town, the self-serving cupidity of the priests, the slyness of a man who clasps the breast of a young woman before vanishing into the shelter of the crowd. Emerging from the crush in the Jagannath temple, he looks back: "A crowd is out there. A world. Perhaps I would like to be with *them*. Within and without . . . I turn and look at the crowds again. And I am reminded of a huge holy flower swaying in the wind of other, greater reasons" (*DP*, 17–18). "Taste for Tomorrow" packs a lot into a small space. It is amongst the most achieved, understated, and cohesive of Mahapatra's poems. The feelings are focused in and embodied throughout by the movement of the images, from the crows to the huge holy flower. There is little here of that self-absorption, that sense of curling in on itself, that explicit tracking of the movements of mind and emotions that I mentioned earlier as recurring his work.

"Hunger," first collected in the 1976 volume *A Rain of Rites*, is still perhaps Mahapatra's most famous poem, and here we can see more clearly the speaker's focus on his own feelings and perceptions:

It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back.
The fisherman said: will you have her, carelessly,
trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his words
sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.
I saw his white bone thrash his eyes.

I followed him across the sprawling sands,
my mind thumping in the flesh's sling.
Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in.
Silence gripped my sleeves; his body clawed
at the froth his old nets had dragged up from the seas.

In the flickering dark his lean-to opened like a wound.
The wind was I, and the days and nights before.
Palm fronds scratched my skin. Inside the shack
an oil lamp splayed the hours bunched to those walls.
Over and over the sticky soot crossed the space of my mind.

I heard him say: my daughter, she's just turned fifteen . . .
Feel her. I'll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.
The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wife.
Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber.

She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,
the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside. (LD, 46)

Here narrative, language, and structure work in tandem to create a compelling sense of inevitability. The end-stopped stanzas each depict a self-contained and specific part of the whole incident: the fisherman's initial proposition to the speaker; the two men walking along the sand, each consumed by his own turmoil; the description of the shack; the final sealing and consummation of the proposition. The short syntactic units, rarely more than a line or two in length, hurry the narrative along. The furtiveness of the transaction is heightened by the avoidance of the markers of direct speech, and this gives the whole incident a whispered, huggermugger atmosphere. Many of the tropes and rhetorical figures economically link emotional response to concrete detail. The zeugma in "trailing his nets and his nerves," for instance, connects the father's nervousness and agitation with the presumably empty nets – the symptom and cause of the desperation which leads him to offer his daughter to the speaker. "Her years were cold as rubber" combines the promise offered by the girl's youth ("she's just turned fifteen") with a sense of revulsion and self-revulsion which is continued in the following images: the "wormy legs," the "fish slithering, turning inside."

On the other hand, the line "I saw his white bone thrash his eyes" is more confusing. Mahapatra is, I assume, trying to indicate the sense of distress and conflict visible in the father's expression as he is forced into this shameful offer of his daughter. But where has the "white bone" (a fish bone?) come from, and in what way does the bone thrash his eyes? Although this image is, in my view, distracting, the impact of the poem is undiminished. The momentum and inevitability I remarked on earlier enable Mahapatra to surmount such questions; the effect can be likened to a car going over occasional speed bumps. But the "white bone" seems to me to a symptom of a method which, in other Mahapatra poems, can become more of a difficulty: the slide from image to image is in many cases a source of confusion.

A case in point is the beginning of the long poem *Relationship*, which, as I mentioned earlier, uses the Konarka Sun Temple as a focus for the exploration of the Orissan past:

Once again one must sit back and bury the face
in this earth of the forbidding myth,
the phallus of the enormous stone,
when the lengthened shadow of a restless vulture

the gentle leaf, the folded belly
and the sweeping fire,
like the warm waters around fish,
like the velvet down about the floating breath
of fledglings. (LD, 70)

The verb “swills” is made to apply to a series of nouns and noun phrases, with many of which it doesn’t work at all well. Can fruit and flowers swill? Is “swill” really an appropriate word to apply to the down on fledglings? By the time the lines have arrived at the end of the chain of images, the syntactical link has become evanescent. As John Stachniewski has pointed out, Mahapatra’s concentration on imagery leads him to neglect syntactical connections; and this neglect can lead, as here, to confusion and semantic dissonance.¹³

My intention here is not to pick at Mahapatra’s loose grammar. My point, rather, is that this syntactical laxity, combined with the drift from metaphor to metaphor, from image to image, often creates a sensation of having started off at point A and arrived at point B without quite knowing how you have reached there (or indeed, without knowing where precisely it is that you have arrived). Poetry, of course, is not only a linear art; it has many resources, including imagery, which can be used to qualify, counteract and transcend the linearity and sequentiality of syntax. So it is possible to agree in general terms with Mahapatra’s statement that he is aiming not for a linear poetry of statement but for one based on the juxtaposition of images and symbols, and still question how effective the method is in particular cases. In the passages from *Relationship* that I have been looking at, the syntactical backbone seems to me to collapse under the weight of imagery. As clauses and images accumulate, the syntax becomes attenuated, the direction of the sentence elusive. Bruce King describes Mahapatra’s work as a “difficult, often obscure poetry of meditation, recording reality as an unknowable flux.”¹⁴ This is true enough as a general statement, but it needs to be explored in more specific terms, as I have been trying to do here. In an interview, Mahapatra has commented on the relationship between his scientific background and his poetry: “I suppose that study of Physics taught me a certain discipline in the use of words in a poem. . . . Physics taught me to write with a conciseness, not to use the ‘unnecessary word’ in a poem.”¹⁵ Conciseness and discipline, however, particularly linguistic and syntactic discipline, are precisely what are missing from many of his poems, and their absence is one of the sources of the obscurity of his work. If obscurity on its own were to be a criterion of judgment, then many modern poets, from Rimbaud to Celan and beyond,

would find themselves in the dock. What is at issue here, rather, is the nature of that obscurity. There is a tenuousness of meaning in many of his poems which is often a direct consequence of certain characteristic ways of using language.

III

Mahapatra has many admirers, and a number of them have offered various defenses or explanations of his obscurity. For Syd Harrex:

Mahapatra's imagination is of the type that is Jungian (or whatever an Indian, more specifically Orissan equivalent of that may be). Many of his poems seem to be the result of a quest for verbal surface indicators of primordial, pre-linguistic, dream-layered experiences, the legends and archetypes of a collective unconscious, the grass-roots of the emotions, the ancestral lineaments of personal identity.¹⁶

Harrex later goes on to explain the reason for this Jungian analogy: it lies in the way Mahapatra uses "landscapes and objects." He "identifies or compares himself with their inner life or being in an effort to map and understand his own inner world, the psyche's equivalent of landscape."¹⁷ That may well be the case, but this is not usually what is meant by an archetype, and the invocation of Jung in the context of Mahapatra's poetry is a distraction. It is true that Mahapatra uses myth often in his poetry, and myth is intimately connected with the Jungian ideas of the archetype and the collective unconscious. But the deployment of myth does not by itself make a poem a product of the collective unconscious, except in the most nominal sense. One could hardly describe, say, Arun Kolatkar's uses of the *Mahabharata* in *Sarpa Satra* or of the Khandoba myth (*Jejuri*) in the Jungian terms used by Harrex of Mahapatra. An archetype in the Jungian sense draws into itself a charged constellation of psychic energies, something that one rarely finds in Mahapatra's poetry, which, as I have suggested, often creates a sense of pathos and diffuse brooding. Indeed, the problems with Mahapatra's work that I have been outlining often arise from the fact that, rather than being in any sense archetypal or collective, the poems often move in directions that seem to be personal to Mahapatra and unavailable to the reader.

Others link Mahapatra's poetry to Surrealism.¹⁸ This, too, seems misconceived. The surrealist image depends, amongst other things, on a bringing together of different realities, as in the example from the nineteenth-century poet Lautréamont which the Surrealists much admired: "as

beautiful. . . as the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella."¹⁹ It is true that one will sometimes find this kind of juxtaposition in Mahapatra's work; the street lolling like a giant tongue in "Taste for Tomorrow" seems to me an image possessed of that "convulsive beauty" which André Breton advocated.²⁰ But this is rare in Mahapatra. More pervasive is the kind of movement that I have described earlier: a languorous drifting between, or a chaining together of, images, as in the opening lines of *Relationship*. And the effect of this in Mahapatra's poetry is also very distant from the uses to which the Surrealists wanted to put their images: an excavation and liberation of the polymorphic energy of the unconscious and of desire, the subversion of bourgeois *mores*.

A third argument, partly visible in Harrex's remarks quoted above, is to appeal to that old standby, "Indianness," or the "Indian sensibility." This, certainly, is Mahapatra's response to charges that his poetry is obscure. "I suppose our sensibility," he has remarked, "the Indian sensibility, is different from the Western one" (*DP*, 131). The difference between the two, according to Mahapatra, lies in the fact that "the Indian sensibility inserts its probes into the unknown, with the result that the poetry loses its concreteness, moving the reader into a realm where clarity is lost and the verse depends on intimations of significance to help the reader along. It may well be this vagueness, this indeterminacy, that puts the Western reader off."²¹ The problem with this approach, as A. K. Ramanujan suggests in "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?," is that there is no simple or single answer to the question. Ramanujan demonstrates this by exploring the implications of stressing different words in the title of his essay. Amongst the responses he explores are that "there is no single Indian way of thinking," or that there is, in fact, no way of thinking that is specific to India, or that (and this seems closest to Mahapatra's position) "it is the West that is materialistic, rational; Indians have no philosophy, only religion, no positive sciences, not even a psychology; in India, matter is subordinated to spirit, rational thought to feeling, intuition." But, as Ramanujan goes on to point out: "We – I, certainly – have stood in one or another of these stances at different times. We have not heard the end of these questions – or these answers."²²

Leaving aside the question of whether an "Indian sensibility" exists, and, if so, what it might be, another difficulty with this account of Mahapatra's poetry is that it is essentially circular: Mahapatra's poems – the train of thought seems to run – appear to be vague, indeterminate, and lacking in concreteness because they manifest an "Indian sensibility"; and the evidence for their Indian sensibility is precisely their vagueness,

indeterminateness, and lack of concreteness. The notion of an “Indian sensibility” is not interrogated. Indeed, pushed to its conclusion, this line of thinking seems ultimately to rest on the foundation of a hoary Orientalist stereotype: a materialist and rationalist West versus a dreamy, mystical India. As I have been trying to show here, however, the indeterminacy can often be linked directly to such features of Mahapatra’s technique as his syntax and his chains of imagery.

IV

For nearly fifty years Mahapatra’s dedication to his art has been exemplary and unstinting. Two important qualities of his work stand out. One is his humanitarianism, his sympathy with the underdog, which has, throughout his career, enabled him to probe clear-sightedly into many dark corners of Indian life – violence, oppression, and poverty, amongst others. The other is his metaphorical imagination, which is highly developed and extremely fertile (although his facility with metaphor and imagery, as I have argued, is at times a problem). In many of his poems he has brought together these qualities to provide an acute, unflinching perspective on his own society and culture.

If I have qualified my assessment of him by expressing some reservations about the language of his poetry, this is in part the product of a feeling that someone who writes as powerfully, movingly, and convincingly as he does at his best, in poems such as “Taste for Tomorrow,” “Hunger,” and many more that I haven’t had space to discuss (“The Abandoned British Cemetery at Balasore,” “Sunburst,” “A Missing Person,” and others), should also have produced quantities of work that frustrates with its vagueness. Mahapatra has written (or at least published) too much and too indiscriminately for his own good. He once commented, rather remarkably, in an interview: “I have no critical judgement and therefore can’t tell which poems are better written than others.”²³ If this is true, one consequence it has had is to dilute the impact of his best work. A more selective approach to publication would have allowed his poetic strengths to emerge in sharper relief.

Notes

1. Jayanta Mahapatra, “Slow Swim in Dim Light,” in *Door of Paper: Essays and Memoirs* (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2007), 203. This is the most easily

- accessible compilation of Mahapatra's prose. Further references to this book will be given in the text, using the abbreviation *DP*.
2. In recent years, Mahapatra has also taken to writing original poems in Oriya. Most of Mahapatra's original collections are out of print, but there is a substantial selection of his work available in *The Lie of Dawn: Poems 1974–2008* (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2009), from which I have quoted wherever possible. Unfortunately, the poems are printed in thematic sections rather than chronological order. Further references to this book will be given in the text, using the abbreviation *LD*.
 3. This account of his upbringing is derived from an autobiographical essay, "Jayanta Mahapatra," in *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, vol. 9, ed. Mark Zadrozny (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989), 137–50. A scanned version of the essay is reproduced in the biography section of Mahapatra's website: www.jayantamahapatra.com/bio.asp. Further references to this essay will be given in the text, using the abbreviation "JM."
 4. Jayanta Mahapatra, *Land* (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2013), 45, 57, 47, 55, 14, 19.
 5. An early example is "Dhaulti," in the 1979 volume *Waiting*, reprinted in *LD*, 18; the most recent is "Asoka" (*Land*, 34), Mahapatra's own translation of one of his recent excursions into writing poetry in Oriya.
 6. An extended discussion of Mahapatra's representation of women can be found in Madhusudan Prasad, "'Echoes of a Bruised Presence': Images of Women in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra," *World Literature Written in English* 28, no. 2 (1988): 367–78. This essay is reprinted in a slightly revised version in *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: Some Critical Considerations*, ed. Madhusudan Prasad (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 2000), 220–36.
 7. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed., *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 20.
 8. Mahapatra and others have commented on the significance of a number of these. For the symbol of the door, see his essays "Freedom as Poetry: The Door" (*DP*, 1–6) and "The Door" (*DP*, 157–62); and for rain, see an interview with Aruna Ludra, *Indian Literary Review* 7, nos 1–3 (1991): 53. The image of rain is also discussed by, amongst others, Niranjana Mohanty, "Rain Poems of Mahapatra: A Study," in *Panjab University Research Bulletin (Arts)*, 22, no. 2 (1991): 39–53.
 9. Quoted by Pushpinder Syal, "Jayanta Mahapatra's Use of Language," in Prasad, *Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra*, 204 (ellipsis in the original). The passage is in a letter of May 1983 from Mahapatra to Syal.
 10. Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, rev. edn. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 195.
 11. Amongst the exceptions to this are John Stachniewski, "Life Signs in the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra," *The Indian Literary Review* 6, no. 2 (1986): 79–84, Sudesh Mishra, *Preparing Faces: Modernism and Indian Poetry in English* (Adelaide: University of the South Pacific and Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1995), 335–51, esp. 336–41, and parts of

- M. K. Naik's article "Two Worlds: The Imagery of Jayanta Mahapatra," in Prasad, *Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra*, 98–114 (esp. 108–10).
12. This is the title given in *Door of Paper*. When it was first published, in *Queens's Quarterly*, 80, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 65–73, the title specified the year as 1972.
 13. Stachniewski, "Life Signs," 79.
 14. King, *Modern Poetry in English*, 195.
 15. Jaydeep Sarangi, "An Interview with Jayanta Mahapatra," in *The Indian Imagination of Jayanta Mahapatra*, ed. Jaydeep Sarangi and Gauri Shankar Jha (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006), 188.
 16. S. C. Harrex, "Ripening Vines," *CRNLE Reviews Journal*, nos 1 and 2 (1988): 30. For another comment linking Mahapatra to the collective unconscious, see Vilas Sarang, ed., *Indian English Poetry Since 1950: An Anthology* (Bombay: Disha Books, 1990), 32.
 17. Harrex, "Ripening Vines": 30–31.
 18. Nigamananda Das, "Jayanta Mahapatra: The Cryptic, Mystic and Feminist," in *Transcendence and Immanence in Works of Select Poets in English: Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, Niranjan Mohanty, R. Parthasarthy, Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, W. B. Yeats*, ed. Lata Mishra (New Delhi: Access, 2013), 134. Sarang, *Indian English Poetry*, 32, also links Mahapatra to Surrealism.
 19. Le Comte de Lautréamont, *The Songs of Maldoror*, trans. R. J. Dent (Washington, D.C.: Solar Books, 2011), 210.
 20. André Breton, *Nadja* (1928), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 160.
 21. Jayanta Mahapatra, "Through Moral Uncertainties: Indian English Poetry Today," in *Us/Them: Translation, Transcription and Identity in Post-Colonial Literary Cultures*, ed. Gordon Collier (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Georgia: Rodopi, 1992), 153.
 22. A. K. Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?," in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34, 35.
 23. "Jayanta Mahapatra in Conversation with Abraham," *Indian Literature* no. 180 (July–August 1997): 152. Elsewhere, however (*DP*, 89), he displays some awareness of the kinds of difficulties I have been highlighting: "When I reread the poetry I have written, I find many of the poems confused, made up of abstractions which fail to connect with the reader. (This is especially true of my earlier work.)"

*Modernisms and Modernity: Keki Daruwalla
and Gieve Patel*

Graziano Krätli

I

Unlike a number of his contemporaries, especially from Bombay, Keki Daruwalla is neither a “city” nor an “urban” poet, but a traveler across various landscapes, real as well as historical or mythological, although critical attempts to cast him as a “landscape poet” have been largely reductive if not misleading.

Born Keki N(asserwanji) Daruwalla in the Burhanpur District of Madhya Pradesh in 1937, the son of a Parsi school teacher who studied and worked in England during the First World War, he attended various schools and was instructed in a number of languages (English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu) because of his father’s teaching appointments around the country. After obtaining a master’s degree in English Literature from Government College, Ludhiana, he joined the Indian Police and served for a decade in various locations, mainly in northern India, before moving permanently to Delhi, where he worked for the government until his retirement. Simultaneously, his was one of the longest and most productive literary careers in contemporary India, comprising twelve collections of poetry, four books of short stories, two novels, one travel book, and an influential poetry anthology.¹

With *Under Orion* (1970) Daruwalla enters the stage of Indian poetry in a fiercely original way, as shown by the very first poem in the collection, “Curfew in a Riot-torn City.” The setting (a town under curfew, presumably as a consequence of communal riots), the situation (a police unit patrolling the streets at dawn), the suspense and the action (real or, worse, feared), and the protagonist (a commanding officer on edge), although unprecedented in Indian poetry, English or otherwise, was quite familiar to the poet because of his experiences in the police.² Yet the act of “policing” in the poem, like its underlying rhetorical alignment of medical disease and

military intervention, is also a pretext to explore an engagement of a different and more original kind. The juxtaposition of contrasting elements, which sets the scene and the tone of the poem from the very beginning, reveals a possible network of more intimate and disturbing relationships:

Blood and fog
 are over half the town
 and curfew stamps across the empty street
 A thinning drizzle
 has smeared the walls,
 giving moss and fungus a membrane of bile.³

The opening interplay of humoral and atmospheric elements (blood/fog, drizzle/bile), counterpointed by verbs suggesting force, violence, and vilification (stamp, smear), resolves in a transition from the phytologic (moss) to the pathologic (“membrane of bile,” the town as “tumour-growth” and the “sick tribe”) via the ambiguous word “fungus.” The poem moves from the atmospheric and the humoral to the aquatic, the “headlights raking the walls, / barracuda-eyes / searching for prey” find their elusive counterpart in “fish-eyes following you from a reef crack”; while, a few lines below, “Lanes branch tentacular” and, in a sort of defensive mimicry, “you prowl, / an octopus on its beat.” As the day dawns, and the protagonist enters the “reef,” the metaphor of the curfewed, diseased town as a treacherous underwater labyrinth evolves into grisly images of real or visual carnage: “overhanging limbs,” “embryonic fingers,” a “mass of liquefied flesh” (the townspeople), faces “running with acid,” red meat “hooked to the cambrel” or “hanging on the jowls,” ending with a pestilential vision of “headless bodies in a burning van.” Then, after “[t]wo days have passed / without turning up a corpse,” a new episode of brutal violence forces the officer to extend the state of emergency and to “clamp the curfew . . . on the outer fringe” – a desperate act of surgical containment which, rather than containing anything (other than its own rhetorical inefficacy), prompts him to raise the question (and the specter) of contagion. A strange and superfluous question, of course, but one which reveals the tension between imposing and losing control (curfew/contagion), thus showing how the poem is as much about an officer’s dilemma as it is about a poet’s creative effort to shape his own verbal material.

After the curfew has been lifted, contagion is out and running in the very next poem, “Pestilence,” where the onslaught of an undiagnosed disease (“who says it is cholera?”) is described in curt, nervous, broken lines that

convey a sense of agitation and imminent danger. The “scurry of footsteps” that have followed the protagonist from the riot-torn city become “pairs of padded feet,” multiplied and amplified by an emphatic use of repetition and alliteration (“behind me / astride me / in front of me;” “black feet / brown shoulders / black shoulders;” “frail bodies / frozen bodies / delirious bodies / black bodies;” “soot-brown / soot-green / soot-grey;” “padded feet / padded progress”), while a gloomy palette (black, brown, soot) further contributes to a claustrophobic sense of siege. This is eventually lifted by the healing hand of humanitarian aid, which literally (i.e., sarcastically) transforms the situation into an issue of black versus white:

the hospital floors are marble white
 black bodies dirty them
 nurses in white habits
 unicef jeeps with white bonnets
 doctors with white faces receive them⁴

Despite the risk of contamination, ironically rendered by the image of black bodies soiling white marble floors (supposedly because they are left lying on them), the hospital staff in their white “habits,” white “bonnets,” and white “faces” are willing to accept them. The repetition of the same symbolic color, combined with the lexical ambiguity of such words as *habit* and *bonnet*, gives more than a hint of neocolonial make-believe, which is then exposed in the mockingly rhymed diagnostic dilemma: “who says they have cholera? / they are down with diarrhoea,” while the “memory like a crane arm / unload[ing] its ploughed-up rubble” recalls the potentially devastating consequences of a misdiagnosis of this kind.

The magical roots of alliteration, assonance, staccato rhythms, and other poetic devices that Daruwalla uses in poems such as “Pestilence” belong to a universe in which the need to propitiate, subdue, and assimilate (gods, spirits, natural forces) may also involve the use of phytomorphic, zoomorphic, and anthropomorphic representations. In “The Ghaghra in Spate” (from the concluding section, “Poems from the Terai”), Daruwalla adopts the traditional personification of the river as a goddess to create the portrait of a lady in disarray, capricious and unruly as only a female deity can be. Elsewhere the anthropomorphic is used differently to explore the objectification of religious will. In “Shiva: At Timarsain,” the depiction of a Himalayan genius loci, impervious yet immersed in a rugged devotional landscape, brings out an ambiguous invocation:

Lord of the stalactite,
 of the third eye and rimed beard

will you leave these heights
 where calcified columns
 rise and descend in rectilinear thrusts?
 Will you wear a raffia wig
 and let them tame you, domesticate you
 and pat your ice-cone sharpness
 into a rounded lingam?⁵

By contrast the domesticated effigy of “A Goan Christ upon a Goan cross” (“Ecce Homo”) prompts the poet to imagine a creative remake (“But I would go about it / in a different way”) whose results are liberating and revitalizing in a theological as much as in an aesthetic manner. In their respective ways, these two poems approach religious devotion with an inquisitive reverence more typical of the imaginative artist than the devotee. But while the former explores an anthropogenic environment (“the crags here are rock temples / of some abandoned cult”) to introduce the topic of the descent and domestication of god into a material object, the latter creatively reinvents an exhausted symbol of martyrdom.

“Shiva: At Timarsain” and “Ecce Homo” are juxtaposed in *Collected Poems* but not in *Under Orion*, where the former poem forms a diptych with “Shiva: At Lodheshwar,” which is not included in the collected volume. The difference between these two “pilgrimage poems” is of altitude as much as of attitude, with the latter comparing and contrasting the sturdy water-carriers, who come from five hundred miles “walking on feet unshod,” with the stampede of temple devotees. There is an obvious parallel between the “crush of faces, limbs, breasts” and the “pulp of flowers, sandal and oblation food,” which is hourly swept off the floor and taken to the chief priest, who supervises the sorting of the banknotes from the other offerings. More than the pragmatism of the priest, the symbolic act of separating what is of worth from what is worthless (reminiscent of the floor-cleansing and separation of wheat from chaff in Matthew 3:12) suggests a contrast between the “essential” pilgrimage represented by the water-carriers, ascetically barefoot, and the obnoxious patronage of the devotees thronging the temple gates. In the hands of a lesser poet, this might have been resolved in a simplistic distinction between opposite forms of devotion (spiritual vs. earthly, or high vs. low), but Daruwalla is interested in a more complex and consequential aspect of this (arguable) dichotomy – that is, the localization, realization, and representation of devotional space, or what one scholar has called the “natural epiphany of the divine.”⁶

Published the year after *Under Orion*, *Apparition in April* (1971) gives the impression of consisting largely of leftovers from the previous book, and its

few attempts to break new ground may hardly be considered successful, either technically or otherwise.⁷ By contrast, *Crossing of Rivers* (1976) marks the passage to a more ambitious versification and a more cohesive thematic approach, as evidenced by the beginning of the first poem, “Boat-ride along the Ganga”:

Filing into a motor boat at dusk
we scour along the water upstream.
Slowly the ghat-amphitheatre unfolds
like a nocturnal flower in a dream
that opens its petals only at dusk.⁸

Here the ABCBA rhyme scheme, with its opening and closing motion reinforced by the repetition of the *dusk*, releases the double movement of the motor boat speeding upstream while slowly disclosing the crepuscular view of the burning ghat. The opiate symbolism of the nocturnal flower (and the succeeding image of “Palm-leaf parasols sprouting like freak-mushrooms”) is promptly deflated by the more prosaic view of “the sewer-mouth trained like a cannon / on the river’s flank,” which “triggers” the squeamish reaction of the boat-rider as he is confronted by the ghastly reality of the funeral pyres. Disagreeable as it is, the sewer-mouth, like the *pāndās* (Varanasi’s breed of half priests, half tourist guides) who “calculate / the amount of merit that accrues to you / at each specific ghat,” and later on, the barges and sailboats on anchor, hold the viewer firmly this side of the “veil of fire,” behind which death vibrates with the burning of “flesh and substance.” Any attempt to probe the “heat-haze rising from the fires” leads instead to references first to Symbolist art, then to prehistoric cave paintings, and finally to Dante himself, who “would have been confused here” (but would he have, really?), unsure whether to “place this city / In Paradise or Purgatory, or lower down / where fires smoulder beyond the reach of pity.” Dante’s dilemma, rhetorical (and rather predictable) as it is, introduces the real issue of the non-Hindu’s dual confusion: at the meta-physical concept of the river goddess as mother, daughter, and bride, and at the much-too-physical reality of a place “where corpse-fires and cooking-fires / burn side by side.”⁹

Starting in the early 1980s, Daruwalla’s poetry draws more explicit inspiration from both historical events and literary sources. Although a certain fascination with the legendary and historical past – and the interplay of factual and fictional narratives – has always dwelt between his lines, with *The Keeper of the Dead* (1982) “history” – with its trappings, fallacies, and pitfalls – becomes more prominent as a subject and the poems are

more focused on specific periods and regions, such as the spread of Buddhism, the Mughal period (in the “Shadow of the Imambara” section),” and European colonialism.

In “The King Speaks to the Scribe (Third Century BC),”¹⁰ a victorious yet repentant emperor, Ashoka, having embraced Buddhism after the horrors of the Kalinga War (“I trod / this plain, dark and glutinous with gore, / my chariot-wheels squelching in the bloody mire”), gives his scribe thorough and detailed instructions on the carving of the edicts with which his name is largely associated. “Pestilence in Nineteenth-century Calcutta,”¹¹ on the other hand, is a satirical portrait of British isolation in, and cluelessness about, the land they are supposed to rule. In such a land “of mud and mire” death is everywhere and the fear of falling “like skittles,” and being “interred in the same loam, / mourned by the same tolling bells,” British, French, and Dutch together, is part and parcel of being a sahib. What is that Indians are killed by the climate as well, only on a larger scale than Europeans (“Black fellow die, much”).

Daruwalla eventually gave in to the temptation of “turning the past into poetry” with *Fire Altar: Poems of the Persian and the Greeks*, a close-knit collection originally written in 1992–93 but published only in 2013. Inspired by a quartet of ancient sources (Herodotus, Plutarch’s *On the Malice of Herodotus*, Firdausi’s *Shahnameh*, and the play *Darius Codomannus*), as well as by Matthew Arnold’s popular 1853 narrative poem “Sohrab and Rustum” (a retelling of an episode in the *Shahnameh*) in the *Shahnameh*), and visits to the ruins of Pasargadae and Persepolis, the book traces the “Coming of the Parsis” to India at the end of the first millennium CE, from the fall of the Achaemenid Empire and the spread of Zoroastrianism to its persecution following the Muslim conquest of Persia in the seventh century. The alternation of sonnet sequences and sections of loosely rhymed narrative verse provides a suitable structure for the accommodation of a variety of poetic modes. At the same time, it serves as a conceptual framework for the alternative narratives and conflicting views (“Herodotus on Cambyses” and “Cambyses on Herodotus,” Persians and Greeks, Muslims and Zoroastrians, barbarians and non-barbarians) which, blurring the line between fact and fiction, conjure a sense of “history” as a variable and virtually infinite series of putative histories, apocryphal stories, and personal narratives – an immense hall of mirrors such as a disciple of Borges might concoct.¹²

II

Like Daruwalla, Gieve Patel did not spend any significant amount of time abroad; instead, he discovered and nurtured his own particular form of exile – as a member of an ethnic and religious minority and as an Anglophone poet – entirely at home, in the city he first depicted as Bombay and that has since been recast as Mumbai.

Born in 1940 to a Parsi family originally from southern Gujarat, Patel studied in Bombay at St. Xavier's College and Grant Medical College before pursuing a medical career that allowed him to weave his creative activities (as a poet and artist, playwright and critic) into a seamless fabric. After making a double debut in 1966 with a poetry collection published by his friend and mentor, Nissim Ezekiel, and a painting exhibition at the Jehangir Art Gallery, he continued over the years to produce three plays, two more volumes of verse, and an edition of a collection of poems written by students of the Rishi Valley School, in Andhra Pradesh, where Patel has been teaching poetry workshops since 1997.¹³ In recent years, he has devoted himself mainly to painting and sculpture, while his poetic talent and skills have been serving a long-standing translation project focused on the seventeenth-century Gujarati poet Akho (Akha Bharat).

Patel's first collection may be summed up as a sharp and sensible portrayal of a young man establishing his personal, social, and cultural identity by tracing and testing the boundaries of his world, while focusing on realities that are part of his daily experience and yet, at the same time, safely removed from it. More than half of the poems deal with protagonists separated or excluded from the mainstream of society because of their status, ethnicity, or caste; or because they are sick, dying, or dead; or even because of their advanced age, a condition which separates and excludes *per se*, regardless of social status or health. Patel's interest in these marginal subjects is addressed early on in a diptych consisting of a short question (in "Grandfather") followed by a longer answer (in "Servants").¹⁴ "But for what, tell me, do you look in them, / They've quite exhausted my wonder," asks the grandfather of his young, city-educated grandson, who replies providing a visual (and voyeuristic) exploration of the point at issue instead of an explanation. Prompted by a slant-rhyming closed couplet ("They come of peasant stock, / Truant from an insufficient plot"), it describes the furtive experience of observing the servants sitting animal-like and smoking in the dark. When the "Lights are shut off after dinner," the servants revert to a dim, uncommunicative universe of their own. Like

their skin, “The dark around them / Is brown, and links body to body” in a way that suggests an ancient, mysterious, and potentially threatening complicity with nature. Reinforcing this primitive, magical view are the hard fingers glowing “as smoke is inhaled / And the lighted end of tobacco / Becomes an orange spot,” thus providing an alternative, more evocative form of illumination. But, like the “dark around them,” this image of archaic, magic tribalism is immediately dispelled by the final stanza, in which the servants are compared to cattle “resting in their stall” – a far cry from the romanticized, glorified depictions of low-caste or tribal subjects that are typical of much Indian poetry from before or after Independence.

A different form of voyeurism (although in this case justified by medical training) is implied in “The Difference in the Morgue,” which marks the transition from such “hospital poems” as “Cord-Cutting,” “Catholic Mother,” “Old Man’s Death,” and “Post-Mortem Report” (where an “acknowledgment of change” typically involves the death of a small child or an old man, or the birth of a baby), to the shrewd description of an autopsy in “Post-Mortem.” Outside the morgue, Patel explores his own difference as a member of a dwindling minority (the Parsis), which makes him an outsider in a country long dominated by larger cultural and religious groups. This “ambiguous fate” is the subject of “Naryal Purnima,”¹⁵ the longest and possibly the most ambitious poem in the collection. The pause between the first and second monsoon rains, which the first stanza describes (and the Naryal Purnima festival celebrates), acquires a symbolic meaning in the collapsed cameos of the second stanza, with the poet observing “the rich and the less rich as they come / Scrubbed and bathed, carrying a dirty little satchel / With a nut for the gods” (the traditional offering of the Coconut [Nariyal] Full Moon [Purnima] festival). The poet reflects on his allegiances, even as the underlying question (“Do I sympathize merely with the underdog? / Is it one more halt in search for ‘identity?’”) leads to a much more sensitive topic, namely the preferential treatment received by the Parsis under British rule, which in turn reflects the complexity and the ambiguity at the heart of this “search for ‘identity’” – as an individual as well as a member of a minority community and a citizen of the country as a whole:

Our interiors never could remain
Quite English. The local gods hidden in
Cupboards from rational Parsi eyes
Would suddenly turn up on the walls
Garlanded alongside the King and the Queen.

And the rulers who had such praise for our manners
 Disappeared one day. So look instead for something else:
 Even accept and belong.¹⁶

But accept what, and belong to what or whom, exactly? Confronted with this predicament, the poet finds temporary relief in turning “From these supplicants to the urchins,” their “meagre flesh” and their hunger an “indisputable birth-mark / To recognize / Myself and the country by,” thereby allowing the protagonist’s “present identities” to emerge as a more pluralistic and inclusive self, as the concern for the possibility that “*Our prayers may go unheard*” (emphasis added) clearly suggests.

This scrutinizing, self-inquiring attitude culminates in the single suggestive stanza of “Evening,” arguably the most subtly complex poem ever written, in India or elsewhere, on the premises and pitfalls of decolonization:

Our English host was gracious
 We were soon at ease;
 Or almost:
 The servants
 were watching.¹⁷

This perfectly balanced cinquain consists of two opening lines and two closing lines linked by a conjunction and a conjunctive adverb in the middle. The first two lines make a dual statement (one for each of the parties involved) conveying a relaxed convivial ambience. The authenticity of this (ideal) situation is then questioned by the conjunction–adverb combination that suggests a possible alternative, while the colon introduces the couplet that ends the poem on edge. The reader will notice the similarity – indeed, the specular relationship – between the three clauses (“Our English host was gracious / We were soon at ease” and “The servants / were watching”); but the significant difference between the end-stopping of the first two and the enjambment of the third calls into question the equilibrium – and the nature itself – of such a relationship. In so doing, it takes the reader back to the beginning of the poem (and the evening), with its false assumptions now clearly exposed. In fact, what is truly under scrutiny here is neither the silent watchfulness of the servants nor the graciousness of the English host, but the questionable ease and legitimacy of the Indian guests.

Ten years separate *Poems* from Patel’s next collection, *How Do You Withstand, Body* (1976), a period dominated by tragic events, in India and abroad, whose extent and implications resonate throughout the book. Much

closer to home than Bangladesh, Vietnam, or the Middle East, in September–October 1969 Gujarat was the theater of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims, thereby forming the backdrop for the much anthologized (and always relevant) “Ambiguous Fate of Gieve Patel, He Being Neither Muslim Nor Hindu in India.” The poem is a sarcastically self-reproachful lament, opening with a line that went on to acquire iconic status (“To be no part of this hate is deprivation”) and closing with the acknowledgment:

Planets focus their fires
 Into a worm of destruction
 Edging along the continent. Bodies
 Turn ashen and shrivel. I
 Only burn my tail.¹⁸

A notion of endless corporality defined by its extreme, emblematic manifestations permeates the entire collection and marks a definite change in Patel’s poetry. Rather than as a boundary between incompatible territories (of age, health, caste, and other socially discriminating conditions), the body is now seen as a tragic territory of its own, perpetually beleaguered and blasted by ferocious and merciless enemies; a “priceless rag soaked in desires,” torn between the blinding opposites of carnality and carnage, and constantly subject to the ravages of time and space. The difference is not between the morgue and the dissection hall anymore, but rather between dissection and dismemberment, between the forensic pathologist’s scalpel and the savage brutality of the eye-gouging penknife, the tongue-chopping tongs, and the countless tools and techniques of the torturer (of which a poem emblematically titled “Forensic Medicine: Text Book” provides a partial list).

The specular relation between the violence against the human body and the constraint man puts upon nature, especially in an urban environment, finds visual and semantic expression in the juxtaposition (on facing pages) of two couples of poems: “How Do You Withstand, Body” facing “Public Works,”¹⁹ and “The Ambiguous Fate” facing “City Landscape.”²⁰ In the first of these four poems, the human body – portrayed as a “poor slut” reduced to “Dumb, discoloured, / Battered patches; meat-mouths / For monster’s kisses” – finds a parallel in the overturned city bus described as a “wrecked, mangled monster,” as well as in the child mangled by a circumcised butcher in “The Ambiguous Fate.” And yet, while both “Public Works” and “City Landscape” begin with an

image of urban constraint and imprisonment (“Day after day the sea enchain’d / Behind granite buildings,” or seen “through / slats of buildings”), they significantly evolve in different directions. With the “slicing [of] the ocean / Down to blue ribbons,” “Public Works” takes a somewhat Freudian plunge into childhood territory, where a simple game (“All walls / Against Water”) may turn into a nightmarish “sewage trickle between my legs” and trigger a vision of “the island-city sinking.” Such an outcome is temporarily contained by public works (“Now taming / is here”), but eventually leads to scenes of urban chaos culminating in the carnage of the overturned bus. Similarly, “City Landscape” portrays a landscape of urban decay, where human debris changes, under the feet of the strolling poet, from “Muck, rags, dogs, / Women bathing squealing / Children in sewer water, / Unexpected chicken” to more visionary “miles of dusty yellow / Gravel straight / From the centre of some planet / Sucked dry by the sun, / And as radioactive as you wish.” And yet, whereas in the former poem the view of the captive sea led to sadistic childhood fantasies of destruction and disarray, the latter ends with a paean to the healing powers of imagination:

... My sight
 Like an angler’s rod,
 Springs across dust and buildings
 To claim a few fish.
 They tickle the inside of my chest
 As I carry them across the city
 Dancing on a scooter.²¹

The image of the poet’s sight springing like an angler’s rod “across dust and buildings / To claim a few fish” suggests, like a previous poem in the same collection (“The Sight Hires a Boat It Sees”), a sort of projective identification that finds a more complex and sophisticated expression in the cinematic techniques deployed in *Mirrored, Mirroring*. In “Hill Station” the narrator watches a group of monkeys lice-picking and copulating outside his hotel window. His “vision” is both encumbered and enhanced by the meshed window screens, although his attention is really focused on things he “cannot see,” meaning the couple next door, “hideously / Silent through the flimsy / Hotel partition.” Confronted by their challengingly suggestive silence, he conjures images of metaphysical disgust and sheer physical violence. Yet, instead of breaking down their door, he simply shrugs and enters his own room, there to notice “the

monkeys . . . have hardly stopped,” and to encounter the “quiet, happy glance” of his wife snugly reading comics in bed. This encompassing vision of “[t]he monkeys, us, / And the lurid couple” brings about an epiphanic acquiescence in which “[e]ach ecstatic thrust is / Freely contaminate[d] with an appetite for lice, / Comics, and many more such distractions” – including, one may assume, the poet’s own voyeuristic and meditative long take.

Published fifteen years after *How Do You Withstand, Body, Mirrored, Mirroring* (1991) marks a passage to the age of retrospection and reconciliation. The two processes are inseparable, to some extent even indistinguishable, and obviously problematic in their attempts to articulate a way forward. Patel opens what may eventually become be his final collection with a candid statement, whose profound implications set the tone for the rest of the book:

In the beginning
it is difficult
even to say,
“God”,

one is so out of practice.
And embarrassed.

Like lisping in public
about candy.
At fifty!²²

The confessional mode of the poem’s first line becomes more mundane, almost parodic, with the admission of being “embarrassed” because “out of practice,” which eases the way for the self-mocking image at the end. Once this admission is made, the next poem (“Simple”) consists of a bold, almost arrogant, confession of faith: “I shall not / be humble before God. // I half suspect / He wouldn’t wish me to be so.”²³ This is followed by a clear and, indeed, quite simple (although far from simplistic) explanation of what turned the poet away from God (not “arrogance or / excessive / self-regard,” but the refusal of “having my nose ground / into the dirt”), and what brought him back to Him (“I have been given / cleaner air to breathe // and may look up / to see what’s around”²⁴). This explanation marks a point of departure from Patel’s previous thematic concerns, and the new direction is indicated by the expression of a more mature and independent form of spiritual quest. What makes this progress particularly interesting – and relevant to the collection as a whole – is the role breathing plays in it. The poet may now “look up /

to see what's around" because he has been "given / cleaner air to breathe." The nose, from vulgar organ of smell, "ground into the dirt," has been upgraded to the instrument of a complex and sophisticated process of spiritual development, in which breathing represents a link between man and God ("cleaner air" has been given).

References to smell and breathing (as well as to elevation, death, and departure) are a leitmotif of *Mirrored, Mirroring* in its tentative, meandering, and inquisitive spiritual journey. The "odour of human manure" that, in "From Bombay Central,"²⁵ pervades the railway station but "does not offend," anticipates a more substantial list of "eternal / station odour[s]" which take most of the second stanza of the poem. "Hitting the nostrils as one singular / Invariable atmospheric thing," this amalgam of odors acts as a "divine cushion," buffering the poet in his "hard wooden / Third-class seat" and suggests a more final departure than what is involved in a philosophical reverie. In fact, later on the poet indicates a third-class carriage of an Indian Railways train ("with open windows") as his preferred mode of transport when his "Time's Up."

Through a subtle network of specular relationships and cross-references, *Mirrored, Mirroring* takes a winding course toward its final destination. Previous excursions in the dissection hall and the torture chamber provide the reformed anatomist with the material and the experience to argue that

It makes sense not
to have the body
seamless,
hermetically sealed, a
non-official
box of incorruptibles.
Better shot through and through!
Interpenetrated
with the world.²⁶

And a few pages later, the same concept of bodily interpenetration is used to describe a form of devotional mysticism in "God or" ("God or / something like that / shot / through each part of you"²⁷). This and other poems in *Mirrored, Mirroring* represent fine examples of modern-day bhakti poetry, as they document the poet's attempt to make sense of the possibility and plausibility of God in this world, while at the same time visualizing his own departure from it.

Notes

1. See [Bibliography](#).
2. In an interview with Eunice de Souza, Daruwalla explains how *Under Orion* “was written in one short year when I returned to the police in 1968 after a five-year break. Earlier I had worked with the government of India in the hills. Crime and bandits do get in the way, as also a flood.” Eunice de Souza, *Talking Poems: Conversations with Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46.
3. *Collected Poems: 1970–2005* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006), 41.
4. *Ibid.*, 44.
5. *Ibid.*, 52.
6. Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3rd edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 5.
7. This is, perhaps, the reason why Daruwalla selected no more than one-quarter of its content for his *Collected Poems*, making this the least represented of the nine collections covered.
8. *Collected Poems*, 97.
9. *Ibid.*, 98.
10. *Ibid.*, 153–55.
11. *Ibid.*, 155–57.
12. Borges and the Barbarians are the inspiring forces behind *Fire Altar*. The collection is introduced by Daruwalla’s response to Cavafy’s well-known poem “Waiting for the Barbarians.” In Daruwalla’s poem, the torch of barbarism is first carried by the Parsis (“While the West waited, / we sailed eastward to Gujarat”) and then extinguished altogether in the closing lines (“It is not that the barbarians won’t be coming,” but that “there never were any barbarians”). As for the Argentinian master (to whom Daruwalla refers directly in “Roof Observatory,” from *The Map-Maker*, and indirectly elsewhere in his work), his influence is more subtle and pervasive. Besides the scenes from *Darius Codomannus* (quietly passed as one of the sources for the book, but written by Daruwalla himself), Borges’s “Story of the Warrior and the Captive” (from his 1949 collection *EL Aleph*) provides a likely paradigm for the peculiar “philosophy of history” propounded in *Fire Altar*.
13. For a list of Patel’s works, see the [Bibliography](#).
14. *Poems* (Bombay: Nissim Ezekiel, 1966), 2–3.
15. *Ibid.*, 23–26.
16. *Ibid.*, 24.
17. *Ibid.*, 28.
18. *How Do You Withstand, Body* (Bombay: Clearing House, 1976), 26.
19. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
20. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
21. *Ibid.*, 27.

22. "The Difficulty," *Mirrored, Mirroring* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1.
23. *Ibid.*, 2.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 3.
26. "It Makes," 30.
27. *Ibid.*, 41.

The Third Generation: Melanie Silgado and Manohar Shetty

Sharanya

In a chronology of modern Indian English poetry, Surjit S. Dulai begins the timeline by referring to C. R Mandy, the editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* in 1947, as someone who “encourage[ed] local literary writers.”¹ Tracing three generations of poets, beginning from Nissim Ezekiel, he cites the third generation as beginning in the 1970s, when a student of Ezekiel’s, Santan Rodrigues, publishes a poetry collection titled *I Exist* in 1976. That generation included several new poets – many of whom were mentored by Ezekiel – who went on to found publishing presses and publish their own work, including Melanie Silgado and Manohar Shetty.² These new poets, Dulai writes, “move away from radical modernist techniques. They are more concerned with the portrayal and assessment of their family background, their own lives and relations with others, and their immediate environment.”³ This chapter will focus on the poetic oeuvre of Silgado and Shetty as poets occupied with the familiar, outlining their concerns and poetic styles, and attempting to tease out the overlaps between their respective bodies of work.

Melanie Silgado was “born in 1956 in Bombay to Roman Catholic parents,” subsequently going on to study English at St. Xavier’s College in Bombay.⁴ A selection of her poems first appeared in the 1978 volume *Three Poets* – the first of four collections of poetry⁵ launched by the “short-lived collective” Newground that she founded along with fellow Bombay poets Santan Rodrigues and Raul D’Gama Rosein the same year.⁶ In 1985, as part of her course at the London College of Printing, Silgado produced a second volume of poems titled *Skies of Design*, which went on to win the Best First Book Commonwealth Poetry Prize, Asian Section.⁷

Silgado’s early work demonstrates a preoccupation with violence – particularly sexual abuse and the unraveling of a disrupted mind – that continues through her published work, but that is at its most assertive and “adrenalized” in the poems in *Three Poets*.⁸ The voices in Silgado’s poems

are not merely victims of violence, they are also perpetrators – and, ultimately, witnesses. They “fall,” “break,” “scratch,” “slap,” and “scream,” but they also watch “daily faces crumple, / die in front of mirrors”⁹ and mourn the dead “bundled in the van / your entrails angry and hanging loose.”¹⁰ Rodents and scavengers litter her landscapes, as do crowds: aggressive and urban. Frequently, the link between familial oppression and Silgado’s sharp reclamation of the female self is a strong one. In “Goan Death,” on the burial of a father:

Where vultures clustered round
in lace and satin blacks,
weeping salt,
raw red their mouths,
mumbling incoherent prayers,
their dentures going brown.
His wife, my mother
tore within her
memories and still-born past.
Hallucinations for tomorrow
she wept no salt-corrosive.
Destruction clung inside her.¹¹

In juxtaposing her mother as the destroyed figure with the weeping relatives as birds of prey, Silgado manages to subvert the trope of the mourning woman: the wife (also mother) does not weep out of despair, and the “vultures,” in spite of their sanctimonious instruction (“picking entrails neatly / said: Were you true wife / your head be bowed, / in weeping, mourning state”) are portrayed as being more deceitful than distressed.¹² Destruction becomes a prime operator in the cycle of grief: some prey on it; others, such as the wife, are prey to a different form of it: destruction that pre-dates the death of the destructor.

According to Bruce King, Silgado differs from her mentor and friend, poet Eunice de Souza, who also addresses Goan society in her work, but with more satire and dialogue than Silgado. King believes that Silgado’s portrayal “is more compassionate, and there is a close identification with her dead father. The confessional, compassionate, familial and social often blend; the personal is set within a context of others.”¹³ The personal/political dichotomy is a false framework to impose on either poet for both poetic endeavors attempt to address their respective experiences as women within Goan Catholic households in Bombay whilst also trying to comment on the nature of society surrounding them. A deeper concern is King’s assertion of

compassion and identification with the father figure. In a poem such as “Goan Death,” the narrator talks around the death by talking about the living. In “Sequel to Goan Death,” the narrator admits, after kissing the face of the deceased father, “dead with last stubble, / cold as the marble church” that:

The coffin is long as a journey,
The grave looks like a grave.
Nothing special for father
who hated graves.
It saves an epitaph.¹⁴

This last line is telling in its implied indifference and relief. In a more direct poem about fatherhood, titled “For father on the shelf,” the narrator refers to the father’s alcoholism with anger and a simultaneous inability to hate completely:

You never knew I wet my pillow
oftener than I had ever wet my bed.
...
I grant you divine power that it took to live your kind of life,
both villain and hero of the piece.
Father you lived too much.¹⁵

The tussle here is not between empathy and accusation, but rather between two polarities of power. In “granting” her father a position of mock divinity, the narrator is taking back the right to condemn him for his violent, alcoholic tendencies. The shift – especially in the last poem – of power remains within the confession form; it occurs during her narration, as she bears witness to her own life and his, in front of a photograph of him. In the title poem of *Skies of Design*, the narrator concludes, because she “undid all my hopes. / I made no claims to knowing you. / As on a distant whimper the ear cannot focus, / one a disappearing star the eye cannot alight”:

All power, now, I take away from you.
As from my father, my brothers,
the ones before you.
I shall bury you under the slipping sands
so that generations of memories
can rise upon you.¹⁶

Silgado’s confessors are unyielding women; they are plagued by loneliness and violence, but they confront – or attempt to – rather than submit easily. About the poetry of Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, and Silgado, King

asserts that “the women map a psychology of contradictions, humiliations and defeats rather than self-assertions and triumph,” unlike the “narrative” or “tonal distance” and “self-protectiveness in the male poets.”¹⁷ Triumph, if it is to be defined as such, certainly does not contain the strain of overcoming defeat or patriarchy, as King points out. However, it could be argued that triumph may lie in the very acknowledgment of being crushed or defeated, and that the “tonal distance” or “self-protectiveness” in male poetry of the generation is not necessarily at odds with the violent confessions of the women, but rather exists as a contrast only if distance and self-protectiveness are considered to be virtues in poetry. Much of Silgado’s work uses images and testimonies of violence to foreground the triumph of speech as a validation of that violence. In “A Finale,” which is one of Silgado’s most poignant endeavors to unravel the generational burden of womanhood, the narrator is relentless in acknowledging her own inability to cope:

I sit amid the clutter.
 Dead animal.
 Bowels loosened all around.
 Night is heavy on my back
 and I, towering
 on my mother’s stilts
 the new act
 on the painted bill.
 . . .
 I change my stilts
 for tight-rope lunacy.
 The lights go out.
 I fall.
 I break.¹⁸

The clutter and weight of history is too much; it has driven the narrator to “fall,” “break,” and calmly give in to lunacy. The image of “loosened bowels” scattered across the room of her mind contrasts sharply with Silgado’s metaphor of the circus act; womanhood is then not merely an act to be performed for others, it is also an act that unravels in the course of its very production. The narrator may be the new act, but she is also – willingly, obstinately – a dead animal, barely surviving over the men who “lived too much.” The last poem in *Skies of Design* is resounding on this point. In “The Brave One” the narrator is emphatic:

Got to keep going
 To lapse is to lose.

I am the brave one.
 I make the rain.
 I burst the buds.
 Irritable friends say:
 Don't give us Plath,
 give us blood,
 or mud with a new shape,
 . . .
 I gape. I'm the brave one. It's a strain.¹⁹

When contrasted with “The Earthworm’s Story” – termed by King as “a metaphor for feminine survival through self-humiliation” – the effects of this “strain” are telling.²⁰

I lost this last bit of shine
 scraping along the way.
 The crow pecked,
 the ant bit,
 and the gravel sneered underbelly.
 . . .
 It does not matter
 if that's your foot over me.²¹

Silgardo’s obsession with animal imagery – a feature that is common to Shetty’s poetry too – is frequently avian in nature, especially in *Skies of Design*. The image of birds is often used to indicate the delicate, ephemeral nature of human life and tender but terrifying moments between people, particularly children. In “Do not tell the Children,” which addresses a child:

Alone you fight the night screeches
 of the sleepless birds and build your defences
 like the jackal in the silhouette
 of the enormous hill.
 I have nothing to offer you
 but an eternity of lines around my throat.
 Circles of time.²²

The “sleepless birds” here could be read as the entirety of adulthood waiting outside the comfort of sleep and home; the comparison with the aforementioned first-person narratives about violent fathers and vulturine families only intensifies the contrast between safety and violence. The “lines” around the narrator’s throat here are then, as a result, not merely indicative of aging, but also signs of the liberal violence of others, which one can seemingly only battle by becoming predatory oneself.

Elsewhere, Silgado's use of bird imagery points to fragility and innocence; in "Child," a poem from *Three Poets* that is once again addressed to a child, the narrator observes:

Sometimes, your head on one side
 you venture, tentative,
 brother of the sparrow.
 You won't be kissed.
 I too was a child my dear,
 my heart as large as your fist.²³

In likening the three-year-old child to a sparrow's sibling, Silgado seals the impact of the image; the child emerges as a tiny, invisible figure, pecking its way tentatively through life. The immediate harshness of "you won't be kissed" is then softened, and produces a curious effect in this context: it emerges as an act of benevolence, preparing the child for the wary but occasionally joyful adult universe later found in *Skies of Design*.

In "A March Poem," the narrator ruminates on the "long road" of childhood "that began with the first bead of sweat / that grew till it became a sea." Referring often to the widening dimensions of life – with allusions to "long" days, shadows, legs, and "tall" trees – the narrator breaks the reminiscing to say:

I also know there is no sky to mark the limits,
 only to my mind that stumbles past each mile.
 Every undergrowth along the way offers
 a new bird, a new batch of speckled eggs,
 a new generation of wings.²⁴

The image of the cycle of life here, and the repetition of "new," connotes discovery, growth, and, curiously enough, optimism – a subtle gesture toward adulthood as a promise, from egg to wings, from the ground to the limitless sky. When contrasted with one of the concluding poems of *Skies of Design*, "Bird broken," the promise is not a false, uneven one; failure is implicit in its accompaniment, and perhaps even necessary:

Bird broken on a flying wing
 you stumble on the air.
 . . .
 No one knows about the fractures
 in the asphalt
 only visible to those that fly.
 Bird flying on a broken wing
 soon your voice will break

and sing to some
dark, columnar mass.²⁵

The inversion of “bird broken” and “bird flying” in the above stanzas is telling; if the flight of life breaks one initially, as it will, it is possible to keep flying, until the “resounding burial / of air and dirt” claim one.²⁶ These are positions of aching vulnerability, for while Silgado’s poem could easily be read as an ode to a distraught, hurt bird, it is difficult not to draw the analogies that recur through her two collections, where the journey and corpus of the bird-figure mirror – or even enhance – those of man’s. In “Waking,” a tender poem about a lover’s first movements in the morning, Silgado writes:

Your hair is soft as a beach.
Your breathing the sound of the sea.
The first word you say
will be guttural and half full of sleep.
...
Outside the round pigeons
garble and stutter.
A prayer rests on their wings.²⁷

The bird-figure is now an indicator of the atmosphere of the morning: peaceful, playful and incoherent, the “garble and stutter” appearing to be in the same vein as the sleepy, “guttural” sounds of her lover. The demarcation between the public and private lives of the narrator and her lover – outside, the world of the pigeons; inside, the intimacy rising with the sun – breaks with the line, “a prayer rests on their wings”: a reference to both worlds, it would seem.²⁸ Although the poem begins with jarringly violent images (“The blood rests in your palm. / Soon it will rise like the sun/ shooting its veins, fleet arrows.”), it concludes on a more subdued and resigned note (“The sun stirs in your palm. / Mornings of departure”).²⁹ The pigeons here mark the shift in tone and worlds, bridging the social and the natural.

Silgado’s poem “Bombay” is perhaps a superior example of this particular convergence. While the worlds in Silgado’s poetry, as demonstrated, offer insights into the interiority of suburban lives, urban life itself is not alluded to as often unless it helps to highlight a social aspect of the lives contained within; in “Endless Faces” we watch as “Every wall’s a mirror. / You crash into the repetitive rooms. / Faces splurge and sliver after you,” whereas in “Stationary Stop”³⁰ we are told that “This station breathes with people/ who breed each other./There are one way tracks / diverging at the

signal 'go'. / No train has ever passed this way."³¹ Both instances, coupled with Silgado's other poems elaborated on earlier, focus on movement within urbanity and less on urbanity itself. In "Bombay," however:

you breathe like an animal.
Your islands grained and joined,
are flanks you kicked apart
when some dark god
waved diverse men into your crotch.
They built
your concrete-toothed skyline,
with kicks and dedications
to their gods.³²

Bombay has been personified endlessly in modern Indian poetry. Poet and artist Arun Kolatkar dedicated an entire volume of poetry to the city's former art district and inhabits various voices within the space, from a dog's to the casual walker's (*Kala Ghoda Poems*), while poets before and after him have created a "vocabulary that venerates the city's ambition,"³³ from Nissim Ezekiel's swift observations in "A Morning Walk" ("Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged, / Processions led by frantic drums"³⁴) and Raul D'Gama Rose's "Land Reclamation Bombay: 1972" that compares reclamation to the heinous act of sexual violation ("Comes down/ a rusty blade/slicing/the bottlegreen tanglement / of her stark nude back / to shut away/ the act"³⁵), to poet and writer Adil Jussawalla's moving ode to the city's idealized generosity with migrants ("Gatherer of ends whose brick beginnings work / loose like a skin, / spotting the coast, / restore us to fire"³⁶) and Arundhati Subramaniam's feisty "5:46, Andheri Local," which describes the city as "A thousand-limbed / million-tongued, multi-spoused / Kali on wheels."³⁷

Silgado does reference the passing of lives within the city ("Some live unwarranted,/their carpets thicker than their lawns"), but the poem is predominantly about the jagged-jigsaw nature of Bombay and its various bothered, breathing parts.³⁸ The usage of human body parts to denote various events in the city's history is not unprecedented, as has been discussed, but its overtly sexual description, with references to dissenting "flanks" and a "sluggish shore" that should "reclaim your cunt from time to time," highlights other recurring concerns in Silgado's poetry, such as sexual violence.³⁹ Silgado's Bombay emerges as a foreboding, violent creature that resists capitalist assault.

Manohar Shetty's "Bombay," on the other hand, a poem from his first collection *A Guarded Space*, also emerges as a monstrous creature, but one

that violates and grows with every violation; mostly a perpetrator, only occasionally a victim. On its anatomy, he writes:

Marooned by the unkillable
 Cycle of mutilations it widens
 Mutant serrated teeth
 To rip and masticate the tightening
 Torniquet of the sea.⁴⁰

Bombay's ruthless land reclamation process appears as a generational concern for modern Indian poets. Some, such as D'Gama Rose, view the city as a victim of it while others, such as Shetty and Silgado, acknowledge the tug between modernization and the obstinate force of the sea. Shetty's choice of verbs ("marooned," "masticate," "rip," "widens") and adjectives ("mutilations," "mutant serrated teeth," "tightening") all suggest the emergence of a brutal, enclosed city. While earlier in the poem he captures the helplessness of the island – "the island is pounded thin, veins splayed / To the sea's rim, fingers / Spread-eagled towards the horizon"⁴¹ – toward the end, he marries the city's deformed anatomy to its historic, fierce struggle for existence: "Convex stomach ballooning, / Its paw scoops the tide for more: / Drips, shovels a larger clump/ At each meal."⁴²

Both Silgado and Shetty are concerned, however briefly, with the forces that run the metropolis, but in different ways. For Silgado, the people are the driving force behind the urban form; their poverty is cataclysmic and their thirst for "concrete-toothed skylines" is irresponsible.⁴³ For Shetty, however, the city exists as a creature of its own reckoning. Its people may comprise the organism, but it is the city that "widens," "rips," "shovels," "scoops," and "masticates." The city and its interiors are the primary urban forces in Shetty's poetic universe, and "Bombay" is one of the earliest demonstrations of this concern.

Manohar Shetty studied at St. Peter's High School in Panchgani and at the University of Mumbai. He published *A Guarded Space* with Newground when he was twenty-eight years old, culling poems written between 1974 and 1980. He worked as part of the editorial staff at the *Sunday Standard Magazine* for three years,⁴⁴ and has, to date, published four other collections of poetry: *Borrowed Time* (1988), *Domestic Creatures*, which consists of older poems and some newer ones (1994), *Personal Effects* (2010), and *Body Language* (2012). Shetty also edited a collection of short stories about Goa in 2010, titled *Ferry Crossing*.⁴⁵ Like Silgado, he began his own publishing imprint for poetry called Doosra Press, under which he published *Personal Effects*. His other work has been published by small,

independent presses: Adil Jussawalla's now-extant Xal-Praxis brought out *Borrowed Time*, and Marathi poet Hemant Divate published *Body Language* for Poetryvala.⁴⁶

The characters in Shetty's urbanscapes are intensely lonely. This theme of urban ennui is one that evolves across his five collections; if *A Guarded Space* addresses the paranoid and claustrophobic condition of the loner, then *Body Language*, his most recent collection, turns its eye outwards on to the world, particularly life in contemporary Goa, seeking to understand characters as varied as bodybuilders, senior citizens, and European tourists. The nature of Shetty's urban obsession changes across the collections, too. The focus moves from the components of urban life – pavements, walls, newspapers – to the relationship between living spaces and the people who move within them, such as living rooms, dinars, and gardens. While both Silgado and Shetty do write about Goa, they do so in very different ways. Silgado chooses to focus on the construction and rituals of the Goan Catholic family and reveals a desire to situate that particular strand of identity and history within her larger concerns about women and violence. Shetty writes about everyday Goan life from the perspective of an outsider – as someone who lives there, and has watched the landscape turn with time. Indeed, the Goan landscape does not emerge as strongly in his earlier collections as it does in *Personal Effects* and *Body Language*.

In *A Guarded Space*, Shetty's urban personae are fleshed out in individual poems, the titles of which are revealing in their preoccupations: "Mannequin," "Cocoon," "The Recluse," "The Lunatic," and "Neighbourhood," to name a few. Several of these poems explore the dialectic between the private and the public, be it from the viewpoint of a mannequin gazing at the people passing by every day, or the man in "Familiarities" who is threatened by a tree outside invading his physical and temporal space. Shetty's imagery is hard, relentless, and stinging in its accuracy; bodies burn from the ennui and time moves like death. In "The Common Chronicle":

My eyeballs burn in the sun.
Cars crunch into my eardrums.
I cross and recross a web of streets,
...
I sleep like a corpse; my dreams are black.
The alarm clock rocks my eardrums.⁴⁷

The near-alliterative effect of "cars crunch," "cross," "corpse," and "clock" enhances the bleak, harsh atmosphere of the poem that is created by the

images in themselves: black dreams, corpses, burning eyeballs, and an urban maze that completes the nightmare of repetition. “The Recluse” could be a neighbor:

He wakes every morning from the spell of the dead.
Mucous lids dense as cobwebs
Inspect a wall, a bewildered bed.
The air crackles and hums like cables,
Newspapers drop like bombs on doorsteps:⁴⁸

The atmosphere is rotting and almost war-like, and the recluse is a survivor in his bed. The urbanscape here is at its strongest, alluding to everyday objects such as newspapers and beds and drawing analogies with humming cables and bombs, creating a vivid image of a loner’s universe.

The theme continues in *Borrowed Time*. In “The Awakening,” a man wakes up from a nightmare to find that the world around him is not dissimilar:

... eyes
Bulging like molten balls
Bowled him backwards, nerve-cords
Spiralling round his dazed gaze,
... And when at last
The sun woke, a shimmering foil, the bulb’s
Filament was a sliver of coal.⁴⁹

Shetty’s penchant for describing the most precise, disorienting sensations remains; eyeballs bulge, burn, and are trapped within cobweb-like lids. The natural world is seen through the eyes of the urban (the sun becoming a “shimmering foil,” the air “crackling”), and the body is perennially near-collapse, on the verge of merging with the overwhelming urbanism that surrounds it. In “Reflections of a Cartographer,” from *Personal Effects*:

Through the thick, magnifying glass –
Veins in my honed eye
Streams of red – the contour
Lines are taut webs, gradients
Coalesce from blue to green,
To the burnt sienna of dry blood,⁵⁰

The comparisons to blood are present throughout his work; morning tea becomes a “blood clot sea”⁵¹ of dead ants, it is “hard to / Imagine the steely core flaking away / Like dried clots / Of blood”⁵² to become rust, and a litchi has “the texture / Of clotted blood.”⁵³ It is a strain of metaphor that is a part of Shetty’s larger fixation with the limits of the human body, and the

point of separation of the human world from that of the animal world – a concern that is present in Silgado’s work as well, but differently, as the human remains the center of her poetic universe. In “Child” from *Domestic Creatures*, the figure of the child is constructed through the anatomy of animals:

The first night, your fists, like pink
 Webbed feet, clenched in defence
 . . . in sleep, you smiled,
 All hums, tremulous cat-grin.⁵⁴

The poem ends by comparing her eyes to those of a “wondering loris.”⁵⁵ When contrasted with “Catwalk,” a section from a poem in *Body Language* titled “Marginilia I,” which is a short, sharp take on supermodels:

Their
 Hawk-eyes frozen
 On camera wear
 The mascara
 Of tigers.⁵⁶

These images simultaneously fascinate and repel because they open an alternate view of a familiar universe – that of our own corpus. Nothing is sacred, not even the flesh of a child, which is in fact made unfamiliar by the intimacy of such images. The supermodels here emerge as fierce beasts of prey – not unlike Silgado’s vultures – but they are portrayed as ambitious and elegant. Bruce King says of the title of *Domestic Creatures*: “It does not begin with an idea of Indianness or an ideology; its quality comes from its concentration on the personal, the known, the genuinely observed and what it really means.”⁵⁷ Although King goes on to elaborate on the fraught relationship between our desire to seek a particular “authentic” form of Indianness in modern Indian poetry and the “Indianness” in everyday Indian urban life, such as the world found in Shetty’s poetry, this particular observation is an astute one and can be extended to include all of Shetty’s collections: the “personal,” the “known,” and the “genuinely observed” are all examined so closely that they become alien to us.

Shetty’s interest in animal lives and bodies is not restricted to drawing comparisons with the human body; objects as familiar as boats and trees are subject to such associations. In “Familiarities,” Shetty writes of a tree invading a man’s private, physical space:

Its presence unsettled him:
 Branches like tentacles nagged

The window bars, unwrapped a shower
Of insects that nestled under his skin,⁵⁸

The tree – already a live creature – becomes even more so, bordering on threatening, when its branches are compared to “tentacles.” They “nag” window bars and “unwrap” insects, immediately appearing as bothersome and cruel creatures. The poem ends, however, with the branches being cut off, at which point “he wills the halved / Boughs to reach out to him, / He remembers the leaves’ shifting shades, / . . . Green drapes against the rain”: the tree has instantly transformed back into a gentle, generous but distant object, one that is no longer too close for comfort.⁵⁹ In one of Shetty’s most accomplished poems, “The Boats,” two tied boats on the beach are compared to lovers who “lurch closer, bodies chafe / And whisper, wince,” but the solitary universe quickly gains a disconcerting animation:

Salt festers in their ribs.
The grey waters wrinkle.
Their bones twitch.
Trash as the moon-chained
Tide deepens to darken
Eel-scaled waves.⁶⁰

When the violent bodies of the bodies – trashing, chafing, lurching, wincing – are seen in their habitat, animated by “grey,” “wrinkled” waters and “eel-scaled waves,” the boats suddenly appear aged, twitching now instead of trashing. Similarly, in “Migratory” from *Borrowed Time*:

Flapping like white flags
They teeter on the tree’s
Threshold, crests tinged
Between yellow and black;
. . .
While the travellers flutter and lift
In electric clouds, dim
Like filaments in the horizon.⁶¹

Here, a reversal occurs: the birds become the subject of the poem, but they are continually compared to urban objects such as flags and filaments “in electric clouds.” The animal figure is just as much in flux as the human figure is. In Shetty’s poetry, the urbanscape and its components act as a medium to bridge and separate the two forms. Frequently, animals that traditionally repulse, such as reptiles, rodents, and insects, are transformed into glamorous creatures subverting human notions of the kind of

domestic animals one tends to seek intimacy with, such as cats and dogs. In “Frog” from *Body Language*:

Its hind legs are the flippers
 Of a deep-sea diver.
 Stuck fast as cling film
 To the cliff-face of a wall,
 . . .
 Its tongue is the zip
 Of a measuring tape
 Clicking back,⁶²

The frog has transformed from an ugly, slimy reptile to a deep-sea diver, a sprinter, and a gymnast. The most repulsive of its anatomical parts are compared to efficient objects such as cling film and measuring tapes. In using such unexpected metaphors and humor, Shetty succeeds in bringing us closer to not merely the animal in question, but also to animal life in general. A sense of empathy is created, however briefly, by bringing a human lens over the world of the animal. The creatures are ultimately made domestic, for our benefit, but they remain so in the imagination.

Shetty’s later work remains concerned with the alienation of the animal world, but the nature of his engagement is not quite as explicit as it appears to be in his earlier work. Although *Personal Effects* and *Body Language* dedicate several poems to animals, such as the aforementioned “Frog” and others such as “Honeybee” and “Peacock,” his poems begin to occupy themselves with the concerns of a human being, dwelling on aging, death, and family more than ever. The relationship with animals remains, but increasingly they become a mode of expression for the human world, and less the reverse. In “Three Aphorisms” from *Personal Effects*, Shetty writes:

To a Young Couple
 May you most
 Tenderly embrace
 The high
 Fidelity
 Of the whale.⁶³

The whale-figure makes only a fleeting appearance, and is, moreover, not the focus. The poem adopts a fond, parental tone, commenting more on the required fidelity and mindset for commitment than on the whale itself. The whale is, at this point, a metaphor that exists only to comment on the nature of a human relationship. Similarly, with “Termite” from the same collection:

That's not you in the closet
 Mirror. The monastic
 Forehead is yours and the lofty
 Temples: the pupils like lit
 Candles, . . .
 . . . Look
 At the arterial
 Tunnels of mud.
 That's you now: must,
 Dryrot and sawdust.⁶⁴

The poem is titled "Termite," but the termite itself never makes an appearance. Its presence is felt in retrospect, through the tunnels of dust and mud left behind. More importantly, the poem demonstrates a continual concern for the mortality of the human – even the tunnels of mud are "arterial." The termite serves only to highlight this anxiety for mortal life; when the man looks into the mirror, he sees not just the potential of all that he could be – the anointed, almost sacred anatomical parts that terrorized him in *A Guarded Space* – but also the limits. In spite of the blessed body, he sees only his eventual death. The absence of the termite itself is the ultimate proof of his mortality.

According to Bruce King, "Shetty maps the mind's pains, fears, wounds, disillusionments and moments of insanity. The poems define areas of the inner self, its defences and relation to reality."⁶⁵ King was, at the time, referring exclusively to *A Guarded Space*. This concern with the inner self, which is most strongly present in earlier collections such as *A Guarded Space* and *Borrowed Time*, does not vanish with later writing. It does, however, evolve into a wry, caustic tone that lingers on the inner self in the context of its surroundings. The shift in physical spaces across the collections is itself testimony to that: whereas in the earlier collections Shetty's protagonists would haunt empty bedrooms and streets, the figures in *Personal Effects* and *Body Language* are on the brink of abandoning their living rooms, gardens, and churches – all spaces populated by families and neighbors.

For both Silgado and Shetty, the shift in focus in their work is not merely from a shocking intimacy with violence to a more subdued but tensile confrontation with it, but also from looking on to the world of the other – whoever the other may be: animals, children, a difficult society – to introspecting from within it. Both Shetty and Silgado share thematic concerns, such as the unexpected trauma of childhood and a peculiar fascination with the world of animals, but it is less this that renders them poets to be read together and more that the movement in their poetry

reflects similar questions about how to belong to the world while always being subjects outside it. Silgado turns her gaze from violence outside the domestic sphere to that which politically unravels within it. Shetty's preoccupations with mortality and pain have not decreased, but merely changed form. This is also reflected in the aforementioned depiction of a parallel, animal world. By the arrival of *Body Language*, any neat, existing boundaries between the two worlds have collapsed. The world of the human is once again, like Silgado's, at the center.

Notes

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SECTION IV

Poets of the Diaspora

*“My First, and Only, Sight”: A. K. Ramanujan
and the Five Senses*

Nakul Krishna

A. K. Ramanujan died in 1993 in Chicago, an untimely death following an adverse reaction to anesthesia for minor surgery. The flag in the University of Chicago’s main quadrangle flew at half-mast; Ramanujan had taught there for three decades. In his early sixties when he died, he was a towering figure in more than one academic discipline. Born to orthodox Tamil-speaking Brahmins in the Kannada-speaking princely state of Mysore and educated at the Maharaja’s College, then a formidable institution of higher education, he had traveled to the United States of America on a Fulbright Scholarship as a graduate student in Linguistics. His dissertation on Kannada grammar proved enough to get him hired to the University of Chicago’s growing program in South Asian Studies. It was while he was at Chicago that he published his most significant work. This included six collections of poetry: in English, *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), and *Second Sight* (1986); in Kannada, *Hokkulalli Hoovilla* (“No Lotus in the Navel”) (1969), *Mattu Itara Padyagalu* (“And Other Poems”) (1977), and *Kuntobille* (“Hopscotch”) (1990). A fourth English collection, *The Black Hen*, was published posthumously in his *Collected Poems* (1995). Chicago was also where he worked on the volumes of translation from Kannada and Tamil that made him the most influential translator of pre-modern Indian literature into English in the twentieth century, as well as the many scholarly essays on aspects of Indian literature, culture, and folklore that won him his academic reputation.¹

Inconveniently for the literary historian, it is possible to place Ramanujan in several literary and intellectual lineages to equally illuminating effect. He appears, with Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes, as one of the founding figures in the twentieth-century tradition of (“modernist”) Indian poetry in English.² He appears also (though he looms less large) as a pioneering formal experimenter in the tradition of twentieth-century Kannada poetry.³ He might, just as plausibly, be seen in terms of his

formation against the backdrop of a modernist revolution in the twentieth-century literatures of the two Indian languages he knew best, Tamil and Kannada, in particular the Tamil poetry of Subramania Bharati, whose literary influence in the Tamil world is comparable to that of Tagore on modern Bengali literature.⁴ In intellectual terms, he might be seen as a product of what might be called, on the model of the Bengali prototype, the Mysore Renaissance. This was a real but understudied phenomenon of the early twentieth century, finding expression in the work of a disparate set of intellectual and cultural figures united by a childhood in the south Indian princely state of Mysore whose rulers had, from the nineteenth century onward, put into a place a remarkable set of industrial, scientific, and educational institutions, of which the Maharaja's College was the most important.⁵

Alternatively, he might be severed from his Indian contexts and read as part of an international tradition of poetic modernism, a much younger figure in a lineage of poets defined by their distance from the English–French–German center of twentieth-century modernism: W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and César Vallejo, but also the mid-century American masters Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams. His scholarly trajectory might be seen in the light of international academic trends – Chomskian linguistics in the late-1950s, structuralism in the subsequent decades, a cautious interest in elements of postcolonial theory, and a life-long penchant for psychoanalytic approaches to the study of literature and folklore, among many others. Equally, he might be placed in the history of “area studies” in American universities, itself the product of the American academy's Cold War-era interest in South Asian societies, and consequently their languages and literatures.⁶

Nothing short of a comprehensive literary biography – none yet exists – could do justice to the variety of Ramanujan's contributions. However, so thoroughly intertwined were Ramanujan's efforts as a poet, scholar, and translator that any attempt to focus on his English poetry in isolation will be likely to mislead. One must look for a sort of Ariadne's thread to take one through the labyrinth. One such thread, or the nearest thing to it, might be found in the lines of a long poem, “Prayers to Lord Murugan,” from his second English collection, *Relations*; it was one of those selected to be read out at his funeral. The telling lines come in section 8 of the poem:

Lord of the headlines,
help us read
the small print.

Lord of the sixth sense,
give us back
our five senses.⁷

The invocation of the senses, the injunction to see more clearly what the inattentive mind is apt to ignore, is a recurring motif in Ramanujan's poetry and it is put to a variety of uses in a range of contexts of political as well as literary historical significance. It is not the only such recurring trope in his poetry. Some excellent previous criticism has used Ramanujan's concern with "the nature of the human body and its relation to the natural world" as a similar thread.⁸ Other critics have traced his allusions to (metaphors of) family and kinship throughout his poetic career,⁹ and, in line with late-twentieth-century critical trends, his status as a "diasporic" writer.¹⁰ The following pages attempt to say something about the nature of Ramanujan's modernism, in terms both of its emphasis on the sensual and particular over the abstract and in its creative attitude to history and tradition – indeed, in how Ramanujan fashioned for his modernism a literary genealogy that traced his poetic impulses to the pre-modern literatures of south India.

"Prayers to Lord Murugan," Ramanujan would later explain, was a response to an ancient Tamil poem about the god Murugan. But his prayers were really "antiprayers; they use an old poem in a well-known genre to make a new poem to say new things. The past works through the present as the present reworks the past."¹¹ The modernist moment in Ramanujan is too complex a thing to be found in a single element of his poetry. But if his academic and poetic oeuvre have anything like a thematic center, that center is to found in his recurring veneration of "our five senses."¹²

Even in his first English collection, *The Striders*, the titles of the poems – such as "Still Life" and "Self-Portrait" – make the image, rather than the concept, the unit of poetic organization. Motifs of perception and the organs of vision recur, frequently in sinister variations. An index entry for "eye" would yield a long list: "lidless eyes," "the prehistoric yellow eyes of a goat," "a bulbous foetal eye," all the way up to the "round red eye" of the fearsome "black hen" in the poem from which his posthumously published final collection of poetry took its title.¹³ Perception is for Ramanujan always a creative act, a *seeing as*: "Waterfalls in a Bank" in his third English collection *Second Sight* opens, in characteristically *in medias res* fashion:

And then one sometimes sees waterfalls
as the ancient Tamils saw them,
wavering snakeskins¹⁴

Perception in Ramanujan's poetry is never innocent, never simple, and the knowledge that comes of seeing is typically unsettling, often menacing. "Watch your step," warns the narrator of "Chicago Zen." "Sight may strike you / blind in unexpected places."¹⁵ The last stanza of "Take Care" displaces a phrase from the famously banal bucolic by W. H. Davies ("What is this life if, full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare?") into the anomic world of twentieth-century Chicago and becomes, for a writer seldom given to explicit political pronouncements, a vehicle of political commentary:

In Chicago,
do not walk slow.
Find no time
to stand and stare.
Down there, blacks look black.
And whites, they look blacker.¹⁶

Perception can be about the apprehension of relations (no doubt this was one of the senses of the title of his second collection, *Relations*), where it is the poetic mind that finds – or creates – unity from a miscellany of elements, as in Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Or it can be a kind of "double vision," another recurring phrase. The narrator of Ramanujan's "Entries from a Catalogue of Fears," published when he was in his early forties, is distressed at the prospect of losing just this poetic faculty:

Sixty, and one glass eye,
even I talk now and then and God,
find reasons to be fair
everywhere
to the even and to the odd,
see karma
in the fall of a tubercular sparrow
in the newspaper deaths in Burma
of seventy-one men, women and children;
actually see the One in the Many,
losing a lifetime of double vision
with one small adjustment
of glasses.¹⁷

Part of this is an expression of Ramanujan's fear of turning into the "Hindoo" who is half-mocked in a series of poems (the colonial-era spelling hinting that his subject is in part the stereotype itself) for whom, with all his aspirations to detachment, "the only risk is heartlessness."¹⁸ But

the fear is also poetic: what if his double vision, the ability to see the Many in the One, turns out to be a quirk of his spectacles, leaving the poet with nothing to do? The fear – like others in his catalogue – is both comical and affecting. A poem written in his early sixties, another “anti-prayer” written in the voice of the boy-devotee Prahlad, that mythical exemplar of piety in the Vaishnava hagiographical tradition, has him address Vishnu in his incarnation as “Narasimha,” half-man, half-lion:

End my commerce with bat and night-
owl. Adjust my single eye, rainbow bubble,
so I too may see all things double¹⁹

One of Ramanujan’s motivations for the veneration of the “five senses” is an annoyance with the old idea of the Hindu (or indeed, the “Hindoo”) as possessed of some higher, non-sensory, faculty – an orientalist cliché persuasive enough to have been internalized even by many Hindus. Thus does the superficially “minor” poem, “Second Sight,” which concludes his third, 1986, collection of English poetry, become thematically substantial enough to give its title to the whole volume:

... As we enter the dark,
someone says from behind,
“You are Hindoo, aren’t you?
You must have second sight.”
I fumble in my nine
pockets like the night-blind
son-in-law groping
in every room for his wife,
and strike a light to regain
at once my first, and only,
sight.²⁰

The three most important of Ramanujan’s volumes of translation from Tamil and Kannada have in common this fact: that, between them, they seek to refute a conventional understanding of the Hindu tradition of thought, and consequently of the poetry informed by it, as incorrigibly prone to abstraction.²¹ Ramanujan’s decisions about what, and how, to translate were – to the extent that those decisions were guided by any conscious design – the editorial counterpart of a critical judgment about the pre-modern poets of south India, that they, like him, owed their literary achievements to their “first . . . sight.”

Ramanujan's emphasis on the faculty of sight, and everything it comes to symbolize, was one of many things Ramanujan got from the poet whose strictures on craft, after those of W B Yeats (on whom he had once considered doing doctoral work), influenced Ramanujan most profoundly: Ezra Pound. The imprint of Pound's remark – "the natural object is always the adequate symbol"²² – is to be found everywhere in Ramanujan's verse, right from his earliest collection *The Striders* (1966). But it was part of Ramanujan's own evolving self-conception that he came to reject any idea that his poetic lineage was best understood as a straight line of influence from Anglophone or European modernism.

He would come in later life to see the key moment in the evolution of this self-conception as the one that came early in his academic career when he was asked if he could teach Tamil. After protesting that he knew Tamil only as a mother tongue, he decided to acquaint himself with the Old Tamil language and literature of which he, having grown up in a Kannada-speaking milieu, knew very little. In an account that has become justly famous in the history of modern Indian literature, he describes descending into the basement stacks of Chicago's Harper Library "in search of an elementary grammar of Old Tamil":

The University had just acquired a large collection of books from a famous South Indian historian. It was still uncatalogued, even undusted. As I searched, hoping to find a school grammar, I came upon an early anthology of classical poems . . . I sat down on the floor between the stacks and began to browse. To my amazement, I found the prose commentary transparent; it soon unlocked the old poems for me. As I began to read on, I was enthralled by the beauty and subtlety of what I could read. Here was a world, a part of my language and culture, to which I had been an ignorant heir. Until then, I had only heard of the idiot in the Bible who had gone looking for a donkey and had happened upon a kingdom.²³

The poems to which he refers were composed almost two thousand years ago, compiled in eight anthologies and produced in three (likely fictitious) "Sangams," or literary academies, in Madurai from the first to the fourth century AD, as the conventional dating has it. They were not, for the most part, religious in character. There were few references in them to mythology, and even fewer to metaphysics. We still know little about the people who wrote them except what the poems themselves allow us to infer: a sense of the texture of their everyday lives, and, just as importantly, the landscapes they inhabited. Those landscapes were associated in their poetry with a rich pattern of symbols – the hills, the coasts, the forests, the fields, and the wasteland.

Ramanujan's influential afterword to his first set of translations from this corpus, *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1967), made his claim for the original poems' literary virtues with vigor and elegance: "In their values and stances, they represent a mature classical poetry: passion is balanced by courtesy, transparency by ironies and nuances of design, impersonality by vivid detail, leanness of line by richness of implication."²⁴ In addition to the muted dig at the colonial-era criticism that deemed India's classical literature hysterical and pleonastic, there is a considered judgment of the Sangam corpus's virtues as a "mature classical poetry" that could well serve as the manifesto for a mature modern(ist) poetry. The early response to *The Interior Landscape* was enthusiastic. Reviewers praised Ramanujan's ease with modern English (and American) idiom in his renderings of the classical Tamil. What elicited special commendation was the ingenuity with which he drew on a wide range of modern poetic techniques – the use of spacing, punctuation, and stanzaic structure – to evoke elements of the original that resisted translation. Far from being thought inimical to an authentic rendering of pre-modern literatures, the techniques of poetic modernism have now come to seem indispensable to capturing their distinctive qualities, making what was once a radical suggestion the merest platitude: that the poetic translator must have a firm command over contemporary poetry in the target language.

The Interior Landscape opens with the following untitled poem (Ramanujan had prefaced it with the traditional commentarial colophon "What She Said"), attributed to a certain "Tevakulattar" ("The Poet of the Temple"):

Bigger than earth, certainly,
higher than the sky,
more unfathomable than the waters
is this love for this man
of the mountain slopes
where bees make rich honey
from the flowers of the *kuriñci*
that has such black stalks.²⁵

So many non-Tamil readers have received their Sangam poetry via Ramanujan that it can be hard to tell what is in the original (itself a matter on which objective judgment is difficult) and what is an interpretative choice by Ramanujan. The elements of the Tamil poem, one long and crowded sentence, emerge in an importantly different order. The Tamil gives us the earth, sky, and water first, then the slopes, bees, and flowers of

the mountain country, and turns only at the end to the human feeling, “love.” It is possible, though far from easy, to put “love” at the end of an idiomatic English rendering. But for Ramanujan, the English word order, fortuitously enough, reflected a truth about the poems’ “inner form.” The poem, Ramanujan writes, “opens with large abstractions about her [i.e., the female narrator’s] love: her love is bigger than earth and higher than the sky. But it moves toward the black-stalked *kuriñci*, acting out by analogue the virgin’s progress from abstraction to experience.”²⁶

Equally, the “inset” – in this case, the indented block of text set off from the main body of the poem – was to Ramanujan’s mind not an eccentric typographical experiment but, rather, a way of hinting by means of a visual device at the structural principles that governed the original poems. The bees, mountains, and flowers in the inset “enact” what the poem does not mention: the lovers’ union. All of this is done without any explicit markers of comparison. The “interior landscape” of Ramanujan’s title was a reference to the complex conventions behind the poems, conventions mapping the landscapes of the Tamil country on to the symbolism of Tamil poetry: the mountains with the union of lovers (as in the poem above), the wasteland with separation, and so forth. “Thus,” wrote Ramanujan, “is the real world always kept in sight and included in the symbolic. These poets would have made a . . . Marianne Moore . . . happy: they are ‘literalists of the imagination,’ presenting for inspection in poem after poem ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them.’”²⁷

The quotation from Moore’s “On Poetry” suggests one source of his reaction to the Tamil poems.²⁸ A year before his dramatic encounter with them in the library basement, Chicago’s *Poetry Magazine* had published a poem of Ramanujan’s, “The Striders,” that we can see in retrospect as a poetic manifesto not unlike Moore’s. In its earliest published form, the poem began with the lyrical, Yeatsian line, “Put away, put away this dream,” but he would later instruct his editor at Oxford University Press to omit it (Ramanujan was a compulsive reviser and his default editorial impulse was to cut down). The poem would also give his first published collection in English its title:

And search
for certain thin-
stemmed, bubble-eyed water bugs.
See them perch
on dry capillary legs
weightless

on the ripple skin
of a stream.
No, not only prophets
walk on water. This bug sits
on a landslide of lights
and drowns eye-
deep
into its tiny strip
of sky.²⁹

"The Striders," written a few years before Ramanujan's discovery of the Sangam poems, shows its origins in the austere poetics of Ezra Pound ("eye-deep" is from Pound's *H. S. Mauberley*), but the New England water insect in it is, like William Carlos Williams's celebrated "red wheelbarrow," the lowly mascot for a new poetics: in Williams's rousing slogan, itself a continuation of Pound's injunction about the natural object, "Say it, no ideas but in things."³⁰ But, where Pound had looked to faraway China for an example with which to purge English poetry of Victorian verbosity, Ramanujan would find his wellspring in the backyard he had so long ignored. The shock of the Sangam poems was that of finding fellow modernists – after a fashion – in a place and time he had not thought to seek them. It is not surprising, then, that *Kuruntokai* 3 in Ramanujan's translation is a poem in which the most important thing is not "love," toward which Ramanujan's own poems – not unlike the ancient Tamil poets – maintain a darkly ironic and unsentimental attitude. It is, rather, the thin black stalk of the *kuriñci* that are in focus in the translation, like the "thin-/stemmed . . . water bugs" in "The Striders."³¹

In his work on the Sangam poems, the secularism of the poems' world-view was part of their appeal for Ramanujan. However, in his two subsequent projects of translation, Ramanujan was to find elements of his own modernism – the accent on the image rather than the abstraction, and a poetic focus on human experience and evanescence – even in the religious literature of Tamil and Kannada that he had long kept at arm's length. The second of these projects involved a turn, surprising even to Ramanujan, to the pietistic Vaishnaiva literature he had first heard being recited by orthodox uncles in the Mysore and Madras of his childhood. Ramanujan's translations from the Tamil saint-poet Nammālvār, published as *Hymns for the Drowning* in 1981, found even in these abstraction-heavy poems, a theological counterpart to his taste for the particular image, the image of the "the inverted triangle where the poem starts with an all-embracing sweep and then converges to a specific point, either an iconic figure or some

part of the devotee himself.”³² A single example from Ramanujan’s translation of one of Nammālvār’s poems will serve to illustrate the point:

He who took the seven bulls
by the horns
he who devoured the seven worlds
made me his own cool place
in heaven
and thought of me
what I thought of him
and became my own thoughts³³

With this translation, a new connection is forged, not only between Nammālvār and the poets of the Sangam tradition,³⁴ but also between a shared element of both traditions and the poetic enterprise of the twentieth century. It was yet another mark of Ramanujan’s growing maturity that he, with each passing decade, found new poets he could – in Pound’s phrase – do business with.

The path to this ecumenicalism about whom one might legitimately claim as a poetic forebear had been paved in the work of translation that preceded *Hymns for the Drowning*. Ramanujan’s mid-thirties had been spent studying the medieval world of the radically egalitarian Virashaiva movement of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and its compressed, enigmatic poetry in Kannada. He had studied these poets in Mysore, and had then been thought a trifle eccentric for his interest in their “vacanas” for their poetic virtues, rather than as vehicles of Virashaiva doctrine, not to mention his idiosyncratic preference for them over the epic mythic poems in Kannada conventionally placed at the top of the language’s canonical hierarchy. The *vacanas* – literally, “sayings” or “utterances” – were part of a remarkable corpus of writings that united social criticism with theological subtlety and linguistic inventiveness. But as Ramanujan would put it in *Speaking of Siva*, the selection of translations from the corpus published in the Penguin Classics series in 1973: “the incandescence of Virasaiva poetry is the white heat of truth-seeing and truth-saying in a dark deluded world”.³⁵ The challenge of translating this corpus was not its linguistic complexity; the poems are short, syntactically simple, and their sense is largely intelligible to a speaker of modern Kannada in a way that the Sangam poems are emphatically not. The challenge was, rather, to make a poetic case for the *vacanas* that could bridge the gap between the political and theological context of the poet-saints of a heterodox medieval sect and a modern reader uninterested in history, theology, or even politics.³⁶

The continuity between the motivations of Ramanujan's translations and his own poetry are most obvious in a late poem, "Mythologies 3," that describes the most unusual of the Virashaiva poets, the woman saint Akka Mahadevi. Ramanujan describes her violent response to being touched by her earthly husband after she had given herself to Siva:

So he hovered and touched her, her body death-
ly cold to mortal touch but hot for God's
first move, a caress like nothing on earth.
She fled his hand as she would a spider,
threw away her modesty, as the rods
and cones of her eyes gave the world a new birth:
She saw Him then, unborn, form of forms, the Rider,
His white Bull chewing cud in her backyard.³⁷

The unexpected, tonally disruptive, reference to "the rods / and cones of her eyes" are central to the poem.³⁸ *What* Akka sees matters less to Ramanujan than *how* she sees it. The critic Stephen Burt puts the point sharply when he writes that "Ramanujan does not celebrate exactly what Akka celebrates. She cherishes the experience of the god; he, the human imaginative powers that (from a more or less secular point of view) allow her to see what she sees and to feel as she feels."³⁹ Yet again, the pre-modern is refracted through the modernist lens and given a new emphasis.

It is clear enough from the examples considered here that there is much more to Ramanujan's achievement than is captured in the well-known remark in Parthasarathy's apology for Ramanujan's poetry, namely that it was "the heir of an anterior tradition, a tradition very much of this subcontinent, the deposits of which are in Kannada and Tamil, and which has been assimilated into English."⁴⁰ Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who is nothing if not an admirer of Ramanujan's poetry, is right to see that the remark relies on an inadequate metaphor:

The languages inherited by the multilingual Ramanujan may not conform to Parthasarathy's geological model. For the model to hold we have to agree that Ramanujan arranges Tamil and Kannada in the lower strata, English in the upper, and each time he chooses to write he descends, caged canary bird in hand, into the thickly-seamed coal pit of the mother tongue.⁴¹

The more one learns about the osmotic interpenetrations of Ramanujan's many traditions, the less one is inclined to favor any such geological model. Convinced that all he had were his five senses, he cultivated the arts of perception, finding literary mentors and precedents in surprising places, constructing for himself an intellectual-poetic genealogy as he went along.

As he once put it to an interviewer with his characteristic concision and knack for the spontaneous blank verse utterance, “I no longer can tell what comes from where.”⁴² The virtues of Ramanujan’s poetry, and his place in India’s literary history, come of just this uncertainty.

Notes

1. More extensive biographical narratives are to be found in Bruce King, *Three Indian Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Dom Moraes* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1991): 13–19; Molly Daniels-Ramanujan, “An A. K. Ramanujan Story,” *The Oxford India Ramanujan*, ed. Molly Daniels-Ramanujan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), xi–xxxvi; Edward C. Dimock Jr. and Krishna Ramanujan, “Introduction: Two Tributes to A. K. Ramanujan,” *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), xiv–xviii; A. R. Venkatachalapathy, “Obituary: A. K. Ramanujan,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28.31 (1993): 1571; David Shulman, “Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan (1929–1993),” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53.3 (1984): 1048; and Nakul Krishna, “Reading the Small Print,” *The Caravan: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, August 2013, 54–66.
2. This is in no small measure an aspect of the canon-forming influence of Bruce King, *Three Indian Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Dom Moraes* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1991). King’s critical approach is discussed in Geeta Patel, “King, Three Indian Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Dom Moraes,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 51.4 (1992), 960.
3. There is a succinct critical account of Ramanujan’s Kannada poetry and its reception in H. S. Raghavendra Rao, “A Myth and a Mythology,” *The Hindu*, October 28, 2011.
4. Ramanujan makes for Bharati’s prose poems precisely the claim that this essay will make, *mutatis mutandis*, for Ramanujan’s own relationship to India’s classical literatures: “Bharati here uses contemporary Tamil to reach back into the past of the Vedas and forward into a future in modern Tamil poetry – he draws the bow back only to launch the arrow forward” (A. K. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 243).
5. A brief account of this “Renaissance” is to be found in Ramachandra Guha, “The Mysore Generation,” *The Hindu*, April 20, 2004.
6. For a brief account of the Cold War context of Ramanujan’s scholarly life, see Nakul Krishna, “The Heron and the Lamprey,” *The Point Magazine*, January 2014, <http://thepointmag.com/2014/criticism/the-heron-and-the-lamprey>.
7. A. K. Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 116.
8. Vinay Dharwadker, Introduction to *Collected Poems*, Ramanujan, xviii–xxxviii.

9. Anjali Nerlekar, “Of Mothers, Among Other Things: The Sources of A. K. Ramanujan’s Poetry,” *Wasafiri*, 18:38 (2003): 4953.
10. Jahan Ramazani, “Metaphor and Postcoloniality: The Poetry of A. K. Ramanujan,” *Contemporary Literature* 39.1 (1988): 27. Also see R. S. Patke, “The ambivalence of poetic self-exile: the case of A. K. Ramanujan,” *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 5.2 (Winter 2001): <http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v5i2/rspatk.htm>, accessed August 27, 2015.
11. A. K. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 192.
12. Ramanujan was of course skeptical about the prospects of any such attempt. “Looking for the centre,” goes the poem of that title, “is a job / for eccentrics who can feel the thirteen / motions of the earth / when they stand still in the middle / of the market” (A. K. Ramanujan, *Collected Poems*, 184).
13. The quoted phrases appear, respectively, on pages 34, 79, 95, and 195 of Ramanujan, *Collected Poems*. A likely folkloric source for the image of the “black hen” is suggested in Narayana Chandran, “A Source in Sorcery: The Black Hen and the Posthumous Poet,” *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, XL/4 (October 2009): 143–50.
14. Ramanujan, *Collected Poems*, 189. Compare the arresting opening of “The Striders,” discussed below.
15. *Ibid.*, 186.
16. *Ibid.*, 104.
17. *Ibid.*, 87.
18. *Ibid.*, 90.
19. *Ibid.*, 226.
20. *Ibid.*, 191.
21. This is quite apart from their attempt to overturn the too-quick identification of the Indian with the religious – part of what drew Ramanujan to the Tamil love and war poems of the “Sangam” era was their predominantly secular character, one of many aspects of the *avant la lettre* modernity he would come to see in them.
22. Ezra Pound, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” *Poetry* 1, no. 6 (March 1, 1913): 201.
23. A. K. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), xvii.
24. A. K. Ramanujan, *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (Indiana University Press, 1967), 115.
25. *Ibid.*, 1.
26. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, 244.
27. *Ibid.*, 250.
28. For a brief discussion of Moore’s influence on Ramanujan, see Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Partial Recall* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), 241.
29. A. K. Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.
30. William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1958), 6.

31. The preceding five paragraphs are a revised and condensed version of material previously published in Nakul Krishna, "The Heron and the Lamprey," *The Point Magazine*, January 2014. An excellent discussion of the literary and philosophical antecedents of "The Striders" is to be found in King, *Three Indian Poets*, 74–77.
32. M. R. Parameswaran and Uma Parameswaran, "Singing to the feet of the Lord: On A. K. Ramanujan's Translations from Nammālvār's Poetry," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 19 (2) (1984): 143–44.
33. Nammālvār, *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Visnu by Nammālvār*, trans. A. K. Ramanujan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 50.
34. A well-attested connection that Ramanujan discusses in A. K. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 246–49.
35. A. K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva* (London: Penguin, 1973), 27.
36. For a fascinating account of Ted Hughes' admiration for *Speaking of Siva* and its influence on his own poetry, see Ann Skea, "Ted Hughes' Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom," in *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, ed. Terry Gifford, Neil Roberts, and Mark Wormald (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 81–95. For a brief and sometimes critical discussion of Ramanujan's place in the twentieth-century reception of the Virashaiva movement that takes issue with his relative lack of interest in the politically emancipatory aspects of the poems, see H. S. Shivaprakash, *I Keep Vigil of Rudra: The Vachanas* (London: Penguin, 2010), lxxvii–lxxviii.
37. Ramanujan, *Collected Poems*, 228.
38. Ramanujan's poems often refer to "rods and cones": for example, "Fear" in *Second Sight* gives us "the rods / and cones / of everyone's / Reuter eyes" (*Collected Poems*, 132), and the cousin figure in "Real Estate" is a "man of vision with a perfect / eye for parallax, he has compasses / in his rods and cones" (*Collected Poems*, 91).
39. Stephen Burt and David Mikics, *The Art of the Sonnet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 368.
40. Quoted in Mehrotra, *Partial Recall*, 163.
41. Mehrotra, *Partial Recall*, 164.
42. Quoted in Mehrotra, *Partial Recall*, 177.

*U.S.-Based but India-Born: G. S. Sharat Chandra
and Vijay Seshadri*

Ravi Shankar

Separated by nearly fifteen years in terms of birthdates, G. S. Sharat Chandra (1938–2000) and Vijay Seshadri (1954–) both migrated to the United States at roughly the same time, in the early 1960s, as part of the first real wave of South Asians to settle in America. The impact of their consequent deracination resonates throughout their poetry, though the difference in their ages – Sharat Chandra was twenty-four and already successful as a lawyer working for a plantation company when he left India, whereas Seshadri was only five when his family moved from Bangalore to Columbus, Ohio – accounts in part for their distinctive poetic idioms. Sharat Chandra is more colloquial, irreverent, and straightforwardly narrative in scope, while Seshadri is philosophical, urbane, speculative, and possesses a hybrid lyricism that typifies a certain kind of twenty-first-century poetics that has come to be seen as characteristically American, even as his inflections might share something in common with such British poets as W. H. Auden. Sharat Chandra and Seshadri also occupy a special place in American letters, as the former was the first Asian American to be nominated for and the latter the first to win the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry. Seshadri's collection *3 Sections* won in 2014, becoming the first book by any Asian-American poet to win that highest of literary honors.

While Sharat Chandra is the elder, Seshadri's impact on the landscape of American poetry has been more pronounced, so it seems appropriate to begin by looking first at the trajectory of his career. Seshadri's first book, *Wild Kingdom*, was published in 1996 by Graywolf Press and established a writer of considerable intellect and wit, not to mention someone as comfortable writing a sonnet ("The Refuge," "A Werewolf in Brooklyn," and "The Language War") as a long poetic sequence ("The Lump" or "Lifeline," which won the 1995 Bernard F. Connors Long Poem Prize when it was published in *The Paris Review* in 1994 – before being collected in *Wild Kingdom*). Reading the collection, it is not readily apparent that

Seshadri is an immigrant from India, though seen through that lens many of the tropes begin to take on a heightened resonance. For example, there is a poem entitled “from *An Oral History of Migration*,” and though it’s a dramatic monologue from the perspective of an African-American bluesman born in the 1930s, one senses that the identification the speaker makes with his guitar is commensurate with the transmigration of a poet into the language he uses (“you be that thing”), and that uses him, to create a notion of identity which is complicated by dislocations in space and time. The speaker, who has made the move from a rural background to Harlem, writes:

Some people think if you keep jumping
over a patch of ground, jump
like some bighorn sheep,
that patch of ground eventually go away.
It don’t; it’s always there.¹

This folksy, bluesy bit of wisdom is equally applicable to one’s ethnic heritage and the place from which one’s family hails. Much as we might hope to be assimilated, to jump over our own ancestry, we can never escape it since, acknowledged or not, it’s always there.

The long poem “Lifeline,” which was anthologized in *Best American Poetry of 1997*, offers in a microcosm many of the themes that Seshadri would come to explore in his later work. The premise of the poem is simple enough – a man gets lost in the woods and has to find his way out, and, as critic D. H. Tracy has put it, the narrative structure of the poem manages to “show [Seshadri’s] irrepressibility and baroque-ness are not compulsions, but are introduced as necessary to demonstrate and solve particular problems.”² In the case of “Lifeline,” the problem is one of survival since, as the hours pass, morning into night into the next day, it becomes exceedingly more and more difficult for the man to find his way out, which results in not just a physiological but also an existential crisis. Gripped by fear, the man’s mind begins to wander and he recognizes the minuteness of his life, his family’s life, in this environment of firs and ferns, a landscape shaped and reshaped by millions of years of environmental pressure.

At one point in his journey, he nearly gives up, exhausted, imagining his bones found by someone in time, “a cucumber vine trellised / by the seven sockets in his skull.” The specificity of those apertures – nostrils we use to smell, eye sockets that allow hearing, the external acoustic meatus above which the ear fits so we can hear, the gaping hole of the mouth – are indicative of the world of phenomenological sensation so important to

poets and yet, in a skull, they retain none of the individuation or personality that we feel we possess. Additionally, the internal off rhyme of “trellised” and “skull,” the consonance of “vine” and “seven,” are all prosodic elements that help this narrative, free verse poem retain a measure of aural sophistication and evince a supreme craftsmanship.

It is in the middle, though, that the poem enacts what might be considered a quintessential Seshadrian turn, moving from the elemental, even banal fact of being lost in the woods to a more profound and cosmic speculation:

But, still, as almost everyone does,
 he'd occasionally had inklings, stirrings,
 promptings, and strange intuitions
 about something just beyond the radius
 of his life – not divine, necessarily,
 but what people meant when they referred
 to such things – which gave to the least
 of his actions its dream of complicity.

...

and that life, his life, blossoming now
 in this daisy chain of accident and error,
 was nothing more or less than what there was.

(*Wild Kingdom*, 62)

For the man lost in the woods to arrive at that moment of recognition is extraordinary and universal, for which of us seen from the vantage point of a star might not appear similarly, no matter how rich or self-possessed we imagine ourselves to be? In the face of billions of years of history – “the annihilating dimensions of which/ words such as ‘infinite’ and ‘eternal’ /were ridiculous in their inadequacy” (*Wild Kingdom*, 63) – our own ego is painfully insignificant. And yet what do we have, except for language, to use as a lifeline to pull ourselves out of the primordial slime and back into our inhabitable selves?

Seshadri's second book, *The Long Meadow*, won the 2003 James Laughlin Award of the Academy of American Poetry and it contains his best-known poem, “The Disappearances.” Soon after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, *The New Yorker* chose to publish this poem on its back cover, where it became seared in the collective imagination, becoming as much a part of the process of grieving about and moving on from the calamity as W. H. Auden's poem “September 1, 1939.” That poem, as most readers know, was written about Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland and it was passed around in the aftermath of the collapse of the Twin Towers. Similarly, Seshadri's

poem was not written about the tragedy itself, but, rather, about the Kennedy assassination, and yet in its opening lines, beginning “on a day like any other day, / like “yesterday or centuries before,” the poem evoked the unexpected and senseless specter of cataclysm and collective tragedy and cast the self in relief at a particular historical moment.

As Seshadri said in an interview with Jeet Thayil for *Poets & Writers* magazine:

The fact that I came from one civilization to another, however young I was, puts me in historical circumstances. History has a density simply because in the movement from one society to another it's reality is made more painfully apparent to you. When you have the problem of history as a poet, you have to find a way to manage it, to appropriate it and not have it appropriate you . . . “The Disappearances” is peculiar because it's very much about American history. My authority with respect to American history – my ability to appropriate it – is problematic because I come from another culture, from India, and because I'm an immigrant even though I came here when Eisenhower was president. It's still one of the things by which history exerts itself on me and, I guess, oppresses me. But, then again, I was here when Kennedy was president. I remember the day of his assassination clearly, as does anybody who was conscious in America at that time. It's very much a part of my experience, part of the things that shaped me as a child . . . “The Disappearances revolves for a while around how uncanny loss is. If you think about the experience of people who have died, they're there and they're gone, and that's the real mystery of it. It's the great oblivion of death that is the most interesting thing about it, and that's what I was really baffled by. Narratives of loss tend often to be very coherent; they resolve into grief. We imagine people who have lost someone to have grieved and to have gone on. Nobody deals with the deepest existential response, which is bafflement.”³

Another notable poem from *The Long Meadow* is “The Nature of the Chemical Bond,” which for all intents and purposes is a prose piece. Not a prose poem, which Russell Edson defined as “a statement that seeks sanity whilst its author teeters on the edge of the abyss,” but prose *prose*, closer to an excerpt from a memoir, in which the speaker documents his father's obsession with the Civil War and his childhood excursions to various battlefields around the country. The title of the piece is both autobiographical – Seshadri's father was a chemist who “investigated the nature of the chemical bond” – and metaphoric, since what keeps the nuclear family together other than some version of the ionic or covalent bond that holds together atoms? For the first time, Seshadri confronts the specter of his upbringing directly and in a form that one might not imagine would “fit” in a book of poems.

As he writes about his family, “We were strange. We were doubly strange: strange because Indians are strange even in India, having been exiled from time and history by an overdeveloped, supersaturated civilization, and strange also because no one remotely resembling us had ever before lived where we lived.”⁴

The real breakthrough of *The Long Meadow* is the inclusion of this memoir fragment in a book of poems, without apology or prefatory note. As Seshadri says elsewhere, in an interview with *The Believer*:

Phenomena are always determined by history. You abstract certain qualities and say that they define a genre. A long, discursive Ashbery poem is nothing like an essay by George Orwell, which has an intention . . . But it has a lot in common with an essay by Montaigne, because Montaigne is inviting you into his mind, and the movements of his mind . . . rather than the content of his judgment. So you can't say, “Well, the essay is this and the poem is that.” You can't make credible hard-and-fast characterizations, especially now, when there's so much intermingling. We live in a trans period, right? Contemporary issues of sexuality, for example – the exciting aspects of them – have to do with transgenderedness. And there's trans-nationality. There are people like me, for example. I mean, what am I? Am I Indian? Am I American? And I'm not alone in being between things. That in-betweenness, that's true of the genres too. They're flowing into each other and they're transforming into new things.⁵

That fluency and transmigration of genre reaches its apex in *3 Sections* (2013), which includes poems entitled “Memoir,” “Personal Essay,” and “Mixed-Media Botanical Drawing,” transliterations of Ghalib from the Urdu, as well as a long prose section called “Pacific Fishes of Canada.” In the citation for the 2014 Pulitzer Prize, the committee called the book “a compelling collection of poems that examine human consciousness, from birth to dementia, in a voice that is by turns witty and grave, compassionate and remorseless.”⁶ Indeed, Seshadri has proved himself to be an epistemological poet, one who is concerned with the scope of the human mind and its limitations, yet, rather than abiding in a purely Parnassian realm of speculation, his poems also include pop cultural references. He also cultivates a Wallace Stevensesque focus on metaphysics and a John Ashbery-like parataxis, where ideas leap from line to line, clause to clause, using coordinating rather than subordinating conjunctions to maintain an equilibrium between disparate figures. For example, he creates an entire world from fragments of perceptions in his poem “Secret Police,” where “the towelette flutters punctually in the window. / [and] The neighbor who never talks silently combusts in his patio / in

choreographed figure eights./ [and] The phone clicks: Click, click – Click, click.”⁷ The associative impetus of the poem goes from the regular movement of the inanimate towlette to the mute neighbor, whose patterned path evokes the numerical rotary dial of a phone, which is a tool for talking (but sometimes more for surveillance than connection) that harkens back to the telegraph; the overt logic is not readily evident, yet, taken in summation, it’s undeniable.

Another part of *3 Sections* is Seshadri’s long poem of nearly 500 lines, called, in a representative conflation of genres, “Personal Essay.” Really a discursive meditation on the nature of the self, of language, and of the self in language, it continues to develop an emphasis on the microscopic and the macroscopic, moving from the specificity of certain individuals who live in the speaker’s neighborhood in Brooklyn to the plasma in the sun’s core, from the connotative to the denotative, the speaker perpetually perplexed at the sheer fact of existence, the plenitude that arises from sheer emptiness. As critic Bhisham Bherwani writes, the poem recalls,

in its scope and its relentless exploration – in this case of the elusive fabric of reality – the excursions of T. S. Eliot in *Four Quartets*, of Hart Crane in *The Bridge*, and of A. R. Ammons in *Sphere*. “Personal Essay” surveys the binary nature of “experience”: the conjured, imagined, and created experience and its antithetical experience of reality (as we know it), “the experience by which we become aware that what we see, smell, hear, feel, taste” is, simply – like an inanimate object, a person, or a shadow – what it is, and “doesn’t resemble anything, correspond to anything, symbolize anything, [or] allegorize anything.” Its inquiring speaker, keenly tuned to everything around him, considers what he sees, recalls, and perceives, his only resource being his ensnaring words.⁸

Another remarkable quality of Seshadri’s poetry is that it is particularly attuned to our new media moment of accelerated perception and innate narcissism, teasing out from the self-referential reflection of self a polarity of connection to the other through an ingenious spawn of personas and perspectives. This quality is readily evident in a poem such as “Thought Problem,” which begins:

How strange would it be if you met yourself on the street?
 How strange if you liked yourself,
 took yourself in your arms, married your own self,
 propagated by techniques known only to you,
 and then populated the world? Replicas of you are everywhere.
 Some are Arabs. Some are Jews. Some live in yurts. (3 Sections, 33)

The mitotic process being described seems the apogee of self-obsession, and yet the net result is one in which the difference between self and other is less vast than we might have imagined it to be. That collapse brought about by increased globalization is simultaneously estranged and intimate, specific and universal, incarnating Rimbaud's notion that "je est un autre" and Nietzsche's claim that "you are always a different person." As Seshadri himself says:

That external self seems to be more or less accidental. We all think of ourselves as our subjectivity, our consciousness, right? And so that problem of the self was always a big problem for me, always a big issue. And it's doubled for the immigrant because the immigrant tends to come from an older world – and we came from a stable, ordered society where we historically had always had a place, in a fairly rigid, hierarchical order, an ancient Indian order . . . in the face of all that, you probably have to split yourself in various ways just in order to survive, and to think of yourself as a multitude.⁹

According to *Poets & Writers*, the multitudinous Seshadri has worked "as a fisherman, and as a biologist for the National Marine Fish Service. He drove a truck for a living in San Francisco, and worked briefly as a logger before coming to New York City to study with poet Richard Howard in the master's program at Columbia University," before his current position as a Professor of Creative Writing at Sarah Lawrence University.¹⁰ Such an esoteric accumulation of experience feels truly American, as it's hard to imagine someone in India working as a chai wallah, a rickshaw driver, a statistician, and then as a professor, perhaps because social class is still much more rigid in the old country than it is in the new; nonetheless, the reason Seshadri feels truly contemporary is because he's able to straddle these disparate realms without it ever feeling jarring or conflicted. As Bherwani again has written:

We have no benchmark of a contemporary volume that wittingly, and obsessively, evokes the metaphysical. *3 Sections* does so ingeniously, without the poet lapsing into didacticism or invoking philosophical rhetoric, through an array of characters and personas engaged in whatever it is that engages them: idleness, crime, filmmaking, mathematics, radio talk show hosting. The speakers, even as they wrestle with impossibilities – though, ironically, they don't always seem aware of themselves as such grapplers – are accessible and amiable.¹¹

With the publication of *3 Sections*, Seshadri has established himself firmly at the forefront of American arts and letters, and if his speakers are amiable,

they are nonetheless astringent in their lucid appraisal of the nature of reality and his voice – wry and perceptive, compassionate yet analytical, and surprisingly wise, or, rather, wise in surprising ways – has the capacity to comfort us even as it discombobulates the patterns we thought we perceived in the rhythms of our own lives as we're afforded a glimpse from a vantage point high above them.

Seshadri's predecessor, G. S. Sharat Chandra, on the other hand, was more interested in evoking a sense of place in, rather than outside of, time, and his investment through the course of the seven books of poems he published is more in the story of the ambivalence of the immigrant, than in the speculative and accidental aspects of the self enmeshed in the dimensions of abstraction. Born in 1938 in Nanjangud, Karnataka, in India, he studied English literature at the University of Mysore even while he was being groomed to take over his father's legal practice. Sharat Chandra was twenty-four when he arrived in the United States, already a man, if not yet a poet. He then attended the University of Iowa writing workshop, married an American woman, and embarked upon a literary career that spanned four decades, teaching creative writing primarily at the University of Missouri at Kansas City.

Sharat Chandra's first book, *Bharat Natyam Dancer and Other Poems*, was published to acclaim in India by the Writers Workshop in Calcutta in 1968, and his subsequent collections appeared in the United Kingdom and in the United States. As he settled into America, his poems began to gravitate toward the sense of alienation and assimilation that a first generation immigrant might keenly feel. As Sharad Rajimwale writes, Sharat Chandra "has his roots in South Indian family life. But his sense of being uprooted in his new country, the United States, makes his self feel insecure. But he is less nostalgic about India than critical and often fantasizes about a third world where he would find comfort . . . [he] appears rootless and undefined in his American surroundings."¹² One of his seminal poems, "Self-Portrait," describes this pain with acute poignancy:

There are scars instead
of lines on my palm
I've no biography
only remembrance. . .
. . .
On a nameless street
someone holds a horoscope
to my face
buttons carved with my initials

my fingerprint on a bill of fare
 . . .
 I'm not their man
 I assure them
 walking away
 my hands squirm
 in my pockets like fish
 gasping for air.¹³

Beginning with the scarring on the speaker's palms, there's a sense of the wounding inherent in leaving behind one's home for a diasporic existence. The speaker is reified into an object for which others try to find an equivalence, holding up a horoscope (perhaps reminiscent of the prevalence of Vedic astrology in Indian decision-making) to his face, and the self is made commensurate with an item of commerce, a bill of fare, as if to imply that you are what you can pay for in this new country. When the speaker departs, he doesn't bring with him a sense of relief at having left the gaze of those who would reduce him to something less than what he actually is, but instead he carries his anxiety with him, a condition perfectly embodied by the disconcerting image of his two hands compared in a simile to fish, out of their natural aquatic element, gasping for breath in a nervous posture that, cosseted in the dark of his pockets, *no one can see*.

In an interview published in *The Journal of South Asian Literature*, Sharat Chandra detailed his opinion of both India and America, evincing a sort of double rejection. First on his mother country: "I do not feel alienated from India. I don't care for a lot of people there, especially those that are in control of its political, social and educational institutions. Some of my poems reflect this. The land is still swamped with prejudices and discriminations. As a son of a non-grata father, I have been severely victimized."¹⁴ Then on his adopted home: "Madison Avenue publishers haven't published a single book of original poems by an Indian poet in a decade . . . it's so discouraging to have your poems praised and published in leading magazines whose editors are themselves superb poets, then to be summarily rejected by a book publisher."¹⁵ Sharat Chandra's third collection, *Once or Twice* (1974), delves into the nature of his dual estrangement by mobilizing metaphor in the service of identity. For instance, in the poem "Second Journey" the image of fish is again investigated, though this time, rather than being simply pulled out of the water, the fish has had real violence enacted against it. "In the gullet of fish," the poem begins, "the fisherman's touch / becomes art /the needle/ the color of breath" (26). Wrenched out of the water, the fish finds that the very sharpness embedded

within it is the source of a new, if ultimately fatal, form of respiration. The poem is framed by two quatrains in the first and last stanza and the rest of the stanzas are cinquains, allowing Sharat Chandra to formally evoke something of the disharmonious plight of the immigrant, which is rendered throughout as color, something atmospheric and insubstantial, certainly not solid enough ground to put roots down in. The poem ends with the culmination of this second journey, from India to America, or alternately from birth to death: “No one repeats after you / the color of touch / you’ve come home / to the color of what” (27). The last line, missing a question mark, hangs nonetheless like an unanswerable question, even a kind of accusation – what indeed, if in fact “home” is ever anything more than a construct to which some of us have no access?

Sharat Chandra’s sixth collection, *Family of Mirrors*, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, is, according to Keith Lawrence’s brief biographical sketch of the poet in *Asian-American Poets: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, simultaneously,

his most idiosyncratic and most potentially enduring work . . . although the themes of Chandra’s earlier collections recur here, themes of separation, otherness, death, and the nature of self, a number of poems in *Mirrors* are characterized by a lightness of tone, a *joie de vivre* mostly missing from the earlier collections . . . Too, there is an expansion of earlier “immigrant” themes,” so that, in effect, Chandra argues that a kind of immigrant status is synonymous with the human condition, especially in a frenetic, fluid, and shrinking world . . . In “Voyages,” death is suggested as a metaphor for the immigrant experience, where we find that existence itself depends on nothing then within our control since most of us have felt noting “outside of our thoughts.”¹⁶

This is perhaps the place where Sharat Chandra’s work touches Seshadri’s, who writes in “Personal Essay”:

Slowly consciousness estranges itself from those with whom
proximity, if not propinquity, has caused it to
identify, and slowly the consciousness estranges itself
from everything else that identifies it—
the place it lives, or at least tries to live. (3 *Sections*, 59)

For Chandra, that sense of internal displacement is a requisite condition of the immigrant experience, and this is a theme that he expands upon in his final collection of poems *Immigrants of Loss* (1991), which was also his most highly acclaimed book, winning both the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and the T. S. Eliot Poetry Prize in 1993. As Keith Lawrence writes, “the

universality of displacement and the sharply divisive nature of American social hierarchies are central themes of *Immigrants of Loss*.¹⁷ The book finds the poet at his most meditative, almost as if he had a Keatsian foreboding that his own mortality was right around the corner. A poem, “Waking at Fifty,” broods:

Show me a man who sleeps to be miserable,
 I'll show you myself
 the story isn't easy,
 grown into my own soliloquy
 I've become a face beside a face
 waiting for the ferry.
 I tell myself it's all right,
 all faces become one
 in their fall after fifty:
 others gone ahead will offer tea
 between wakefulness
 and a good deal of forgetting.
 I wake up to a bed half empty.
 My lover of last night
 has become mother downstairs
 in a conspiracy of children
 who think birthdays are fun
 for someone who seems undone. (*Immigrants of Loss*, 47)

In April 2000, Sharat Chandra passed away suddenly at the age of sixty-four of a brain hemorrhage, much to the shock of the community that had embraced him as one of their own. As John Mark Eberhart wrote in his obituary of the poet in *The Kansas City Star*:

G. S. Sharat Chandra, an internationally renowned poet and writer and a professor of English at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, died Thursday at 64 after suffering a brain hemorrhage. Chandra was one of the most honored poets of his generation. His 1993 book *Family of Mirrors* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry . . . “He was very highly regarded nationally, even internationally,” said Robert Stewart, managing editor of UMKC’s *New Letters*, which over the years had published Chandra’s poems, stories and even some drawings, “The quality of wit and real human poignancy in his poems was almost unprecedented among contemporary poets.”¹⁸

The University of Missouri–Kansas City where he taught poetry for so many years saw fit to honor his memory by creating a prize, ironically for short fiction rather than poetry (his last book, *Sari of the Gods*, was a collection of short stories published in 1998). In spite of the critical acclaim, according to Lawrence:

[T]ime will, perhaps, bring a more measured response to Chandra's poems. Considered objectively, some of the "light" poems in *Family of Mirrors* are also lightweight; poems like "Raquel Welch Read Tom Wolfe" and "Campus Poet" approach silliness. More crucially, the unapologetic objectification of American women in some of Chandra's "lust poems" is not merely tawdry and offensive, but an unfortunate promulgation of sexual stereotypes of the immigrant American male. Still, Chandra's ability to simultaneously reify the Indian American experience and force all readers to confront their own exclusion, their own "immigrant" condition, will insure the continued significance and eminence of his writing.¹⁹

Both Sharat Chandra and Seshadri were born in India and migrated to America in the 1960s, one as a young man and the other as a child, and that's perhaps where the similarities between them begin and end. Certainly, both poets are interested in the notion of immigration and displacement, though these themes are foregrounded in Sharat Chandra's work while Seshadri uses them as a philosophical launching pad to explore history and cognition as they impinge on contemporary life. Both also seem to be more weighted toward the American side of their hyphenated identity, perhaps because of the idiom they chose to write in and the country in which they lived for most of their lives. As Sharat Chandra said when asked about his nationalistic allegiances, "the writer in exile is nothing new. Writers used to leave their country and go to Paris or London. But these days there doesn't seem to be one center. I am not an 'English' poet in the sense of your question, nor am I an 'Indo-Anglian' poet (that is a terrible word). My work is closer to an American orientation. I simply consider myself as a contemporary writer."²⁰ Similarly, Seshadri has said about his cultural identification:

[I]t's kind of complicated for me because I grew up a stranger in this society, although I was very much embedded in it, too. There were very few Indians, very few Asians, in America at that time. Society imposes an identity on you because of the way you look. Your struggle as a self has to do with an identity being imposed on you that you know is not your identity. You don't think of yourself as your external representation, or even your national origin or anything like that. You don't reduce yourself to that. That's kind of unthinkable . . . my parents had just stepped out of a very old Indian world when they came here. We had a sense of our own status in the world, which is taken away from you when you're an immigrant. When you're an immigrant, you're at the bottom of the ladder. You might not be at the bottom of the ladder economically. We weren't. We were middle-class people, and my father was an academic, a scientist. Those contradictions led me to feel that the role in society I was given didn't jive with my

sense of myself. I think, in fact, that is the case with most people. Everybody feels themselves to be in an original relationship to creation, and feels confined by their social role.²¹

These two poets, in part by being pioneers, however inadvertently, epitomize South Asian-American writing, a taxonomic category that has significantly expanded in recent years. Anthologies such as W. W. Norton's *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia and Beyond* and University of Arkansas Press's *Indivisible: An Anthology of South Asian American Poetry* showcase a whole new generation of Indian American poets. Among these are Reetika Vazirani, born in Patiala, India, in 1962 and author of such acclaimed collections as the Barnard New Women Poet's Prize-winning *White Elephants*, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award-winning *World Hotel*, and a posthumous collection of poems published by Drunken Boat Media, *Radha Says*; Srikanth Reddy, who has masterfully employed the postmodern technique of erasure in his acclaimed book *Voyager* and who teaches at the University of Chicago; Prageeta Sharma, considered one of the most innovative experimental poets of her generation and a poet whose books are published by FENCE; and Kazim Ali, the poet, essayist, fiction writer and translator, born to Muslim parents of Indian descent, whose poems explore the lyrical intersection of faith and quotidian life. Including myself, these are just a few of the growing number of Indian American poets who are working today and for whom some relationship with India, whether oppositional or in synchronicity, helps inform their poetics. Thanks to the trail-blazing work of G. S. Sharat Chandra and Vijay Seshadri – neither of whom could be categorized in any narrowly ethnic way, and both of whom have deepened the modes of utterance deemed possible for Asian-American poets – new avenues are opening up for future generation of Indian poets, both native and diasporic. Estranged from and enmeshed in India and America, the complex, polyvalent work of these two important poets holds the promise of interacting with and re-energizing poetry being written in English and in the indigenous languages also within India itself – a dual recognition that would be the only proper legacy for these two incongruent innovators.

Notes

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3. Jeet Thayil, "An Interview With Poet Vijay Seshadri," *Poets & Writers* (June 29, 2004: www.pw.org/content/interview_poet_vijay_seshadri. Accessed January 13, 2015).
4. Vijay Seshadri, *The Long Meadow* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1996), p. 38.
5. Laura Standley and Vijay Seshadri, "The Believer Logger – You Are Vijay Seshadri," *Believer Magazine* (June 10, 2014: <http://logger.believermag.com/post/88378196294/you-are-vijay-seshadri>. Accessed January 13, 2015).
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8. Bhasham Bherwani, "Review: On Vijay Seshadri's '3 Sections'," *The American Reader* (May 2, 2014. <http://theamericanreader.com/review-on-vijay-seshadri-3-sections/>. Accessed January 13, 2015).
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10. Jeet Thayil, "An Interview with Poet Vijay Seshadri."
11. Bherwani, "Review: On Vijay Seshadri's '3 Sections'."
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13. G. S. Sharat Chandra, *Once or Twice* (Hippopotomus Press, 1974), p. 38.
14. G. S. Sharat Chandra, "JSAL Interviews G. S. Sharat Chandra." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 16:2, Summer 1981, 117–25, www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/40873709?sid=21105701428121&uid=3739256&uid=2&uid=4. Accessed January 13, 2015).
15. *Ibid.*, 119.
16. "G. S. Sharat Chandra." In *Asian American Poets: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, by Lawrence Keith, edited by Guiyou Huang and Emmanuel S. Nelson (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 59–63.
17. *Ibid.*, 60.
18. Robert Stewart, and John Mark Eberhart. "G. S. Sharat Chandra Obituary." *Kansas City Star*, April 20, 2000, Evening ed., Arts sec.
19. Chandra, *Asian American Poets: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, 61.
20. Chandra, "JSAL Interviews G. S. Sharat Chandra," 119.
21. *The Believer*, online. Available at <http://logger.believermag.com/post/88378196294/you-are-vijay-seshadri>.

*“First and Foremost . . . a Poet in the English
Language”: Agha Shahid Ali*

Hena Ahmad

Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001) has been critically acclaimed both in America and internationally and his work has been translated into several languages, including Italian, Hebrew, Kashmiri, and Urdu. Shahid was very clear about his identity as a poet. Describing his voice as “deeply rooted, and yet cosmopolitan,” he considered himself, “first and foremost . . . a poet in the English language.”² He underscored that he “own[ed] three major world cultures (Hindu, Muslim, and Western) without effort,”³ and as he grew up with them, he felt these three were, as he put it, “a part of his mental and emotional makeup.”⁴ He said, “I can use the Indian landscape, and the Subcontinent’s myths and legends and history, from within, and I can do so for the first time in what might seem like a new idiom, a new language – Subcontinental English.”⁵ Shahid pointed out that “in India he [made] his case by making one for all South Asian writers in English – that they all are privy to triple or more mixes, which they can exploit from within . . . the way the spirit of Urdu weaves itself into my English.”⁶ Without the desire to represent India to the West, he could write in English with an inwardness about the immense resource that the subcontinent offered. Growing up speaking English and Urdu, and hearing Hindi, Punjabi, and Kashmiri, he “just assumed that cosmopolitanism was the way to be, that for him it was *the* natural state.”⁷ “The accidents of history,” Shahid said, “had put [him] in the enviable . . . situation of contributing simultaneously to three . . . traditions: the new Anglophone literatures of the world, the new Subcontinental literatures in English, and the new Multi-Ethnic literatures of the United States.”⁸

Having published two books of poetry with Writers Workshop, Calcutta – *Bone-Sculpture* (1972) and *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* (1975) – he established a reputation in the early 1970s as an expert on Modern Poetry at Hindu College in Delhi, subsequently leaving it in 1975 for Pennsylvania State University’s doctoral program in English. It is noteworthy that an early

formative influence, T. S. Eliot, whom we can hear in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, was the focus of Shahid's doctoral dissertation. Eliot's death imagery particularly intensified what was already embedded in Shahid's sensibility from early childhood. Shahid's poetic themes, a combination of personal, political, historical, and cultural elements (the personal elements particularly caught up in elements of myth and culture), are defined, in his words, by a "sensibility . . . informed by a sense of loss . . . [whether] in an engagement with language, landscape, history, myth and legend. In all of them . . . there *is* this overriding sense of the evanescent, the vanishing. And I suppose that's what inspires me most to write."⁹ It was always, as Shahid points out, a part of his sensibility and temperament that he saw "everything in a very elegiac way. It's not something morbid, but it is part of my emotional coloring."¹⁰

Agha Shahid Ali's themes of exile, loss, nostalgia, and his political concerns are expressed largely through an engagement with history and memory. He thought that "history is a way of recovering and enriching one's memory . . . of nourishing, strengthening, and making it be something more than just a very private, simple affair."¹¹ In "The Dacca Gauzes" and "After Seeing Kozintsev's *King Lear* in Delhi," drawing on Oscar Wilde and Shakespeare, he merges literature with history and memory. "The Dacca Gauzes," one of his most popular poems, draws its central image, the "Dacca muslin," from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, mentioned in the poem's epigraph: "for a whole year he sought to accumulate the most exquisite Dacca gauzes." Dacca muslin, a very fine cotton that used to be made in Dacca, the largest city of Eastern Bengal in colonial India and now Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is described in the following lines:

Those transparent Dacca gauzes
known as woven air, running
water, evening dew:
a dead art now, dead over
a hundred years.¹²

At a reading, Shahid would explain the background of the poem by sharing some historical facts with his audience (the Dacca muslin was highly coveted in the courts of Europe, and Pocahontas, the Virginian Native American daughter of a Chief, wore a dress made of Dacca muslin at the court of King James I). Explaining that colonial Britain destroyed this handloom industry, amputating the thumbs of weavers as a deterrent, in order to promote the textile mills in England, he would quote William Bentick, the Viceroy of India, who in 1834 said that "the bones of the

cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains of India.”¹³ Shahid clarified that in setting out to write this poem he did not have an overt political agenda to represent what the British did. “What engaged me there was a horrific act . . . but only as it was passed down to us, thus becoming legend, and . . . tied up . . . with family history and my grandmother(s).”¹⁴ However, he said he “felt very resentful about it historically,”¹⁵ as he also did about the treatment meted out to Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal Emperor of India (1837–58), referenced in the poem “After Seeing Kozintsev’s *King Lear* in Delhi.” The poem begins as the speaker steps out of the theater and into the streets of Delhi after seeing the film, the words of King Lear reverberating in the first two lines of the poem: “Lear cries out ‘You are men of stones’/ as Cordelia hangs from a broken wall.”¹⁶ Significantly, the theater’s location, Chandni Chowk, one of the most famous parts of old Delhi, serves to transport the speaker from King Lear’s dramatic tragedy to a historical one – the humiliation and exile of Zafar, who was also a famous poet. The speaker is thus plunged into colonial history in the fourth stanza:

I think of Zafar, poet and Emperor,
being led through this street
by British soldiers, his feet in chains,
to watch his sons hanged.¹⁷

History is a trigger for memory and literature, pointing not only to the presence in his verse of his ever-constant awareness of human injustice but also exhibiting a remarkable command over aesthetics and artistry.

The Half-Inch Himalayas (1987), Shahid’s first full-length book from which the above two poems have been taken, and which took a long time to emerge in its final shape, was rejected by publishers in earlier versions, and Shahid was “glad because it was not quite there.”¹⁸ In 1985, the year it was accepted by Wesleyan University Press, it was a “finalist in all the national competitions.”¹⁹ As Shahid says, “it got accepted when it was aesthetically ready.”²⁰ Interestingly, alongside “The Dacca Gauzes” and the other poems in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, he was also attempting “humorous poems,” such as the “telephone poems” and “Red Riding Hood” in the slim chapbook-like *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, published by Sun Gemini Press in the same year as *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. To quote Shahid, “no one would think the poems [“The Dacca Gauzes” and the “telephone poems”] are by the same person. And if by the same person, then not at the same time. Such is the mysterious business of temperaments.”²¹ For instance, one telephone poem, “Today, talk is cheap, Call somebody,” begins, “I called Information Desk, Heaven

/ and asked, "When is Doomsday?"/ I was put on hold." And the last three stanzas read:

I prayed, "Angel of Love,
 please pick up the phone."
 But it was the Angel of Death.
 I said, "Tell me, Tell me,
 when is Doomsday?"
 He answered, "God is busy.
 He never answers the living,
 He has no answers for the dead.
 Don't ever call again collect."²²

Simultaneously, he said, he was writing "persona poems," such as "Eurydice" and "Medusa," which "did not fit into the thematic structure of *The Half-Inch Himalayas*"²³ but did fit into, and were included in *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. That *The Half-Inch Himalayas'* poems reflect a sheer longing for home is because, Shahid pointed out in interviews, he wrote the poems as a student when he could not afford to go back to Kashmir. As he explains, "the exilic temperament [in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*] was not a youthful pose."²⁴ He missed his parents, his home, his friends, and Kashmir. But once he could go to Kashmir every year, as he did later, he did not suffer that particular sense of loss anymore. While *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, published in 1987, draws largely on home, parents, family, ancestors, and particularly Shahid's experiences in Delhi and Pennsylvania, Shahid emphasizes that the "I," his "first person singular has never been just [him]" but goes beyond to encompass "some of the multitude" and to transcend the personal into more universal, "larger patterns."²⁵

His next book, *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, published by Norton in 1991, melded histories and memories, cultures and traditions, and demonstrates in many ways Shahid's immersion in American culture. "One very good thing that happened to me by moving to Arizona was," he told an interviewer, "that I suddenly found a landscape that could somehow bear my concerns and my themes of exile, loss, nostalgia . . . Some of my political concerns, too."²⁶ The nostalgia that marks especially the poems about vanished Native American tribes and ghost towns in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* is characterized by Shahid as a "homesickness for what has gone, what has vanished."²⁷ "I think of people who because of historical forces have lost so much," he said.²⁸ As Lawrence Needham notes, Shahid "reclaims the voices of life's victims in painful awareness of the enormity, even futility of his task. As always, [he] is the chronicler of loss."²⁹ Having

found nothing like Kashmir in America, in Arizona Shahid discovered the “larger-than-life melodramatic landscape” of the south-western desert where, in some ways, “Arizona is even more dramatic than Kashmir . . . because of the Grand Canyon and . . . the fact that the Arizona desert was in fact an ocean two hundred million years ago.”³⁰ All these things became metaphors for Shahid in *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*, which gives particular prominence to Emily Dickinson’s “Evanescence” in a sequence of eleven poems titled “In Search of Evanescence,” and in the title poem, “A Nostalgist’s Map of America” in which the word “Evanescence” is repeated six times, and where the subject matter encompasses the Papagos,³¹ a Native American tribe; the sacred saguaros,³² “large tree-like columnar cacti”; Medusa, “The Youngest of the Graeae,”³³ three sisters, in Greek myth, who shared one eye; and the legend of Laila and Majnoon, the Arabic love story of star-crossed lovers.

The prologue poem, “Eurydice,” written from Eurydice’s point of view, transposes the Greek myth to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, a metaphor for hell, where the guard prevents the “rare passenger,” Orpheus, from taking Eurydice “on the train with him / rushing along the upper Rhine.” Shahid said he was always interested in Greek myth, partly because when he was a child his mother read him tales from Greek and Roman myth, and the myth of Eurydice stayed with him for a long time. Explaining what started the poem, in a radio interview, he said that he had read

[a] marvelous poem by Adrienne Rich, “I Dream I’m the Death of Orpheus,” in which she took images from Jean Cocteau’s film *Orphee*. It’s a startlingly incredible poem she’s written and I also had my first stirrings of feminism. . . . I said everything we hear about the legend is from his point of view, that is, he is lonely on earth, he has lost her. And I said this poor woman had one chance to get out of hell and he screwed it up. A number of things came together and to me the most modern image of hell was the Nazi camp and I just said that is hell and so in trying to modernize the myth a lot of my politics in its own way came to the surface.³⁴

Another poem, “The Keeper of the Dead Hotel,” about the copper miners’ strike in Bisbee leading to the Bisbee Deportation in July 1917, underscores Shahid’s “sense of history and injustice,” to borrow a phrase of his.³⁵ The title of the last poem, “Snow on the Desert,” refers to a true event, the unusual snowfall in Tucson in 1987. Mixing three cultures – Hindu, Western, and Muslim – the poem merges these with memory, exile, and nostalgia, especially toward the end of the poem. The poet/speaker is driving his sister to Tucson International Airport, “very early in the

morning” when “suddenly on Alvernon and 22nd Street / the sliding doors of the fog were opened, / and the snow, which had fallen all night, now / sun-dazzled, blinded us.” Later in the poem, the reference to the Papagos and the saguaros highlights, albeit indirectly, the poet’s political concerns about “vanishing tribes”:

the saguaros have opened themselves, stretched
out their arms to rays millions of years old,
in each ray a secret of the planet’s
origin, the rays hurting each cactus
into memory, a human memory –
for they are human, the Papagos say:
not only because they have arms and veins
and secrets. But because they too are a tribe,
vulnerable to massacre.

Driving back from the airport, as “the fog /shut its doors behind me on Alvernon,” the poet/speaker remembers another moment that “refers only to itself, in New Delhi one night / as Begum Akhtar sang, the lights went out. / It was perhaps during the Bangladesh War.” Begum Akhtar, an “abiding romance”³⁶ of Shahid’s, sang ghazals and was the most famous semi-classical singer of India. The “great Begum Akhtar,” he said, “one of my ideals . . . elevated ghazal singing into a great art form.”³⁷ Shahid’s collection of poems, *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* (1975), is devoted to her.

Although the poems in *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* incorporate attempts at “syllabics, stanzas, one-sentence poems, metrical rhythms,” in Shahid’s words, “he was not following any clear-cut rules but an inner ear to make them metrical.”³⁸ Nevertheless, he was already moving toward form when he started working on *The Country Without a Post Office* in the years 1990 to 1996. Two things coincided with the writing of this book: the start of political turbulence in Kashmir, and Shahid’s meeting with James Merrill. Raising “the stakes” for himself, challenging himself to use traditional poetic forms he had never tried before, and taking on the agony caused by the conflict in Kashmir, Shahid found that both the rigorous poetic forms and James Merrill did not allow him to make things “convenient” for himself.³⁹ “Its large subject-matter, the turmoil in Kashmir,” in Shahid’s words, “accompanies my largest aesthetic canvas so far. I wanted to honor the cruel luck of being given as one’s subject the destruction of one’s home[land] . . . by serving the language and not letting it become an aesthetic convenience.”⁴⁰ Shahid’s awareness that “good politics don’t necessarily mean good poetry”⁴¹ kept him from making things

easy for himself as he transformed the painful subject matter of the devastation in Kashmir into art.

Shahid went almost every summer to Kashmir during the insurgency, which began in 1990, and saw first-hand the devastation there. *The Country Without a Post Office*, both the book and its title, “arose from factual reality in that no mail was delivered in Kashmir when the troubles started.”⁴² The meeting with Merrill not only coincided with Shahid’s interest in form, but was to have the greatest impact on his poetry. While Shahid acknowledged the visible and invisible influences of other poets on him, of James Merrill he said in an interview, “I value him immensely as a presence in my work, and I would say he’s in some ways the formal spirit guiding me through *The Country Without a Post Office*.”⁴³ “It was almost like he occurred in my life as a poetic influence when I was ready for him,” he said.⁴⁴ Shahid started “studying what Merrill and other great users of traditional forms were doing,”⁴⁵ and then began writing demanding forms, canzones, sestinas, and villanelles, and also, paradoxically, prose poems. To his delight, Shahid found the strict forms not constraining but, rather, liberating, giving him as they did an “immense freedom just through the shackles.”⁴⁶

“The Floating Post Office,” written in the rigorous verse form of the sestina, takes its epigraph from an article, “Houseboat Days in the Vale of Kashmir,” in the October 1929 issue of *The National Geographic*. The poem’s epigraph – “The post boat was like a gondola that called at each houseboat. It carried a clerk, weighing scales, and a bell to announce arrivals” – describes postal arrangements during the British period in Kashmir. Offering background information on Kashmir, a historical detail cited by Shahid was that the British sold Kashmir in 1846 to the Maharaja, under whose law non-Kashmiris could not own property in Kashmir.

A major presence in *The Country Without a Post Office* is Emily Dickinson. While visible to a great extent in *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*, here she is surprisingly linked to the theme of Kashmir. When Shahid moved to Amherst he had already embarked on the poems of *The Country Without a Post Office*, poems dealing with Kashmir’s strife. As Shahid tells it, with a smile and a chuckle, “a student of mine in the MFA Program at UMass pointed out to me that there are six poems of Emily Dickinson’s in which the word ‘Kashmir’ occurs twice or thrice as the place and the other three times as the wool, the fabric. And I found them and I quickly used them up before anyone else could, so all these references are in that book.”⁴⁷ Shahid, who had never written prose poems, as mentioned earlier, till he started writing poems in defined forms, included all his first

few prose poems in *The Country Without a Post Office*. An Emily Dickinson line titles one of these: "Some Vision of the World Cashmere." The epigraph is also hers: "If I could bribe them by a Rose / I'd bring them every flower that grows / From Amherst to Cashmere!" "And, I thought," Shahid declared inimitably to William Moebius, "this was a welcome note she left behind specifically for me."⁴⁸ While the poem self-consciously establishes a connection between Amherst and Kashmir, Shahid recounts that it "really transcribed a dream [he] had."⁴⁹ The poem begins with the phone ringing in Amherst, and we hear the conversation begin: "Your grandmother is dying." When this conversation stops, the speaker, Shahid, puts the phone down and is in his home in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. He explained, "there used to be a cottage in our garden where my grandmother lived and I run towards that cottage. So suddenly from Amherst I am in Kashmir."⁵⁰ The poem thus links Dickinson's "Amherst to Cashmere."

The Country Without a Post Office, Shahid said, "was not an easy book to write. It took a lot out of me. . . . And in a way for me a much bigger subject matter has occurred, which is the loss of my mother. So I'm writing very much about her in which Kashmir comes in, in one way or the other, and will, but for me, for my personal life, it is the end of a universe."⁵¹ His mother's terminal brain cancer, followed by her death in April 1997, left Shahid unable to write for a year. The first poem he wrote after his mother's death, "Lenox Hill" – his second canzone, that some, including Amitav Ghosh, consider perhaps his greatest poem – elegizes his mother.⁵² "Lenox Hill" (its title taken from a hospital in New York City where his mother underwent brain surgery) and other poems inspired by her bring together God, mysticism, longing, anxiety, and death in his 2001 book *Rooms Are Never Finished*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. Becoming mythic and anchored in religious history, his mother and Kashmir are woven into poems that command a range of stories from Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam about Jesus, Krishna, Hussain, and especially Zainab. The connection between his mother and Zainab is illuminated in the prose poem "Karbala: A History of the 'House of Sorrow'," the first of the twelve sequentially numbered individual poems that comprise the poem "From Amherst to Kashmir," which informs the reader that "[s]ince she was a girl," Shahid's mother "had felt Zainab's grief as her own." Shahid identifies his own grief for his mother with Zainab's, who mourns her brother Hussain's martyrdom.

The first time Shahid read "Lenox Hill" publically was at Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in 1998.⁵³ What made this a show stopper was that

after the first three stanzas he stopped, telling the audience that he did not have the paper copy of the entire poem with him. After a brief explanation from Shahid, the audience – mostly of fellow poets – gave a long, emotional standing ovation. “Lenox Hill,” in a reversal of mother and child roles, has the poet taking on the role of mother and his mother that of his daughter, as in the following lines:

“As you sit here by me, you’re just like my mother,”
 She tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir,
 She’s watching, at the Regal, her first film with Father.
 If only I could gather you in my arms, Mother,
 I’d save you – my daughter – from God. The universe
 Opens its ledger. I write: How helpless was God’s mother!

The poem ends thus:

For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir,
 And what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe
 When I remember you – beyond all accounting – O my mother?

“My mother gave me,” Shahid said, “so much a sense of poetry and music and ritual, all these marvellously magical things.”⁵⁴ Shahid had a profound, open relationship with his parents. Emphasizing the encouraging role his parents played in his early development as a poet, Shahid would narrate that at the age of twelve, when he wrote a poem and showed it to his father, he did not say it was good but bought him a beautiful leather-bound notebook to write all his poems in. When he filled it up, a few years later, his father presented him with another leather-bound notebook, and wrote in it, in English: “Another notebook for the same game. Spontaneous self-expression must now grow into studied attempts at conciseness and discipline.”⁵⁵ Shahid’s poetic impulses, which in many ways were present since his childhood, were nurtured in a home that exposed him to Urdu and English poetry, Persian and Kashmiri poetry, to Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Ghalib, Faiz, and Hafiz, and to Indian and Western classical music, as well as to Indian film and music, all seamlessly interwoven into daily conversation.

Shahid brought both the rhythms and music of Urdu poetry and language into English verse forms and infused English literary imagery and allusions into the ghazal, an Arabic, Persian, and Urdu lyric poem in couplet form, which he rendered in English with great success. “It was his genius,” the poet Christopher Merrill writes, “to fuse the English and Urdu literary traditions: he knew *Paradise Lost* as intimately as the Koran; he was inspired alike by Dante and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. And he devoted his last years

to reshaping our literary landscape, convincing more than a hundred American poets to write ‘real ghazals in English.’”⁵⁶ With these hundred and more ghazals, anthologized in *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*,⁵⁷ Shahid ensured that the “actual form [of the ghazal] found its way into American poetry.”⁵⁸ Shahid also completed his own book of ghazals in English, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, published posthumously by Norton in 2003.

Shahid called himself “a triple exile” or “a multiple exile,” but his self-description as an “exile” was, in his words, “a self myth-making.”⁵⁹ He liked the term “exile” for its metaphoric power, its “emotional resonance,” preferring it to the “near-clinical” expatriate or émigré.⁶⁰ He emphasized that he felt “absolutely comfortable” in both America and in Kashmir.⁶¹ As he said, “I don’t ever feel I’ve given anything up in India. In a strange way, I’ve recovered my roots as a South Asian, as an Indian, as a Kashmiri in a stronger way. For example,” he explained, “translating Faiz Ahmed Faiz is something that occurred to me in the US.”⁶² It was in America, Shahid said, that he truly became a poet, where he realized himself in “formal, aesthetic, and artistic terms, became a poet [he] could respect . . . [where he found] his voice, his manner, his courage, his formal degree of virtuosity.”⁶³ Conscious of the aesthetic effect of his poems and sensitive to the power of language, his ear was always attuned to the texture and music of language; sometimes a phrase shaped a poem, sometimes a single word. What mattered to Shahid above all was aesthetics and form. Though his poetry was always concerned with matters of political conscience and fairness, he never subordinated form to politics. He said, “when I write I am sensuously engaged with language and . . . at that point I’m just thinking about how to make [it] the best possible poem.”⁶⁴ This “sensuous engagement with language” reflects his poetic concerns, elaborated in his essay, “A Darkly Defense of Dead White Males,” which begins with the statement, “[s]ubject matter is artistically interesting only when through form it has become content.”⁶⁵ This, in a sense, encapsulates Shahid’s insistence on form: “the more rigorous the form . . . the greater the chance for content.”⁶⁶

“The Veiled Suite,” the last poem Shahid wrote before his death, was selected by Harold Bloom for inclusion in *Till I End My Song: A Gathering of Last Poems*, in which “everything,” as Bloom states, had been selected “because of its artistic excellence” (xvii). This collection of the last poems of the hundred most influential poets of the last four centuries begins with “Prothalamion” by Edmund Spenser (1552–99) and ends with “The Veiled Suite,” which Bloom calls “one of the most haunting of all last poems”

(369). “The Veiled Suite” has an epigraph, a line from a dream Shahid had in Spring 2000 soon after his diagnosis of brain cancer, in which he says to himself: “Faceless, he could represent only two alternatives: that he was either a conscious agent of harm, or that he would unknowingly harm me anyway,” embedded in which, perhaps, is the poet’s nightmare, the fear of his nemesis and of his own death. “The Veiled Suite” was Shahid’s third canzone, the “dauntingly difficult” verse form invented by Dante who himself wrote no more than one because he said it was like “loading himself with chains.”⁶⁷

At Shahid’s memorial, at New York University in April 2002, Anthony Hecht, unable to attend, sent a statement that began with a comment on his own attempts at writing a canzone: “having used the form,” Hecht reflected, “he could easily understand why no one had been tempted to write more than one.” The form, Hecht explains, revived by that “master of forms, W. H. Auden,” prompted [Hecht], Eli Sisman, John Hollander, James Merrill, and Marilyn Hacker to attempt the form once. So when Hecht received Shahid’s second “superb” canzone, “Lenox Hill,” he had declared that Shahid deserved some sort of entry in *The Guinness Book of Records*. But, Hecht said, he had spoken too soon because “shortly before his death Shahid sent [him] a third poem of his in the same form which in [his] view makes him its indisputable master.”

Unlike his poetry, Shahid was full of wit and laughter, gregarious to a fault, and he loved to cook and entertain. He famously responded when asked by an interviewer about his philosophy, “I don’t have a philosophy; I have a temperament.”⁶⁸ The sense of his heritage sharpened over the decades as he juggled his fidelity to Urdu and his fidelity to English as a poet writing in English. The music and flavor of his work, while in English, conveys his affinity with the Urdu language. Shahid never wrote in Urdu but felt that the “poetry of the old Urdu culture [had] seeped into [his] works . . . and [made] [his] work in English very different”⁶⁹ (49). This unique sensibility permeates his major poetry collections as he responds to his geographical and metaphorical landscapes – Kashmir, New Delhi, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Amherst – the political events in Kashmir and the death of his mother inspiring his last two collections. The centrality of loss, longing, and death in Shahid’s poetry on Kashmir brings a relevance and immediacy to his readers, which has led to his being referred to as the “voice of Kashmir.” Along with his strong social conscience and the intricate web of death, dreams, memory, and history woven into his verse, the reader finds in his poetry a multiplicity of belonging, a fascination with his environment, a reaching toward the universal through the

local and personal. Indeed, his seems to be an identity that is not fractured, his poems expressing no anxiety about a hyphenated identity but, rather, imparting a sense of multiplicity well suited to a poet of a country without a post office.

Notes

1. Agha Shahid Ali, "Agha Shahid Ali: The Lost Interview," interview with Stacey Chase, *The Café Review* 22 (Spring 2011), p. 36.
2. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Christine Benvenuto, *Massachusetts Review* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2002), p. 267.
3. Agha Shahid Ali, "A Darkly Defense of Dead White Males," in *Poet's Work, Poet's Play: Essays on the Practice and the Art*, eds. Daniel Tobin and Pimone Triplett (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 149.
4. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Stacey Chase, p. 36.
5. Agha Shahid Ali, "A Darkly Defense of Dead White Males," p. 149.
6. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Lawrence Needham, *The Verse Book of Interviews*, eds. Brian Henry and Andrew Zawacki (Amherst, Massachusetts: Verse Press, 2005), p. 135.
7. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Stacey Chase, p. 36.
8. Agha Shahid Ali, "The Beloved Witness," in *What Will Suffice: Contemporary American Poets on the Art of Poetry*, eds. Christopher Buckley and Christopher Merrill (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1995), p. 2.
9. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Stacey Chase, p. 39.
10. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Deborah Klenotic, "Waiting for Word in the Paradise That Was Kashmir," *UMass Amherst Magazine* Spring 1998, accessed online February 16, 2014 [no page numbers available] http://www.umass.edu/umassmag/archives/1998/spring_98/spg98_books_ali.html.
11. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Stacey Chase, p. 40.
12. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), p. 15.
13. Agha Shahid Ali, "William Moebius in Conversation with Agha Shahid Ali," interview with William Moebius, *Poets of New England*, Part II, no. 107, Academic Instructional Media Services, producer/director Elizabeth Wilda, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 2000, videocassette.
14. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Lawrence Needham, p. 139.
15. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with William Moebius, Part II.
16. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, p. 25.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Lawrence Needham, p. 134.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

22. Agha Shahid Ali, *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (Tucson: Sun Gemini Press, 1987), p. 5.
23. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Lawrence Needham, p. 143.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 136–37.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
26. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Stacey Chase, p. 39.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Christine Benvenuto, p. 266.
29. Lawrence D. Needham, “Agha Shahid Ali,” in *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 13.
30. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Zee TV in Brooklyn, New York, 2001, CD-ROM. This is a video-recording of an unedited interview conducted by Zee TV in April 2001.
31. Accessed online: www.native-languages.org/papago_culture.htm, May 4, 2014.
32. Accessed online: www.desertmuseum.org/kids/oz/long-fact-sheets/Saguaro%20Cactus.php, May 4, 2014.
33. The Graeae, “gray-haired from birth . . . were the sisters and protectors of the Gorgons. Perseus stole their eye and did not return it till they told him how to find the Gorgon Medusa, thus betraying their sister.” Definition by Agha Shahid Ali in *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*, p. 92.
34. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with S. Leonard Rubinstein, originally broadcast as an episode of the radio program, *Odyssey Through Literature*, on April 13, 1992; producer Nancy Marie Brown, Pennsylvania State University, audiocassette.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Zee TV in Brooklyn.
37. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with William Moebius, Part II.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Deborah Klenotic.
40. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Lawrence Needham, p. 136.
41. Agha Shahid Ali, “Poems Are Never Finished: A Final Interview with Agha Shahid Ali,” interview with Eric Gamalinda, *Poets and Writers* 30, no. 2 (March/April 2002), p. 47.
42. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Lawrence Needham, p. 144.
43. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Christine Benvenuto, p. 264.
44. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with William Moebius, Part II.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with William Moebius, Part I.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*, Part II.

52. Amitav Ghosh, "The Ghat of the Only World," in *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times*, ed. Amitav Ghosh (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), p. 74.
53. Shahid read "Lenox Hill" at the 73rd Annual Session of Middlebury College's *Bread Loaf Writers' Conference* (the oldest writers' conference in America) on August 15, 1998, where he was a member of the Conference's Poetry Faculty.
54. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Eric Gamalinda, p. 50.
55. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with William Moebius, Part I.
56. Christopher Merrill, "Introduction to Agha Shahid Ali: A Retrospective Selection of Poems," *Ratapallax* (Spring 2002), p. 133.
57. Published in 2000 by Wesleyan University Press.
58. Agha Shahid Ali, "Introduction," in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, ed. Agha Shahid Ali (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 13.
59. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Stacey Chase, p. 30.
60. Agha Shahid Ali, "A Privileged Site: The New Exiles," in *Live Like the Banyan Tree: Images of the Indian American Experience*, ed. Leela Prasad (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, 1999), p. 53.
61. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with William Moebius, Part I.
62. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Zee TV in Brooklyn.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with William Moebius, Part II.
65. Agha Shahid Ali, "A Darkly Defense of Dead White Males," p. 141.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
67. The following quote is from Anthony Hecht's statement, read at the Agha Shahid Ali Memorial Reading at New York University in April 2002: "Once in an interview I was asked about that dauntingly difficult verse form invented by Dante and employed in his poem that begins, 'love, you clearly see that this lady,' and of which he said that in composing it he had loaded himself with chains and would never write another."
68. Daniel Hall, "Foreword," in *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems*, Agha Shahid Ali (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), p. 16.
69. Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Eric Gamalinda, p. 49.

*The Languages of Diaspora: Meena Alexander,
Sujata Bhatt, Imtiaz Dharker*

Lopamudra Basu

Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, and Imtiaz Dharker are three contemporary women poets whose achievements represent the fruition of Indian poetry in diaspora. Many common tropes in the biographies of these women, as well as engagement with a variety of similar themes in their poetry, lend themselves to a productive comparison of their lives and works. Alexander, Bhatt, and Dharker were born in the 1950s, in the generation immediately following independence. Alexander and Bhatt were born in India, while Dharker was born in Pakistan. Though belonging to different regions of South Asia and speaking distinct languages, their early lives were marked by migrations precipitated by the travels and migrations of their families. While Alexander's father's career in meteorology led to her crossing the Indian Ocean for Sudan, around the time of her fifth birthday, Bhatt's father moved to the United States and subsequently settled there in pursuit of greater opportunities in his chosen field of virology. Dharker's family immigrated to Scotland when she was only a year old. This first childhood passage was followed for all three women by other migrations. These experiences of multiple border crossings, and the sedimentation of various languages in their poetic works, establishes a basic kinship between these poets.

**Mother Tongues, Colonial Languages, and the Hybrid Tongues
of Poetry**

South Asian poets in diaspora whose poems map complex relationships with their mother tongues, languages of colonial inheritance, and languages of myriad spaces they have inhabited, Alexander, Bhatt, and Dharker are poets who grew up steeped in the traditions of their regional Indian languages – Malayalam, Gujarati, and Urdu respectively. They developed an ambivalent relationship to the English

language, steeped as it is in the history of colonial oppression, and yet, paradoxically, this became the language of creative expression for them. For Sujata Bhatt, there is an additional element of complexity in the introduction of German to this already complex linguistic history. Bhatt married a German writer and has made Bremen, Germany, her home. Her poetry therefore has to negotiate her relationship with three languages: Gujarati, her mother tongue; English, the language of primary creative expression; and German, the language of her adopted country in adult life.

Imtiaz Dharker's bilingual sensibility was shaped by her encounter with English in Scotland and her exposure to Urdu as the language of her home. Her visits and extended stays in Mumbai also immersed her in the rhythms and cadences of Mumbai's languages, but in her poems we are most intimately exposed to words of Urdu and Punjabi, remnants of tongues heard at home and in her travels to South Asia. The snippets of Punjabi found in Dharker's poetry seem to echo a lost past of pre-Partition, undivided India and an undivided Punjab that she inherits from the memories of her family. Meanwhile, though Malayalam is Meena Alexander's native tongue, her home state of Kerala has been a place of residence only intermittently. Other languages such as Hindi in Allahabad, or Arabic and French in Khartoum, have blended with the mother tongue spoken at home. Moreover, the imposition of English by regimes of colonial pedagogy continues to produce effects of alienation and disjuncture between the body she inhabits and the tongue she speaks. Alexander's relationship with Malayalam is also complicated by the fact that she rejected its script while loving its oral rhythms as expressed in the work of wandering poets and minstrels. In a poem such as "Illiterate Heart," Alexander documents her complex relationship with her linguistic past:

A child mouthing words
to flee family.
I will never enter that house, I swore,
I'll never be locked in a cage of script.¹

This poem records the painful ambiguity Alexander experiences with both of her languages. English is profoundly alienating, but she also simultaneously feels a sense of imprisonment in the traditional script of Malayalam and has to reject it to find her own poetic voice. In the end, the only home that language is able to provide Alexander is in the creative

transformation of the fragments of various languages into a hybrid post-colonial poetics that is able to produce beauty even as it records loss.

Sujata Bhatt's famous poem, "A Different History," which has been anthologized in many collections, begins with the exploration of the similar painful legacy of inheriting English as a colonial language, but the pain is quickly transformed to a celebration of an original artistic manifesto of love and creativity in the new language:

Which language
has not been the oppressor's tongue?
...
And how does it happen
that after the torture,
after the soul has been cropped
with a long scythe swooping out
of the conqueror's face –
The unborn grandchildren
Grow to love that strange language.²

Bhatt gives expression to a fully developed aesthetic of postcolonial hybridity in poems such as "Search for My Tongue," where she mixes words in Gujarati script with Gujarati in Roman script followed by English translation.³ At the heart of the poem she is confronting the loss of her mother tongue and eventually reclaiming it in the hybrid aesthetic of the poem, which mixes languages and scripts.

Imtiaz Dharker's predicament of negotiating bilingualism and biculturalism in her poetry is evident in several poems in her collections. This in-between condition seems to feature prominently in the collection *Leaving Fingerprints* (2009), where the lyrics echo memories of the diverse languages of her life and cultural inheritance. Several lyrics in this collection, such as "Kinna Sona," have Punjabi titles and echo snippets of Punjabi and Hindi songs such as "*Kinna Sona tinnu rab ne banaya*."⁴ This title functions as an ironic counterpoint to the situation depicted in the lyric, which is that of the immigrant or visitor being photographed for biometrics during a border crossing or at an immigration checkpoint at an airport. This song, which Dharker translates as "Always as God made you beautiful," is what the subject in the lyric hears in the background as she is instructed to look at the camera and take her biometrics to establish eligibility to enter a nation state. This process of surveillance resurfaces in other poems in the collection *The Terrorist at My Table* as something that is essentially dehumanizing. However, the migrant subject reclaims

her agency by the act of invoking a long-forgotten Punjabi song that reaffirms not just her beauty but also her humanity.

The most striking use of hybrid or multiple languages by Dharker occurs in the poem titled “Gaddi aa gayi.”⁵ The verses of this poem are punctuated by the recurring refrain “*Gaddi aa gayi tation the.*” This refrain in Punjabi is a chilling reminder of the horrors of Partition that led to ethnic blood baths and the massacre of trains of refugees on both sides of the border. This is not something Dharker experienced in person but, as her title metaphor of “fingerprints” for this collection indicates, the traumatic memory survives in subsequent generations. Even when Dharker’s family had migrated to Scotland, this refrain in Punjabi brought home the fragility of national belonging and the violence often unleashed in the process of nation formation. In all three poets, the practice of introducing fragments of different languages underscores both the legacy of varied languages and the serious attempt to find an aesthetic form that gives expression to the polyphonic and multilingual nature of South Asian poetry in diaspora.

Feminist Poetics and Struggles for Gender Equity

Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, and Imtiaz Dharker deliberately engage with topics central to their gendered identities in their poetry. Although they may not embrace the label of “feminist poet,” the centrality of gender is indisputable in the works of these three women. While Alexander is committed to exploring a feminist genealogy of literary influence in her work, and both she and Bhatt want to give full expression to many censored aspects of women’s lives, Dharker’s engagement with gender takes on a somewhat different focus because in this negotiation she grapples with her identity as a Muslim woman. Alexander and Bhatt examine and resist patriarchy in other formations. Their primary exploration of feminism is not in the context of opposition to a particular religion. Dharker, on the other hand, takes on the critical question of the role of women in Islam, which in a post-9/11 world has become a hotly contested issue.

In the essay “In Search of Sarojini Naidu” in *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996), Alexander follows the lead of Alice Walker in seeking out a lineage of literary foremothers. Alexander traces her literary predecessors in the figures of Indian women writers such as Sarojini Naidu, Lalithambika Antherjanam, and Nalapat Balamaniamma. In this essay, Alexander gives voice to the difficulty women writers have traditionally faced in giving expression to their

sexualities. She explores the split between the dynamic political career of Sarojini Naidu and the “choke hold of a lyricism” in Naidu’s poetry, where the pathos of women is conveyed without any viable means of seeking a way out of the suffering.⁶ In the same essay, Alexander critiques Gandhi’s invitation to women to join in the decolonization struggle while at the same time displaying an inability to accommodate their sexuality, leading to episodes such as the forceful cutting of women’s hair in Sabarmati Ashram. Alexander writes that in the framework of Gandhian nationalism, “women were freed for political action but the female body had to bear the pitiful burden of repressed desire and the pain of withdrawn sexuality.”⁷ In her poetry, Alexander consciously avoids this pitfall faced by her literary foremothers and does not self-censor many experiences of female sexuality.

Alexander’s poetry is often a deliberate unveiling of many previously censored female experiences. In the poem “Passion” she gives lyrical form to the pain and joy of childbirth:

I am she
The woman after giving birth
life
to give life
torn and hovering
as bloodied fluids
baste the weakened flesh.⁸

But even more traumatic than the portrait of female post-partum is the muted representation of childhood sexual molestation described in the poem “Veil,” anthologized in the collection *Quickly Changing River*.⁹ Alexander has described, in her memoir *Fault Lines*, how after a recent trauma the buried memory of childhood sexual molestation at the hands of her maternal grandfather resurfaced. The poem also voices Alexander’s simmering anger at her mother for her inability to notice this violation and also her failure to protect her against this event.

Sujata Bhatt, in a bold and pioneering step, has deliberately foregrounded female bodily experiences in her poetry. She has a number of poems that are unabashedly erotic and focus on women’s experiences of sexual gratification. Bhatt, like Alexander, emerges from the Gandhian and the Hindu ascetic tradition, which seems focused on abstinence and sexual repression rather than in the principle of pleasure seeking. In poems such as “White Asparagus” we see the arrival of a female consciousness that is open in its quest for physical pleasure and is not racked by guilt or shame in admitting to its own bodily needs. In an interview with Helen Tookey,

when she was asked about the importance of writing about women's lives and experiences, Bhatt responded:

For most of human history, girls and women's stories, if told at all, have been told by men, usually from a male perspective and sometimes from an actively misogynist point of view. So in a way, I feel I am "writing back" to history. . . I always felt that I should be able to write about whatever concerned me, without being censored. I've always felt a need to break certain silences and yes to bear witness.¹⁰

Thus, in "White Asparagus" Bhatt documents the heightened state of female desire during pregnancy.¹¹ The poem does not shy away from topics such as female masturbation, traditionally unexpressed, deliberately subverting the tradition of lyric poetry that constitutes the female body as an object of the male gaze, only depicted as a source of sexual gratification for male lust. Instead, the female body is depicted as an agent active in its quest for pleasure, without guilt or fear of chastisement.

Like Alexander's, Bhatt's poetry too gives expression to experiences of childbirth, menstruation, and motherhood. In addition, Bhatt also draws on the relatively taboo and repressed topics of infertility, miscarriage, and pregnancy loss from the archive of her own lived experiences as a woman. In the poem "More Fears About the Moon," Bhatt records the sadness of recurrent miscarriages:

Fetus after fetus lost
Can't you take me away
from this city?¹²

The image of tides, in the poem, continuing to rise without receding, evokes the sense of disruption in the natural rhythms of fertility in a woman's body and the resulting disharmony in her life. The despondency of the poet and her sadness at the lack of fertility in her life seem to be echoed in the natural landscape of the full moon and the tides.

Imtiaz Dharker's explorations of gender and justice in her poetry occur within the context of her relationship to her religion of Islam. From her very first publication, *Purdah and Other Poems*, Dharker has been an unequivocal critic of Islam, and indeed of all organized religion, as institutions that systematically limit women's access to the public sphere and deny full recognition of their humanity.¹³ This early volume begins with a set of two poems titled "Purdah 1" and "Purdah 2." "Purdah 1" delineates a rite of passage in every orthodox Muslim woman's life when she is forced to confront the knowledge of herself as a physical and sexual being and taught to feel shame for her body. This cultural indoctrination into a sense of sin is

formalized through the practice of veiling or purdah. The donning of the hijab or purdah, for Dharker, represents a loss of freedom and equal access to public space for Muslim women and a solipsistic withdrawal into the recesses of her own mind and its limitations, rather than an opening out to the world.

“Purdah II” discusses the social consequences of the indoctrination into a sense of bodily shame that took place in “Purdah I.” The institution of veiling and the spatial segregation of the sexes actually breed all kinds of corruption. The clergy are vested with enormous power and often take advantage of their close access to women students of the *Koran*. Purdah, instead of ensuring high moral standards, actually produces all kinds of sexual and moral corruption, including clergy taking advantage of young women, forced arranged marriages, and, ultimately, rebellion by women against such a repressive climate in the form of elopements or covert affairs. Dharker is exposing the ugly underbelly of righteous Islamic societies.

Dharker is passionate in expressing her moral outrage against the excesses of orthodox Islam. In her critique of Islam, she does not posit any alternatives that are less repressive as options for people of faith. This total rejection of Islam in her early volume seems to inadvertently reproduce the binaristic division of the world into the secular West and the religious, traditional Orient, with the latter being fixed as a space where women’s freedoms are severely curtailed. The lyric poet is recording her intense dissatisfaction with the institution, but perhaps a historical contextualization of the institution of veiling would have helped readers to come to a more nuanced understanding instead of creating a shorthand of Islam as synonymous with women’s oppression.¹⁴

In other poems, such as “Honour Killing” in *I Speak for the Devil*, Dharker describes the highly repressive codes within Islamic families that prohibit young women from making their own romantic choices and punish women who flout these rules with honor killings or ostracism.¹⁵ These later poems seem to add to the theme of earlier critiques of rights of women in Islamic societies. However, in a poem such as “Not a Muslim Burial” we finally realize that Dharker’s critique stems from a highly anti-nationalist perspective, as echoed in the lines:

No one must claim me
 On the journey I will need
 no name, no nationality
 Let them label the remains
 Lost Property.¹⁶

Poetry in the Public Sphere: Interventions of the Lyric

All three women poets are interested in exploring the lyric poem as a genre that intervenes in issues facing the world. Alexander and Dharker respond in their lyric poems to the violence they encountered in the social and political spheres following 9/11. Bhatt grapples with the legacy of Nazi violence in her adoptive homeland of Germany. Dharker has to grapple with her Islamic heritage in the aftermath of 9/11. While her earlier volumes had focused more on critiques of institutions within Islam, in *The Terrorist at My Table* Dharker responds to injustices faced by Muslims as result of the racial profiling and surveillance unleashed in a post-9/11 world. Together, all three women deploy the lyric as a genre of memorialization of historical trauma and a form that bears witness to the events of history for the purpose of initiating change.

Although both Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt express a gamut of personal emotions through their lyrics, both poets think of the lyric poem as a mode of engaging with the volatile political world around them. Alexander in particular has spoken extensively about the lyric in a time of violence. In an interview soon after 9/11, Alexander spoke about the peculiar propensity of the lyric form to capture traumatic events in the public sphere while also enabling a distancing from the intensity of the present moment:

It seems to me that the lyric poem is a place of extreme silence, which is protected from the world. To make a lyric poem you have to enter into a dream state. Yet, at the same time, almost by virtue of that disconnect it becomes a very intense place to reflect on the world. . . . In the composition of poetry, something that is very difficult to face is brought within the purview of language, into a zone of images and is crystallized. And that act of crystallizing the emotion through the image actually has its own peculiar grace, which frees one, if only momentarily, of the burden of the experience. This seems to be the great gift of poetry.¹⁷

Alexander has used the lyric form to voice her emotions on a variety of events affecting the public spheres in India, the United States, and the rest of the world. The rise of the Hindu Right in India, which has produced devastating consequences in the state of Gujarat, killing thousands of Muslims as a result of state-sanctioned violence carried out by the ruling party, the BJP, and its allied right-wing Hindutva groups in 2002, has found traumatic expression in Alexander's poetry. Along with bearing witness to these devastating incidents in India, Alexander simultaneously laments the destruction of the Twin Towers in her island home of

Manhattan on September 11, 2001, and the repercussions of that event for the United States and the rest of the world in the subsequent decade. It is the volume *Raw Silk* that brings these two public events to a critical juxtaposition. She effectively harnesses the lyric form to bear witness to the atrocities of state-sanctioned religious riots in India and laments the cycle of violence and retribution unleashed by the attacks of 9/11. In the sequence of poems “Letters to Gandhi,” she charts the expanding gap between the secular ideals of the Indian independence movement and the present-day reality of a narrow, violent, and exclusionary Hindu nationalism. The brevity and simplicity of a short lyric such as “In Naroda Patiya,” titled after the locality in which the events occurred, throws into relief the horror of Hindu mobs slashing open the bellies of pregnant Muslim women:

Out they plucked
a tiny heart
beating with her own.
No cries
were heard
in the city.
Even the sparrows
by the temple gate
swallowed their song.¹⁸

In contrast to the reticence and muted sorrow of “In Naroda Patiya,” Alexander engages in a direct expression of protest in the poem “Slow Dancing,” in the series of poems “Letters to Gandhi”:

Dear Mr. Gandhi
please say something
about the carnage in your home state.
How did you feel when they shut
the gates of Sabarmati ashram
that February night
and the wounded clung outside?
What has happened to ahimsa?
Is it just for the birds and the bees?¹⁹

Sujata Bhatt also uses the lyric poem to bear witness to events that extend beyond her personal life and to intervene in the public sphere. Bhatt’s lyrics express her protest against the endemic and pervasive nature of gendered violence. In “Frauenjournal” a topic such as female feticide blends with female genital mutilation. While representing in precise detail the brutality

and barbarity of these acts, she questions the function of the lyric form to intervene in these social issues and produce any kind of change:

How can you bear witness
with words, how can you heal
anything with words?²⁰

In addition to her poems protesting gendered violence against women, Bhatt's poems also go back to the historical events that have shaped modern Germany. Her poems often express the burden that German people who survived the war felt. In poems such as "Mozartstrasse 18" she confronts the painful burden of Germany's twentieth-century history and the legacy of the Nazi era that it has to continue to grapple with.²¹ As an immigrant of color, she confronts the history of Bremen and its records of citizens who disappeared from a particular neighborhood, who got sent to concentration camps, and who got killed on the war front. In the poem "Devibahen Pathak," Bhatt reflects on the new associations she develops with the swastika symbol necklace that her mother used to wear.²² While in her childhood the swastika was an auspicious Hindu symbol, often used to decorate the house or wedding venues, she is unable to wear the necklace or look at the swastika once she becomes aware of how it had been appropriated by the Nazi regime. It is no longer a timeless Hindu religious symbol, but has instead become associated with Aryan supremacy, the Holocaust, and its terrible toll on Jewish and other non-German lives. In this poem, Bhatt's personal and public worlds collide, and in grappling with the burden of twentieth-century German history Bhatt is no longer able to use the swastika symbol in her personal and religious spaces. It has become tainted by the cruel history of Fascism in Germany.

From her first published volume, *Purdah and Other Poems*, Imtiaz Dharker has highlighted the intersections of gender, nationalism, and violence in her poems. In poems such as "Another Woman," she depicts a dowry murder, an example of gendered violence and systematic brutality that Hindu women in India are often subject to.²³ Even more interestingly, Dharker is able to weave the personal topic of the unraveling of an intimate relationship with the metaphor of two nations at war in her series of poems "Borderlands: Battlefields," included in *Purdah and Other Poems*.²⁴ In the poems in *The Terrorist at My Table*, Dharker's earlier preoccupation with Islam and its interplay with women's roles takes on a broader focus. She is still preoccupied with questions of Islamic identity, but instead of focusing on questions of women's freedom or the religious divide running through the Indian sub-continent, she explores issues of Islamic identity in the

post 9/11 world. She reflects on the term “terrorist” in the poem “The Right Word,” and on the appropriateness of terms such as “terrorist,” “guerilla warrior,” and “martyr” for the guest she invites to her table, specifically referring to places such as Gaza and Jerusalem in the title poem “The Terrorist at My Table.”²⁵ In these poems Dharker is expressing solidarity with many ongoing struggles for self-determination that have not been resolved in the world. Her own historical connection with Partition makes her empathize with the Palestinian issue. Even though she has been highly critical of orthodox Islam she feels and expresses a sense of solidarity with Palestinian Muslims as well as Muslims who were brutally tortured in Abu Ghraib, as in the poem “Still.”²⁶ In a post-9/11 context when racial surveillance and profiling of Muslims has reached a peak, Dharker reasserts her Muslim identity as a mark of solidarity. She does not condone radical Islam or its violent methods, but she can empathize with the sense of injustice felt in many corners of the world and can almost give voice to these complex feelings from the perspective of the terrorist. In “Still,” the narrator begins by stating that she was not a victim of torture, but the poem ends with identification with Abu Ghraib terror suspects who were physically abused, stripped, and laughed at by female guards. As Dharker confronts the ethical lapses of the detention centers, she is able to re-establish her ties with the Muslim world. She may be personally critical of Islam’s lack of sufficient attention to gender equality, but she is more vocal about the shocking lack of humane treatment and justice meted out to many Muslims worldwide.

Alexander, Bhatt, and Dharker use the lyric form to explore the intersections of the personal with larger questions in the public sphere. For Bhatt, the engagement is often with ongoing issues of gender-based discrimination and the legacy of Fascism in Germany. Meena Alexander, on the other hand, uses the lyric form almost as a genre of journalistic reportage, stitching various details of contemporary events in her ongoing protest against the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in India and her disillusionment with revenge and retaliation in the costly wars undertaken by the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. Imtiaz Dharker explores her identity as a Muslim woman, an aspect of her heritage that she had distanced herself from, in her earlier poems. While she remains highly critical of gendered violence, segregation of sexes, and other practices in her earlier volumes of poetry, more recently there is a broadly expressed solidarity with Muslims fighting for the right to self-determination in Palestine and Muslims facing new regimes of surveillance and discrimination following 9/11. In these poems, Dharker reconnects emotionally to her

South Asian and Islamic roots, thus moving from a rejection to a much more nuanced identification with Islam.

Intersections of Lyric Poetry and Visual Art

It is important to map not just the geographic coordinates and the places that have influenced the diasporic poetry of Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt, but also the artistic influences that have had a profound effect on their poetry. Along with literary and linguistic traditions, both Alexander and Bhatt have responded to works of visual art through their poetry. Imtiaz Dharker, in addition to being an established poet, is also an artist. In several of her volumes, her poems are paired with stunning drawings which complement and enhance the poems and produce powerful intersections of visual and literary text, a task which is not possible with any one medium in isolation.

Sujata Bhatt's *A Color for Solitude* (2002) is a long sequence of poems tracing her deep interest in the works of Rainer Maria Rilke, his wife the sculptor, Clara Westhoff Rilke, and their common friend Paula Modersohn-Becker, the painter. Although still working with the lyric form, the poems together chart an intimate biography of these three artistic figures and the influence they had on the creative lives of each other. Bhatt encountered the paintings of Paula Modersohn in Bremen. She was already familiar with her biography, and her premature death after childbirth, which resulted in a celebrated elegy from Rilke titled "Requiem for a Friend." Bhatt was immensely drawn to the two women who were so central to Rilke's life and wanted to reimagine them talking back to Rilke. In way, Bhatt's poetic project is very feminist, as she wants to reverse the silencing of Paula by Rilke's poem. Instead, she tries to create a characterization of both Paula and Clara. In this triangular heterosexual relationship, Bhatt also introduces a homoerotic intensity in the obsession of Clara and Paula for each other as subjects of each other's artistic productions.

Meena Alexander's poetry also frequently draws on a plethora of visual art, and she too follows the Greek rhetorical tradition of *ekphrasis*, which describes an object of visual art through the medium of language. One example of Alexander responding to an object of art is the poem "Buddha of Bamian."²⁷ The poem depicts in painstaking detail the spirituality and beauty inspired by the massive statue of Buddha and also the tragedy of its destruction by the Taliban who interpreted this ancient work of art as a violation of the precepts of Islam. The poem "Amrita" is also a tribute to the legendary early twentieth-century Indian painter.²⁸ However, in both

these poems Alexander uses the artistic object as an entry point into rumination about violence or tragedy in the world today.

Unlike Alexander and Bhatt, who respond to visual art through the medium of poetry, Dharker works in two artistic media: lyric poetry and drawings. Many of her poems have accompanying black and white drawings that are not just illustrations but an integral part of the performance of the poem. Many of Dharker's drawings are of female figures. Their faces are indistinct, almost symbolizing a generic female figure rather than an individual. The cover of *The Terrorist at My Table* produces one such female figure. The figure is veiled and the flowing garment she wears contains lines, resembling fingerprints, connecting back to her earlier volume *Leaving Fingerprints*. The eyes of the female figure on the cover of *The Terrorist at My Table* are visible. A poem in this volume titled "These are the Times We Live In I" describes the surveillance and interrogation of a possible terrorist/suicide bomber and the interrogator's attempt to match the passport photograph to the person he is interviewing.²⁹ The poem ends with the violent description of a face splitting away and landing on the page of a newspaper, followed by Dharker's drawing of a veiled face in profile. The lower part of the veil consists of lines of newsprint describing a terrorist attack. The lines of the lyric and the drawing work simultaneously to evoke the randomness and banality of terrorism being reduced to newspaper headlines and the tragedy of not understanding or resolving the underlying human problems that lead to these acts.

The Politics of Location: Contexts of Poetic Reception

The critical reception of Meena Alexander has been more profuse than that received by Sujata Bhatt or Imtiaz Dharker. Alexander's current home in North America, and in New York City in particular, as well as her location in academia, has made her poetry more readily the subject of postcolonial literary scholarship, which has also flourished in North America in the last couple of decades. Bhatt's location in Bremen, Germany, removes her from the academic centers within which postcolonial literary studies have evolved in the recent past; nonetheless, her work has been recognized and feted internationally. She received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia) and the Alice Hunt Bartlett Award for her first collection *Brunizem*, a Cholmondeley Award in 1991, and the Italian Tratti Poetry Prize in 2000. Imtiaz Dharker's establishment in Britain, meanwhile, makes her very well-known there for her work as a poet, visual artist, and documentary

filmmaker. Her poems have been used in Britain's high school multicultural literature curricula, and she has been widely anthologized, although there is a paucity of monographs on her work. She was awarded the Cholmondeley Prize by the Society of Authors in 2011, and received the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry in 2014.

In *The Hybrid Muse*, Jahan Ramazani has argued that postcolonial poetry has received less scholarly attention as a genre than the novel, which has been read as a political allegory of different postcolonial nations.³⁰ The lyric poem is even harder to include within this narrow paradigm and has thus often remained at the margins of literary scholarship. Alexander's status as a lyrical essayist and memoirist makes her accessible to people who may find poetry relatively inaccessible. The fact that Sujata Bhatt and Imtiaz Dharker focus exclusively on poetry partially explains the limited critical attention that has come their way. All three poets are still prolific and in the prime of their writing years. As more of their works get anthologized and disseminated in school and college curricula, as well as popularized in artistic and performance venues, it is likely that their important contributions to the lyric form, to the vital connection between poetry and the public sphere, and to poetry's intimate relationship with other arts will be explored more deeply by future scholars.

Notes

1. Meena Alexander. "Illiterate Heart." *Illiterate Heart* (Evanston: Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2002), 63–68.
2. Sujata Bhatt. "A Different History." In *Sujata Bhatt: Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2013), 24.
3. Bhatt. "Search for My Tongue." In *Sujata Bhatt: Collected Poems*, 48–55.
4. Imtiaz Dharker. "Kinna Sona." In *Leaving Footprints* (Glasgow: Bloodaxe Books, 2009), 105.
5. Imtiaz Dharker. "Gaddi aa gayi." In *Leaving Footprints*, 75.
6. Meena Alexander. "In Search of Sarojini Naidu." In *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 179.
7. Alexander. "In Search of Sarojini Naidu." In *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience*, 172–92.
8. Alexander. "Passion." In *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience*, 17–20.
9. Meena Alexander. "Veil." In *Quickly Changing River: Poems* (Evanston: Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2008), 32–33.
10. Helen Tookey. In Conversation with Sujata Bhatt." *PN Review* 40.1 (2013), 30–32.

11. Bhatt. "White Asparagus." In *Sujata Bhatt: Collected Poems*, 167.
12. Bhatt. "More Fears about the Moon." In *Sujata Bhatt: Collected Poems*, 274–75.
13. Imtiaz Dharker. *Purdah and Other Poems* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).
14. Feminist scholars of Islam such as Fatima Mernissi in *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Reading: Addison Wesley, 1987), and Leila Ahmed in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), have pointed out that the veil was never strictly imposed in early Islam and women in early Islam had full access to public spaces, including battlefields. It is only under later Caliphates that the purdah or hijab became a way of denying women their human rights to freedom of expression and movement.
15. Imtiaz Dharker. "Honour Killing." In *I Speak for the Devil* (Glasgow: Bloodaxe Books, 2001), 13.
16. Dharker. "Not a Muslim Burial." In *I Speak for the Devil*, 37.
17. Lopamudra Basu. "The Poet in the Public Sphere: A Conversation with Meena Alexander." *Social Text* 72 (Fall 2002), 31–38. For a more detailed analysis of Meena Alexander's use of the lyric in a time of violence see "Introduction" *Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander* Ed. Lopamudra Basu and Cynthia Leenerts (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 1–19
18. Meena Alexander. "In Narodiya Patiya." In *Raw Silk* (Evanston: Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2004), 75.
19. Alexander. "Slow Dancing." In *Raw Silk*, 78.
20. Bhatt. "Frauenjournal." In *Sujata Bhatt: Collected Poems*, 291–92.
21. Bhatt. "Mozartstrasse." In *Sujata Bhatt: Collected Poems*, 133–37.
22. Bhatt. "Devibahen Pathak." In *Sujata Bhatt: Collected Poems*, 125–30.
23. Dharker. "Another Woman." In *Purdah and Other Poems*, 38–39.
24. Dharker "Borderlands: Battlefields 1." In *Purdah and Other Poems*, 45–54.
25. Imtiaz Dhaker. "The Right Word." In *The Terrorist at my Table* (Glasgow: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), 25–26.
26. Dhaker. "Still." In *The Terrorist at my Table*, 40.
27. Alexander. "Buddha of Bamian." In *Quickly Changing River: Poems*, 20.
28. Meena Alexander. "Amrita." In *Raw Silk* (Evanston: Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2004), 72.
29. Dhaker. "These Are the Times We Live in I." In *The Terrorist at My Table*, 45–46.
30. Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

SECTION V

The New Millennium Poets on Themselves

*From the Language Question to the Question
of Language: Three Recent Books of Indian Poetry
in English*

Vivek Narayanan

In a 2010 interview with *Almost Island*, Adil Jussawalla suggested that the “younger poets” may be more explicitly demonstrative with language than the generations before them: “It’s like the reader is being told, Here, I’m using a language which can do a hell of a lot.”¹ While no observation can be all-encompassing, and no trend will apply to everyone, there is some truth to this point. Of course, one can find self-consciously “language-ey” moments across the entire history of Indian poetry in English – for instance, famously, in sections of Jussawalla’s own *Missing Person* (1976) – but I think it can still be said that in first collections published roughly after about 1990, Indian poets in English seem to begin to understand their relationship to language differently.² Language is no longer striven for as only a matter of faith and clarity, a window to the world; instead, language is a medium that itself has to be continually re-negotiated and traversed. Taken to the extreme, this idea can also mean, in some works, the covert suggestion that nothing can exist beyond or outside language, that language is not only enough for the poem but also the *only* remaining theater for action. In other works, by contrast, to write in English in a multilingual environment is necessarily to come to an awareness of one’s own limits and to struggle with things that can never be adequately said.

These notions might be connected to new contexts for Indian poetry from the late ’80s onwards – the growing popularity, broadly speaking, of post-modernist and post-structural theory, the particular self-awareness with regards to English opened up for an entire generation by Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, economic liberalization in India, and so on – but it would be presumptuous to assert these too strongly as “causes.” What we can observe is that there is a new, often explicitly marked self-consciousness and anxiety about language, as well as a greater tolerance for language as a

kind of indulgence. Ironies are more complex and more uncertain; lush textures, baroque structures, periphrasis, overstatement, and repetition, to greater or lesser degrees, become features of this new poetics and prosody, for – I would argue – better *and* worse. This may well be just a passing phase on the way to something else; such notions of excess have countless precedents that reach back to the very dawn of poetry. Still, readers trained on modernist dictums such as “less is more” and the prizing of the laconic might find this work bewildering at first. The best of this new poetry, I think – in keeping with the dual idea of language as both possibility and limit – enacts the “spillage” with formal clarity and by balancing it with moments of sparseness, quiet, and concision.

In the following pages, I will explore these propositions by trying to think through three recent books of Indian poetry in English: Arundhati Subramaniam’s *Where I Live*,³ Ranjit Hoskote’s *Central Time*,⁴ and Jeet Thayil’s *These Errors Are Correct*.⁵ This is *not* a shortlist of whom or what I think is significant or interesting to read of the recent poetry; such a shortlist should surely include some others. In any case, there is absolutely no guarantee that the roster of Indian poets in English we consider important or even representative today will be widely recognizable fifty or one hundred years from now. The next few generations may well produce an explosion of writing that will force us to completely reconsider everything that has come before. With that disclaimer, here I merely choose three poets whose work I know well and have followed over a period of time to help me work through a very specific set of questions about language. A quick further word about this endeavor: in his gargantuan and addictive *Lives of the Poets*, Michael Schmidt pauses long enough on Indian poetry in English to say, surprisingly:

No substantial critical literature has emerged in India to clarify and consolidate developments: it is only when exported that Indian writers seem to be “affirmed” within a critical context. Criticism clears a space for poet and for reader. Without it there is a kind of void.⁶

I say *surprisingly* because of how astute Schmidt’s comment is – in the midst of *Lives of the Poets*’ vast sweep – and how right. Apart from a few strong points of departure in the ’70s and early ’80s,⁷ this poetry community seems to lack serious, honest discussion beyond merely complimentary reviews – the review as essentially an extension of the publicity around the book – biographical statements and the occasional bile-ridden rant. In this way, little has changed in decades. On the other hand, the real work of criticism is fraught, in various ways for various reasons, when writing about

the present or the recent past, and about one's own friends, acquaintances, and peers. I know, in beginning, that I may make errors of judgment. The best I can do is to try and freeze a moment that may or may not be a passing phase, in pursuit of an intuition. I hope something of this discussion will continue to be helpful.

Identifying Indian: Arundhati Subramaniam

In thinking through what might be called the post-90s "language turn," I would like to begin by considering Arundhati Subramaniam's "To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn't Find Me Identifiably Indian."⁸ I hope readers will not find it misleading or even unfair that I begin with a lengthy reading of this poem, since I don't consider it to be anywhere close to her best or even most typical work. In reading Subramaniam's first volume for Bloodaxe, a "new and selected," I find that there is a marked difference roughly after the third section, "How to Disarm," which I believe begins with poems written after her second Indian book for Allied Publishers.⁹ After this point, the length of Subramaniam's lines vary less wildly within individual poems, the line-breaks feel less haphazard, are more tensile, the forms hold and deliver better, and a greater authority and clarity has seeped into the voice. Some of Subramaniam's recent work certainly ranks among the best currently being written in Indian poetry in English.

"Welsh Critic," like many of her poems before this point, feels somehow like apprentice work. However, if it is ultimately an incoherent poem, as I think I can show, and if it has become rather too handy an anthology set-piece, it nevertheless introduces some of the questions I would like to dwell on in this chapter. As rhetoric, it points both backward and forward; it forces us to think again about the confusing and troubling question of who or what we should be writing for and to. Finally, I consider it and some of its problems here as a point of necessary housekeeping.

"Welsh Critic" begins life as a riposte to a review by the poet and critic Landeg White of Subramaniam's poems (among others) in *Poetry Wales*, that "lamented the lack of an identifiably 'Indian' element in English poetry in India, in contrast to the robust patois of African poetry."¹⁰ This, of course, is as annoying and – more to the point – badly phrased a complaint as that of William Radice's when, in a 2008 review of Jeet Thayil's anthology (*The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*), he effectively complains of not hearing a "tabla-beat" in contemporary Indian

English.¹¹ The implication seems to be that the Indian poets of the anthology are still “mimic men,” not nearly Indian enough.

In Subramaniam’s poem, on the other hand, Landeg White quickly becomes a soft target. In the first two stanzas, the narrator imagines herself in his eyes, the worst possible cliché of a “wide-eyed Eng Lit type / from a sun-scalded colony” – yet strangely, as this cliché develops, it also gathers details that don’t bear it out but suggest instead the narrator’s own identification: the “exploding” country made distant by the television set, the “dandelion tea” that sounds more appealing than alienating, and “dharma,” arguably a key concept in Subramaniam’s later writing. The first sentence of the third stanza is, “You may have a point.”

Eventually, the poem turns back, and it is the critic that will soon enough become a cardboard cliché: an almost mythical, demonic figure, the archetypal patriarchal colonialist European uber-male. He is the “arbiter of identity” who has the power to remake the poem’s narrator at “will.” By this time, the poem has been wholly unfair – if indeed he is still being addressed – to the critic Landeg White, a Welsh preacher’s son, a poet and translator (of Camoens) who lived a third of his professional life in Africa and was a contributor, among other things, to an important early anthology of Malawian poetry.¹² It may be that the figure being invoked is no longer meant to be White, and is deliberately meant to be more generalized, archetypal, pure evil. Yet, if that is the case, the poem’s *title* still sticks in the craw. What is the significance of the poem being addressed to a “Welsh critic”? Is “Welsh” just being used carelessly here as a synonym for “White man,” or is there some significance to the critic being Welsh, a culture and a language that has itself been marginalized, ridiculed, and swallowed by the English? If it is the latter, then there is no evidence for it in the text. Indeed, it seems a true missed opportunity that the specific Welsh-ness of the critic is never absorbed or addressed, although this would have unshaken the facile shorthand the poem prefers to begin and end with.

In the middle section of the poem, however, something else is at work in an often stunning long sentence of subordinate clauses that, finally, walks away from a concluding argument. Beginning with the line, “This business about language,” we move into an anaphoric structure that recalls ritual incantation, where “mine” and yours,” “mind” and “gut,” “little” and “much” are exactly balanced – or perhaps just *weighed* – against each other, where, interestingly, the metrical signatures of “verisimilitude” and “Brihadaranyaka” are precisely compared. Something other than the anger of the dispossessed is being tested and even found to hold here,

although it also sometimes breaks down, as in the obscure and perhaps sloppy phrase “halitosis of gender.”¹³ This is an area of high risk, where the writer lets language go where it will, and tries awkwardness or incoherence for the sake of locating resonances.

In fact, there *are* what sound and feel like identifiably Indian inflections and habits in Subramaniam’s poems and prosody. They are available to me as a reader, especially since I’m more than willing to accept that India has, indeed, a sizable Anglophone middle and upper class. Having lived in Africa for several years, White, I suspect, had an ear that more readily identified *African* cadences and tones on the printed page. Identification, for reader as much as writer, is a complex, contradictory, and open-ended process. Paradoxically, in order to be new, the Indian writer in English *has* to be continually revisiting the old and not-so-old resources of the language she is writing in. It is tricky to tell if a new tonality has emerged from or beyond these resources, especially when, as A. K. Ramanujan famously put it, one can “no longer tell what comes from where.”¹⁴ So, if the question of how to begin hearing inflection – of *tuning*, if we might call it that – is real and can be shown to be crucial to poetic reception and lineages,¹⁵ it is also a delicate, subjective, and continually evolving front. The new Indian English is developing along this front. What sounds wrong, awkward, or “off” today may not do so two decades from now.

*

The writer, alas, is mired in a continual present; she can only discover these new possibilities by moving into areas of risk and doubt. Part of this risk lies in the foregrounding of language itself. Subramaniam’s poetry in *Where I Live* is one example of this post-1990s trend in all its complex and ambiguous dimensions. The lushness and excess of certain lines seem to signify the verisimilitude of a life that extends to and must include the products of capitalism and “kitsch [that] has its own powers of healing” (“Cardiac Care Unit”).¹⁶ At its best, this quality in the poems is pulled against another, ascetic renunciation – which is also the renunciation of language – as both a desire and an inevitability. This latter tendency often suddenly produces lines of striking simplicity following plenitude and overstatement, as in the remarkable poem “Osteoporosis,” about the “gait” of older Indian women (“how they roll ship like from side to side”) that ends:

Sideways isn’t a strategy here.
It’s how we live.¹⁷

Here the human body is its own system of hard coding that cannot be resisted and stands in firm opposition to verbal art, as also in the equally remarkable “Sharecropping”: “her [i.e., the narrator’s mother] eyes bright /with defeat /as I grow stealthily/into her body.”¹⁸

At other times in *Where I Live*, language seems problematically unstable, moving in and out of clichés and appropriations in a way that makes it hard to know precisely how to read the irony, or even, sometimes, to know if it is intended.¹⁹ A surprising twenty one (by my count) poems in the collection directly name, mark, or foreground language.²⁰ The purposes, contexts, and success of this strategy are various. As Stephen Burt points out in a recent essay on “poems about poems,” such a foregrounding might lead to the “institutions and the limits of contemporary poetry” being taken up as “explicit subjects.”²¹ Unfortunately, this seems all too rarely to be the case when language, poetry, or verbal art are presented as explicit subjects in Indian writing in English. What we get, instead of the specific critique of institutions and social relations, is something more abstracted. The automatic purpose of such an “announcing” might simply be the writing subject’s way of affirming their own presence and right of access. The danger in explicitly announcing language as the medium is that one states the obvious, makes it a too-quick ritual touchstone. When the strategy is deployed very often, it can annoy.

Somehow connected to all this is the common use in *Where I Live* of what linguists call “periphrastic genitives”²² – “the white autocracy of silence” (11); “the first tremulous shoot of dream” (89); “the circus pleasures/ of halogen” (92); “an ever-widening commune/of breath” (91) – where the genitive, used to possess or relate words, is turned into a phrase, generally using “of.” In English, this is an extravagant and sometimes excessive gesture that finds extra room for adjectives and more easily mingles abstract and concrete nouns. Individual examples of this construction may hit the mark – as, for instance, wonderfully, in the “ever-widening commune/of breath” cited above – but always, again, run the risk of overstatement, when abstract concept and objective correlative are slapped together. It may be that all of this shadows the baroque traditions in Indian languages, but that is a difficult call to make.

Violence and the Baroque: Ranjit Hoskote

As I hope to show, this different understanding of – or, even, this different philosophical relation to – language can also be seen in the work of Ranjit Hoskote. At the very start, Hoskote’s investment in plenitude and excess

might be witnessed in the prodigious number of poems included in his collections – a gesture that seems like an almost conscious riposte to the slim output of many important Indian poets in previous generations. *Central Time* (Viking Penguin, 2014), his most recent book, contains a hundred poems, in homage to the tradition of *shataka* anthologies in Sanskrit.²³ This prodigiousness of publication might signify overconfidence; equally, it could be that Hoskote prefers that posterity should decide which and how many of his poems to keep. Reading some of his collections from beginning to end can produce fatigue, with many poems feeling mechanical or not doing enough, tied up with inevitable, sentimental endings. Overstatement might sometimes shift an individual poem into delicate variation; at other times, it might just belabor the lyric. On the first careful reading of *Central Time*, as an experiment, I made specific note of the forty or so poems that, even when flawed, triggered a second recognition. In a return reading, I limited myself to only those poems I had marked in sequence, finding myself with a far more satisfying, intense experience that still covered all the essential themes and formal outlays of the collection.²⁴

Hoskote has had an affinity for the baroque from his very first book, *Zones of Assault*;²⁵ this reached a peak in his often (unfairly) overlooked *The Sleepwalker's Archive*,²⁶ which, while again sluggish when read from cover to cover, contains some poems that are highly intricate and very moving, such as “Figures in Landscape by Doppler,” a meditation on hindsight. In these earlier collections, Hoskote’s diction is distant from everyday speech. He creates curious, often fantastical, ornate architectures, and elaborately polite – even mannered – addresses. The maximalist intent is signaled by a broad and sometimes arcane vocabulary. I have to look up words fairly often when reading his poems; yet it should be said that the difficult words, when looked up, almost always turn out to be carefully chosen and specific to a purpose in the line. Hoskote has long been criticized for his vocabulary and elaborateness of structure; usually inconsiderately, I think. In his later books, he attempts to draw his diction closer to speech, introducing cliché and pop-culture references, going more and more often for plainsong. This shift in the work has recently received praise; however, it can be an uneven process, even when, as in *Central Time*, it has achieved a greater confidence. In any case, as I demonstrated with Subramaniam’s “Osteoporosis,” sections of overstatement or “excess” can be brought to a sudden shock with strong, simple, lovely lines:

Sometimes I mourn
for the child I used to be.

(“Coda”)²⁷

(In the lines above, note especially the tremendous, mysteriously powerful use of the enjambment.)

Hoskote and Subramaniam may seem at first to be vastly different kinds of poets; yet their linguistic structures can be similar. Hoskote also turns to the periphrastic genitive – although not as often as Subramaniam, but enough that it can be recognized as integral to his style.²⁸ Further, *Central Time*, by my count, includes at least twenty poems that directly name, mark, or foreground language. Some examples of this at the level of the phrase are: “grooved vowels, flared plosives”;²⁹ “the open book of the sky burns very slowly”;³⁰ “the rough shrubbery of our speech”;³¹ “check . . . the verbs for stains”;³² and so on. As with Subramaniam, the repeated reliance on this trope can be grating or obvious; yet, as also with Subramaniam, there are important instances when the explicit invocation of language is purposeful and moving. In the fascinating “Harbour Thoughts,” for instance, Hoskote shades the English word “land” with the Hindi “zameen”:

Land is what you look for, all your life.
Zameen is what you hope to find.³³

In poems such as this, a strong bond holds together verbal language and the world (or, more specifically, language and *land*); they are continuous and the link between them is vital. At other times, the writer has to face a disconnect, the problem amplified for this particular community of writers because English in their world is still, for the time being, an elite minority language. As with Subramaniam, watching the TV screen exploding, in Hoskote what might emerge after long years of toil with verbal language is its shocking inadequacy: “Whatever the word does, / it gets there late” (“The Grammarian’s Farewell to Language”³⁴). Should the writer then disavow language, or accept it as it is? At times like these, language can tacitly become the sole terrain for the poem and, often in Hoskote’s poems,³⁵ language becomes either the place of violence or a place where violence can be staged. The ambivalence between the two is impossible to resolve. Here is a poignant example:

By what name
shall we haul it in?

Strophe upon strophe
they strike us, the waves. (“To Name a Sea”³⁶)

How does one, however, turn up the temperature without lapsing into a soft-pornography of violence? In Hoskote’s poetry, the more showy

shock is often contained in the verbs or verb phrases: “a moon flying in shards from an axe-blow,/an eye bursting with all it wants to see.” (“Nocturne with Lost Candle”³⁷). The new Indian poets in English risk a poetry of effects. Violence in Hoskote can be melodramatic, made-up. In his earliest published poems, the question of language in violence remains largely unstated. In the recent poems of *Central Time*, there is a shift: an explicit reference to language is often used to frame the violence. It’s an uncertain strategy, when the link to the world has already been broken. Will the poem be diminished or properly grounded by language? Will the representation of violence be able to point effectively to the horror of the real, or merely replace/avoid it? Consider “Rehearsal for Departure,”³⁸ which, like a great many of Hoskote’s poems, uses or broadly alludes to a kind of “Boy’s Own Adventure” scenario – exotic locales and characters, challenges, perhaps a self-serious protagonist on a quest. These poems can also be seen to be driven by a subtle but ever-present, even angry, masculinity. This particular poem is a fantasy of violence dreamed by a clerk – more precisely, a quartermaster, which, in this case, must refer to a provisions officer for a land army – who seems to understand his complicity. The violence that follows is deliberately immaculate, and the announcement of the poem as no more than a dream contains but also somehow diminishes the implications of the poem, reduces the scale. There certainly remains the question of complicity, already covered in the unnerving red-stained fingers of the first stanza; but, apart from that, at poem’s end, one is left not knowing what exactly to take away.

So, if small objects can be hugely magnified by the writing act in Hoskote, this very process can sometimes have the opposite effect of reducing the scale of the work. The issue of diminishment is sometimes also raised in the formal conservatism of the poems in *Central Time*. By formal conservatism, here I mean the exceedingly fastidious quality of the voice and the music. If Hoskote’s “near baroque” is best reflected in the rich, sometimes masterly, carpet of sounds he can roll out and sustain, in his most recent book the rhythms can also sometimes feel too carefully balanced, the stanza too neatly tied up. The poems sometimes seem defeated by their own poise, their desire to both signify and contain risk, to exceed the measure and unstintingly preserve it. At any rate, one cannot gainsay the many memorable lines and turns of phrase in *Central Time*. When Hoskote’s maximalist tendencies meet his ability to imagine civilizations as a whole, the poems can deepen and layer themselves:

. . . the generations of cars that fly down the autobahn
 hidden by plane trees, their sleepless tires foaming
 beneath our windows like an unseen ocean's tides.³⁹

Language and Mortality: Jeet Thayil

Jeet Thayil is a few years older than Subramaniam and Hoskote, and perhaps should be understood as a transitional figure between the poets who precede and follow him. Thayil's relationship to language feels slightly different from that of Subramaniam and Hoskote. He does use the periphrastic genitive, but very occasionally.⁴⁰ Language, as signified by the very name of his earlier collection – *English*⁴¹ – is clearly important to Thayil as a subject, and is implicit throughout. Fewer poems than in Subramaniam's or Hoskote's books explicitly mark language, words, or the writing act – ten, by my count, in *These Errors Are Correct*.⁴² All the same, language for Thayil can certainly be an indulgence, an excess, and a forgivable one – in a way that I think may be different for the Indian poetry in English that comes just before him.

You could say that Thayil's poems try to have it two ways at once – on the one hand pointing to the real or the aspiring-to-be-real of biography; on the other, shading off into fiction and assertion. Language mediates this ambivalence. Many of the poems seem to want to recreate the high of forbidden drugs and the bliss of addiction in language, to make language itself into a drug; at the same time, they can, sometimes, be told too smugly from the distance of one who has come out “rehabilitated” from addiction. Heroin and its aftermath is too easy as a theme or a moral of the book; the major moments and shifts happen elsewhere.

Consider the sonnet sequence, “Premonition.”⁴³ Unsettling on several levels, this is the poem that sets me wondering if we might come to eventually see *These Errors Are Correct* as a masterpiece, even if the book has flaws. The background here is a public secret: Thayil lost his wife; the poem is addressed to her, though written before her death.⁴⁴ It is not quite a poem of loss, but is fundamentally about how the dead are *not* lost to us, how they will return again and again, whether we like it or not, sometimes to taunt, sometimes to seduce, sometimes simply to make us feel the pain of the leaving again. In the middle of this often sonically, linguistically, and figuratively sumptuous poem, there is a single moment where language – in fact, the sonnet itself – is hailed:

two are twined in this sonnet
 the bones got me started⁴⁵

The devilish rhyme that joins this couplet is itself twining, linking not only the line endings but also the *on* of “bone” and “sonnet”; and the two being *twined* – never to be one – are the two lovers in the poem but, perhaps, also language and mortality.

If the language to be found in poems such as “Premonition” can be impeccable and very even, there are other places where it is more uneven, where new tonalities and formal possibilities are being tested against each other. Thayil’s American intonations are easier to hear because they are a familiar, established point of reference, but *These Errors Are Correct* is also a book of return to India that seeks to absorb and produce a new “local.” In this regard, its methods are tentative and sometimes disjointed. Poems such as “Wagah”⁴⁶ jump-cut narrative ideas in ways that want to elude the intelligence. Long poems such as “Not Remembering”⁴⁷ and “Verticality”⁴⁸ seem to be lists of sentences that want to make a musical, not semantic, progression. Here we seem to be seeing formal techniques influenced by writers such as John Ashbery; but Thayil’s music is different, say, from Ashbery’s, or from Ashbery’s American cohorts and younger imitators, not only in the use of a more Indian vocabulary, but in its arrangement. At the same time, these techniques seem so flamboyant and so alien to the previous traditions of Indian English that we struggle to fully inhabit and make sense of them in that context.

Over time, however, these kinds of poems in the book have begun to grow on me, to flare up in sections of sudden clarity if not completely “clicking” into place. The problem is that we are seeing just the beginning of something trying to come into being. We don’t yet have the later work that will abandon or vindicate this turn, the further poems that will teach us to read these. The linguistic and formal shift we see happening in the more uncertain areas of *These Errors Are Correct* may just be the writer still learning how to go in a new direction; or it may be him waiting for readers to learn how to go there too.

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A book will “lie as long unwritten/As it will lie unread,”⁴⁹ Laura Riding tells us, which is also to say quietly that even *repeated* reading takes a long struggle to save a book from remaining unread. Criticism is a practice that must absorb time and essays written too quickly must almost inevitably involve errors of judgment. I can’t help wondering if, of the three principal books considered here, Thayil’s has emerged the most clearly for me simply because I’ve had the longest time to reread it. And, this much close listening, research, and thinking later, I still can’t help wondering if the

phenomenon I've tried to identify – a kind of “language turn” in post-1990s Indian English – is really, as they like to say in the American colloquial, “a thing.”

In any case, poetry *is* experiment. It is a testing ground that, hopefully, even if it goes in directions we eventually retreat from, significantly extends our (and our language's) understanding of limits and possibilities. What is at stake is what I've somewhat cautiously been calling the new relationship to language. The phenomenon is not at all limited to the three writers examined here; a much longer essay would try to find these questions and problems in a number of books of Indian poetry in English after 1990. Such an approach, when taken to the work of Mani Rao or S. S. Prasad, for example, might lead us in very different directions. Moreover, Indian poetry in English – as we see it being broadly imagined in recent anthologies such as Thayil's own *60 Indian Poets*⁵⁰ – is rightly an inclusive, transnational elective community. In this way, the trends outlined here, when brought to maturity, might begin to speak directly to the future of *all* English poetry. We may soon be thinking about the question of language in vastly different ways than what I've tried to elaborate here. In the final instance, it is to be admitted that, as an Indian writer of poetry in English, I come to these questions through my own entanglement with these issues. So, whether my comments turn out to be harsh or helpful, I hope they will be read in such a spirit:

not knowing this from that
he sees his own faults only
when he finds them in others:

the man on the boat for whom
the people on the bank
are the ones drifting away.⁵¹

Notes

1. “Before and After: an Interview with Adil Jussawalla,” *Almost Island*, Monsoon 2012: 43. Available at: http://almostisland.com/monsoon_2012/interviews/pdfs/before_and_after.pdf, accessed September 10, 2014.
2. Of course, there is at least one important older Indian poet who can be said to have aspects of the baroque in his work – Keki Daruwalla. Very differently, one can also see aspects of this trend in the *poems* of G. V. Desani – see, for instance, his entry in P. Lal's *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1969) – unfortunately it's not clear to me how many poems Desani wrote, or if they were ever properly collected.

3. Subramaniam, Arundhati. *Where I Live: New and Selected Poems*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2009.
4. Hoskote, Ranjit. *Central Time*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2014.
5. Thayil, Jeet. *These Errors Are Correct*. Chennai: Tranquebar Press, 2008.
6. Schmidt, Michael. *Lives of the Poets*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000. Cited in the chapter "Beyond Stylistic Irony" (exact page no. not available since this was accessed from the ebook edition).
7. I am thinking of the provocative work of Arvind Mehrotra, or of the lesser-knowns such as Nita Pillai or S. Nagarajan seen in snatches in journals and anthologies from this time. After that, there does seem to be a dry, or at least arid, stretch, until we get to, for instance, the wonderful new books by Laetitia Zecchini (*Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India*), Rosinka Chaudhuri (*Derozio, Poet of India*), and, of course, the present volume.
8. Subramaniam, *Where I Live*, 53. The poem can also be found in the *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2008) and online at: www.poemhunter.com/poem/to-the-welsh-critic-who-doesn-t-find-me-identifiably-indian/, accessed September 10, 2014.
9. Subramaniam's first book for Bloodaxe and her second Indian collection bear the same title, *Where I Live*, although their contents are different. In the text that follows, *Where I Live* always refers only to the Bloodaxe volume, which selects poems from Subramaniam's first two Indian collections, and adds three sections of new work. Bloodaxe has also published a further book of Subramaniam's, *When God Is a Traveler* (2015), currently shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot prize. I regret I do not consult it for this essay since the international edition has not been released at the time of writing.
10. See, for instance, William Gibson on Subramaniam's oral introduction to her poem: "Can't Kick the Habit." *The Guardian*, August 23, 2003. Accessed December 11, 2014: www.theguardian.com/books/2003/aug/23/williamgibson.
11. Radice, William. "Fresh Air and Chanel No 5." *The Guardian*, December 5, 2008. Accessed December 11, 2014. www.theguardian.com/books/2008/dec/06/bloodaxe-contemporary-indian-poets.
12. *Mau: 39 Poems from Malawi* (Blantyre, Malawi: 1971). A free e-copy of this book can be accessed on White's website: <http://landegwhite.com/mau/>. White very much had a part in the making of the new post-independence African poetry. His own poem in this anthology, "In the Village" (p. 32) comes so close to Subramaniam's own arguments that I can't resist quoting it at length: "In the village . . . // the chief's daughter has a transistor; /She is dancing to the Beatles . . . //But the tape-recorder man / on his codification project wants / 'Your own music' . . . //The chief is bemused/by this pressure from Europe/Not to attend to Europe://Is he 'himself'/with the radio on or off?"
13. Why "halitosis"? The word seems impossible to read here. Apparently men are reported to have bad breath more often than women. Or is this a reference to what Eliot rather too queasily called "female smells"? ("Rhapsody on a Winter Night").

14. Quoted in Parthasarathy, R., ed. *Ten Twentieth-century Indian Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976), 96.
15. I don't have the space to develop this point fully here, but one could cite countless examples, including William Carlos Williams's very late welcome in England, or, indeed, the difficulty that poetry readers in the United Kingdom or the United States still have in clearly hearing the lines and prosody of Ramanujan, Kolatkar, Jussawalla, Honnalgere, and so on.
16. Subramaniam, *Where I Live*, 25.
17. *Ibid.*, 116.
18. *Ibid.*, *Where I Live*, 115.
19. Some examples at random: "long mocha legs" ("I Live on a Road," 55); "timeless latex wisdom" ("Flagbearers," 122); "soupçon of opera" ("Epigrams for Life After Forty," 119); "warm coconut lullabies" ("Heirloom," 12). Or consider these disturbing uses of "tribal": "there's more to desire / than this tribal shudder / in the loins" ("Black Oestrus," 100); "tribal as birth / or dream" ("Night Shift," 72).
20. Some examples at the level of the phrase: "our mouth stained / with the green salad of language" ("Flagbearers," 122); "Language begins / to peel away from you" ("Watching the Steamrollers Arrive," 121); "the rumble of verb or the soft / flesh of pure vowel" ("Lover Tongue," 109); "word slither into word, / into the miraculous algae/of language" ("Leapfrog," 104); "to weave a clause/ . . . that breathes,/welcomes commas . . ." ("Another Way," 96); "Inhabit the verb" ("Strategist," 56).
21. Burt, Stephen. "Poems about Poems." *Boston Review*, December 1, 2014. Accessed online at: www.bostonreview.net/poetry/stephen-burt-poems-about-poems-borzutzky-heikkinen-sol. Also read Burt's account of the "nearly baroque" trend in contemporary American poetry (*Boston Review*, April 11, 2014), which may or may not bear connection to the strategies I am trying to trace here in post-1990s Indian poetry in English.
22. I personally find that this particular device is somehow much more common in Indian poetry in English since the 1990s than, say, in contemporary English poetry from the United Kingdom or the United States. I will point to examples of it in Hoskote and Thayil as well.
23. Mentioned, for instance, in the following profile of Hoskote by Madhavankutty Pillai: "The Man Who Wrote a Poem on a Non-meeting." *Open*, May 16, 2014. Accessed online at: www.openthemagazine.com/article/books/the-man-who-wrote-a-poem-on-a-non-meeting. (Though it should be mentioned that many Sanskrit shatakas collect work written over an entire *lifetime*.)
24. Naturally, such a reading is vulnerable and subjective, so I request that readers repeat the experiment and report on it.
25. Hoskote, Ranjit. *Zones of Assault*. Mumbai: Rupa Publications, 1991.
26. Hoskote, Ranjit. *The Sleepwalker's Archive*. Mumbai: Single File, 2000. Some of the poems in this collection are included, possibly with slight revisions, in *Vanishing Acts* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006).
27. Hoskote, *Central Time*, 25.

28. A few examples from *Central Time*: “faultless needlework of dream” (22); “matte scroll of grass” (43); “tawny memories/of desert” (46); “the scorching transit of their breath” (46); “deep-shelved archive of silences” (101); “the desert of my madness” (63). These are used in very similar ways and contexts as in Subramaniam. Of these, I would cite the last as an example of when the construction successfully delivers.
29. Hoskote, *Central Time*, 44.
30. *Ibid.*, 127.
31. *Ibid.*, 113.
32. *Ibid.*, 101.
33. *Ibid.*, 64 (italics in original).
34. *Ibid.*, 12.
35. The link between language and violence also comes up in Subramaniam’s work, for instance in the early poem, “Blank Page”: “my words stabbing/the white autocracy of silence” (Subramaniam, *Where I Live*, 11.)
36. Hoskote, *Central Time*, 41.
37. *Ibid.*, 55.
38. *Ibid.*, 60. The full text of this poem can also be accessed online at the *Caravan* website: <http://caravanmagazine.in/poetry/four-poems-1>.
39. Hoskote, *Central Time*, 77.
40. Actually, in *These Errors Are Correct*, “the amplified hymns of truth” (In “Two Interventions,” 49) was the only one I noted. I think there may be a couple more that I missed.
41. Thayil, Jeet. *English*. New Delhi: Penguin/Rattapallax, 2005.
42. I did not count the total number of poems in each of the three collections primarily compared here, but the three run to almost the same page-length – around 125 pages.
43. Thayil, *These Errors Are Correct*, 11.
44. Strangely, the poem was written before his wife Shakti Bhatt’s death, but, not knowing what to do with this problem, we shall not let it detain us here. In a note, Thayil says, “I wrote the sequence in early 2005, two years before Shakti’s death. When it came time to revise the poem I did very little except change the title.” (Thayil, *These Errors Are Correct*, 122.)
45. No. 7 of the sequence. Thayil, *These Errors Are Correct*, 17.
46. *Ibid.*, 44.
47. *Ibid.*, 1.
48. *Ibid.*, 64.
49. Laura (Riding) Jackson, “The Troubles of a Book,” in *The Poems of Laura Riding* (New York: Persea Books, 1980), 90.
50. This uneven but signal anthology has had a few slightly different incarnations, plus or minus a few poets. In its first version, it was the fourth volume of the annual poetry journal, *Fulcrum* (Cambridge: 2005). Later it became *60 Indian Poets* (Penguin India, 2008) and *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Poetry in English* (Bloodaxe, 2008).

51. See Vidyakara's *Subhasitaratnakosa*, no.1283 (eds. D. D. Kosambi and V. V. Gokhale, Harvard Oriental Series No. 42: 1957). The English adaptation here is my own, with help from scholar Tyler Neill. Daniel Ingalls' translation of this verse can be found in *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry* (Harvard Oriental Series No. 44: 1965).

Our Speaking English Voice: A Voice That Speaks for Us?

Anjum Hasan

I write in English, but I did not come face to face with an Indian poem in English until, in college, at seventeen, I read Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion." Ezekiel, whose first collection of poems, *A Time to Change*,¹ was published in 1952, is considered the post-Independence progenitor of the genre. All English poetry previous to that – and it began to be written in the early nineteenth century – has generally been considered archaic, sentimental, and vaguely spiritual. Given my teenage understanding of poetry as generally dealing with "old, unhappy, far-off things" rather than some "familiar matter of today," I found Ezekiel's voice in "The Night of the Scorpion" too close at hand as well as unsettlingly direct, nonchalant even. "I remember the night my mother/ was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours/ of steady rain had driven him/ to crawl beneath a sack of rice." The poem ended in an equally familiar manner: "My mother only said:/ Thank God the scorpion picked on me/ and spared my children." This is exactly the sort of doting thing one could expect one's own mother to say. I remember feeling for this poem, when I first read it, something approaching distaste. The poem was prosaic; it lacked the expansiveness, the rhythm, the capacity to elevate that I had come to expect from poetry.

I had forgotten my initial response to Ezekiel until many years later I came across these lines from Amit Chaudhuri's introduction to the *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*. He's talking about how some Indian poets created a modern vocabulary not through a demonstrative English or post-colonial gestures of appropriating the language, but simply by using it in an everyday way:

The peculiar excitement of the poetry that Ramanujan, AK Mehrotra or Dom Moraes . . . wrote in the 1960s and 70s derived not so much from their, to use Rushdie's word, "chutnification" of the language, but, in part, from the way they used ordinary English words like "door", "window", "bus", "doctor", "dentist", "station", to suggest a way of life. This was, and

continues to be, more challenging than it may first appear; as a young reader, I remember being slightly repelled by the India of post offices and railway compartments I found in these poems; for I didn't think the India I lived in a fit subject for poetry.²

So I was not alone in my failure to appreciate Ezekiel "as a young reader." All of us educated in English verse possibly face, at some point, the challenge that Chaudhuri talks about – we all experience this strange resistance to voices too close to home, that speak in accents very much like ours, and dwell on subjects that don't seem worthy of poetry. Yet the "way of life" suggested by the Indian poets' use of commonplace English words is not necessarily only a Westernized one, but more generally an Indian one. Half a century ago, it was a writer considered our most compulsively anglicized who noticed this. Nirad C. Chaudhuri writes, in his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, about how he often met with workmen on the streets of Delhi who asked him "Sa'ab, time kya hai?" Why use the word "time" when there are words for it in their native tongues, he wonders. Perhaps it is a sign of modernity:

In the same way everybody employs "room", "market", "garden", "shoe", "bed", "wife", "father", "son", "marriage", "danger" and similar words of workday status without there being any obvious reason for preferring these words to their Indian equivalents. But for the most part the foreign words are the words in which a modern Indian expresses his cultural concepts.³

So, the English that the Indian poet adopted when he began to write in a modern way had already been vernacularized (or at least many of its common nouns were) by the man on the street. And it is through the liberal use of nouns too that "Night of the Scorpion" achieves its close-to-the-bone effect, by naming specific things in their particular context – scorpion, sack of rice, peasants, lanterns, candles, and then, once the beliefs and hopes of the peasants regarding the phenomena of scorpion bites have been, again very straightforwardly, conveyed, "More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,/more insects, and the endless rain."

Sarojini Naidu was the second Indian poet I read in college; and she, like Ezekiel, is still part of school syllabi. Naidu was actively involved in the Indian freedom movement and also wrote (in response to Edmund Gosse's Orientalist demand for "some revelation of the heart of India"⁴) sonorous verse ventroquilizing figures such as the palanquin bearer, the bangle seller, and the Indian weaver – exactly the kind of poetry that Ezekiel and the poets that followed wrote against and the dreamy view of India they challenged. (In contrast to Naidu's alluring images of the country, for

instance, the poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra says in his long poem *bharatmata: A Prayer*: “ah my motherland/ you are, in the world’s slum/ the lavatory,”⁵ while his contemporary Adil Jussawalla writes, in his book *Missing Person*, “Partition’s people stitched/ Shrouds from a flag”⁶ and, in another poem, “See Indians bite the dust,/ streams of pent-up blood / bless their stone.”⁷) At the time, having consistently imbibed the metered verse of the English Romantics all through childhood, I was amused by Naidu’s poems and their rhythms settled easily in my mind. I did not notice, as I do now, that even though they are (like the men the elder Chaudhuri encounters) of the working class, Naidu’s characters speak in so romantic an English that it is difficult to imagine them threading those ordinary English nouns into the Indian languages they presumably speak in real life. Conversely, no Indian words intrude into this apparent translation of native speech. This is English as an artifice, therefore, and yet apparently employed unselfconsciously, unlike the strategic use of ordinary language by the modern poets.

The poet who has made the most joyful use of English as a language of Indian ordinariness is Arun Kolatkar. His landmark collection titled *Jejuri*⁸ – an interconnected series of poems on a visit to the temple town of Jejuri – is written in the voice of a half-reluctant pilgrim narrator. One of the most striking things about *Jejuri* is that Kolatkar makes poetry out of the day-to-day aspects of the town and yet the idea of worship in a timeless mythological landscape (which is what Jejuri is famous for) is not rejected. The two, by coexisting in proximity to each other, effect a mutual transformation – a boy washing dishes in a tea-stall appears to be performing ablutions and ceremonies at the sink, a goat must be sacrificed to the railway-station clock and the station master bathed in milk before you get to learn the timing of the next train, and so on. The language in which he achieves this feat is often conversational, even casual.

To appreciate Kolatkar one may have to unlearn ideas about poetry inculcated in the Indian classroom, however. Had I read the *Jejuri* poems in college, I might have been impervious to how adeptly Kolatkar (as much as Ezekiel in “Night of the Scorpion”) transforms the ordinary, rather than just making a record of it. The inability to savor him could partly be the result of how commonplace Kolatkar’s poems *sound* and of sound being a crucial factor in my experience of poetry. His poems do not impress in speech as effectively as they do on the page. The use of very short, blunt lines, the lack, often, of rhythmic effects, and the anti-climactic climaxes – all of these might even go against the poems when they are read out. Their charm lies in one’s being able to readily imagine a real-life

narrator (unlike in the case of Naidu's native speakers) talking that way. "Take my shirt off/and go in there to do Pooja?/ No thanks."⁹ Yet, when performed, their low-key quality might suggest that they are more modest than they are.

This is not to say that these modern poets shied away from meter and rhyme. Dom Moraes wrote formal verse consistently, and Ezekiel was an early practitioner too. "Night of the Scorpion" is from his fifth collection of poems, *The Exact Name*,¹⁰ a book which, according to leading critic of Indian poetry in English, Bruce King, constitutes a departure for the poet, the poems here revealing, in comparison to his earlier work, "a greater fluidity of cadence, a closer approximation of the speaking voice" that expresses "Indian life without self-consciousness or artificial Indianness."¹¹ Interestingly, in direct contrast to my point above regarding Kolatkar – about a conversational tone in poetry not lending itself well to poetry as performance – King says of "Night of the Scorpion" that "it was unrhymed and written for the speaking voice, to be read aloud."¹² Why, then, did I once shun that voice? How does one push through this resistance in order to come out on the other side – so that Indian words in English might appear natural to our ears and our own poetic voices sound appealing to us?

*

On the relationship between spoken and written forms, the poet Gieve Patel, who too belongs to that early generation which brought Indian poetry in English closer to modern life, has observed: "The average, well-educated Indian school student does not know how to speak at a public platform. The mercurial, charming chatter with implosions of words and running together of text is pleasurable to hear at games field or picnics but it doesn't work as public speaking." This is from his introduction to *Poetry with Young People*, a collection of poems written in annual workshops with Patel by twelve- to eighteen-year-old students of the Rishi Valley School, Andhra Pradesh.¹³ Patel describes how one of the many challenges he faced in trying to make poetry acceptable to and eventually welcome among the students was breaking their reluctance to recite their poems publicly. But even if we're no good at public speaking, we do believe it can be taught. When I was at school, debates were more exercises in enunciation and less opportunities to hone one's argumentative abilities. In junior school, elocution competitions were the rage. And memorizing poems was essential to claim any knowledge of literature.

Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, takes up the matter of "Prer NUN sea ayshun" in a very funny and instantly recognizable scene to do

with the recitation of Walter Scott's "Lochinvar" – a staple of Indian classrooms. The girl reciting it has just won the First Prize for Elocution and unsuspecting visitors to her home must therefore be treated to what one guest at first believes to be a Malayalam translation of the poem:

The words ran into each other. The last syllable of one word attached itself to the first syllable of the next. It was rendered at remarkable speed,

*"O, young Lochinvar has scum out of the vest,
Through wall the vide Border his teed was the bes."*¹⁴

This is a very telling example because it's often the case in India that when the English voice melds with the "vernacular" the result is generally seen as hilarious rather than innovative. Nissim Ezekiel's comical "Indian English" poems are the best-known examples of such humor in the genre. Here, vernacular liberties with English take the form, not of a funny accent as in Roy's novel, but of incorrect, and thereby funny, grammar and usage. A more interesting, perhaps more convincing example of the vernacular voice is to be found in Eunice de Souza's poems. De Souza, a contemporary of Jussawalla and Mehrotra, and of the generation that succeeded Ezekiel, was hailed for the forthrightness and wit of her first collection *Fix*, many of its poems written in the voice of Goan Catholics. These are the opening lines of her poem "Catholic Mother":

Francis X. D'Souza
father of the year.
Here he is top left
the one smiling.
By the Grace of God he says
we've had seven children
(in seven years)
We're One Big Happy Family
God Always Provides
India will Suffer for
her Wicked Ways
(these Hindu buggers got no ethics.)¹⁵

As in Ezekiel's Indian English poems, this too is a speaking voice. Ezekiel distances himself from his protagonists by stereotyping them, creating in poems with generic titles such "The Professor" and "The Patriot," an exaggerated speaking voice that belongs to a *kind* of a person – morally conservative and pompous if well meaning – rather than just any person. De Souza's poems have greater particularity and, as in the above lines, there is a subtle and gradual shift from her voice to that of her subject's. This

makes her a more sympathetic observer than Ezekiel, possibly because she herself belongs to the community she writes about. Her contemporary Mamta Kalia is another poet whose witty and colloquial poems about middle-class female lives manage to strike a similar note between tenderness and irony. Latter-day poets have not adopted this tone as persuasively. Lately it is from theater rather than poetry that one might gauge how our speaking English voice has developed. It is an often-discussed fact that as soon as actors appear on stage their everyday voices unfailingly desert them. They assume accents in which traces of prim high school debates and elocution lessons are apparent. A new generation of theater artists seems to be trying to break this acute self-consciousness with the language by attempting to make the whole process of creating English theater less stylized and formal.

In playwright Ram Ganesh Kamatham's *Crab*, for instance, directed by Arghya Lahiri,¹⁶ actors defiantly spoke in their "normal" voices as well as, in a significant sense, played themselves – young, Indian, urban, twenty-somethings, free to do what they like, fall in love, out of it, change jobs, move town, opt out of the system altogether, and yet, despite these freedoms, remain vaguely disillusioned. The play was less dialogue and more talk, clearly developed in situ with the actors, the aim being to show that these characters were going to find out who they were through conversation, argument, tirade, and so on, rather than letting someone else put words in their mouths. Similarly, Swar Thounaojam's *Fake Palindromes*, directed by the playwright,¹⁷ is a series of sketches driven less by a clear plotline and more by the possibilities of creating drama through repartee and natural, freewheeling speech. Here again, the freeing of the voice, so to speak, allowed the characters to express their individuality rather than play stock characters from Indian society. Since a great deal, if not everything, is expressed through voice in theater, speaking convincingly and playing a believable character could be said to be one and the same thing, highlighting an all too familiar conundrum facing those who write in English – namely, how to capture a non-English India in the language?

Until a few decades ago, this problem seemed to afflict Indian English fiction too, a problem for which Salman Rushdie is generally believed to have pioneered a solution. As critic Shama Futehally said about his novel *Midnight's Children*:

[Indian novelists] have usually done one of two things. They have either made their characters use an English of artificial fluency and correctness like Anita Desai; or they have satirically made them use incorrect English, like

Jhabvala. The first approach reduces the credibility of a character; the second reduces his appeal. Rushdie uses their English exactly as they use it themselves—totally wrong, completely acceptable, capable of transmitting extremes of human experience.¹⁸

But does a convincing speaking voice, a voice that speaks to us, also make that larger leap and speak *for* us? Futehally's essay was written in 1983; a good two decades later, when Rushdie's reputation had been burnished by the fatwa, even as his increasingly overblown novels were met with diminishing enthusiasm, novelist Amitava Kumar noted in a *Tehelka* article on August 6, 2005: "His is no doubt a powerful voice [but] in some fundamental way, it is the voice of a metaphorical outsider, and therefore incapable of revealing to ourselves, in an intimate way, our complicities, our contradictions, and our own inescapable horror." Kumar's point is that Rushdie's fiction conceals a deep concern for himself, an anxiety about his outsider status, which he addresses in his novels by attempting through his characters "to reclaim what he has lost." This renders his literary experimentation less subversive than it might appear.

Understanding that the matter of a writer's voice is not just one of technique but also of politics brings us to the heart of the matter. If Rushdie's attempt to create an effective Indian idiom must be seen in relation to his distance from India, then what might lie behind the prose of an equally influential writer, the poster-boy of new Indian fiction over the past decade: Chetan Bhagat? Bhagat's writing has tapped into a, more casual English style. Part of his enormous appeal surely lies in the fact that his language sounds intimately familiar to his readers. If they recognize themselves in his characters, it follows that they like the sound of these character's voices. Here is an excerpt from a conversation at the start of Bhagat's novel *One Night @ the Call Centre*.

"You might have heard of my book – Five Point Someone. I am the author," I said.

"Oh yes," she said and paused. "Oh yes, of course. I have read your book . . ."

"Yes. So how did you like it?"

"It was all right," she said.

I was taken aback. Man, I could have done with a little more of a compliment here.

"Just all right?" I said, fishing a bit too obviously.

"Well . . ." she said, and paused.

"Well what?" I said after ten seconds.

"Well. Yeah, just all right . . . okayokay types," she said.¹⁹

This is very far from Rushdie's robust, colorful, invented vernacular. Minimal effort appears to have gone into the shaping of these English sentences; Bhagat apparently writes as he would himself speak, rather than pausing first to listen to the sound of his own voice. (In fact, in this first scene, it *is* the author himself talking – with a girl on a train who gives him an idea for a novel.) And yet the Indian words and adaptations are both obvious and contemporary, such as the colloquialism “fishing” for the active seeking out of a compliment. “Okayokay types” is another Indian expression of the moment, while the Americanism of “man” is more conventional (if still cool). An Indian inflection is evident in “How did you like it?” Noticeable about the passage is how insipid it is. Words and phrases are blandly repeated, suggesting that these characters have a very circumscribed vocabulary and, therefore, perhaps a limited range of feelings and ideas. The extensive discussions of Bhagat's hugely popular books rarely concern their language. There is now a younger generation of writers and readers much more at ease with English and therefore, curiously, less engaged with it than the Desais, the Jhabvalas, and, indeed, the Rushdies.

To return to Amit Chaudhuri's point: the poets, he says, got there first. Though this is not widely acknowledged, it was in the crucible of poetry and not fiction that an English idiom was originally formed. Were these poets, in the process, able to take from common speech and return something to it? Another writer who has given extensive thought to the question of the vernacular in literature (evidenced most recently by his unexpectedly colloquial and contemporary translations of Kabir's verse²⁰), is the poet and scholar Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. Chaudhuri says about Mehrotra that “like his contemporaries, he had to create a vernacular by *not* doing certain things, by *not* looking toward Indian poetry, Indian English, or his Indian forebears; after all, as he recently said in an interview, Indian English ‘has no demotic’.”²¹ This could be generalized to be true of all the mid-twentieth-century moderns, most of whom adopted what Bruce King calls the “dry, commonsensical manner”²² of American and British poetry of the 1950s and 60s. Even if the man on the Indian street has been using English for a long time, it is by drawing as well from that more literary source that something like a demotic was fashioned by these poets. Half a century on, what shape has that legacy taken in contemporary English poetry?

*

The poet Hoshang Merchant has recently written that Nissim Ezekiel once told him he regretted the inclusion of his “Night of the Scorpion” in the

school syllabus. “The Bombay children, as was their wont, must’ve screamed ‘Scorpion! Scorpion!’ at him even as he slowly sallied out of life on the Bombay Double-Fast,” says Merchant.²³ And the poet Brian Mendonca, writing about his encounter with the genre in college, has said, “The rhythms of Indian poetry in English, compared to a diet of Shakespeare’s blank verse seemed so simple. So accessible. Almost like talking . . . Poetry was something that wrote itself, to record the magic of the moment.”²⁴ These two views, encapsulating the simplicity of the first modern experiments with Indian English verse and the caricature of the poem through over-familiarity with it as a school text, capture something of how this poetry is seen these days. Of course, these founding poets are not all jaded. Some of these early pioneers, such as Jayanta Mahapatra or the younger-by-a-generation Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, are still writing and publishing; others, such as Dom Moraes, are only now getting the benefit of intelligent critical attention.

A useful way to trace the development of the genre is to examine the idiom in which anthologists have described it. Notions of both insignificance and iconoclasm have been a persistent part of the image of Indian poetry in English. Early anthologists such as Vilas Sarang, R. Parathasarathy, Pritish Nandy, and K. Ayyappa Paniker tended to remind their readers about the marginality of this poetry and mounted only a tentative defense on its behalf. (Though it is doubtful that Pritish Nandy’s remark that the English language poet is to Indian poetry what Alice Cooper is to American rock, has held good!²⁵) As late as 1992, in his *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra called those Indians who write poetry in English “strugglers in the desert.”

In more recent anthologies, edited by poets such as Ranjit Hoskote and Jeet Thayil, the use of English has become a sign of cosmopolitanism rather than a signifier of limited relevance. The perceived easy accessibility of this poetry – “almost like talking,” in Mendonca’s phrase – is now complicated by a range of voices, forms, and styles. “Experiments with the villanelle and the sonnet coexist with attempts to conduct into English the silhouettes of the ghazal and the doha, the discipline of the bandish, the cadences of the dialect,” said Hoskote in his introduction to *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets*.²⁶ Jeet Thayil’s *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*²⁷ featuring 72 poets, while not as voluminous as early collections such as P. Lal’s 1969 *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo* with 132 poets, is certainly the largest recent anthology in the language. This is not just a matter of enlarging the club. By also including poets who live – and whose parents and even grandparents might

have lived – in the West, Thayil brings previously unknown poets to the attention of readers in India. His introductory essay is titled “One Language Separated by the Sea.” Here, then, is one way in which Indian poetry in English has grown: the image of the desert has been replaced by that of a literature spread across oceans.

Yet continuity has been preserved in various ways. One is through the straightforward thread of tribute to the older poets that runs through the work of the younger ones. This is not necessarily to acknowledge influence as much as to simply acknowledge. Vijay Nambisan’s “Dirge” invokes the elders only to say he is not up to the task of carrying their legacy forward: “So Arun and Dom and Nissim – I will shun their hard-earned grief/ And much though I will always miss ’em, in softer shadows find relief.”²⁸ In “Passing a Ruined Mill,” Hoskote imagines that for Ezekiel, poetry was a tree he had created, laden with forbidden, poison fruit, “its roots anchored in passion.”²⁹ This image of the poet being consumed by his own creation becomes both a larger metaphor and a description of Ezekiel’s own struggles in the desert. And in his poem “Nissim Ezekiel” Amit Chaudhuri says, with a touch of the anti-climactic, of his meeting with the poet as a seventeen-year-old, “In some ways he did not disappoint.”³⁰

Born in 1949, and thus a contemporary to the poets following Nissim Ezekiel, such as Mehrotra and Jussawalla, the Kashmir-born, U.S.-based Agha Shahid Ali, on the other hand, drew attention to his sources by often invoking the famed ghazal singer Begum Akhtar in his verse rather than any English language poet. His poetry is marked by an intensely elegiac note inspired by Urdu verse; lyrical meditations on the tragedy of Kashmir become extended metaphors for loss, forgetting, and death. Shahid himself has been influential, particularly via his experiments at bringing the ghazal form into English; Jeet Thayil’s poem “Malayalam’s Ghazal” has a direct antecedent in Shahid’s “Ghazal,” which too is a meditation on a language: in this case a “language of loss” – Arabic.

Continuity can also be seen in how, to return to the theme of this chapter, questions of idiom and language remain central to the genre and are often addressed through the poetry itself. Instances of wrestling with English recur; to mention just a few examples: Sujata Bhatt’s horrified cry of “I dreamt English/was my middle name”;³¹ Shahid’s search for an identity as a poet, “I began with a laugh, stirred my tea with English, /drank India down with a faint British accent,/temples, beggars and dust”;³² and Jeet Thayil’s acknowledgment of “the risk/ and worry of committing word to stone./ English fills my right hand, silence my left.”³³ Further, despite the existence of a by now solid body of work called

“Indian poetry in English,” the question of its legitimacy, given the language in which it is written, has not gone away. Even though he claims a global status for it, the first third of Thayil’s introduction is devoted, like the writings of his older anthologist colleagues, to defending these poets against the charge that because they write in English, they don’t matter to Indian literature.

Yet the genre continues to expand and poets now experiment boldly. New subject matter is one instance of the widening of boundaries. The Germany-based Sujata Bhatt, for instance, uses her “displaced” position to set in motion what Joseph Brodsky called “retrospective machinery” – memories of her childhood in India – even as her varied adult experiences from all climes, featuring all manner of characters past and present are, with the lightest of touches, claimed as material for her own poetry. While the first move – reflection on being an Indian in the West – is common to several previous diaspora poets, reaching its pinnacle in the brilliantly ironic work of A. K. Ramanujan, the second demonstrates a new confidence. The poetry of Ranjit Hoskote, contemporary with Bhatt’s, reveals experimentation of another order; Hoskote’s poems are like modernist fragments and their allusive quality is heightened by the large number of poets, painters, and intellectuals, alive and long dead, Indian and Western, to whom his poems are often dedicated.

Poets are also extending themselves through reworkings and translations, reclaiming a broader Indian literary tradition than just the one inaugurated by Nissim Ezekiel.³⁴ Adil Jussawalla has memorably said that “Anyone who is concerned with Indian writing should, at some stage, state his limitations,”³⁵ drawing attention to the vital fact that, given our multifarious linguistic culture, no one individual has complete access to all Indian literature. This limitation has led Indian poets who write in English (much more than the novelists) to try and make inroads into non-English worlds. Several of the older poets were avid translators – A. K. Ramanujan from Tamil and Kannada and Dilip Chitre from Marathi – and younger poets have followed suit. Translations of poetry from medieval Kerala³⁶ and Kashmir,³⁷ of the *Bhagavad Gita*,³⁸ and of modern poetry from Indian languages³⁹ have been undertaken by contemporary poets in the past decade. Through his reworking of the ghazal, Shahid inaugurated one way of bringing an Indian literary tradition into English; younger poets (such as Tabish Khair, in his recent collection *Man of Glass*⁴⁰) show other ways in which such traditions can be assimilated; in one series of poems, he rewrites the myth of Shakuntala by drawing on various Indian and Orientalist sources, depicting his Shakuntala as the daughter of a secular Muslim scholar.

All these developments suggest a new globalism, and not just because the practitioners of this poetry are spread across continents. There is also a cosmopolitan spirit evident in the unconcern about fashioning anything like a specifically Indian voice. The marginality expressed by the earlier poets was felt most explicitly in relation to the question of Indianness, and their poetry therefore tended to be more personal and self-exploratory as well as concerned with recasting ordinary life into poetry. This is no longer the only poetics in evidence. As Vivek Narayanan writes in his poem “Mr S’s Native” – reflecting on the difficulty that a person who belongs to more than one culture might face while trying to provide a straightforward answer to that inescapable Indian conversation-starter concerning one’s place of origin: Where is your native place? – “Can it still be your native if you are, by virtue of/ indelible travels, no longer very native?”⁴¹

The question of the native has perhaps been put to rest within the writing itself if not yet in the discussions around it. Our voices appear to have grown more assured and their tenor is no longer only that of dry commonsense. How, then, to identify that distinct Indian idiom? Arvind Krishna Mehrotra’s famous little essay, “What is an Indian Poem,”⁴² presents one part of Arun Kolatkar’s sequence of poems “Three Cups of Tea,” which he wrote in Bombay-Hindi patois and then translated into American English. This is in the voice of an audacious working-class man demanding his pay and stealing the manager’s watch when he doesn’t get it. The patois version starts, “main manager ko bola mujhe pagaar mangta hai.” If poems can be said to have descendants, then the offspring of this verse of Kolatkar’s can be found in Altaf Tyrewala’s book-length poem *The Ministry of Hurt Sentiments*:

Expressway pey number one kar dala
 English and Hindi ka solid ghotala
 Waiter ko bolo to make the AC zyaada
 Such headache in my post-colonial maatha
 Yeh roti is made from chakki atta?
 Itna long kayko lagata
 Bhenchod! You call THIS pasta?⁴³

The Ministry of Hurt Sentiments is a howl of rage at the degeneration of Bombay, an acutely visceral description of the city’s moral corruption and physical slime, and a brutally funny epitaph for it. This is very far from Kolatkar’s gently wry vision in *Jejuri*, or in the ebullient poems celebrating Bombay street life in his later collection *Kala Ghoda Poems*; in fact, one of his characters makes an appearance in Tyrewala’s book, much reduced

since her Jejuri days: “the white-haired harridan in the tattered sari/She once harangued Kolatkar at Jejuri/ Now she scavenges on the outskirts of the Chembur slum.”⁴⁴ This image suggests that Kolatkar’s language is perhaps no longer capable of holding up to the nightmarish complexity of Indian reality. The excerpt above is in Bumbaiya patois too, but the unrestrained mixing of an invented Hindi with English nouns, which endows Kolatkar’s speaker with self-assurance, has in Tyrewala’s poem become almost abusive. It is of a piece with the macabre reality he is describing. The language has turned upon itself, its only function seems to be to cheat on both Hindi and English (“English and Hindi ka solid ghotala”).

Such patois are no longer limited to Bombay; this is how many young urban people speak today – if not in Hindi-English, then Kannada-English, Bengali-English, Punjabi-English, and so on. And the use of this hybrid is driven by the need not just to sound contemporary but also to replace the clunky vocabulary foisted on our languages by purists with something that feels less alien. As Vijay Nambisan asks plaintively in his book-length meditation on the uses and misuses of English, “*Everyone* in India says ‘telephone’ . . . why do the silly bureaucrats and politicians put up signs saying ‘dūrbhāsh’ or (in Tamil) ‘tholaipési?’”⁴⁵ But it is also the case, as Tyrewala’s book shows, that this khichdi language disguises a loss, which is the loss of the ability to articulate a whole self in any one language because of the fragmentation and superficial hybridity of contemporary Indian culture.

This patois, then, is the only English in India that can today claim the status of a vernacular, even if it’s hard to say whether it is, really, English that has infused these various languages or the other way around. Just as the first generation of modern poets adopted a straightforward, ordinary idiom to express Indian realities, thereby changing conventions of both poetry and its subject matter, this new vernacular challenges poets to imagine how the lives and values expressed through it might become, not just an occasion for satire, but for a genuinely new poetry.

Notes

1. Nissim Ezekiel, *A Time to Change* (London: Fortune Press, 1952).
2. Amit Chaudhuri, ed., *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (London: Picador, 2001), xxviii.
3. Quoted in Vijay Nambisan, *Language as an Ethic* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003), 12.

4. Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2001), 174.
5. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *bharatmata: A Prayer* (Bombay: Ezra-Fakir Press, [1966]), n.p.
6. Adil Jussawalla, "Sea Breeze, Bombay" in *Missing Person* (Bombay: Clearing House, 1976), 39.
7. Jussawalla, "Scenes from a Life," in *Missing Person*, 17.
8. Arun Kolatkar, *Jejuri* (Bombay: Clearing House, 1976).
9. Kolatkar, "Makarand," in *Jejuri*, 43.
10. Nissim Ezekiel, *The Exact Name* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1965).
11. Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 21.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Gieve Patel, ed., *Poetry with Young People* (New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2007), xxv.
14. Arundhati Roy, *God of Small Things* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2002), 271.
15. Eunice de Souza, *Fix* (Bombay: Newground, 1979).
16. Performed at Rangashankara, Bengaluru, 2007.
17. Performed at Rangashankara, Bengaluru, 2011.
18. Shama Futehally, *The Right Words, Selected Essays, 1967–2004* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2006), 206.
19. Chetan Bhagat, *One Night @ The Call Centre* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2012), Prologue.
20. *Songs of Kabir*, trans., Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Gurgaon: Hachette and Delhi: Black Kite, 2011).
21. Amit Chaudhuri, "The Sideways Movement," *Caravan* (September 2012), 81.
22. Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 333.
23. Hoshang Merchant, "Nissim and I: A Tale of Two Poets," *Kavya Bharati* No. 25 (2013): 150.
24. Brian Mendonça, "The Palette Is India," *Tehelka*, March 19, 2005.
25. Pritish Nandy, ed., *Indian Poetry in English Today* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1973), 5.
26. Ranjit Hoskote, ed., *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002).
27. Jeet Thayil, ed., *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2008).
28. Vijay Nambisan, "Dirge" in *The Bloodaxe Book*, 104.
29. Ranjit Hoskote, "Passing a Ruined Mill," in *The Bloodaxe Book*, 290–92.
30. Amit Chaudhuri, "Nissim Ezekiel," in *The Bloodaxe Book*, 186.
31. Sujata Bhatt, "Brunizem" in *Brunizem* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1993) 105.
32. Agha Shahid Ali, "The Editor Revisited," in *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (Penguin Books India: New Delhi: 1992), 21.

33. Jeet Thayil, "English," in *English* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003), 39.
34. This tradition has now been extended back to the nineteenth century, with several academic works dedicated to the subject appearing over the past decade.
35. Adil Jussawalla, ed., *New Writing in India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 22.
36. Vijay Nambisan, trans., *Puntanam and Melpattur: Two Measures of Bhakti* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2009).
37. Ranjit Hoskote, trans., *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Dēd* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).
38. Mani Rao, trans., *Bhagavad Gita* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).
39. A recent example is Joy Goswami, *Selected Poems*, trans., Sampurna Chattarji (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2014).
40. Tabish Khair, *Man of Glass* (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2010).
41. Vivek Narayanan, *Life and Times of Mr S* (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2012), 33.
42. Thayil, ed., *The Bloodaxe Book*, 397–99.
43. Altaf Tyrewala, *Ministry of Hurt Sentiments* (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2012), 67.
44. Tyrewala, *Ministry*, 27.
45. Nambisan, *Language as an Ethic*, 17.

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Index

- A Sketch of Anglo Indian Literature*, 98
- Alexander, Meena, 389–394, 396–402
The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience, 392
Quickly Changing River, 393
Fault Lines, 393
Raw Silk, 397
- Ali, Agha Shahid, 375–386, 432
Bone Sculpture, 375
In Memory of Begum Akhtar, 375
The Half Inch Himalayas, 377–378
A Walk Through the Yellow Pages, 377
A Nostalgist's Map of America, 378–381
The Country without a Post Office, 380, 384
- Alvarez, A., 208
Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan, 82, 85, 87–88
- Archer, David, 223
- Atkinson, James, 154, 156
- Bengal Annual*, 149
Bengal Hurkuru, 148
Bengal Magazine, 84, 86
- Bantleman, Lawrence, 167, 197
- Bhagat, Chetan, 429
One Night @ the Call Centre, 429–430
- Bhatt, Sujata, 389–394, 396–402, 432, 433
The Color of Solitude, 400
- Bhose, Hurry Mohun, 105
- Bishop's College, 50
- Bloom, Harold, 78, 384
- Borges, Jorgen, 276
- Bose, Buddhadeva, 59, 138–139, 165
- Bryce, James, 155–156
- Bysack, Gour Das, 51
- Calcutta Journal*, 151
Calcutta Literary Gazette, 148–149
- Carshore, Mary, 52, 65, 67–69, 75–76
- Chakravarti, Sasthibrata (Sasthi Brata), 163
- Chakravorty, Dipesh, 65
- Chaudhuri, Amit, 423–424, 430, 432
- Chaudhuri, Nirad C., 424
- Chaudhuri, Rosinka, 29, 55–56
- Chitre, Dilip, 185
- Chunder, Greece, 119
- Clearing House, 172, 176–188
- D'Oyly, Charles, 98
damn you, 192, 196, 270, 271
- Damrosh, David, 268–269, 276–277, 281, 260–262
- Daruwalla, Keki, 313–319
Under Orion, 313
Apparition in April, 316
Crossing of Rivers, 317
The Keeper of the Dead, 317
Fire Altar: Poems of the Persians and the Greeks, 318
- Das, Deb Kumar, 163
- Das, Kamala, 164, 234–242, 246
My Story, 236, 239–240
Summer in Calcutta, 236, 237–238
The Old Playhouse and other Poems, 236–237
- Das, Sisir Kumar, 130
- Datta, Michael Madhusudan, 48–59, 213
Upsorie, The, 48, 54
King Porus, 48, 55
Captive Lady, The, 48, 57
Meghnadbadh Kavya, 49
Visions of the Past, 57–58
The Anglo Saxon and the Hindoo, 56
- De Souza, Eunice, 239–243, 427
Fix, 242–245
Women in Dutch Painting, 245
- Deleuze, 212
- Deleuze and Guittari, 211–212
- Della Crusca Poetry, 32–33, 64
- Derozio, Henry Louis, 21–29, 73, 105, 156
Poems, 21–22
The Faker of jungheera, 22–26, 28
- Desai, Anita, 163, 164

- Deshpande, Gouri, 165
 Dharker, Imtiaz, 389–402
Leaving Fingerprints, 391
The Terrorist at my Table, 391, 396, 398, 401
Purdah and Other Poems, 394, 398
I Speak for the Devil, 395
 Dionysus, 192, 195
 Dunn, Theodore, 118
 Dutt, Aru, 82–83
 Dutt, Govin Chunder, 82–83, 115
Dutt Family Album, 83, 115
 Dutt, Kshetramoni, 83
 Dutt, Toru, 82–91, 114
A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields, 84–85, 120
Bianca or the Young Spanish Maiden, 85, 86
Journal de Madamsaille d'Arvens (Diary in Translation), 85, 86, 87–8
- E.L., 68, 69–70
 Eliot, T.S., 208, 210
 Ezekiel, Nissim, 166, 171, 191, 194–197, 209, 212, 214–221, 423–424, 436–437
ezra, 194, 196–200
- fakir*, 197
 Forrest, Charles Remus, 24–25
- George, Rosemary Marangoly, 239–240
 Ghosh, Kashiprasad, 116–118, 213
The Shair, and Other Poems, 117–118
The Bengali Book of English Verse, 118
 Gibson, Mary Ellis, 22, 27, 32
 Gosse, Edmund, 119
 Grainger, James, 34
Sugar-Cane: A Poem, 34
 Grant, John, 148, 150, 152
- Harex, Syd, 308
Heart Echoes from the East: or Sacred Lyrics and Sonnets, 76–77
Helter-Skelter Magazine, 155–156
 Herberlin, John, 133
 Honnalgere, Gopal, 166, 184
 Horsford, John, 34–39
 Hoskote, Ranjit, 186–187, 412–416, 431, 432
Central Time, 413–416
Zones of Assault, 413
The Sleepwalker's Archive, 413
- India Gazette*, 148, 150–155
Iva and Other Poems, 70
- John Bull in the East, 151
 Jones, William, 41–44
- Jussawalla, Adil, 164, 166, 171, 177–178, 181–187, 197, 407, 425, 433
Land's End, 251, 255
New Writing in India, 251, 255
Missing Person, 251, 253, 407, 425
Trying to Say Goodbye, 255, 258, 260–262
The Right Kind of Dog, 255, 258–259
- Kabroji, Fredoon, 120, 215
 Kamatham, Ram Ganesh, 428
Crab, 428
 King, Bruce, 171, 194, 201, 227, 298, 302, 307, 329, 339, 342, 426, 430
 Kipling, Rudyard, 108–109
 Kolatkar, Arun, 165, 178, 284–296, 425–426, 434
Jejuri, 284, 286, 290–292, 425
Chirimiri, 285, 288
Droan, 285, 287, 294–295
Bhijki Vahi, 285, 288
Kala Ghoda Poems, 285, 286, 292–293, 434–435
Sarpa Satra, 285, 286, 293–295
Arun Kolatkarachya Chaar Kavita, 285
The Policeman, 285
The Boatride and Other Poems, 285
- Kumar, Amitava, 429
- Lal, P., 162–170, 195, 431
 Larkin, Philip, 206–209
 Lawrence, D.H., 206–207, 208
 Lawrence, Honoria Marshall, 71, 75–76
 Layden, John, 40–41
Lays and the Law, 101
Leisure Hours: Desultory Pieces in Prose and Verse, 70
 Leslie, Mary Eliza, 70, 76–77
Lyrics and Lays, 99
- Mahapatra, Jayanta, 299–310
Land, 300
Dispossessed Nests, 301
A Rain of Rites, 304
Relationship, 305–307
 Makashi Panekar, Shankar, 164
 Mandy, C.R., 328
 Maria, Anna, 32–34, 64
 McMillan, Alec, 103
 McTavish, Rebecca, 50
 Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna, 178, 190–191, 195–196, 210–211, 269–283, 286, 357, 425, 434
The Absent Traveller, 269–270, 277–278, 281
Distance in Statute Miles, 275, 279
Songs of Kabir, 279–281
 Merchant, Hoshang, 170, 430

- Modern Indian Poetry in English, An Anthology and a Credo (credo)*, 166, 431
- Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry*, 163
- Mohiuddin, Tulamiah, 168
- Moraes, Dom, 224–232
A Beginning, 224
Poems, 224
John Nobody, 224
Out of God's Oven: Travels in a Fractured Land, 226
Gone Away, 226
The Long Strider, 227
The Cinnamon Shade, 230
Typed with One Finger, 231
- Nabar, Vrinda, 191, 238, 242
- Naidu, Sarojini, 66, 69, 77
- Naipaul, V.S., 232–233
An Area of Darkness, 232
Half a Life, 232
- Nambisan, Vijay, 432, 435
- Namjoshi, Suniti, 164, 165
- Nandy, Pritish, 164, 171
- New Monthly Magazine*, 28
- Nicolson, Adela, 77
- Oaten, E.F., 98
Opinion Literary Quarterly, 192, 194
Orient Pearl, 149
- Paranjape, Makarand, 22, 26
Parbury's Oriental Herald, 150
- Parker, H.M., 103
- Parker, Henry Meredith, 105–108, 109
- Parthasarthy, Rajagopal, 271, 273–274, 357
Rough Passage, 271–272, 274
- Patel, Gieve, 165, 166, 178, 181–182, 319, 426
How do you Withstand, Body, 322, 324
Mirrored, Mirroring, 323–325
- Peeradina, Saleem, 166
- Poetry India*, 192, 193, 194–200
- Pope, Alexander, 34–35
- Pound, Ezra, 122, 193, 198, 275–278
- Quest*, 197
- Radice, William, 139, 142
- Rajan, Rajeswari Sundar, 27
- Ramanujan, A.K., 164, 272–274, 309, 347–358
The Striders, 347, 349, 352
Relations, 347, 348
Second Sight, 347, 349
The Black Hen, 347
- The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology*, 353
- Hymns for the Drowning*, 355
- Speaking of Siva*, 356–357
- Ratan, Jai, 163, 164, 167
- Ravi, 191, 192, 196
- Ray, Lila, 164
- Ray, Romita, 24–25
- Richardson, David Lester, 44, 51–53, 98, 148
- Rodrigues, Santan, 192, 195, 328
- Roy, Arundhati, 426
The God of Small Things, 426–427
- Rushdie, Salman, 211, 428–429
- Sen, Pradip, 163–164
- Seshadri, Vijay, 361–368, 373
Wild Kingdom, 361, 363
3 Sections, 361, 365–368
An Oral History of Migration, 361, 363
The Long Shadow, 363–364
- Sethi, N.K., 164
- Shahane, Ashok, 285
- Sharat Chandra, G.S., 164, 361, 368–373
Bharat Natyam Dancer and Other Poems, 368
Once or Twice, 369
Family of Mirrors, 370
Immigrants of Loss, 370–371
- Shetty, Manohar, 335–343
- Shigram, Po, 102
- Silgado, Melanie, 328–335, 342–343
- Sio, Kewlian, 163, 166
- Subramaniam, Arundhati, 186, 409–412
- Tagore, Rabindranath, 130–143
Gitanjali Song Offering, 130–142
The Gardener, 137
The Crescent Moon, Citrā, 137
One Hundred Poems of Kabir, 137
Fruit Gathering, Stray Birds, 137
Lover's Gift, Crossing, 138
The Fugitive, 138
Fireflies, 138
The Child, 138
Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore, 138
- Tagore, Satyendranath, 132
- Tank School of Poetry, The, 152–153
- Thayil, Jeet, 416–418, 431, 432
These Errors are Correct, 416–417
A Time to Change, 423
- Thounaojam, Swar, 428
Fake Palindromes, 428
- Tod, James, 67
- Tornado*, 193

Tyrewala, Altaf, 434
The Ministry of Hurt Sentiments, 434

Vagartha, 193
Vrischik, 192

Index

White, Henrietta, 50
White, Landeg, 409–410
Writers' Workshop, 164–173
Writers' Workshop Miscellany, 164, 165,
167, 173