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The jewel in the cobra's mouth

by Eric Ormsby

A review of The Clay Sanskrit Library*, co-published by New York University Press.*

In 1843, Sir Charles Napier conquered Sind and a year later *Punch* carried a cartoon of the victorious general with the caption "Peccavi," that is, "I have sinned." The Latin pun is often attributed to Napier and could have been his, given his wit and dash. And perhaps he did feel a bit sinful. Two years earlier, while at Poona, he had remarked, "Our object in conquering India, the object of all our cruelties, was money. Every shilling of this has been picked out of blood, wiped and put into the murderer's pocket."

Still, Napier was a savage and ruthless commander and it would be anachronistic, as well as plain wrong, to read simmering anti-colonialist sentiments into these words. Napier felt contempt for British administration and colonial hierarchy not for their mercenary motives, which he bluntly acknowledged, but for their hypocrisy and sheer incompetence. As the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* reveals in its article on him, Napier went so far as to scribble in the margins of Vincent Eyre's puffed-up book on the Anglo-Afghan war, "You were all a set of sons of bitches," in reference to the officers of that ill-fated campaign. The casual amnesia of posterity can be cruel; when recently it was proposed to erect a statue of Napier in Trafalgar Square, Ken Livingstone, the mayor of London, asked who Napier might be. *Sic transit gloria mundi!*

General Napier "had" Sind, and the British held on for over a century. But can anyone really be said to "have" Sind, or indeed, the least part of India, in any permanent sense? Sometimes that vast sub-continent with its teeming populace, its panoply of cultures and customs, its varied religions and hundreds of languages, seems a phantasmagoric region of the imagination rather than an actual nation. My own idea of India was formed in childhood, largely through reading Kipling (his *Kim* still strikes me as an indispensable masterpiece). Later fervent immersions in such translated classics as the *Upanishads* or the *Bhagavad-Gita* or *The Ocean of Story* or—yes, I admit it!—the *Kama Sutra*, complicated and, so to speak, deepened my fantasies, and these in turn were nuanced by such modern Indian authors as Tagore, Narayan, Nirad Chaudhuri, and others. Add E. M. Forster, Paul Scott, and the irresistibly readable John Masters (not forgetting the film version of *Bhowani Junction* with the luscious young Ava Gardner!) and you have a potent, if indigestible, mix. I struggled with Sanskrit over a period of years and haven't yet admitted final defeat. Later I became fascinated by the Mutiny of 1857, and, for a time, a colleague and I used to send each other chapattis—the signal for revolt—through campus mail when confronted with yet another administrative imbecility at the university where we then worked.

The fascination of India is that of a world larger than our imaginations can contain, however we may stretch them. Napier, for all his bloodiness, felt this, as did Sir William Jones, that

eighteenth-century English polymath to whom we owe the scientific study of Sanskrit and the beginnings of Indo-European philology. As the English learned, to invade India is to become invaded oneself, a lesson that earlier conquerors, from the Greeks to the Mughals, had long since learned, often at bitter cost. Can we now imagine the English language without such infiltrated words as curry, bungalow, pundit, nabob, sherbet, mango, or guru? The merest glance at the madly erudite nineteenth-century dictionary *Hobson-Jobson* with its swarming inventory of "Anglo-Indian" locutions reveals our lexical indebtedness on every page.

Indian art from Mohenjo-Daro onwards, Indian music and mathematics, the rich and subtle cuisine, not to mention the profound religious and philosophical traditions of every variety—all this, and more, informs our mental India. But the most crucial aspect of Indian culture, the immense and ancient corpus of literature written in Sanskrit, has received spottier recognition, largely for lack not only of good, but of consistent, translations into English. There are exceptions, of course. Of the sacred texts, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* have been often and well translated. And classical Sanskrit poetry has occasionally been beautifully rendered; the translations by the late Daniel Ingalls, in particular his 1965 *Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry* (a book I remember reading to tatters), are unusually fine.

It is hardly surprising that the chief obstacle is the Sanskrit language. While the difficulties of Sanskrit are legendary, it is not the intricate splendor of its morphology and syntax that constitutes the sole barrier to translation. Rather, the fact that the classic language was codified quite early arrested its development as a living vernacular; thus, we have the peculiar anomaly that the language in which the greatest works of Indian literature were composed for nearly two millennia was traditionally considered perfect as it stood (indeed, the name of the language, *samskrta*, means "perfected"). Panini, a grammarian of genius who flourished around 500 BC, composed so thorough and definitive a description of Sanskrit that his work, the *Astadhyayi*, became normative for all later writers. (Panini's treatise, in its rigor and precision, may have been influential as well beyond the boundaries of Sanskrit; there is some evidence that the work provided a distant model for early Arab grammarians, over a millennium later, in such early Islamic intellectual centers as Basra and Kufa.) Hence, while the language was living, in that it was spoken and written actively, it did not undergo (as, for example, Greek did) the various alterations and mutations most languages historically exhibit. (By the way, the best brief discussions of Sanskrit are now to be found in a two wonderful new works, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the World's Ancient Languages*, edited by Roger D. Woodard, and Nicholas Ostler's *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World*.)

To write well in Sanskrit—and the same could be said for other languages that serve as repositories of sacred tradition, such as Hebrew or Arabic or Persian—entailed working within a circumscribed, however huge, universe of discourse. We tend to prize the innovative. At least since the rallying cry of Baudelaire ("au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau*," his emphasis), we—and not always the brightest among us—value whatever is quirky, unpredictable, "radical," or "iconoclastic." To choose an example I love and prize: No Sanskrit author would have dreamed of composing a *Finnegans Wake*. To subvert the language, however magnificently, would have betokened a drastic failure of true creativity as well as a grotesque breach of established taste. Refinement of the given, not innovation, was the aesthetically honorable desideratum. In such a learned tradition, originality lies in perfection—the incessant burnish rather than the brilliant fracture.

The problem for the translator, already reeling from some colossal compound word (agglomerations of six or seven words are commonplace) or triple-layered pun, is formidable. What appears in English as exotic —a cobra adorned with a jewel or "the Lord of tortoises"—in the original represents the lovingly polished reconfiguration of an age-old conceit. The delight arises from encountering something old and cherished and familiar suddenly aglint with new highlights, unanticipated shades. (To my knowledge this occurs in English literature only when a writer echoes

the King James Bible and gives some phrase memorized in childhood a sly spin of the unexpected. It is of course common in modern Hebrew poetry in which everyday words can still be made to emit Biblical reverberations.) How is the translator from Sanskrit to convey or even suggest such multifoliate densities of allusion and echo?

The Clay Sanskrit Library, a marvelous new venture, grapples with these, and other, problems in a bold yet delicate manner.[1] Modeled on the Loeb Library of Greek and Latin classics, the Clay Sanskrit Library (CSL) presents masterpieces of Sanskrit poetry, drama and prose in a dual-language format. In addition to the entire *Mahabharata*, one of the two national epics (it will occupy thirty-two volumes of the Library!), translation of some fifty other classical works is envisaged. The original Sanskrit (in transliteration) on the left side of the page faces the English translation on the right. Each volume includes a brief introduction to the author or work, a clear guide to Sanskrit pronunciation as well as a concise description of *sandhi* (that complicated system of "euphonic combination" in the script that drives beginners mad) and a "*sandhi* grid" (on the inside back cover of each volume), together with succinct but useful notes. The transliteration, which is at first a disappointment in place of the lovely Devanagari script, is very cleverly done to enable a beginning reader of the original to recognize the root forms of Sanskrit words. (In Devanagari script, *sandhi* causes the forms of final and initial letters in compounds to mutate or to fuse).

The editors have also had the ingenious idea to signal puns in the Sanskrit by the use of a special slanted font and a triple colon in the translations. Sanskrit authors loved to play with words, to multiply refinement upon refinement, as befits clever wordsmiths in a received tradition. This device—known in Sanskrit as *slesa*—can allow for as many as ten simultaneous connotations at once. Thus, the punning phrase *âmbara/khandena* in a poem by Bhartri hari can mean "piece of the cloth" or "part of the sky" and in the Clay volumes is printed: *piece of the cloth: part of the sky*, to show the double meaning of the words.

Anyone who loves the look and feel and heft of books will delight in these elegant little volumes. With their jade-green dust-jackets, sleek format, and pocketable dimensions, they are, as befits their contents, at once sensuous and austere. Like the I Tatti Renaissance Library, another sumptuous offshoot of the Loeb, the Clay Sanskrit Library represents one of the most admirable publishing projects now afoot. The first twelve volumes, which appeared all at once this February like a dazzling flock of "sweet-voiced *krauñcha* birds" (as the epic *Ramáyana* has it), might daunt even the "powerful rutting elephant," let alone a wretched reviewer. Nevertheless, even if my own (scholarly) "loincloth is of one hundred pieces of torn cloth," to quote the poet Bhartri hari again, I'll try to give an impression of some of these works from a non-specialist's perspective.

The titles now published include the first two volumes of the *Ramáyana* by the epic poet Valmíki, a poem of some 25,000 verses which seems to date from around the middle of the fourth century BC; volume four of the equally massive epic, the *Mahabhárata*; two volumes, *The Birth of Kumára* and *Shakuntala*, by Kalidasa, most renowned of Sanskrit poets and dramatists; a collection of love lyrics by three poets, Amaru, Bhartri hari, and Bílhana; *The Heavenly Exploits*, a selection of Buddhist biographies; a satirical play, *Much Ado About Religion*, by Bhatta Jayánta; the first volume of a long quest-narrative by Budhasvamin entitled *Emperor of the Sorcerers*; another narrative by the Jain "poet-monk" Jinaratna called *The Epitome of Queen Lilávati*; a volume of satires by three different authors, Nilakantha Dikshita (seventh century) from South India, and the Kashmiri poets Ksemendra (eleventh century), and Bhallata (ninth century); and finally, the novel *What Ten Young Men Did* by Dandin, probably composed in the sixth century AD.

The general editor of the Library is Richard Gombrich, Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, who also contributes a translation of Bílhana's "The Fifty Stanzas of a Thief," and does so, to his credit (if not always his success), in strict rhyming stanzas. The list of translators and editors—there are some twenty-eight in all—reads like a "who's who" of contemporary Indology; even more

impressively, their English translations display a uniform excellence of style (though I cannot judge the accuracy of the Sanskrit texts). Of the first twelve volumes I've now seen ten and the versions are, by and large, lucid, swift, and sometimes eloquent (not invariably the case with the Loeb Library). As Richard Gombrich explains in his introduction to his translation of Bílhana, ancient Indians valued poetry most when it had some element of *rasa*, a term which means "atmosphere" or, better, "flavor." He defines it thus: "A flavor is an emotion or sentiment, not experienced directly as in real life, but aesthetically, so that it affords a calm enjoyment, a dispassionate pleasure in the passions." These translations, I'm happy to say, are full of such flavor.

I haven't seen the new CSL edition and translation of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, the play first translated into English by Sir William Jones in 1789 under the title *Sacontalá* and which had an immense impact on European literature (it went through six editions in less than twenty years and was translated into twelve other languages). But since this, and Kalidasa's exquisite "court epic" *The Birth of Kumára*, now translated for CSL by David Smith, are rather better known, I'll focus on the impressive new volume of *Love Lyrics*. The translations by Greg Bailey of Bhartri hari's *Satakatraya* from the fourth century AD and of Amaru's *Amarusataka* from the seventh, have a vigor and directness that speak to a modern reader. Bhartri hari's work falls into three sections: politics, passion, and disenchantment. In all three a robust and complex personality comes through, equally at home in the snarl as in the sigh. "A man who has no learning is a beast," he exclaims, for

> Armlets do not embellish a man,
> Nor necklaces bright as the moon,
> Nor a bath, nor ointment, nor flowers,
> Nor well-adorned hair.
> Only perfectly cultivated speech
> Thoroughly adorns a man.
> All adornments fade away always.
> Adornment of speech is the real adornment.

He can be harsh when he describes the ignorant and the deluded:

> Crawling with worms, slimy with spit,
> Stinking, disgusting,
> Delighting still in its superb flavor, a dog eats
> The fleshless bone of a donkey.
> Even if standing beside him the Lord of the gods
> He sees, no shame he feels.
> A wretch takes no account
> Of how pathetic his possession is.

One of the most interesting aspects of Bhartri hari's poetry is that he gives himself fully to the subject at hand; in describing erotic passion he is shamelessly passionate and yet, he is just as passionate in renouncing it. First, consider the almost haiku-like delicacy of the following couplet:

> This line of hair on her belly,
> Why does it torment me so?

Then, the blunter, and frankly lewd, stanza:

> Drive out envy and reflect on the matter.

Then, noble man, declare it precisely.
Should one frequent the slopes of mountains
Or the buttocks of wanton women glistening with lust?

Not too tough a choice, you might think, unless you happen to be an unusually zealous Alpinist: but while you're pondering your answer, consider "Disenchantment" where he lets rip with the alternative:

Her breasts, really just protuberances of flesh
Measured against golden jars.
Her face, just a receptacle of phlegm
Weighed against the moon.
Her thigh, wet with flowing urine,
Rivals the cheek of a majestic elephant.
But look! Her despicable body
Is made highly prized by distinguished poets.

The theme of *contemptus mundi* is familiar to us from our own medieval poets, but in the Sanskrit poet, it gains almost unbearable poignancy. He knows, and appreciates, the heartbreaking loveliness of the flesh even as he renounces it as transitory. This accounts for the plangent sadness that haunts the whole poem:

We have been patient, but not from patience,
Have abandoned pleasures of the house, but not with satisfaction.
Endured unendurable cold winds and heat,
But have not performed austerities.
Meditated night and day—breath restrained— on wealth,
But not on Shánkara's abode.
Sages undertake all this activity,
But we are cheated of every result.

Women are "the noose of men" because they are frankly irresistible. But what makes this poetry deeply alluring is that the women in it are given full pride of their own sexual desire. In Amaru's beautiful "Hundred Verses," also translated by Bailey, the women's bodies "thrill"; they are "moist with fresh love," against their "disheveled tendrils of hair" after lovemaking; the "Gods—Vishnu, Shiva and Skanda—are useless." (Even in the volume of Buddhist biographies, *The Heavenly Exploits*, translated by Joel Tatelman, the pleasures of the flesh are taken for granted as good, even if they must be transcended: "Bala-sena took a wife from a family similar to his own. He enjoyed himself with her, made love to her and otherwise dallied with her.")

Richard Gombrich's version of "The Fifty Stanzas of a Thief" attempts the impossible: to render the original in strict rhyming stanzas suggestive of the Sanskrit. The poem uses an opening refrain in each stanza to propel the verses; Gombrich translates this as "Still I remember." or "Still I recall." Sometimes this succeeds reasonably well:

Still I recall her flushed with love and wine,
Great eyes in which the darting pupils swim,
Her slender body and her sportive lips;
On a ground of Kashmir saffron every limb
With figures in black deer-musk ornamented;

Her mouth with camphor and with betel scented.

At others, the translation turns inadvertently comical:

Still I remember, ringed with curls, her face,
A rotund moon on whose cool rays were fed
Two swift *chakóra* birds, her restless eyes;
Her lips as the *bandhúka* bloom were red;
She bowed with heavy breasts as prominent
As temples of a rutting elephant.

We might accept the "lunar beauty" of the beloved or even the flitting "garden in her face," but the sudden appearance of a lusting pachyderm in the final couplet undoes it all. (In classic Sanskrit poetry, be forewarned, there is much mention of "elephantine thighs" and rutting bull elephants as well as of breasts "like pots." *De gustibus* ... !)

It's odd that Gombrich fails to mention the free version of this poem by E. Powys Mathers, republished in 2004 by Anvil Press in the collection *Black Marigolds and Coloured Stars*. Powys Mathers claimed to have made the translation in the trenches during the Great War, but since he was a poet-charlatan of great ingenuity, often inventing both his exotic poets and his "translations," this is doubtful. Even so, his unrhymed version (which bears little relation to the original Sanskrit I can detect, beyond the refrain) is smoothly musical in a way that the more accurate Gombrich might have emulated. Despite these reservations, however, his translation is an admirable accomplishment.

On the origins of poetry, the second canto of Robert P. Goldman's superb prose translation of Valmíki's *Ramáyana*—the CSL volume is a re-issue of the 1984 version published by Princeton University Press—gives the best account I know. Valmíki, a sage, is wandering in the forest when he sees "an inseparable pair of sweet-voiced *krauñcha* birds wandering about." Just then a Nishada hunter, "filled with malice and intent on mischief," fatally wounds the male of the pair. While the stricken bird writhes on the forest floor, his mate utters "a piteous cry" and the sage is filled with compassion. As he listens to the grieving bird, the sage says, "Since, Nishada, you killed one of this pair of *krauñchas*, distracted at the height of passion, you shall not live for very long." As he meditates on his own words, Valmíki realizes their true nature: "Fixed in metrical quarters, each with a like number of syllables, and fit for the accompaniment of stringed and percussion instruments, the utterance that I produced in this access of *shoka*, grief, shall be called *shloka*, poetry, and nothing else." Thus was the *Ramáyana*, and indeed, poetry itself, created.

Compassion and grief provide strong spurs to song. Compassion binds poets to the living world of creatures, from the wisest sages to the birds of the forest; grief binds even more fiercely, for all are transient. In the almost incredibly varied and bewildering realm of Sanskrit poetry, narration and drama, so winningly represented in the trim little volumes of this exquisite series, these two noble passions shine continually forth like gentle beacons or, in the words of one author describing Ganésha, the god of wisdom, "like the spreading rays of the rising sun to pacify the teeming darkness of obstructions."

Notes

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1. The Clay Sanskrit Library is co-published by New York University Press and the JJC Foundation, with twelve

volumes released to date and six further titles to appear in August 2005. $22 each. For information about the series, see www.claysanskritlibrary.com. Go back to the text.

Eric Ormsby's latest book is *Ghazali* (Oneworld).

more from this author

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