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RE-MARKINGS

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Thomas Macaulay

Esther David

Kamala Das

William Wordsworth

Moving Frontiers in IWE

Philosophy of Translation

Memoir : *Remote*

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Special Section :

David Ray

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EDITOR : A. KARUNAKER

RE-MARKINGS

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Re-Markings, a biannual journal of English Letters aims at providing a healthy forum for scholarly and authoritative views on broad socio-political and cultural issues of human import as evidenced in literature, art, television, cinema and journalism with special emphasis on New Literatures in English including translations and creative excursions

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EDITORIAL

Myriad impressions of the extraordinary scenic landscape interspersed with enchanting mountain and water views, edenic gardens, lush green lawns and picturesque fountains springing amidst a wide variety of architectural forms crowd upon my mind as I seek to greet and address the *Re-Markings* fraternity from the idyllic precincts of the University of Washington, Seattle. Ecstasy emanating from a stimulating environment blends with strong feelings of nostalgic yearning for home as I ponder over the distance of more than half the world that separates me from my friends in India. A voyage to the land which Columbus discovered, probably by default, can be an enriching experience. Where else can one see such amazing diversity of cultures (here's 'God's plenty', you may think) thriving jubilantly in harmonious co-existence in spite of so many apparent contradictions!

My journey to Seattle was motivated largely by my research project entitled "Recent Trends in Afro-American Fiction with Special Reference to the Writings of Charles Johnson" for the Senior Fulbright Fellowship. Two years ago when the Public Affairs Section of US Embassy, New Delhi informed me that Charles Johnson -- author of *Middle Passage, Oxherding Tale, Dreamer* etc., a MacArthur Fellow and winner of the National Book Award -- was visiting India on a lecture tour, I was thrilled by the prospect of interviewing him against the backdrop of the Taj Mahal, the monument of love cast in alabaster. My enthusiasm did not last long as his visit did not ultimately materialize on account of the Iraq war. Perhaps Fate had ordained that we would meet not in Agra, the city that gave to the world the cosmopolitan idea of *Sulahkul* (the essential oneness of all religions), but in Seattle from where Johnson proclaims to the world the imperatives of embracing a standpoint that calls for an amalgamation of multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural perspectives. It is significant to note how he reflects on the America at the dawn of the New Millennium and explicitly foregrounds the need for a completely new outlook: "half of the country is going into the 21st century with something of an identity crisis because America is very much a pluralistic

society...In other words, America really is the point where so many cultures are crossing. And so the large questions that will be carried into the 21st century will be questions of who are we as Americans. And who we want to be as Americans. But it won't be a black/white dialogue in that respect anymore," a statement that lyrically resonates with the spirit of *Sulahkul*. A practicing Buddhist, Johnson mentions in the 'Preface' to *Turning the Wheel* that he considers the Buddhist Dharma as the most revolutionary and civilized of possible human choices, as the logical extension of King's dream of the "beloved community," and Du Bois' "vision of what the world could be if it was really a beautiful world." He loves India and is excited by my project of translating his novel *Dreamer* (based on the life of Martin Luther King,Jr.) into Hindi in collaboration with my wife Sunita.

The present issue of *Re-Markings* has on its back cover a statement from August Wilson's *Jitney*, a simple statement that takes one to the grass-root level of contemplation of the human dilemma. Winner of two Pulitzer prizes, August Wilson stands at the forefront of the African American pantheon and loves to be known as "a cultural nationalist…trying to raise consciousness through theatre." In *The Ground On Which I Stand* he boldly proclaims: "So much of what makes this country rich in art and all manners of spiritual life is the contributions that we as African Americans have made. We cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products." In one of our memorable conversations, when I asked him the reason for his advocacy of cultural separatism in an age of globalism, he frankly stated: "All of human life is universal, and it is theatre that illuminates and confers upon the universal the ability to speak for all men…We embrace the values of that theatre but reserve the right to amend, to explore, and to add our African consciousness and our African aesthetic to the art we produce. To pursue our cultural expression does not separate us."

I must also share with the readers of *Re-Markings* my close interaction with another significant imprint on the canvas of American letters: David Guterson. A distinguished alumni of the University of Washington, David Guterson is co-founder of *Field's End*, a voluntary organization that promotes the community of writers who care about how their writing

affects the world and helps writers get in touch with other writers. Guterson made his debut into the world of fiction with his *Snow Falling on Cedars,* a best-selling novel that elevates instantly the mind and the heart. Most of his novels and stories may have for their location the little Bainbridge Island where he lives and works but his vision encompasses the universal in all its human manifestations for he believes, like Samuel Johnson, that "what pleases many and pleases long are the just representations of general nature."

Healthy associations, interactions and exchange of ideas go a long way in extending frontiers of experience and destroying narrow prejudices and stereotypes. While leaving the Indian shores for America, one is generally warned to be on the defensive in expecting traditional hospitality from the host university or institute. Considering the general American's insularity and extreme love for privacy of sorts, the warning is not really unfounded. But when you get to meet someone like Professor Richard Dunn -- a renowned Charles Dickens scholar and Chair, English Department, University of Washington, -- as your Faculty Associate, you may be compelled to reformulate your views about American hospitality and warmth. In this context I would also like to mention another magnanimous soul – Dr. Michael C. Shapiro, Professor of Hindi, Department of Asian Languages and Literature, UOW – who simply overwhelms you with his immensity of goodness and cheer. He has visited India twice on Fulbright assignments and is highly appreciative not only of Indian Culture and traditions but also of the delicacies of the Indian cuisine.

The current issue of *Re-Markings* takes us into our third year of publication. At this important juncture, I take immense pleasure in announcing the launch of the *Re-Markings* website www.re-markings.com. The global development of the Internet through the invention of the World Wide Web has made it possible for everyone to lay access to digitized material in every conceivable medium and mode. Looming as the cornerstone of the information age, the Web has revolutionized indeed the world of Information Technology not only by making knowledge come literally knocking at our doors with just a click of the mouse but also by ensuring that the fruits of such a revolution are readily available to all for broad use and innovation. What Thomas Alva Edison

remarked after he invented the electric light bulb: "I shall make electric bulbs so cheap, that only the very rich will be able to afford candles," may appear to be true in the context of IT in the years to come.

Our humble entry into the worldwide orbit decidedly expands the scope of our firm commitment to the creation and sustenance of a durable climate of opinion congenial to critical inquiry and intellectual debate pertaining to issues of import worldwide. Numerous academics, writers and critics from different parts of America -- with whom I had the opportunity to interact during the course of my Fulbright Fellowship -- have expressed their appreciation for the issue-specific analysis and treatment of literary discourses offered by *Re-Markings*. Besides the comprehensive *Special Section* on David Ray, the present issue of the journal offers a rich spectrum of creative and critical renderings: exploration of frontiers of Indian Writing in English, the post-colonial deconstruction of Macaulay's 1835 "Minute", a poignant reflection on life in the shadow of celebrity, the evocation of Jewish life in a walled city, philosophical ponderings into cultural aspects of translation, the cry for a "room of one's own" in areas of female creativity, the futility of violent revolutions, all of which, in one way or the other, address issues and concerns related to the intricacies of the human predicament in a hostile world.

I am indebted to Professor Amritjit Singh of Rhode Island College for his stellar role in helping us expand the horizon of *Re-Markings* by facilitating the evolution of a new friendship of ideas with the intellectual community associated with *MELUS* and *South Asian Review.* In this context, I gratefully thank Dr. Veronica Makowsky and Dr. Kamal Verma for their cooperation and support.

I am deeply beholden to Sundeep Arora for designing the *Re-Markings* website with taste and care and also for effectively coordinating the publication of this issue from Agra, India.

Nibir K. Ghosh

Chief Editor

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REMOTE: REFLECTIONS ON LIFE IN THE SHADOW OF CELEBRITY

David Shields

Why We Live at the Movies

> *The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.* --F. Scott Fitzgerald

Sometimes the only way to find where you're going is to lose your way. The road ahead was the only way to leave the pain behind. Her life began when her world fell apart. When the world turns upside down, the trick is to come out on top. When you're down to your last dream, you either live it or lose it. He left behind everything he knew for the only thing he ever wanted. Mary Alice left the New York rat race to join the human race. A son who's starting out; a mother who's starting over. Jon really drove his parents crazy when he was growing up; they're about to return the favor. For country music star Buddy Parks, the shortest distance between two hearts is a road that leads straight back home. When you pound this beat, it pounds you back. They could risk their lives in the scam of the century or they could get real jobs--tough choice. Ivy thought her best friend had the perfect house, the perfect family, the perfect life--so she took them. One love; two lives; she could sell her body but not her heart. Into her perfect world comes a perfect stranger--and suddenly . . . nothing is perfect anymore. She knew his face--his touch--his voice--she knew everything about him … but the truth. He looked like the ideal husband; he seemed like the perfect father; that's just what they needed; but that's not what they got. An older woman; a younger man; the possibilities were tantalizing: the reality was deadly. They had a passion so strong murder was the only way out. He wants to be tied down; she wants to be tied up--it's not what you think. Charming; seductive; deadly; your deepest secret is his most dangerous weapon. The only difference between a hunter and a killer is his eye. How do you lock the terror out when you've already locked the terror in? He's seen the future; now

he has to kill it. One murder can change the world; one man can stop it. In a world on the brink of war, you either march to one tune or dance to another.

Desire

Women wear glasses on chains, like metal dogs on a leash. They whip them around in the air like a lasso. They bite the earpiece of the temple, than which simply nothing is more suggestive. They lay their glasses down on the table, allowing the whole world to go fuzzy on them, while they rub their eyes. They crawl around on the floor, looking for their glasses, which they can't find because they're not wearing their glasses. They find their glasses and hug you in a frenzy of unblurry relief. They clean their glasses with your T-shirt. They read in bed. They place their glasses on top of their head like deep-sea divers emerging from the deep sea. They push them halfway down their nose so they can neither see you nor not see you, so you can neither see them nor not see them. They remove their glasses, exposing the little red indentation across the bridge of their nose. They smash their glasses while making love to you. They tuck their glasses carefully in a case, like putting a baby to bed.

A woman recently riding the crosstown bus struck me as extremely beautiful, if in a rather traditional, all-American way; without glasses, she would have been a statue, a mannequin, a doll, a cartoon: her beauty would have been too too. Her simple red tortoiseshells eroticized her to an almost intolerable degree. They drew me in and stood me off. They said, "You can look at me all you want, but you can't see me in public. You have no idea what I look like or am like. You have no idea how interesting things get when I take these off. I'm so sexy I need to wear these as a buffer."

The way her glasses worked against her beauty was exactly what made her more beautiful: more human. Glasses insist upon the constant simultaneity of body and mind; the beauty of a woman's face is deepened and complicated by the antiglamour scholasticism of her eyewear. Superman without Clark Kent would be perfect, completely unconvincing, boring.

Glasses have the spectacular virtue of suggesting that there is everything left to imagine: only someone in special circumstances will see the veil removed, the gate opened, the cage unlocked--her naked eyes. Only I get to see her without

her glasses; only I get to see the beauty behind the barrier. Glasses make completely explicit the relationship between eyes and I, between love and trust. Glasses, mask of masks, allude to the difference between how a person appears in public and how the same person might perform in private, and thus suggest the bedroom. The arrogance implied in believing that one's beauty can afford to be concealed is entrancing. By contrast, people not wearing glasses sometimes seem preposterously accessible, uncomplicated, unmysterious, trampy.

What's so sexy about glasses is that they block the male gaze and return it redoubled; they transform the woman from viewed to viewer, from looked-at to looker. *Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses*--Dorothy Parker's aphorism tells us much more about her particular brand of self-loathing than it does about eyewear. "Smell me, touch me, but don't look at me": needless to say, this is a tantalizing message to send.

When a woman wears glasses, she is -- to me, anyway -- displaying her woundedness. (In the wild, a wounded animal doesn't get courted.) She seems both very vulnerable -- I could remove her glasses, causing her to be disoriented -- and very brave--choosing not to conceal her defect in the most vital of the five senses. One sense is diminished; another sense -- touch? taste? -- must, in order to compensate, be particularly acute.

In high school I read Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*. The book opens like this: "The first time I saw Brenda she asked me to hold her glasses. Then she stepped out to the edge of the diving board and looked foggily into the pool; it could have been drained, myopic Brenda would never have known it. She dove beautifully, and a moment later she was swimming back to the side of the pool, her head of short-clipped auburn hair held up, straight ahead of her, as though it were a rose on a long stem. She glided to the edge and then was beside me. 'Thank you,' she said, her eyes watery though not from the water. She extended a hand for her glasses but did not put them on until she turned and headed away. I watched her move off. Her hands suddenly appeared behind her. She caught the bottom of her suit between thumb and index finger and flicked what flesh had been showing back where it

belonged. My blood jumped." Immediately I was deep into Brenda.

“Now what can you do?” I once asked a lover who, in bed, had just removed her glasses and who without glasses was legally blind. I thought I meant “How well can you function without your glasses?” but my question clearly implied another question--concerning mattress acrobatics. I wanted her to put her glasses back on so I could tear them off.

Is anything more unnerving than to be asked, in the middle of a lovers' quarrel, “Why won't you look at me?” The eyes, as the Renaissance never gets tired of telling us, are the windows of the soul. What glasses say is: “My soul is not so easily accessible.”

The terms for frame parts are about the distance between me and you, between here and there -- rim, bridge, hinge, shield. Some temple parts: bend, shaft, and, um, butt portion. Is everyone aroused by looking at diagrams of glasses, or is that only me? I love how the long thin temples screw into round liquescent lenses. In the interest of full disclosure: absolutely nothing could possibly be more erotic to me than the subservient-yet-unreachable paradox embodied by a woman performing fellatio while wearing glasses.

I must acknowledge that some things about glasses just don’t work. All sunglasses, for instance, which are striving so strenuously to be mysterious that they have zero effect on me. And yet, finally, no one, as I've learned all too well, wants to hear: “I love how you look in your glasses; I think you look even better with them on.” The sexiest thing about glasses is that they come off. The sexiest thing about glasses is that the first time you kiss, she lets you take them off and then blinks once, trying to focus.

Where We Live and What We Live For

My favorite joke goes:

This guy Mario says to his friend Vito, “You know, Vito, I know everybody in the world there is to know.”

Vito says, “Oh, give me a break.”

"I do. Just try me.”

“I'll bet you a thousand bucks that you don't know, oh, Robert De Niro.”

"Oh, Bobby," Mario says. "Bobby and I went to high school together. Back in New York. We used to go drinking all the time."

They fly to New York. TriBeCa--a loft. They knock on De Niro's door. He's deep in preparation for his next role.

"Oh, Mario," De Niro says. "How good to see you. Bourbon and water?"

"You know," Vito says to Mario, "you said you knew everyone in the world there was to know, but I can't believe you know Robert De Niro."

"I told you I knew everyone in the world there was to know," Mario says.

"I'll bet you two thousand dollars that you don't know the queen of England," Vito says.

"Oh, the queen and I, old Queenie, we were equestrians together. We used to wash the horses down."

So they fly to Buckingham Palace and get there right at the changing of the guard. Pomp and circumstance. Who answers the door but the Queen herself!

"Oh, Mario," she says, "so good to see you."

Mario and Vito follow her into the palace.

Vito says, "Mario, when you told me that you knew everyone in the world there was to know, I couldn't believe you. But now I see that you know Robert De Niro and the queen of England. Still, I'll bet you five thousand dollars that you don't know the Pope."

"Oh, John Paul," Mario says. "Ol' Popesie Opesie. We're close friends, very close friends. The pontiff and I took our secret vows together. Man, did he love those wafers."

They fly to Vatican City. It's Easter Sunday. Long throngs of ecstatic Catholics are awaiting the Pope's arrival.

"Vito," Mario says, "I have to tell the Pope that I'm here, so you stand here between these two nuns and you'll be just fine."

Mario goes running up the steps to the Pope's apartment, and pretty soon, on the balcony of the Vatican, the Pope and Mario appear arm in arm, waving to the crowd, blessing the crowd one and all.

Mario looks down and sees Vito faint.

“Excuse me, Pontiff,” Mario says, “I'm terribly sorry, but I have to go check and see what's the matter with my friend Vito.”

So he goes out and runs down the steps and pushes past the cardinals -- the crowd parts like the Red Sea – and he gets through and finds Vito and he goes, “Vito, what’s the matter with you? Are you all right?”

And Vito kind of wakes up in a daze and says, “Mario, when you told me you knew everyone there was to know in this world, I couldn’t believe it, but when these two nuns pointed up and said, ‘Who’s that guy with Mario?’ . . .”

Problems and Solutions to Problems

DIANE SAWYER: So is Karen Cooper a woman who deserves another chance to prove she can be a real mother, or should her children get to choose the parents they want? She lives here, in a halfway house for recovering mental patients in Cedar Rapids. She’s been diagnosed as manic-depressive. There’s no cure, but it can be controlled with medicine. And she is determined that the children will live with her again.

KAREN COOPER: Why should they be with me? I’m their mother. I love them. I care about them. I want a chance. I know I've made a lot of mistakes, but I want a chance. Those are my kids and I love them. And I don’t think anybody can love them like I love them. I don't care what they say.

SAWYER: But is the Micks’ problem that they love them too much? Do you blame them for loving them too much?

COOPER: Do I blame the Micks for loving them too much? I blame the Micks for being so selfish and for not--for knowing that the children loved me to begin with and ignoring that fact.

SAWYER [*voice-over*]: But the children say the Micks never told them not to love their mother.

COOPER’S DAUGHTER ANNA: No one told us not to love her. Everyone told us, “She’s your mother. You’re going to live with her. You're going to have a happy time.” Mom and Dad did that all the time. And yet Mom and Dad are blamed for taking care of us and providing us a happy home and loving us. Lord, I thank you for letting us stay with Mom and Dad as long as we have, and I hope it’ll be longer. I love you, Lord. Amen.

SAWYER [*voice-over*]: When Anna, now twelve, and Amanda, ten, learned that they might have to leave the Micks, they went to a store and tried to buy sleeping pills. They say they really talked about suicide. But the younger children have few, if any, memories of what it was like before. Justin was only three months when his mother gave him up; Sarah was just five and Samantha was three. [*interviewing*] Do you remember the things that they say happened during that period?

COOPER: No, what?

SAWYER: That they were beaten?

COOPER: That's not true.

SAWYER: Anna says that one time you beat her with a chain.

COOPER: I don't know where she got that.

SAWYER: Never happened?

COOPER: Never. No.

SAWYER: She also says one time she was beaten with a board of some kind?

COOPER: That is true.

SAWYER: That's true?

COOPER: Mm-hmm.

SAWYER: What sort of board? How badly beaten?

COOPER: Well, I was at a girlfriend's house and Anna was trying to make cookies, and the other lady's kids ate all the cookies. Well, Anna just flipped out. You know, I mean, she went into a rage. I looked at the lady and I said, "Do you have a belt?" And she says, "No, use a board. It doesn't leave any marks." I'd never used a board on Anna before, ever. No. Have you ever been hit with a board?

SAWYER: No.

COOPER: It stings.

SAWYER: But you hit her with a board?

COOPER: Yes.

SAWYER: Bruised her?

COOPER: I bruised her leg.

Sawyer: Let me ask you about some of the other things the children have said happened during that time. They say there'd be no food in the house.

COOPER: I don't know about that. I don't remember.

SAWYER: That the clothes were dirty, that the house was dirty.

COOPER: I was washing clothes in the bathtub; the house was dirty. That's true.

SAWYER: Cockroaches and--

COOPER: Yes, we had a lot of cockroaches.

SAWYER: And dogs had gone to the bathroom on the floor.

COOPER: They would do that. That's true.

SAWYER: Anna says, too, that your boyfriend, at least once, threatened her.

COOPER: I wouldn't doubt that.

SAWYER: And beat her.

COOPER: I've never--I didn't know him to beat her. He beat Samantha.

SAWYER: He beat Samantha?

COOPER: Yes, he did.

SAWYER: If you were a child, would you want to go back to it again? Would you want to risk going back to it again?

COOPER: No.

SAWYER: So you understand how they feel?

COOPER: Yes.

SAWYER: Should they be forced to go back to it when they don't know what's ahead? Should they be forced?

COOPER: Forced? Should they give--should they be given an opportunity, as it was planned in the beginning, to let me change? And should I be given a chance?

SAWYER [*interviewing*]: Did you see the scene on television when they left the Micks'?

COOPER: Yes, I did.

SAWYER: What did you think?

COOPER: It killed me. It hurt.

SAWYER: What hurt?

COOPER: I guess what hurts the most is that they're not mine anymore.

SAWYER: But someone might say, "If you really loved the children, wouldn't you want to see them happy?" And if they are happy with the Micks, wouldn't that be the greater love?

COOPER: Well, I don't know if they weren't happy with me when I was sick and they lived in a house full of cockroaches. They were happy then, too.

The Subject at the Vanishing Point

I attend a march against the Gulf War, and when I confess to my father that I'm constitutionally incapable of participating vivaciously in any sort of group activity, he responds by sending me a series of one-sentence postcards: "Peace in the world or the world in pieces." "Don't stop the world because you want to get off." "It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness." "If you can move one grain of sand from one spot to another, the world will never be the same." "Lost opportunities never return." "Popular culture, of which you and your generation are so enamored, is *substitute* family, *substitute* community, *substitute* love." "Never again." "It's better to die on your feet than to live on your knees." "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." "Change the world--it needs it." I grew up with these aphorisms, these elegant dicta that were meant to explain everything.

On Friday nights, when my sister and I were in junior high school, my parents would take us to Kepler's, the bookstore of choice for Bay Area radicals; while I was supposed to be tracking down *Soul on Ice* or *Steal This Book!*, I was actually scouring *The Whole Earth Catalogue* and the *Evergreen Review* for pictures of naked ladies.

The summer between my sophomore and junior years of college I worked as a teacher's aide in a remedial summer school in San Francisco. All the students were black and all the teachers except me were black. During the lunch break the teachers screened blaxploitation films. One afternoon we watched *Mandingo*, a sort of weird southern gothic inversion of the genre. James Mason, the white massa, acted evil; Richard Ward, his slave, plotted freedom; and everybody shouted, "Right on!" Caught up in the action, I, too, shouted, "Right on!" Everyone turned around and stared icily. A line

had been crossed, a taboo broken. Though I'd been completely serious, I said, "Just kidding," so we could all get back to watching the movie.

Since I was president of the eighth grade, I was directed, despite my stutter, to address, via the intercom in the principal's office, the entire junior high school on the subject of the eighth grade's appalling behavior at the recent public assembly. I found the assignment so flattering, the power so intoxicating, that I didn't stutter at all. Not once. I don't think I even paused for breath.

I know nothing about planes, but a couple of DC-10s had gone down in recent weeks, so I asked the American Airlines ticket agent, "What kind of plane will we be flying?" "Were you in 'Nam?" she said. Confusion (what does asking what kind of plane we're flying have to do with Vietnam?--only now do I see the connection; she thought I might be carrying explosives) and pride (I'd been mistaken for a soldier) warred in my brain before I said, "Um . . . no."

The governor of California once hired me to write a biography of him that would have as its subtitle *Champion of Social Justice*. I quit, or he fired me, when it became increasingly apparent that no one was interested in the champion of social justice except in conjunction with his acerbic son. One day, I was walking with the champion of social justice the few blocks from a restaurant back to his law office in Beverly Hills, when he turned to me and said, "Guess how much it cost me to join the Bel-Air Country Club?" I told him I had no idea. "Fifty thousand dollars," he said.

"I don't buy Coors," I heard someone explain to his roommate in the market. "They're fascists." "They're what?" the roommate said. "They support fascist causes," the man said. "Like what?" the roommate said. "Someone told me what they were," the man said, "but I forget."

Now the only people I like are ambivalent about everything to the point of paralysis.

The Confessions

In the *Confessions*, Rousseau writes: "The mere idea of all the usages of society -- which it is so necessary to observe, and of which I am certain to forget one or other -- is enough to frighten me." Rousseau forgets what he wants to forget. He'd like to forget the civilizing purpose to which language is

subjected by society, but he thoroughly comprehends the relation between small talk and social compromise. Language is the last thing that he has and the one thing that is all his, but, of course, it's not his at all.

"In conversation, in order to speak to the purpose," Rousseau says, "it is necessary to think of a thousand things at the same time and at once." Rousseau doesn't want to speak to the purpose; he wants to write until he discovers a purpose. He doesn't want to be thinking of a thousand things at the same time while he's speaking; he wants to be thinking of nothing at all so that he can begin to write. For Rousseau, conversation is antithetical to writing. He says that "those who live in the world" must "make sure of saying nothing which can give offense." And yet one of the essential if undeclared purposes of the *Confessions* is to offend those who live in the world, to disaffect readers in order to win more profound sympathy from them later on.

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THE MOVING FRONTIERS : A SAMPLE SURVEY OF INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

S. Ramaswamy

In this note, I intend to briefly explore the moving frontiers in Indian Writing in English by looking before and after with reference to the two generations of writers -- with an emphasis on Nirad C. Chaudhury, Sri Aurobindo and Raja Rao from the previous generation and Vikram Seth and Girish Karnad and Gurucharan Das from the present generation -- in no particular order and confined to no particular genre. Whether there is the famous generation gap or not, what matters is that there certainly are changing attitudes to men and matters in these six writers.

Obviously there is a marked difference in the tone and attitude in the Indian Writing in English from the pre-Independence to the post-Independence period and the frontiers are still moving from decade to decade. Nevertheless, as Nirad C. Chaudhury has observed --

> *There is such a thing as stability in motion, immutability in flux. The more I think about the matter, the more convinced do I feel that nations acquire a sort of monumentality in their passage through history. Since to exist is to change, nothing can hope to remain always the same, but I cannot believe that such changes destroy the once formed personality of a people or civilization, or alter their basic character.*
>
> *There is a permanent and basic India which is breaking all the changes it is going through into conformity with its essential nature. This India remains capable of dealing in its own way and time, not only with the chattering fidgetiness of the anglicized upper middle class, which is no worse than an attack of migraine but even with the much more dangerously infective lower middle class* (*Passage* 14-15).

It is in this context that the flux and immutability of some Indian writers of English have been commented on here.

Nirad C. Chaudhury the nonagenarian grand old man has seen a lot of changes since the beginning of this century and has been something of an angry old man. Anger is by no means the monopoly of the young especially after the angry young man movement initiated by John Osborne, John Braine and Alan Sillitoe in England and caught on in the erstwhile colonies and now the Commonwealth. The old men have an edge over the young. For one thing, time is on their side -- and Chaudhury has had a lot of time to reminisce, reflect, cogitate and comment. Musing on what he calls "Adventures of a Brown Man in Search of Civilization" he says --

> *For a great majority of my countrymen their historic civilization is a culture in the anthropologist's sense of the word. It has been reduced to its simplest to become a more or less inert psychological environment in which they live as fish do in water. As for those Indians who have imbibed the notion of civilization from their Western education, their ancient culture is a thing to throw at the heads of foreigners, never to be carried on their own shoulders, where it is felt as a burden. Our men of culture practise it in the abstract, as modernist painters practise abstract art. Their cultural consciousness is a part of their nationalism (Passage* 165).

From one angry old man to another Sri Aurobindo, a one time 'angry young man' -- in fact a revolutionary who transcended all that, the here and the now and evolved as a sage, savant, visionary and a *Mahayogi* who transcended into the spaceless-timeless world of the infinite and the everlasting Self-Reality-Existence-Truth-Consciousness -- Being itself, passing beyond the becoming state reached a super-human state, which Chaudhury has called "stability in motion and immutability in flux". Had he written nothing else, Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* alone would have secured for him a permanent place among great writers. Be that as it may, I would like to refer to one of his 'typical' Sonnets, "The Infinitesimal Infinite" :

Out of a still Immensity we came !
These million universes were to it
The poor light-bubbles of a trivial game,
A fragile glimmer in the Infinite.
It could not find its soul in all that vast:
It drew itself into a little speck
Infinitesimal, ignobly cast
Out of earth's mud and slime strangely awake, --
A tiny plasm upon a casual globe
In the small system of a dwarflike sun,
A little life wearing the flesh for robe,
A little mind winged through wide space to run!
It lived, it knew, it saw its self sublime,
Deathless, outmeasuring Space, outlasting Time
(Aurobindo *Sonnets* 11).

Any comment on this 'Shakespearean' Sonnet by Sri Aurobindo is not only redundant but would be impertinent as it is self-explanatory -- pun intended !

Just to make the point that even technically the present generation has significantly departed from the past, a reference to Vikram Seth is necessary. This 'suitable boy !' achieved a technical *tour de force*, ease with diction, wit, effortless fluency, sharp tongue and unimpeachable sonnet morphology. His achievement is more than mere technical expertise. His *The Golden Gate*, a novel in 591 sonnets achieves breaking the barrier of genres in writing a novel in verse. Neither Sri Aurobindo nor Vikram Seth have "scorned the sonnet" but the sonnet which reached Himalayan heights of Gowri Shankara to reach the common man to dwell in 'clubs and coffee houses !' Vikram Seth modified the sonnet. Brilliant as he is, the reaction to his golden gate (!) has not been universally enthusiastic. As he puts it in one of his own sonnets in his novel --

A week ago, when I had finished
Writing the chapter you've just read
And with avidity undiminished
Was charting out the course ahead,
An editor -- at a plush party
(Well-wined, -- provisio speechy, hearty)
Hosted by (long-live!) Thomas Cook
Where my Tibetan travel book
Was honored -- seized my arm : "Dear fellow,

What's your next work?" "A novel ..." "Great!
We hope that you, dear Mr. Seth --"
"In verse", I added. He turned yellow.
"How marvelously quaint," he said
And subsequently cut me dead.
(The Golden Gate 100).

"Seth" rhyming himself with "Great" is coincidental and convenient for rhyme and not in the least immodest! In another sonnet Seth rhymes "Onegin" with "Reagan". In yet another, he says his first rhymes were formed at the age of three. Like Alexander Pope, he "lisped in numbers for the numbers came". It cannot be denied that Seth's *The Golden Gate*, among other things is the Indian contribution to the sonnet morphology. He is a connoisseur of Western classical music which is probably why his novel in sonnets is cast in the form of a sonata. He is not just a technical prodigy. In *The Golden Gate* there are four references to Mozart (p. 40, 67, 68, 149) four references to Bach (p. 62, 76, 82, 180), four references to Brahms (p. 65, 69, 71, 210), three references to Schonberg (p. 67, 68, 70) and one reference to Vivaldi (p. 73). These references are not just casual, meant to show off or drop names but they are related to the moods of characters in the novel. One may remember here that Seth's recent novel is called *An Equal Music.* It is of interest in that Gore Vidal called *The Golden Gate* "the great Californian novel". It goes to show how an Indian doesn't have to confine himself to his own country and can explore the 'Yuppie' -- Young Urban Professional -- culture of the "Wasp's -- White Anglo-Saxon-Protestants of California. If a personal reference may be pardoned, having lived in California myself, I can vouch for the total authenticity of the insights that Seth has into Californian life to the extent of walking on the catwalk of the golden gate bridge! reducing the title of the novel to its literal level. Seth is truly an eclectic, cosmopolitan Indian writer of the present generation. As he himself has said -- invariably in a sonnet:

The author, Vikram Seth, directed
By Anne Freegood, his editor,
To draft a vita, has selected
The following salient facts for her :
In '52, born in Calcutta.
8 lb. 1 oz. Was heard to utter
First rhymes ('cat', 'mat') at age of three.

A student of demography
And economics, he has written
FROM HEAVEN LAKE, a travel book
Based on a journey he took
Through Sinkiang and Tibet. Unbitten
At last by wanderlust and rhyme
He keeps Pacific Standard Time.(The Golden Gate).

From the "timeless" world of Sri Aurobindo to a young man who keeps "Pacific Standard Time" shows one of the ways in which the frontiers have moved. However, since *The Golden Gate* is a novel -- though it is a "novel in verse", a writer of the older generation who also moves in a trans-temporal atmosphere, Raja Rao can be remembered here.

Sri Aurobindo's wide-ranging eclecticism is seen in some of his plays like *Perseus the Deliverer, Vasavadutta*, etc. His treatment of myth and legend in the genre of drama and theatre differs considerably from the way Girish Karnad uses similar material in his English plays like *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*. Karnad transmutes and transforms his source material to such an extent, being an actor and theatre man himself, that the modern, contemporary, individual talent incorporates the tradition into a transcreation that is rich and strange. The Rhodes Scholar and a practical man of the theatre and cinema blend into a re-creation of the myth and legend of India with a novel blend of traditional material and contemporary narrative technique which is quite challenging in bringing folk and elite theatres together. Sri Aurobindo calls *Vasavadutta* a "Dramatic Romance" and says –"The action of the romance takes place a century after the war of the Mahabharata; the capital has been changed to Cowsambie; the empire has been temporarily broken." (Vasavadutta). The play has a "historical setting" and the "empire" is in the background for telling the story of Vuthsa (King Udayan) and Vasavadutta belonging to rival kingdoms.

If Sri Aurobindo is talking in terms of the legendary past of India in *Vasavadutta*, Gurucharan Das in his play *Larins Sahib* is depicting the modern India, where we get to see the confrontation as well as conciliation between the British and the Indians. Larins, as he is called is Henry Lawrence, who was "*the* Lawrence of the Punjab". The play in three acts, which won the Sultan Padamsee prize in 1968 was first produced in Bombay in 1968 -- very much a post-

Independence product. If Sri Aurobindo is talking about an old "empire", Gurucharan Das is depicting the "Raj" and the British Empire. The "Raj" atmosphere is brilliantly captured by Das. Notice the unusual Englishman Lawrence haranguing Mr. Abbot the imperialist --

> *The average Englishman thinks he is doing someone a favour by being in India. But I thought you were here because you liked being here. Rest assured Mr. Abbot, the Indian doesn't need anyone's shoulder to lean upon. He can do without the Englishman, who as soon as he sets foot in India pines for London fogs and surrey greens... If you have any doubt, go for God's sake, go to your "fresh mornings", "gorgeous noons" and "dewy eves"* (*Larins Sahib* 28-29).

Larins Sahib is a very significant play in the context of post-Independence theatre dealing with the "Raj". It is a historical play –

> *It is 1846, seven years after the death of the formidable Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and the Sikh kingdom has suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the East India Company. Henry Lawrence, already a legend on the North-West Frontier, is appointed the Company's Agent to the Government of the late Maharaja's boy son, Dalip Singh. Preferring Indian officers to British in an attempt to restore Sikh self-respect and endeavouring to root out corruption in the court Lawrence alienates his superiors (Larins Sahib).*

In the context of post-Independence drama and theatre in the political / historical context, Gurucharan Das's *Larins Sahib* is more significant than Shanta Rama Rao's dramatization of E.M. Forster's *Passage to India*.

In the context of a permanent and basic India which is breaking all the changes it is going through, no writer is more significant than Raja Rao who has been writing for sixty years from 1938 *(Kanthapura)* to *The Meaning of India* (1996), *On the Ganga Ghat* and *Chessmaster and His Moves.* Ironically, the greater the physical distance between India and the place where his works are actually written, the

greater the metaphysical proximity to India as India is both immanent and transcendent in Raja Rao's mind and art.

There are, however, sharp social and political differences that surface in his writing. *Kanthapura* with which Raja Rao "entered the literary world", was written in a thirteenth century castle in the heart of the Alps; it heralded a new era in Indian writing in English both in the use of English and in depicting the young Gandhian leading his village towards Independence. Whether it is the early or later Raja Rao, there is only one essential Raja Rao who is recognized as *the* archetypal Indian writer. In his writing as is well known, the literal level transcends into the spiritual dimension and "place" dissolves into "space" -- inner space -- the exploration of which is carried out in terms of the outer -- the quintessential theme of Raja Rao in all his work. "Places" and "People" merge into "Rivers", the waters of the seven seas. India becomes "the India of my inner being", the "antara Kasi" -- "the inner Benares made perfectly clear in his *The Serpent and the Rope*. It is in this sense that the previous generation, the present generation and future generations come together in the contemplation of a permanent India. Indeed, in his work we find what Whitman has called "Passage to more than India".

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RE-ORIENTING MACAULAY'S RHETORIC IN THE 1835 "MINUTE"

Bruce G. Johnson

Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) – renowned British historian, poet, biographer, and moderate Whig – was sent to India in the mid 1830s by England's Supreme Council as President of the Committee of Public Instruction to develop a system for teaching Western literature and science to the people of India. Ostensibly, Macaulay wanted to help the Indian natives "civilize" themselves and enjoy the fruits of progress that in his view had already benefited the British. As Stanley Wolpert puts it, Macaulay became an integral player in "Britain's long-range desire and commitment to govern India with justice as well as by force.…[He] was personally devoted to the utilitarian dream of seeking to legislate 'happiness' and to the even more astounding idea of one nation ruling another in 'the best interests' of the latter" (214-215). The primary dilemma that Macaulay wanted to reconcile, of course, was the Orientalist-Anglicist controversy. That is, as his now (in)famous 1835 Minute on "Indian Education" highlights, he wanted to persuade the Committee to adopt English language-only instruction in India, which would effectively eliminate both classical and vernacular Indian language instruction that British Orientalist scholars supported.

Most discussions about Macaulay's speech have been grounded in debates about the relative merits of teaching the West's socio-cultural values and practices to the Indians in their native languages versus teaching them in English, and about the sincerity of Macaulay and his British colleagues in wanting the "best" for what they perceived to be the less civilized, less cultured population of Bengal. For example, while Macaulay claimed in the "Minute" that "the English tongue is that which would be the most useful to our native subjects" because "it is likely to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the East" (723), notable statesmen such as the eighteenth century's Edmund Burke (1729-1797) and colonial administrators like Macaulay's

contemporary in India, Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859), sued for more patience in England's quest to dominate India linguistically. Indeed, as the author of the first Sanskrit-English dictionary, Orientatlist Horace Hyman Wilson (1786-1860), stated as late as 1834, it is "a visionary absurdity to think of making English the language of India" (in Wilson's letter to Ram Camul Sen, August 20, 1834, qtd. in Kopf 242). Although Macaulay and his fellow Anglicists implied that they wanted to prepare India's population for intellectual and commercial success by facilitating English language instruction, the Orientalists were overwhelmingly concerned that British colonizing practices that included replacing Sanskrit and Arabic languages with English would have a detrimental effect on India's educational system.

Quoting from Macaulay's "Minute" in his 1987 essay, "Of Mimicry and Man" (rpt. *The Location of Culture* 1994), Homi K. Bhabha accurately exposes the cultural tensions inherent in Macaulay's rhetoric: "[a]t the intersection of European learning and colonial power, Macaulay can conceive of nothing other than 'a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'" (87). In other words, as Bhabha goes on to write, Macaulay's desire to indoctrinate Indian natives by instructing them in English would do nothing more than create a class of "mimic m[e]n…[who are] the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English." Bhabha continues his argument by positing that the colonized subject's mimicking of the colonizer's practices – what Macaulay refers to as becoming "English in tastes,…opinions,…morals and…intellect" – becomes threatening to colonial powers because they represent new subject-positions that the colonizers are unable to master. Building on Bhabha's thesis, Elleke Boehmer states that "[m]imickers reflected back to [the] colonizer a distorted image of his world; they undercut his categories of perception. Their rhetorical mode was essentially oxymoronic. They were speaking mutes, Man Friday talking back, the Hottentot Venus looking back. In celebrating their denigrated cultures, 'barbarians' or 'provincials' who had once been labeled inarticulate were speaking out in crafted, complex ways." (172-173)

Bhabha and Boehmer both address the embedded resistance on the part of colonized subjects that occurs during acts of "mimicry." However, their comments go beyond the scope of certain material conditions that contextualized Macaulay's 1835 speech. That is, while they clearly demarcate the implicit irony of the colonizer/colonized relationship, they focus on the long-term consequences that mimicry has had for colonial powers like England. What I want to focus on here is not so much the implications inherent in the multiple discourses that are produced by mimicry, but on Macaulay's rationale in the early- to mid-1830s for embracing this line of thinking in the first place. Essentially, Macaulay is considerably less concerned in his "Minute" with an Orientalist-Anglicist debate that ponders the fate of India's "mimic men," than he is with using this speech as a rhetorical ploy to reinforce an ethos of British nationalism and cultural imperialism.

Although the critical consensus is that the Orientalists and Anglicists were basically split into two irreconcilable camps, these positions were certainly not split in regard to what Macaulay euphemistically refers to as the "intellectual improvement" (721) of the Indians that was dictated by the 1813 Act of Parliament. This is an important point because, in terms of his rhetorical strategy, Macaulay understands that both he and his audience are already in agreement about what the ends of this "improvement" shall be – namely, the institutionalization of Indian "mimic men" who will be ultimately forced to forsake their indigenous linguistic and cultural practices in the process of becoming "English." Indeed, as John Clive asserts, the 1833 correspondence between Governor-General Lord William Bentinck and Macaulay demonstrates that "much of the battle over English education had, in fact, been fought and won before Macaulay ever set foot in India"(360). The real issue, as Clive states, "revolved about the *means* to be employed for revitalizing the vernaculars, and about the *scope* of the educational system to be instituted" (357-358). As Clive and others have argued, the Orientalists shared with the Anglicists the desire to instill in the Indians a Western education contextualized primarily by reading and writing works of literature and science in English. The difference for them was the route taken to get there. Given the Anglicists' perception of the Orientalists as elitist primarily because of

the latter's desire to "restrict education initially to the upper middle classes" (Patra par. 5), the debate was less about appropriate educational content and more about the method of indoctrination. However, because both Macaulay and his audience shared the foundations of a colonizing agenda, his job of persuading them to change their minds about anything fundamental to their geo-political belief systems is practically irrelevant.

Within this context of shared assumptions, Macaulay deconstructs the Orientalists' position on their proposed methodology for instituting "intellectual improvement" by highlighting the inherent contradictions of the Orientalists' own logical appeals within the first third of his speech. By stating that "[a]ll parties seem to be agreed…that the dialects commonly spoken among the natives of this part of India…are poor and rude" (721), and that he has "never found one among [the Orientalists] who could deny…the intrinsic superiority of Western literature" (722), Macaulay dismisses out-of-hand the Orientalists' insistence on the relative merits of instructing the Indian population in their native languages. Moreover, as Clive points out, the Orientalist James Prinsep (1799-1840) "in fact…agreed with everything said in Macaulay's Minute on the subject of the superiority of English" (380). The question for Prinsep did not concern the authority of the English language, but whether or not the British had it in their power to teach English and European science "everywhere."

Although some Orientalists like Wilson and Sir William Jones (1746-1794) argued that India's indigent population would more readily cooperate with the British if they were instructed in their native tongues, Macaulay points out that "it is proved by unanswerable evidence that we are not at present securing the cooperation of the natives" (725) – i.e., no British, including the Orientalists, appeared to actively seek the Indians' input during the debate about how to foster their own supposed "intellectual improvement." As Macaulay here foregrounds, the colonizers' desire to construct the Indians as invisible in their socio-linguistic introduction to British education highlights the Crown's fears that the continued replication of Sanskrit/Arabic in colonial India could only serve to sediment counterdiscursive practices that would threaten England's imperialistic objectives. These

objectives were mandated in 1793 by the Cornwallis Code, the Forty-Eight Regulations of which, as Wolpert notes, "laid the foundations for British rule throughout India, setting standards for the services, courts, and revenue collection that remained remarkably unaltered over time" (199). The success of these systems clearly depended on the ability of the British to "intellectually improve" the natives by teaching them English so that these newly-formed "mimic men" could operationalize the Regulations throughout this part of the empire. As John Stuart Mill would later assert to the House of Lords in 1852, "The whole government of India is carried out in writing" (qtd. in Bhabha 93). Thus, the proposed "intellectual improvement" of the Indians by the British in this context becomes little more than a political ruse to ensure the continued hegemony of the colonial ruling class.

Therefore, because the supposedly "split" factions of Anglicists and Orientalists actually agree upon both the goals of "intellectual improvement" and, apparently, on the "superiority" of the English language, of what, then, did Macaulay need to persuade anyone in this particular speech? Having dismissed the only logical counterargument to his pro- English language position within the first part of the "Minute," why does he continue to speak at length? The reasonable assumption is that, although he continues to repudiate the Orientalist position throughout the remainder of this oratory, the proofs that Macaulay employs in the balance of his speech exposes his real agenda – namely, the importance of British nationalism and pride at a time when England was solidifying its global reputation. Although, as Boehmer states, by 1815 England had become "a pacemaker of European industrialization and expansion" (29), just two decades later – when Macaulay gave his speech – the expansionist policies that were being perfected in India at that time would be honed to such a degree that, to paraphrase the saying, "The sun would never set on the British Empire" by the end of the century.

Ultimately, in his appeal to the British governing elite that is his audience, Macaulay invokes a nationalist rhetoric similar in tone to John of Gaunt's famous speech in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, wherein England is a "royal throne of kings" and is described as "This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,/This other Eden, demiparadise…" (II.i, ll. 44-46). For example, by

commenting on how "[t]he literature of England is now more valuable than that of classical antiquity" and how "[t]he languages of Western Europe [e.g. English] civilized Russia" (724), Macaulay valorizes what he essentially considers the continued "demiparadise" of England at the expense of inferior cultures throughout history. Emblematic of what Bernard Semmel refers to as "the somewhat repellent self-satisfaction of [Macaulay's] class and his nation during this period" (43), Macaulay's brand of jingoism here evokes Edward W. Said's classic reconfiguration of "Orientalism," in which "European culture gain[s] in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3). For example, in his demonization of India's native culture, Macaulay states that "it is universally felt that the Sanscrit and Arabic are languages, the knowledge of which does not compensate for the trouble of acquiring them" (725). Furthermore, in continued hyperbolic attacks designed to underscore these languages' perceived threat to British values and practices, he quips, "by universal confession…[Sanscrit/Arabic texts would]…disgrace an English farrier,…[and] move laughter in girls at an English boarding school" (723). As Amritjit Singh puts it, "All this is hysterical in more than one sense" as Macaulay undoubtedly did not need to go to such rhetorical extremes to have his way in colonial Bengal.

What is particularly interesting about this "hysterical" rhetoric, and why Macaulay essentially uses the Orientalist-Anglicist debate as a veil for propagandistic nationalism akin to Ronald Reagan's and George W. Bush's orientalized constructions of the "Evil Empire" (Soviet Union) and the "Axis of Evil" (Iran, Iraq, and North Korea), respectively, is that it appears at a time when the British empire needed to consolidate public opinion at home in order to displace anxiety about contemporary domestic problems. Specifically, although full-blown social upheaval didn't manifest itself in England until the deep depression of the late 1830s-early 1840s, significant change occurred in the British "demiparadise" just prior to Macaulay's tenure in India. For example, as an outcome of the ongoing struggle between the Houses of Lords and Commons to pass the Reform Bill in 1832, the government resigned on May 19. As Robert M. Adams puts it, "At this point, revolution was a distinct possibility. Some people organized to stop paying taxes;

others started a run on the banks by demanding all their money, immediately, in the form of gold. Government funds sank to new lows; popular leaders worked furiously to keep their followers from rioting in the streets; the nation was exhausted by the crisis." (378)

Moreover, passage of the 1834 Poor Law actually made matters worse for England's disadvantaged class – moralists refused to enact any kind of aid outside of workhouses – and those bishops in the House of Lords who had made passage of the Reform Bill difficult opened up the church to severe critical abuse. Additionally, as the ongoing Parliamentary Commission continued to look into child labor issues and the exploitation of workers in textile factories and mines, social dissonance increased resoundingly in England.

Macaulay must have known that the Orientalist-Anglicist debate about which language(s) to adopt in the British education of India wasn't the real issue in his speech. Indeed, the opening proposition in one sentence he wrote in a letter to Bentinck the same week Macaulay delivered the "Minute" confirms that English language instruction was a foregone conclusion: "If the decision of his Lordship in Council should be such as I anticipate…" (qtd. in Clive 369). Therefore, although Macaulay concludes his speech by threatening to resign if the Orientalist position wins out, he knew that this scenario was a non-issue. Rather, his emotional appeals throughout the "Minute" are grounded in the implied logic that he represents not what is "best" for India – educational instruction presented in indigenous languages – but what is best for his own country by reiterating English superiority and supremacy at a time when tough decisions were being made back home. Intent primarily on promoting cultural imperialism through a patriotic fervor that conflates British nationalism with English language education in India, he characterizes the Orientalist stance in the Bentinck letter as "mere delusion" (qtd. in Clive 370) and positions himself as having the cure for what he refers to as a "present system…[that will only] delay the natural death of expiring errors." Rather than initiating a program that would actually benefit Indian natives, Macaulay's "cure" promulgated an agenda designed primarily to provide succor for the colonizers themselves.

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MAKING OF AN INDIAN JEWISH NOVEL: A READING OF ESTHER DAVID'S *THE WALLED CITY*

D Venkateshwarlu

> *To be a Jew in the twentieth century is to be offered a gift. If you refuse, wishing to be invisible, you choose Death of a spirit. --Muriel Rukeyser*

In terms of Indian Jewish writing, Nissim Ezekiel has been probably the most recognizable Jewish presence in India. During his productive period he was a free thinker. He was a major voice in the formative period of Indian writing in English with others such as R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. As a poet, he was studied with A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarthi, Arun Kolatkar, Kamala Das and Keki Daruwala, among others. But novel as a genre could have provided the required freedom to put the Jewish life in narrative patterns adequately accounting for the Indian Jews in history. Esthar David's debut novel *The Walled City* breaks new ground in actually initiating the Jewish novel in India.

Assimilation to the mainstream culture has always been a great temptation for certain Jews; it certainly was for the first generation of the American Jews. Esther David is not a self-hating Jew, although it was a theme that haunted Jewish communities, historically and at the present time. Ludwig Lewisohn, who eventually became a Zionist, wrote a play called *Adam*[1], to focus on its tragic consequences. Esther David is a sculptor and a writer. She was born in 1944 to a Marathi speaking Bene-Israel community. She lives in Ahmedabad -- the walled city — where she is professionally involved in art, sculpting and creative writing.

The Walled City focuses on the themes such as assimilation and intermarriage, overwhelming impact of Indian culture with its unity-in-diversity vision, Judaism as a ritual, ceremony, synagogue attendance, welcoming sabbath and observing High Holidays, tremendous appeal of Israel and experience of discrimination there (Indian Jews find marriage partners among themselves) — "the other Jews"[2] as Daniel Elazer calls them -- clash of cultures, especially Hindu-

Muslim riots and Hindu version of caste discrimination impacting Jewish life as well in terms of ‘pardes’ or white Jews and brown Jews.

The Walled City, which is a microcosm of India, deals with the three generations of Jews. This is a story of Bene-Israel community, which rediscovered their Judaism with the help of Baghdadi Jews, especially David Rahabi. The Baghdadi Jews, who came with the British purely for commercial reasons and settled in Calcutta, left India when the British did after the Indian independence.

The Bene-Israel community took the nomenclature of Marathis. By and large, Jews lived in this country in peace and security. Benjamin Israel in his *The Bene-Israel of India: Some Studies* makes this observation:

> *The story of the Jews of India has on the whole been a happy one, unlike that of their co-religionists in many other lands. It is true that now and then in the Diaspora Jews have, in one land or the other, enjoyed periods of peace and prosperity and even outbursts of creativity which have brought advancement to the whole of mankind, but these periods have been succeeded... by persecution, contumely, and even expulsion.... The Jews of India cannot claim to have any extraordinary achievements to their credit but they did maintain their identity over centuries in the midst of an alien civilization and, in their small way, prosper. And unlike other small Jewish communities they have not allowed themselves to be killed by kindness and get assimilated in the host society...The saving factor was a stubborn pride in the Jewish heritage, which enabled the Bene-Israel for instance to resist the blandishments of the Christian minorities, much as they admired them and appreciated what they were able to learn from them*[3].

These remarks are significant in the context of the novel. Jews as an ethnic minority always have to tackle the mainstream society, socially, politically and culturally. The interaction between the Jewish life and the mainstream society has been interesting for many reasons. For the Jewish writer, it offers an opportunity to evolve and create an

artistic space, which is more often than not a battleground for what he/she finds in normative Judaism and how it can be of any help in dealing meaningfully with the outside world.

Esther David belongs to the Bene-Israel sect of Indian Jews. Historically their origin has been part of apocryphal speculations. Some take it back to the early centuries consequent upon a shipwreck and the fact that some of the survivors were washed ashore. In any case, they were discovered in this century by their co-religionists and were taught religion, tradition and ritual systematically. They were generally Marathi speaking Jews and had taken indigenous names as well. Their status in Israel like the falashas and the eventual resolution is all too familiar to us.

Esther David is clearly aware of the history of the Bene-Israel community. She is appreciative of the presence of Indian cultural diversity, especially the predominant Hinduism with its caste-system and elaborate rituals of idol worship and the long tradition of polytheism. And the practice of Chaturvarna(four categories that define the caste stratification such as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras) where untouchables are called panchamas — the Dalits. The social dynamics of India with its ambiguities and ironies, not least the triumphs, become the landscape for her creative imagination. The female narrator's psychology and her consciousness responding to the events around her and especially in her family are eloquently expressed through the time-frame spanning from her childhood to her marriageable age — although the narrator decides not to marry because she does not want to go through what her female characters face in the book, in one case at least, Subhadra, a Hindu girl, commits suicide because she is asked to marry someone she does not care for. The practice of arranged marriages is common enough — even to this day. The narrator comfortably moves back and forth with her story, never sticking to linear narration. In the space of the novel, the narrator goes from childhood to adulthood. Her observant eye recognizes the carnivalesque and colour of Hindu rituals which attract her attention to the point of entertaining the idea of becoming a Hindu — which needless to add constantly becomes a source of embarrassment for her mother, Naomi, although her grandfather, Danieldada, whose story is significant in the annals of Jewish community,

is tolerant of them. He keeps a Hindu servant, Mohan, who practically worships him. Danieldada is endearingly portrayed and is aesthetically a strong presence in the novel, emerging as a complex metaphor representing the ambiguities and the quotidian strength of the Indian Jewish community.

It may not be out of place to point out at this juncture how Jewish representations of Hindus in their writings are not uncommon; since Hinduism and Judaism are ancient religions a natural dialogue between them is only to be noted. Jewish writers have been attracted to the idea of India for years. Biographies of major political figures in Indian life, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, are written by Louis Fischer, Erik Erikson and Stephen Wolpert. Hindus appear in the works of Saul Bellow, Phillip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Chaim Potok, Allen Ginsberg, to name just a few. In the case of Allen Ginsberg, a noted beat-poet, he came to India to study Buddhism. Woody Allen's fascination with the Orient deserves a mention here. Although Saul Bellow, arguably the greatest novelist of the post world-war II period, brings Indian characters frequently in his novels, in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*[4], a novel written as a response to the counter-culture dialectic of the New Left, he actually creates a dialogue between Mr. Govindlal, an Indian scientist and Mr. Sammler who is a refugee with the burden of the Holocaust memories. He is now also in the midst of rigorous reexamination of the intellectual positions he had held all of his life including the legacy of Enlightenment and of the virtue of Liberal democracies. A great believer in free thinking and the product of what Jews sneeringly call the Haskala movement, and therefore an assimilated Jew, it is his lot now to review the philosophical trends that had dominated the world thus far and the social practice radically. On the other hand, Mr. Govindlal pursues steadfastly the notion of evicting people from the polluted and the corrupt planet earth and put them on a different planet, possibly the Mars. Mr. Sammler is polite and tolerant of Mr. Lals's view and is not particularly strong to withstand the temptations or sundry intellectual adventures since he is thoroughly battered by the recent history and his perpetual meditation on the foundational energy of the Judeao-Christian civilization is not to be lured by Mr. Lal. He instead wants his ethical structure of normative Judaism work

towards the progress of humanity. Israel Horowitz[5], another noted playwright, makes an Indian, Mr. Gupta, the metaphor for the victim scenario of American urban violence. Two of the Indian Jewish writers also write about Hindus, not to mention Ruth Prawer Jhabwala who constantly writes about Indian themes. Anita Desai hardly addresses Jewish themes except in *Baumgartner's Bombay*[6]. It is about a German-Jewish refugee of World War II who gives shelter to a German boy who however kills him to steal from him. Incidentally, the Jew never connects with the Indian ethos. Nissim Ezekiel has always been a freethinker and an agnostic and does not seem to have connected much with his Bene-Israel identity. In his poetry, he hardly writes about his faith. He uses ironic modes and frequently writes about his version of India which includes Hindus as well with their superstitions, rituals and other peculiarities that seem to attract his satiric bent of mind. As he grew older, he began to focus on issues of transcendental nature and eternal verities, especially in *Latter-day Psalms*[7]. Even as the similarity between this collection and the psalms of the *Bible* can be obvious, the God he addresses may not necessarily be the Jewish God.

In sharp contrast, Esther David's novel may be seen as not only a study in Bene-Israel Jewish community and their encounter with India, but as a paradigm to understand various aspects of the 'milieu' that influence and, in fact, contribute to its achievement. As is known, the family is the center of Jewish life. Alfred Kazin[8] talks about the three different aspects of the American Jewish life: the kitchen, the synagogue, and 'the block and the beyond" which is mainstream America. In the context of the novel, Naomi, the working mother, causes problems partly because in the joint families in India, at least during the fifties and the sixties, women were not allowed to work. The Sabbath is observed as well as the High Holidays. Intermarriage is a perennial subject for discussion and so is aliya to Israel. Since the novel covers the post-Independence India, crucial themes like freedom movement and communal riots also find a place in it. Uncle Menachem is greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and his Satyagraha movement. Danieldada and Leah and Great Grand Uncle Gerard belong to the other generation. Naomi and her husband, Aunt Hannah, Jerusha, Queenie, Uncle Menachem and Emmanuel represent the

next generation. Of course, the narrator's generation includes Cousin Samuel, Cousin Malkha and others. These generations are caught up in changes occurring not only in Jewish life but in India itself — before and after the independence.

Naomi and her husband are tackling the problems arising from the changing face of social dynamic. Naomi is a working mother at a time when her husband is without a job. And they are a part of a joint family which has since almost disappeared as social system. She refuses to share her money with others and insists that they should set up a separate family. She also has problems with her father Danieldada who provides strength and coherence to the narrative. Naomi's disgruntlement with her father is based on the perception that he was responsible for the death of Leah, her mother. Her father had an extra-marital relationship with Durga, a Hindu woman, which causes grief and anxiety in the family. Leah tried her best to stop him and, as a desperate measure, even goes to a Hindu goddess and brings ritual powders to somehow win him back. But it is of no avail. Naomi knows all about it and can never bring herself to forgive him for his transgressions, which stuck like a scar on her soul. Although the narrator enjoys her time with her grandfather, Naomi consistently admonishes her not to spend time with him.

Here we also see the institution of the joint family cracking up. The older generation, which is largely responsible for keeping the faith and taking care of the ritual in synagogue and home, especially marriage, barmitzuah, and High holidays, is genuinely missed because Naomi's generation does not believe in practicing Judaism in the strictest sense, nor are they thoroughly familiar with the rituals. The narrator's generation, of course, has to deal with the temptation of aliya to Israel and the problem of finding a partner in India with a forever-dwindling Jewish population. From what we can gather, Indian Jewry has never been at the forefront of Political Zionism, nor has it experienced tremendous religious fervour and renewal that has occurred elsewhere in Europe and North America. The Hasidic movement, the so-called Haskalah, struggle for the establishment of Israel, the early pioneers who actually made the desert bloom, more importantly, the pogroms and

the Holocaust which devastated the European Jewry - all of this never touched Indian Jewish life. For a Jewish writer, the absence of these factors pose insurmountable problems. It is mere ethnicity that one finds in the novel. In the case of the American Jewish writer, there is still something profound about their writing, in an essentially Jewish way. The mention and the knowledge of these events are conspicuous by their absence, nor do we see, any Indians publishing any treatises on Judaism. The great theological questions, which preoccupied the minds of European Jewry, somehow escaped their attention. It is hard to believe whether Indian Jews have reflected on the Holocaust, Eretz Israel, Jewish art and culture to any particular consequences. One does not know whether there is any particular group, which joined their co-religionists to fight for Israel. However, the narrator's generation has choices to make. They can emigrate to Israel and start a new life; not because they are persecuted in India but because of other reasons such as marriage. That said, one should be fair in the sense that most Indian Jews belong to the middle class and the Bene-Israel community is largely brown in colour.

Even as the tale of the generations is told, India is undergoing transformations. The philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, even if there are marginal dissenting voices, is responsible for the independence. The partition of India and Pakistan permanently planted the seeds of communalism, thus creating a chapter of riots often spurred by the vested interests. The narrator's father loses his partner in the riots and later suffers depression because of it. Hinduism is always plagued by the caste system. Often lower castes are ill-treated and to this day they have not been rehabilitated despite constitutional guarantees and other incentives including general welfare measures. They are called untouchable and the Gandhian term 'Harijan' fell into disuse. The recent conservative attitudes of the caste Hindus gave rise to certain deconstructionist re-appraisals of Hinduism from Dalit and Dalit-Bahujan intellectuals. Kancha Iliah's recent book *Why I am not a Hindu*[9] became a best-seller which is unusual for a scholarly and an academic book.

The novel's recognition of these unpalatable aspects of India, are strength to the inclusive vision it presents. The narrator's generation, therefore, is exposed to modernity and

the after-effects of the ideology of nation-state. Their perception of the tradition is associated with the grandparents. They are familiar with the tradition beyond the fact of ethnicity. After Israel's establishment, youngsters dream of going there. The much cherished family is crumbling. There is inescapable temptation with the outside culture. Daniel dada and Emmanuel have paramours outside their ethnic group, which cause discord. Whereas Daniel dada's extra-marital affair results in pain and eventual death of Leah; in the case of Emmanuel, there is reconciliation and, in fact, Queenie, his Jewish wife, goes to the ceremony of circumcision of the child born to his gentile wife. The child cannot be called strictly Jewish because it is not born to a Jewish mother. For whatever reason, it is not an important question to the narrator, the alter ego of Esther David. It also reminds us of how casual the Jewish life was with the Bene-Israel Jews.

The narrator's inclusive vision is evident from the beginning of the novel:

> *1940. I was born in the walled city of the fourteen gates. Walls which the black-faced langurs with their long flag-like tails sit like sentinels, daring me to break the line of their grey bodies. Black beady eyes watch me from long. Bushy Einstein brows just like Uncle Menachem's.*[10]

Even as Ahmedabad, the walled city, is emerging as a substantive metaphor of India in its cultural assertion, the mediating consciousness is already at work to find synthesis between alien culture and the narrator's Jewish roots. She is constantly encouraged in her interaction with the culture outside her own although India's diversity does not necessarily alienate her and in fact confirms its fundamental vision of unity despite problems, especially in communal relationships. The exuberance and festive atmosphere of Hindu pantheon excite her and she wishes for a moment if only she were not Jewish which speaks of tenuous Jewish context. The most intense aspect of essential humanity in its complexities is the fact that the people of one culture and religion comfortably move into alien culture to seek nourishment in relationships thus driving home the Hindu view that humanity is one large family going beyond the narrow confines of caste, creed and religion --'vasudhaiva

kutumbakam':

> *Uncle Menachem, large-hearted that he is, lends the backyard to Subhdra's family and the Patels, for weddings and ritual like the naming of the newborn babies. And on some nights, Mehboob Khan or the Syed family or Anwar's cousins hold a feast in our backyard to celebrate a wedding or a circumcision* (p.17).

Jews here are comfortable with Hindus and Muslims as well. The great Indian dream of 'communal harmony' and 'unity in diversity' is achieved at least symbolically. Of course, as she comes of age, she achieves clarity and thus is capable of making choices as a measure of her defenses against forebodings and tragic circumstances. She even chooses to stay unmarried because she doesn't want to go through what the females in her narration come across in life. Asceticism is not Jewish and Jewish ethos strongly believes in engagement with the contingent world.

Therefore, her conclusion appears to be ambiguous to say the least. Since Daniel dada is the moving spirit of the revel, capturing its complex vision of pain, sorrow and joy it is appropriate to discuss his character systematically. Daniel dada represents quintessential social fact of the Bene-Israel community. He is portrayed with tremendous warmth and vigor:

> *Danlel dada insists on eating with a knife and fork.... Words come easily to Grandfather, especially at dinner time. He dresses for dinner, rubs his favourite Yardley's eau de cologne on his jaws, and sits majestically at the head of the table, a peg of whisky in front of him. He chats with Mohan who always stands to his right, much to Mother's disgust. Father and I listen attentively, but Mother remains* aloof (pp.38-39).

Although assimilation is a perpetual temptation, Jewish people maintain their ethnic uniqueness. Daniel dada, the grandfather, is western oriented and is given to western life. Both father and daughter are reverential towards him, where as Mother, Naomi, harbours anger against him for the moral transgression and the way he caused the death of her mother. Daniel dada used to have a Hindu paramour Durga.

He was deferential towards Hindu rituals and allowed Mohun, his servant, to worship Hindu idols in his home. At some point, Daniel dada needed to deal with the peculiar psychological changes his wife, Leah, was undergoing. Having given birth to a daughter, who is now growing up, she is not the same person of beauty and attractiveness. The aging process and the biological transformation was a stress she was unable to tackle. This in turn was a problem for Daniel who suddenly did not know his own wife. It is at this juncture, Durga came into his life which provided comfort and consolation. His wife's recriminations and even her visit to a Hindu god-man to have her husband back only proves the strange encounter between a largely Marathi-speaking Bene-Israel community and dominant Hindu culture. And the indigenous culture with which they certainly confirmed in dress, language and other ways, was too tempting and overwhelming to overcome, especially during the stress-periods. Daniel dada did not stray from his roots despite his affair with Durga. He practiced his religion. He would come home and light Sabbath candles and experience communion with the spirituality of Judaism he only knew as a fashion. It was during the darkest phase of his life that he was given to the temptation. He was not to be understood sympathetically even by the narrator:

> *At some point, his vision grew so clouded that he could no longer see the light. He went to live with Durga in the cantonment, near the Hanuman temple and the British Officers' bungalow. There was a certain ruthlessness in his being so close to the house, and yet so far away from everything* (p. 62).

The narrator never ceases to emphasize the presence of history and locale. Hanuman temple, British officers' bungalow, Durga sum up everything. Daniel dada's life is adequately contextualising colonial presence and ubiquitous symbols of Hinduism. The Hindu goddesses like Durga, kali and gods like Hanuman, Vishnu and festivals like Holi create an atmosphere of carnival, joy and colour. The Hindu caste system touches Jewish culture as well. The perception of white Jews especially Baghdadi Jews and brown Jews is only palpable. The story of Daniel is symptomatic of Jews who stayed resisting the temptation of aliya only because they lived here for too long. And their memories of this

country and the relationships they forged here emerge as stronger roots and, of course, the inevitable understanding that you have to start all over again is painful. It is not as if Indian Jews are completely integrated in Israel. As the novel testifies, they always marry within the community. The controversy about Ethiopian Falashas was a curious debate during the seventies.

Daniel's death and the funeral rituals there have to be profoundly moving. One wonders what the Indian Jews have done for themselves over a long period of stay here. According to some sources they go back to the Biblical days. And they have lived here in security. There were no pogroms, there is no persecution and the Indian society allowed them to practice their religion without any impediments from the mainstream culture. How is it that they could not produce comparable achievement in art, culture and intellectual fields as we see in Europe and North America? Nor have they contributed to the hermeneutical aspect of Judaism. They have not produced great commentators on the Law. However, Daniel's story gives a measure of the story of Indian Jews:

> *They cover his eyes with earth from Jerusalem. I take some in my fingers and sprinkle it over his eyes. Brown, dry earth of the Promised Land, textured exactly, like that of my surrogate motherland. Yards of white cloth, stitched on the sewing machine by Mother, Granny and Aunt Hannah. His shroud. The pantaloons, the long coat, the cummerbund and the cap…they put white sods on his feet and tie a sprig of fragrant leaves to his hands with a handkerchief. He is now ready for his last journey. Hands dusty with the earth of both lands, and wet with my tears, I wonder about Jerusalem. Samuel stands like a statue over the grave, the wax from the candles burning his* hands (p.108).

To write a truly enduring novel with sufficient interaction with the High Jewish culture where there is none available is a task that only first rate artists can negotiate. Clearly, Esther David is to find inspiration from a community which has not historically produced profound Jewish ethos with all its glories. Richard Wagner notoriously said that Jews cannot

produce genuine art because they are rootless and their engagement with mainstream society is minimal: “A language, its expression and its evolutions are not separate elements but part of an historical community and only he who has unconsciously matured in this community can take part in what it creates.”[11] Esther David took courage in facing the inevitable difficulties--the absence of usable past and vibrant Jewish High Culture and theoretical problems of creating art in alien and hostile medium--and gave us a novel that stands as testimony to the travails and triumphs of the Bene-Israel of India.

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KAMALA DAS: THE VOICE WITHIN

Piyas Chakrabarti

One of the most significant developments in post-independence India in the genre that has since then controversially come to be known as “Indian writing in English” is the advent of a band of women writers who have used the verse form to express the needs and desires of the female subject in a patriarchal society. The art form became for them a “room of their own” where free from the “senses” of a misfit world they could voice their deepest “sensibilities”. Their works often sparked scandals and there was none more scandalous than Kamala Das when she started publishing. In such collections as *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendents* (1967) and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), she created a furore with her bold subjects and her bolder handling of them. Her collection is a fascinating study of the entire gamut of female desire throbbing with a sense of immediacy rarely found in English poetry. Her poems stem mostly from her own experiences and the visible signs of herself are so evident in her works that they are often classified as “confessional poems”.

Confessional poetry is often characterized by an intense study of very personal experiences, and as a study of Kamala Das’s poetry and her autobiography *My Story* reveals, this was very true of her. However, Kamala Das’s poetry is not just a confession but also a vigorous voicing of her identity: she establishes herself firmly as a desiring female subject searching for love in a world that rarely understands her and is even more rarely comfortable with what it finds.

During the days when she was still a Hindu and married to her Hindu husband, Kamala Das was constantly looking for love in a system where marriage was often for convenience with very little thought spared for such trivialities as emotional bonding. Her early remembrance of the Nalapat marital system clearly shows this:

> *My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismated. But my*

> *mother's timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends.*[1]

Kamala Das lacked her mother's "timidity" and hence the blessing of seemingly peaceful cohabitation was denied to her in her first marriage. Her earliest experience of physical love has a strange violence attached to it:

> *Again and again throughout that unhappy night he hurt me and all the while the Kathakali drums throbbed dully against our window… (*MS 90*).*

It comes therefore as no surprise that her poems often question the limitations of a purely physical association:

> *…can this man with*
> *Nimble finger-tips unleash*
> *Nothing more alive than the*
> *Skin's lazy hungers…("*The Freaks*")*.

Her many escapades into the fleeting world of carnal experience only mirror the restlessness of her soul and the desire to be loved and wanted. Even in her early years she was constantly searching for one who would treat her with more than just physical brutality:

> *I was ready for love. Ripe for a sexual banquet….A cousin of ours grabbed me when I was climbing the stairs whispering, "You are so beautiful" and although I did not believe him, in sheer gratitude I let him hold me with his arms for a couple of minutes. He panted with his emotion. When he kissed me on my mouth I disliked the smell of his stale mouth (*MS 95-96*).*

A deep sense of insecurity marks her sexual wanderings and often sex turns out to be a mask for her battered soul:

> *I am a freak. It's only*
> *To save my face, I flaunt, at*
> *Times, a grand, flamboyant lust ("*The Freaks*").*

Kamala Das makes judicious use of the eunuch symbol in "The Dance of the Eunuchs" to indicate the vacant ecstasy of their frenzied movement. The visible frenzy is only an effort to hide the loneliness within, and in their dance the poet finds an articulate parallel to her internal despondency.

My Story seems to indicate that her husband's homosexual inclinations increased her sense of inadequacy:

> *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 (*MS 104*).*

The controversial autobiography has at times been accused to be bordering on fiction and does at times seem an erratic mixture of fact and fantasy but it also is a valuable indicator of her firm desire to establish a space of her own. On rare occasions when she did find love in her husband it was cloaked in a homosexual fantasy:

> *After bathing me in warm water and dressing me in man's clothes, my husband bade me sit on his lap, fondling me and calling me his little darling boy (*MS 111-112*).*

Her writing has a bare-all-dare-do that no doubt shocked conventional Indian morality but probably was a necessary act of defiance on her part. Her poetry showcases the acute emotional struggles of a woman who abandons her passive role to discover and assert her individual liberty and identity.

Her quest for identity and love takes different turns which find reflection in her writings. In *My Story* there are references to her mild flirtations with lesbianism, the first symptoms of which are evident in her infatuation for her English teacher:

> *Her voice was strange, fractured in the middle and I thought it was beautiful. It was easy for me to fall in love with her….I wrote a poem addressed to my teacher in which I likened her to a rose (*MS 74*).*

Later when she was on a vacation with a large number of students she tasted her first lesbian physical experience with a fellow student in a railway compartment:

> *Then she lay near me holding my body close to hers. Her fingers traced the outlines of my mouth with a gentleness I had not dreamt of feeling…(*MS 79*).*

There is, of course, very little chance for us to validate any of her accounts given in *My Story*, but real or imagined they

nevertheless provide a monitor for the yearnings of her heart. Her lesbian instincts chart a desire within her to be treated with tenderness and love. However, in her relationship with men she rarely achieved this. She approached them with all her feminine beauties and as is often the case in Kamala Das, there was no holding back: "…Gift him all,/ Gift him what makes you a woman, the scent of / Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,/ The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your / Endless female hungers…"("The Looking Glass").

But the unfolding of her body and soul was often met only by the unfeeling hunger of the body:

> *That was the only kind of love,*
> *This hacking at each other's parts*
> *Like convicts hacking, breaking clods*
> *At noon…*("Convicts").

She rarely achieved a satisfaction of both her carnal and emotional needs within her marriage and the resulting frustration is given voice in the "Captive" : "My love is an empty gift, a gilded / empty container, good for show, nothing / else." Even her escapades into the domain of "adultery" remain a futile exercise: "To be frank / I have failed. / I feel my age and / Uselessness ("Composition"). Despite her frankness about sex, she reveals, at times, a deep disgust with her own body. She sought love with it, but often it was the impediment she could not transcend: "The silly female shape had again intervened to ruin a beautiful relationship, the clumsy gadgetry that always, always, damaged bonds." (p.183). Her sense of disgust of the mere bodily union is clearly presented in "A Request": "When I die / Do not throw the meat and bones away / But pile them up / And / Let them tell / By their smell / What life was worth / On this earth / What love was worth / In the end."

Her search for identity was even more difficult because she was, in a sense doubly displaced. She was not just a woman in a male-dominated society but also one who wrote in English. In her famous poem "An Introduction" she brilliantly employs the confessional and the rhetorical modes in order to raise relevant questions relating to a woman's or an Indian poet's identity. She unabashedly accepts her ignorance and

lack of interest about the larger political/social issues surrounding her:

> *I don't know politics but I know the names*
> *Of those in power, and can repeat them like*
> *Days of weeks, or names of months, beginning with*
> *Nehru…* ("An Introduction").

Her poetry was primarily in English, and about her own experiences. She wrote in two languages, Malayalam and English, and she claims both of them as her own:

> *…Why not let me speak in*
> *Any language I like? The language I speak*
> *Becomes mine, mine alone. It is half English, half*
> *Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,*
> *It is as human as I am human, don't*
> *You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my*
> *Hopes…* ("An Introduction").

Indian writers writing literature in the English language is at present a common feature, but Kamala Das had to actively claim that which is now unquestioningly accepted. A. K. Ramanujan probably provided one of the best answers to all the questions regarding whether Indian writers should at all write in English: "I think the real question is whether they can. And if they can, they will." Ramanujan goes on to state, "It is not a matter of controversy whether people can, will, or should write in a particular language."[2] However, for the people around Kamala Das, the ones who wanted her to "fit in", it was evidently a problem. She, with her "strange" ways disrupted a mode of life where to be able to merge silently into the social pool was considered a supreme virtue.

She claimed that it was her reading that provided her with the courage to be her own self. Against the "categorizers", she sustained herself through her voracious reading: "Ask the books that I read why I changed. Ask the authors dead and alive who communicated with me and gave me the courage to be myself *(*MS 152*).* However, the "books" and "authors" only echoed that which was already there in her heart, a deep desire to live life on her own terms.

She remains defiant all through her career, but there is also a constant quest to transcend the bodily limitations. At times

she seeks escape from this claustrophobic existence through identification with the world:

> *…I met a man, loved him. Call*
> *Him not by any name, he is every man*
> *Who wants a woman, just as I am every*
> *Woman who seeks love. In him…the hungry haste*
> *Of rivers, in me…the oceans' tireless*
> *Waiting… (*"An Introduction"*).*

At other times she looks for escape in the mythical Hindu symbols of love, be it Radha-Krishna or Mira Bai-Krishna: "This becomes from this hour/ Our river and this old Kadamba/ Tree, ours alone, for our homeless/ Souls to return someday"("Radha-Krishna").

Her religious poems often show a deep distrust and disregard for the body. This desire to reach beyond her body can be seen even in some of her non-religious poems: " I throw the bodies out,/ I cannot stand their smell./ Only the souls may enter / The vortex of the sea. / Only the souls know how to sing / At the vortex of the sea" ("The Suicide").

The imperfections of her earthly lovers forced her to find solace in Krishna, the archetypal symbol of divine love. In the arms of her divine lover she gained, for a brief span, her moments of complete happiness: "Everything in me / Is melting, even the hardness at the core / O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting / Nothing remains but / You…" ("Radha").

Amidst the emotional wilderness of an unfeeling world, Ghanashyam provided her with an image of permanence, an assurance that there is hope yet for the believer: "…Ghanashyam, / My life, until now a sleeping jungle / Is at last astir with music" ("Ghanashyam").

The same restlessness, which prompted her to the symbol of Radha-Krishna, resulted her in embracing Islam. This is found to be inconsistent by many critics but her soul's wanderings have not always been consistent. In life and poetry, consistency has not been Kamala Das's strength. She had always been governed by her heart's desire and on December 16, 1999 she finally embraced Islam. She claims to have deliberated for years about this, but as is often the case we do not know for sure. Her decision sparked major

debates and was met with the same sense of shock that her writing often generated. She was sixty five years old at the time of her conversion and her decision might have been partly prompted by a desire for public spotlight that had for long been her companion but was slowly shifting allegiance. The anonymity of the burqa might have provided her with physical space but one doubts whether it can give her the emotional solace that was always the focus of her search. However, despite her inconsistencies Kamala Das's poetry remains a powerful statement from a woman who wanted to voice her desires in a largely unfeeling world.

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WORDSWORTH'S *PRELUDE:* MIRAGE AND DISILLUSIONMENT

Ashish Gupta

Wordsworth's genius was intuitive. He explored the recesses of his own mind. He specially concerned himself with those moments of suddenly awakened feelings when something comes to the mind in a flash. Many of his poems proceed from a study of these significant moments when the mind, acting spontaneously and without forethought, reads new values into life experience. He intently watched the rise of unexplained impulses and feelings in his own mind and the minds of others. He interpreted events in the light of emotion. *The Prelude* is an autobiographical poem delineating the growth of the poet's mind as it passed through different stages. This poem analyses as well as communicates the progress of Wordsworth's Republican sympathies, which the French Revolution had stirred in him, and which were strengthened by his visits to France. He was deeply influenced by the Revolution and this poem is coloured by the ideals of French Revolution. But later, after his second visit to France, he felt that it was merely a mirage and ultimately the cause of disillusionment. The poem gives out Wordsworth's message to mankind that the future of man rested, not with the masses congregated in the cities and clamouring for political emancipation, but with those gifted with fortitude and patience. The French Revolution had held out hopes of equality and liberty. But with its excesses a few years later, it dispersed all Wordsworth's glorious visions into a mist of despair, forcing him to go back to Nature to seek some hope and consolation there.

As a child, Wordsworth was of a 'stiff, moody and violent temper', the only one of the five children about whom the mother felt anxious forebodings. He was unlucky enough to lose his mother when he was only eight years old and his father when he was only fourteen. He was sent to a grammar school at Hawkshead where he was allowed to read whatever books he liked. But the impression he received was neither from books nor from teachers, but from

the majesty and loveliness of the scene around him. As he tells us in *The Prelude* (1805-1806), even his moral nature was formed in the school of Dame Nature.

As an undergraduate at St. John's College, Cambridge, Wordsworth showed no promise of future greatness. He was rather untamed and insubordinate, heady and arrogant. It was during his third summer vacation that he visited France for the first time, accompanied by his friend Robert Jones. They landed at Calais on 13 July 1790, on the eve of the first anniversary of the fall of Bastille. It was a "great federal day" when the French King was to swear allegiance to the new Constitution. Wordsworth wrote :

O pleasant exercise of hope and joy !
For great were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, we who were strong in love;
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive ,
But to be young was very heaven .[1]

The Romantic poets were young and against what they believed were stale customs and outdated laws. They were thrilled at the prospect of liberty ushering "happiness unthought of" over "the whole earth". The initial stages of the French Revolution stirred the hearts of all lovers of liberty. They thought that the dreams they cherished would soon be realized and they themselves would have a say in the restructured society :

… The inert
Were roused, and lively natures rapt away :
They who had fed their childhood upon dreams,
The play-fellows of fancy, who had made
All powers of swiftness, subtlety, and strength
Their ministers, used to stir in lordly wise
Among the grandest objects of the sense,
And deal with whatsoever they found there
As if they had within some lurking right
To wield it. (ll. 708-717)

The poet than speaks of contemporary thinkers, political philosophers, and poets who were advocates of liberty in all spheres of human action and of a better world which aimed at the happiness of one and all.

Not in Utopia, subterraneous Fields,

Or some secreted Island, Heaven knows where,
But in the very world which is the world
Of all of us, the place in which, in the end,
We find our happiness, or not at all." (ibid)

Wordsworth took his B.A. degree in 1791,and then settled in London, with the definite plans for his future career. A year earlier (1790), when he made a walking tour to Switzerland, he had to pass through France both ways. But the spectacles of the revolutionaries made little impact on his sensibilities at first. The sight of armies did not stir his feelings. He looked upon these things as from a distance. National rejoicings in France, no doubt, thrilled him with joy, but they did not make him reflect upon these things with any serious concern. He took all these as a matter of course. In November 1791, Wordsworth paid a second visit to France and remained there for a year. Now he had the opportunity of meeting and mixing with the patriots and revolutionaries. Such meetings enabled him to hear from their own mouths their plans and designs, beliefs and hopes. One such revolutionary was Michael Beaupuis whom Wordsworth admired. Beaupuis pointed out to him a hunger bitten-peasant girl who moved the deepest springs of Wordsworth's heart. Beaupuis said : ' It is against that we are fighting.'

Wordsworth returned to Paris in October 1792, a month after the September massacres. His dream was broken. Instead of reign of liberty, equality and fraternity, he saw scenes of horror and ruthless devastation. His peace of mind was terribly disturbed. At one time, he almost decided to ally himself with the revolutionary Girondist party in order to end the follies of the Revolutionary armies. Wordsworth's friends at home saved him from this course, which would have certainly sent him to the guillotine, by stopping his allowance and compelling him to return to England at the end of the year 1792. Later, he recognized that his return was to his good, as he wrote: " now I thankfully acknowledge, / Forced by the gracious providence of Heaven,/ To England I returned."

Wordsworth's heart was grieved when England took up arms against France. He was naturally torn by two conflicting emotions – his love for England and his faith in the ideals of the Revolution. He was in such a state of mind at this time

that he began to nourish feelings against England. When prayers were offered in churches for England's victory, he did not join them. At the same time he was shocked to see France as the destroyer of all that was good and noble. The Revolutionaries were happy at England being their new foe : "In France, the Men who for their desperate ends / Had plucked up mercy by the roots were glad / Of this new enemy." (ll. 308-310)

The Revolutionaries turned tyrants and everywhere terror reigned supreme as if all France had gone mad. Everybody suspected everybody. The guillotine fell on aristocrats and also on them who were even remotely connected with them as well as on those who were suspected of having harboured or helped those who had a hand in running the *ancien-regime*:

> *Tyrants, strong before*
> *In devilish pleas, were ten times stronger now,*
> *And thus beset with Foes on every side*
> *The goaded land waxed mad ; the crimes of few*
> *Spread into madness of many, blasts*
> *From hell came sanctified like airs from heaven,*
> *The sternness of the Just, the faith of those*
> *Who doubted not that Providence had times*
> *Of anger and vengeance,…* (ll. 310-318)

Fear of reprisal silenced voices of dissent, even of those who were supposed to be representatives of the people: "The Senate was heart-stricken, not a voice / Uplifted, none to oppose or mitigate." (ll. 328-329)

The course of events in France brought Wordsworth little relief. The reign of terror overwhelmed him with despair, and its ghastly memory continued to torture him for long. When the Republicans, still professing to act upon the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, entered upon a policy of military aggression, his genial feelings were turned to bitterness: "Domestic carnage now filled all the year /With Feast days; the old Man from the chimney-nook, / The Maiden from the bosom of her Love, / The Mother from the Cradle of her babe, / The Warrior from the Field, all perished, all, / Friends, enemies, of all parties, ages, ranks, / Head after head, and never heads enough / For those that bade them fall: they found their joy." (ll. 330-337)

In keeping with the epic tradition, Wordsworth expresses in an elaborate Homeric simile the Republicans' insatiable thirst for blood and their malicious joy in beheading those whom they suspected to be enemies of the people:

…ever thirsty as a child,
If light desires of innocent little ones
May with such heinous appetites be matched,
Having a toy, a wind-mill, though the air
Do of itself blow fresh, and make the vane
Spin in his eyesight, he is not content
But with the plaything at arm's length he sets
His front against the blast, and runs amain
To make it whirl the faster. (ll. *338-346)*

Wordsworth is troubled by memories of the innocent victims of the French Revolution, imprisoned in separate cells or huddled together in a single cell who were in constant fear of impending death, who entertained fleeting hopes of being set free, whose prayers were unanswered by God, whose tears moistened the dust of their dungeons. Wordsworth finds himself pleading for those condemned prisoners in his imagination :

… Then suddenly the scene
Changed and the unbroken dream entangled me
In long orations, which I strove to plead
Before unjust tribunals, with a voice
Labouring , a brain confounded, and a sense,
Death-like of treacherous desertion, felt
In the last place of refuge - my soul. (ibid)

As a concrete historical movement, the Revolution could not justify itself to Wordsworth's conscience. The intellect, divorced from imagination and the vital movements of admiration, hope and love, made Wordsworth feel all faiths to be dubious. However his heart was filled with doubts. His convictions began to vanish away. He underwent the spiritual crisis of which the history is told in *The Prelude.* Dorothy brought back to him faith and peace. In particular, she restored him to Nature, whose beauty and benign power had been forgotten amid all the excitement and strain through which he had lately passed. This restoration of the life of the senses after the dark tyranny of a life of abstract

thought is the turning point of Wordsworth's career. He traveled farther and farther away from the political faith of his youth. Gradually, he became a Tory. He supported all existing institutions and even justified the abuses which called for reform. He allied himself with the forces of tolerance and obscurantism. He opposed the Catholic Emancipation Bill and the Reform Bill, and wrote a sonnet attacking the people's right to vote. He even went to the absurd extent of saying that cholera, which took a heavy toll of life, was God's condemnation of the reforms he opposed. It was for these reasons that Shelley called Wordsworth a "moral eunuch" and Browning called him " the lost leader".

Up to a certain point it may be said that he was guided by hope and later he was driven by fear. In the second half of his life he cursed what he once blessed and blessed what he once cursed. At the outset he had felt that a benignant spirit was abroad. He expected to see 'the power of the few' destroyed. The Revolution turned into a carnival of feverish passion. Wordsworth's faith in the inherent purity and goodness of human nature received a rude shock. His attachment to the Revolution was both ideological and emotional. But his faith could not withstand the stress and strain of the subsequent course of the Revolution. As he saw the ideas of Revolution being corrupted by its votaries in France and as he saw Napoleon strangling the infant democracy his sensitive nature suffered a setback. The result was a moral crisis from which Wordsworth could not emerge with his poetic personality intact. He became a worshipper of Duty and for the rest of his life was considered a "renegade". His best poetry was produced in the first flush of Revolutionary hope. The decline of his poetic inspiration may be attributed to the loss of political faith in the Revolution.

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DISCOURSAL PROMINENCES:
A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY CONCERNING TRANSLATION OF SELECT TEXTS

D. Himalayanath

Philosophy is a visualisation of reality. It is an activity to probe in to the different dynamics of the appearances which determine discourse. Discourse expresses its prominence textually through a word or a sentence. And these expressions reflect the essence of the intended meaning. The discoursal prominence denoters, in fact, foreground the entire background message of the discourse. It is the *'rhema'* or *'onoma'* of the discourse as in Plato's *'Sophist'*. It is the utterance of the theme of the discourse. When a discourse is translated from its source language to the target language, the discoursal prominence plays a crucial role in transfer of the intended meaning of the author. The very exercise of translation involves a critical and reflective thinking. Translation of a discourse from one language to another language involves the translator's placing his self in another cultural milieu. In this act he has to search for the prominences of the discourse which signify essence and unity of the discourse. Its effective translation determines the meaning transfer of the discourse.

I

Translation provides a spacio-temporal field where while translating i.e. ferrying the intended message of the author of the source language into the target language, the translator himself gets ferried. 'Himself' means his cultural background and specific ways of looking at things. This content of his self interferes with the original text of the source language. Reduction of this interference to the zero level is impossible as translators are human beings; removing the cultural self-content and objectifying the self hundred percent would result in dehumanising and mechanising him. Even when we do this, there is a specific ideology of mechanical model governing the act of translation.

Here fundamental philosophical questions emanate. Can self exist without self-content? When one is translating, this whole process of translation takes place within the self of the translator. It is the translator who takes the meaning from the source language and communicates in the target language. He becomes the medium. In him the understanding of the original meaning takes place and then he puts it in to the target language without loss of the original sensibilities. While doing so, the sensibilities of the target language and the way the people of the target language think and feel determine the translation. There, actually a negotiation takes place between two cultures, namely the source culture and the target culture. And the location for this negotiation is the self of the translator.

Self is the consciousness which is framed by values and values determine thoughts as Nietzsche rightly puts it that "our thoughts should grow out of our values with the same necessity as the fruit out of the tree".[1] Values make character in people and generate culture with their inter-relationships. Every language and its nuances are culture specific. Language denotes things as Heidegger holds the view that "word is what holds the thing there and relates it and so to speak provides its maintenance with which to be a thing."[2] Language conveys the meaning and while doing so it also puts its own conditions of grammar and exceptional usages. This takes the whole translation activity into the territory of hermeneutics. 'Herme' was the messenger of Greek gods, following it hermeneutics also is concerned about the problems of translation. Prior situatedness of translators or hermeneutic meaning interpreters of a given socio-historical tradition influencing the text transfer from source language into the target language is imminent. Translations occur as part of the process of understanding each other's thoughts, cultures and life situations. "Trans" means across, and "latum" means ferry in Latin language. There are bound to be problems when the intended meaning is transported across.

II

Now let us see how this meaning transfer takes place by examining the discoursal prominence of Mahadeviyakka's vacanas (religious sayings) translated by A.K. Ramanujan in *"Speaking of Siva."* [3] A.K. Ramanujan had taken liberty to

translate literally i.e. etymologically the invocatory refrain of *'cennamallikarjuna'* which is the discoursal prominence used by *Mahadeviyakka* as *"O Lord, White as Jasmine".* Word etymology of this refrain *"cennamallikarjuna"* in fact gives out many diverse meanings as per *Kannada dictionary* and *Sanskrit – Panini Dhatupatha* and *Amarakosha*.

Cennamallikarjuna is a compound word: Cenna + Mallika + Arujna. *"Cenna"* is a *Kannada* word meaning beautiful, best, lovely, brave, great, big. These are the meaning which *Kannada dictionary* [4] lists out. This "Cenna" seems to be a *"tadbhava"* word. It joins with *mallika* and *arjuna* which are *sanskrit* words to make a compound of *"cennamallikarjuna".*

Now let us see what meanings are there for *"mallika"* in *Dhatu Patha*[5] and *Amarakosha*[6] in *Sanskrit.* In *Dhatu Patha*, it is said *mallika* word comes from '*mala* or *malla'* root in *Bhvadi gana*, meaning '*dhaarane'* or to wear. In *Amarakosha*, it is said that *'malathe mallikah*'. *'Mala malla dhaarane*', meaning wearer of good body and *malliketi Ardhanaarishwarah'*, that means it is Lord Siva. Amarakosha also gives the meaning of white swan (Amarakosha – 2.5.23), Jasmine, and any creeper (Amarkosha – 2.4.69). And then Amarakosha lists out the meanings of *lamp, yoni or vagina, sage, tapasvi or one who does penance, shell and lotus* for *mallika* word (Amarakosha – 3.6.40).

Let us see what meaning are there for *"Arjuna".* Panini's Dhatupatha says *'Arja – arjane'* in *Bhvadigana* meaning to earn and in *curaadigana*, the '*Arja'* root gets the meaning of '*Pratiyatne'* or counter effort. Amarakosha (1.5.12) says *Dhavaloarjuna* meaning white and *viiroarjuna* meaning hero, '*Kakubha arjuna'* meaning a thick tree and also *arjuna* means a tree dearest to Lord Indra or Head of Gods. *'Shuklatvat Arjuna'* meaning white (Amarakosha – 2.4.45). *Arjuna* also means '*trunamarjunam'* meaning grass (Amarakosha – 2.4.167).

Taking all these meanings, we can arrive at multiple meanings of the compound word *Cennamallikarrjuna*. In this situation, what is the sanctity in limiting ourselves to the "O Lord, White as Jasmine" the translated meaning given by A.K. Ramanujan to the word *"Cennamallikarjuna".* Even this omits the meaning of "Cenna" that is lovely, best, great and big from the compound word *cennamallikarjuna*. His

translation of this *invocatory refrain* in fact disturbs the overall discoursal organisation of *Mahadevyakka's* vacanas. Prof. Ramanujan says in notes to the poems of Mahadevyakka "I have, as elsewhere, taken the liberty of translating literally into English the name of Siva here, cennamallikarjuna. For such names carry aspects and attributes of Siva. Further such proper nouns, if left as they are in the English translations, are inert and cannot participate in the poems as they do in the originals. Other possible translations of the name are "Arjuna of Jasmines" or "Arjuna, Lord of goddess Mallika". Arjuna means White and bright."[7] It appears to be a convincing argument but can we successfully apply word etymology technique to explain a cultural entity called *cennamallikarjuna* especially when, etymologyy as we have seen gives out such multiple and diverse meanings. Prof. Ramanujan's effort is to avoid inertness and facilitate the participation of the reader in the poem. But is it achieved? *Cennamallikarjuna* is a *signature*. By translating the *signature*, isn't the translator diluting the discourse of *Mahadeviyakka. Signature* is untranslatable. It symbolises her own personal *God of Siva* and her attachment to Him. Lot of emotion or feeling is put into the word *cennamallikarjuna* by *Mahadeviyakka.* All this is lost once it is translated as per *selective word etymology.* Instead, the original word as it is should have been retained to allow the English readers to get the feel of the Indian culture. Word etymology simple does not express all the semantic content, the culture denoting word signifies. Therefore, Indian Semantics holds the view that '*Yougika ruudiyor ruudi baliiya',* i.e. among word etymology and usage, the usage should be preferred.

III

Let us examine the text which had enthused courage in the people by emphasising on the ontology of man. That is the text of *"Freedom is my birth right and I shall have it."* [8] Freedom as the mystic aspiration of every individual was rightly articulated and uttered by *Lokamanya Bala Ganagadhar Tilak*. This represented the discourse of early 20th century freedom struggle of India. It functioned as the discoursal prominence of *Swadeshi* and *Swaraj*. Therefore, Tilak was ultering *'Swaraj'* as alternative for *'freedom'*, i.e., *"Swaraj is my birth right and I shall have it".* Now let us study

how this discoursal prominence was translated into Telugu by different writers of modern Indian history in Telugu.

1) A. Sathyanarayana and others[9] have translated this text as *"Svaathanthram naa janma hakku, daanni neenu ponduthanu" (Freedom is my birth right and that I shall have it).*

2) K. Keshava Rao and O. Sathyanarayana Murthy[10] have translated it as *"Swarajyam naa janma hakku; daanini neenu saadhisthanu" (Swaraj is my birth right; I shall achieve that)*.

3) S.R. Anjaneyulu and others have translated it as *"Swarajyam naa janma hakku; daanini neenu saadhinci tiiruthaanu"*[11] (Swaraj is my birth right; I shall achieve that definitely).

The first translation is exact translation. *'Ponduthanu'* means *'I shall have it.'* In the context of the discoursal prominence, it signifies immediate future. In the second translation, the word *'Saadhisthanu'* is used, to mean *'I shall have it'.* But *'Saadhisthanu'* means *'I shall achieve it'.* Though this translation is not exact translation, yet it encapsulates the spirit of Tilak's statement. It signifies the dynamism which is required on the part of the Indian people to liberate the country. And to enthuse this dynamism Tilak was using this discoursal prominence again and again from 1906 to 1920, when he breathed his last. In 1906,[12] he first said it then he roared it again in 1907 at Surath congress. He was using this Swaraj concept during this time with the sole meaning of complete independence to India. This was evident by the discourses of *Bandemataram* and *Swadeshi*. But again when he used it in 1915 – 16 during Home-rule movement, he was using this Swaraj concept in a limited sense of achieving limited freedom or a dominion status to India within the British commonwealth. The translator here had chosen to keep the word Swaraj for freedom keeping alive this change of meaning during the period of ten years. The third translation infact follows the second one and goes little ahead to bring in emphatic i.e. *'Saadhinci tiiruthaanu'* meaning *'I shall definitely achieve it'.*

These three translators carry the background meaning of *Bandemataram, Swaraj, Swadeshi, Boycot of foreign goods and Plea for national education.* The effective foregrounding of this entire background's intended meanings are achieved

fully in the third translation and satisfactorily in the second translation and exactly in the first translation. The third translation is the expression of the people's mood, as the *event line* of discourse of freedom struggle led by Tilak.

IV

Now let us examine a text whose discourse had caused a political revolution in India. It was M.K. Gandhi's "Do or Die"[13] - a call given at the outset of the Quit India Movement in 1942. It was called a *mantra* by *Gandhiji* himself. *Mananaath mantramucyate,* meaning *mantra* as a well thought solution. This solution was given as a simple text. It was discoursal prominence of the discourse of Quit India Movement. It was translated into Telugu language to carry the message of it to Telugu people. Let us see how it was done and which of the following translations facilitate the meaning transfer effectively and why?

1) A. Sathyanarayana and others have translated it as *"Saadhincu leekuntee maranincu"* [14] (Achieve or else die).

2) Vaasi Reddy and others have translated it as *"Svaathanthrayamo leeka maranamo; ceeyi leedaa caavu"* [15] (Either freedom or death; Do or die).

3) Alladi Vaidehi translated it as *"Aacarincu leeka maranincu"* [16] (Practice or else die).

4) The same translator Alladi Vaidehi had translated it earlier as *"Saadhimpudu, saadhyamu kaanicho praanamularpimpudu"* [17] (Achieve it, if it is not possible, lay down your life).

5) M.S.R. Anjaneyulu and others have translated it as *"Vijayamo viira svargamo"* [18] (Victory or hero's death).

Do or die was an imperative discourse. It is the text which is the discoursal prominence of the entire 1942 Quit India movement's discourse. It is coherent to the times of second World War in the sense that when the British promised freedom to India after the war, it was well described by Gandhiji as a post-dated cheque of a failing Bank. The text of *'Do or die'* infact led to the success of the *progression of the discourse* of the Quit India movement.

The first translation reflects the discourse context of quit India movement. The discoursal prominence is also translated in the imperative mood.

The second translation infact gives out alternate translations of '*do or die'. 'Svaathanthramo leeka maranamo'* means either freedom or death, and the alternative of *'ceeyi leeda caavu'* is a literal translation of *'do or die'*. Among these, *'Svaathanthramo leeka maranamo'* is a better translation as it carries the semantic content of the *'do or die',* and also the *focal message* of the Quit India discourse.

The third translation does not represent the intended meaning of the original as *'aacarincu'* means practice and it does not bring out the force of *'do'* word.

The fourth translation by the same translator, though not exact, explains the intended meaning of the discoursal prominence.

The fifth translation is the perfect translation and it means '*victory* or *hero's death'* in Telugu. It represents Telugu cultural voice. It signifies the *mainline* of the Quit India Movement. It spells imperativity as is spelt in the original text. The first four translations do not motivate people as the last one does. It carries the emotional load of the original text and inspires people to fight the final battle against the British as was the intended message of Gandhiji.

V

Among the three texts, *Mahadeviyakka's* text represents a medieval *Kannada* people's aspiration to set up an *egalitarian society* and *Tilak and Gandhiji's* texts provide space for the continuation of the same aspiration in 20th Century. Behind these three texts there is a history of People's struggle functioning as *discourse dynamics.* Translation should catch this and effectively represent the *discoursal pattern.*

Translations give access to *'the other'.* Ontology of understanding *'the other'* in a multi-lingual society necessarily involves the process of translation on the dais of the self. The very understanding is conditioned largely by the cultural factors. Deciphering them would facilitate hermeneutic ability of the self. Translation is the act of consciousness. It involves orientation of the self to the target

culture and its endeavor to manifest through it. This is bound to result in a clash between two prior situatedness or positions of self in two cultures namely in source culture and target culture. And these cultures are bound by socio-historical traditions. This difficulty is overcome by self through *transcreation*.

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MY NEIGHBOUR'S SON

Constantly doodling over his homework
Sashi let out an easy droll
with problems hitting like bricks
on his all-seeing eyes.
In a peaceful cloister
he carefully dissected the words
of his beloved teacher
roving like peach endowments of late sunlight.

The everyday prayer with his grandmother
played like a puff of cool breeze
on a plate of steaming rice
whenever bouts of bamboo shades free-floated
attempted to find a place
inside the tawny temple.

From the wreckages of the past
he built a chest of drawers
into which he filled love
luxuriant and sensual as velvet
shaken from the boughs of childhood
silhouetted against a cool, reflecting pool.

Like an expert policeman
he never took diffident steps in trenches
but went in with flutes of nightingale
turning life's stormy crossings
into an array of fun-land paintings
haunting the walls of play-school corridor.

-Krishna Bose

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'HAIKU'

Bathing in thousands
they float lamps on her breast--
the river sparkles

In the moving train
sleeping on his feet
the newspaper man

A film of mist
between my eyes
and her image

Standing behind
the window bars observes
darkness in shapes

Love tickles
with erect pistils:
hibiscus

Vulnerable
darkness of the opening:
standing alert

Fondling her breasts
I incite a poem
on her body

Alone
rings the cell phone on
her bed

Disappears
into dust her last
Photograph

-R. K. Singh

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David Ray: A Special Section

Guest Editors

Amritjit Singh, Rhode Island College
Seanna Oakley, University of Michigan

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“NOBODY’S DARLING”: REFLECTIONS ON DAVID RAY’S POETIC ODYSSEY

Amritjit Singh

Be nobody’s darling;
Be an outcast.
Take the contradictions
Of your life
And wrap around
You like a shawl,
To parry stones
To keep you warm.
- Alice Walker, “Be Nobody’s Darling”

In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.
- Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” 43

David Ray is not entirely a stranger to academics and other lovers of poetry in India. But it is my honor to re-introduce him through this special section in *Re-Markings* – with a selection of his poems, three short essays, an extended interview with Nibir K. Ghosh, and a brief critical essay by Seanna Oakley.

I first met David Ray in 1976 when I was passing through Kansas City, Missouri, on a bus trip between Los Angeles and New York City. I was struck even then by his passion, his intensity, his paranoia, and by his very un-American interest in India and other parts of the world. He told me he wanted to apply for a fellowship – say, a Fulbright - to spend a year in India and wondered if his past political activism, especially his opposition to the Vietnam War as part of the Poets Against the War (that also included Robert Bly, Denise Levertov, and others), would become a factor in his being selected. Some five years later, during 1981-82, I had the

pleasure of hosting him, his wife Judy (a poet in her own right) and their two daughters, Wesley and Sapphina, at the University of Rajasthan in Jaipur on a yearlong Indo-US fellowship from AIIS (American Institute for Indian Studies).

During the year, the Rays traveled many parts of India; David taught a few classes in the Department and also mentored many of its doctoral candidates; Judy, he and I collaborated on *India: An Anthology of Contemporary Writing*, which appeared at first as a Spring/Summer 1982 special number of *New Letters*, then edited by David, and was published in 1983 as a book from Ohio University Press/Swallow Press. During the few months of our work on the *India* anthology, for all of us in Jaipur who assisted in the work on this collection, the Rays’ three bedroom flat in Tilak Nagar, in the vicinity of the university campus, became a hub of conversation and jouissance, where dozens of cups of tea and coffee were consumed daily along with occasional lunches and dinners. Like a maestro conducting an orchestra, David managed a diverse group of research scholars and colleagues – that included Ved Prakash, Francine Krishna, and I.K. Sharma – who read and re-read dozens of submissions from around the country and abroad to help David and me make the final selections for the anthology. The quality and appeal of the work were the only criteria that mattered for David, and I would like to think the anthology bears an imprint of that process in the extensive translations from several Indian languages that we were fortunate to include, along with the work by Indian-English writers and a few non-Indians who had written about India.

I observed how in India, David showed a quickness and capacity in dealing with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Yes, like most Americans in India for the first time, he asked questions and tried to come to terms intellectually with unfamiliar surroundings and some shocking realities. But David's relationship with the Indian landscape went beyond this expected intellectual understanding. Soon, he was able to create image and sound in response to the scenes and sights, to the poetry and art of India, all of which he took in most voraciously. Some of his most readable poems about India were inspired, for example, by a statue of Mahatma Gandhi near the

campus, the bedeviled look in a beggar child's eyes outside a Hindu temple, a Muslim woman in *purdah*, a family picture from princely archives, a poem by a contemporary Indian poet, or a verse from the ancient epics. What I found most engaging in David's skills as a poet was his ability at cultural and artistic grafting in both directions - enlarging the sense of the human in his own poetry as well as facilitating the work of other poets, translators, and graduate students. Besides the *India* anthology, David's India visit resulted in at least two other publications: *The Maharani's New Wall and Other Poems*, a collection of his own poems published in 1989 by Wesleyan University Press; and *Not Far from the River* (Copper Canyon Press, 1990), a collection of nearly 300 erotic verses inspired by the second-century Prakrit anthology, *Gatha Saptasati* - some of which were originally published in Jaipur in 1983 by the Rajasthan Prakrit Society.

Since returning to the United States in 1983, I have kept in touch with David and family on a regular basis – visiting them many times first in Kansas City and since 1997 in Tucson, Arizona. David, who has been writing in every conceivable genre for over half a century, is a prolific writer. During my visits with him and Judy, I find David writing incessantly in response to a wide variety of stimuli - from environment to politics, personal observations to received narratives. I often get some of my own writing done during my visits to the Ray home, where bonhomie and conversation still work wonders to both stimulate and inspire. Clearly for David, the writing of poetry has always been a dedication and a process by which he creates new mosaics from shards of experience, trying to breathe fresh life into the whole. He is constantly challenged by his desire to respond to new situations, absorb the essence of alien cultures intuitively, and transform these responses into the stuff of contemporary poetry.

In introducing him to the readers of *Re-Markings*, I would in fact like to push this point a bit further. Writing about other cultures and historical experiences to which you don't have "insider" access is a risky business. And if you are a white American, you are especially open to attack by the forces of essentialism, by the zealous patrollers of ethnic and gender identities, as well as by the gatekeepers of political

correctness on both the Left and the Right. David has shown in his extensive output in poetry, fiction, and memoir, the boldness of both including and exploring the experience of Jews, African Americans, migrant Mexicans, and other immigrants. Some readers might feel that in some of these attempts, the poet tends to appropriate others' experiences without adequate self-awareness and a somewhat negligent naiveté. I don't want to minimize the dangers of appropriation and the offending condescension that often results from the breezy incursions by poets, anthropologists, and cultural studies scholars into the sacred spaces or the painful realties of any disenfranchised group's historical experience. But I would like us to balance that risk against the more widely prevalent patterns of neglect and indifference that the majority culture displays toward minority history and experience. Would it be better to ignore the continuing incidence of "race" and "gender" in our lives instead of expressing a poet's outrage in a manner that may or may not satisfy every reader?

I would like to elaborate this point by referring the readers to the frustration African American women writers and scholars have often expressed at the almost total absence in American feminist writings of the lived experience of black women's lives (as in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*) or the literary expression of black women (say, in Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination*, as noted by Alice Walker). In her essay, "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s)," Walker quotes at some length from the prologue to *The Female Imagination*, wherein Spacks attempts to justify her exclusive focus on white Anglo-American women writers. Citing Phyllis Chesler, Spacks asserts that she, like Chesler, has no theory to offer on "the Third World female psychology in America." So as a white woman, Spacks expresses her reluctance and inability to "construct theories about experiences I haven't had," and justifies her choice of concentrating on books that "describe familiar experience, [or] belong to a familiar cultural setting" (372). Walker comments wryly: "Yet Spacks never lived in nineteenth-century Yokshire, so why theorize about the Brontes?"

Audre Lorde too has commented on this issue in her intense search for modalities to overcome our often-fragmented commitments to fight one form of oppression or another. For example, many males who are sincerely anti-racist can be sexist, or homophobic, or anti-Semitic, or some combination thereof. People of South Asian descent in North America, a small minority, would cry foul at any evidence of racism or discrimination against them, but many of the same folks display disturbing levels of insensitivity for the basic citizenship rights of minority groups back home. In her essay, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Lorde has poignantly discussed the consequences of many writers' choosing silence over action and self-revelation by hiding behind the "mockeries of separation that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own. For instance, 'I can't possibly teach Black women's writing – their experience is so different from mine.' Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust?" (43). Lorde posits that silence is often the result of fear: "in the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear – fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation" (42). For Lorde, "the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (42).

The whole career of David Ray confirms a distinctive aesthetic that will not let him be silent. Ray has overcome through his art, through his daily struggle as an artist with image, sound, and word, to overcome the fear of self-revelation. In "Flight," the boy is determined not to be like his father, yet he "took the fear" the father taught him "to Wales and Spain/and Greece and fled the way he did." I would like to suggest that his "small boy's fears/have gone global" in more than one ways. Like Whitman, David Ray embraces in his growing circle of empathy much more than his father's fears of landlords, who drove him from one home to the next in the Oklahoma territory. In his memoir, *The Endless Search* (2003), in his short stories (*The Mulberries of Mingo*, 1978), and for decades in his poetry, Ray has confronted with razor-sharpness – as also with compassion and restraint - his own experience of childhood poverty, class discrimination, and various forms of abuse, reaching

out in this process to others and their experiences in his need to connect, to be human, to be a poet. For example, in his latest volume of poetry, *One Thousand Years: Poems About the Holocaust* (2004), he is concerned as a non-Jewish poet not only with a wide-ranging examination of history but also with the nature of evil.

Though he has published widely and won many awards, Ray probably still sees himself as he did as a rejected child, an outsider excluded from life's feast. Such a fixation, admittedly neurotic, has fed his suffering, but also his art. In India he identified not as much with hosts at sumptuous dinner parties as with the children looking over the wall begging for spare scraps. The walls of his Tucson study are lined with dozens of fat files and drawers full of materials, some of which he knows he might never get around to "processing," or as he puts it, "decommissioning." "We are magpies," David says when I ask him about those files and drawers, "rarely creators." And as a Quaker, he believes that the spirit moves through us, and is not of our making.

Ray confronts issues as human, not sectarian, and cannot imagine disqualifying himself from addressing any issue that feels urgent or critical to his own sense of what is human. I don't think Ray would hesitate to endorse Lorde's declaration about herself in her essay, "Eye to Eye": "Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me. I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of my me-ness, as I discover you in myself" (147). As Seanna Oakley shows in her analysis of a few selected poems in "Hearing and Speaking the World," Ray has chosen to speak, to bear witness, when he has been troubled in his surroundings by warmongering, injustice, racism, and much more, and he has done so without ignoring more personal subjects. In fact, I feel strongly that Ray's ironic and mostly unsentimental exploration of personal pain and suffering empowers him in many ways to confront the contradictions and hypocrisies in public events and tragedies. Ray has demonstrated again and again in his checkered career that he knows, in Lorde's words once again, that "what is most important" to him "must be spoken, made verbal, and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" (40). Once when sitting

in his kitchen, I had asked David if his primary motive in writing poetry was to save the world, he quietly picked up a poetry anthology near him, and quoted to me the following three lines from Alexander Pope's "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" :

> *What? Arm'd for virtue when I point the pen,*
> *Brand the bold front of shameless guilty men,*
> *Bare the mean heart that lurks beneath a star.*

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THE LINDBERGH CLAIMANT

No man has the right
to live it all over again!
I haven't the strength
to bury you twice!
- David Wevill

When the young man turned up
years after the kidnapping
he did not bluntly say, "I
am your murdered child." Yet
no one could deny that he looked
just like the famous aviator,
stood six feet three, had a cleft
chin and the dimples, curly hair
specific as a fingerprint if
matched with the lost toddler's.

A lock of that hair still exists
in a police museum – and Anne
kept one as well from her eaglet's
last haircut. All he desired, said
the claimant, was a chance to prove
he was the child presumed dead –
who had been raised by gangsters
and survived despite the myth
that a monstrous carpenter
had murdered him. "Just look
at me!" he begged, but they closed
the door in his face more than once,
and his letters when they arrived
went straight to the furnace.

But we might ask what he was asking
or why they would not consider
an outcome some would think happy.
To undo their grief, prove
that the carpenter was falsely accused,

guilty of nothing but purchase
of black market money – the ransom –
would topple a tall castle of lies.
If Anne or Charles had opened
the door to their son, the collapse
all around would have shattered half
of America. And therefore the case
and the door were closed again
and again with firm hand in his face.

And what might they have said after
closing that door? *We did not go*
through that grief, suffer that loss
so colossal -- all for nothing. You will
not take away the peace we have found.
And they might add: *We turned*
our hearts to stone long ago – it is far
too late to melt them. We have learned
to live with our stone hearts and our lies.

But their next thought may have been
more kind and parental. *Surely by now,*
dear lamented son, you have learned
to live without us.

AT THE DESERT MUSEUM

Tireless docent, tarantula on the palm
of your hand, letting the children almost

pet its fur, you remind me of the patience
I strove for but never achieved in the classroom

when the only now and then alert face
regarded me with a more or less benign gaze.

It had been many years since I was that child,
one of them, the gazers and gladly amazed.

When I was three years old my mandate
was to take care of my younger sister.

I followed her around, removing the hazards,
including a tarantula she scooped up

and plopped into her mouth before I could grab it.
The spider was huge, bronze, and furry like this one

the docent takes in her hand, providing a lesson.
When in that other lost year I plucked a tarantula

out of the fearless girl's mouth I shouted
"Hoison, Ellen, Hoison!" for I could not

pronounce the perils of that farm where
we scurried about like spiders, lusting for someone –

anyone – to lift us to breast or lips. I see
that same hunger in the eyes of these children,

fidgeting, just dying to pet a tarantula,
the least of their perils.

CEDAR WINDMILLS

What these people brought
from back east amazes,
i.e., why did they choose
a desert if they could not
endure life without
the manicured green lawns
of Ohio, swept clean
by industrial leaf-blowers?

And on that green turf
sprinkled daily with rare
water a pair of small
cedar windmills turn
their blades idly, though
not to pump anything.

The owner must be,
like me, another Don
Quixote. Or perhaps
they are His and Hers
windmills. Children
and I pause to watch
the creaking arms turn.

And the plastic pink
flamingoes in the next
yard must also reveal
some transplanted dream –
the wild cloud-piercing flight,
 the one not taken today.

MILLENNIUM MADNESS

It became a parlor game,
naming the important events –
the discoveries, the miraculous
works of genius over the last lost millennium.

A thousand years of progress – impressive!
On television a number of experts pondered
the question, praised our escape from the dark,
and savored tasty fruits of the Renaissance.

Doctors picked drugs. Astronomers
spoke of stars and those who had found them.
Poets praised Shakespeare, and musicians
turned Mozart and Bach into nominees.

The Italians deserved credit for Galileo,
Leonardo, Michelangelo, Marconi,
and nobody mentioned Mussolini. Germans
and French had done their full share – Goethe

and Martin Luther – and Madame Curie, without
whose work we could not see our bones.
The bomb was on everyone's list, and Einstein
named as the top hero of science, although

in truth he never loved the bomb. Even men
living were deserving of praise – a genius or two
cracked the secret of our human genomes and others
broke the code of DNA, though the woman

who deserved credit got none. It's a wonder –
all the good stuff to be found within us, and how
looking back one can see a straight line of progress.
Malthus and other gloom and doom prophets were left

out of the script, as might be expected – for who
would wish to hear of war, famine, and pestilence
when one of the marvels of television is that
it is bright and glowing and only mildly radioactive.

DELPHI

At Delphi the oracle
answered as if in a trance,
caressing the truth.

At other times
she spoke in a frenzy,
her voice booming

through perfumed vapors
rising out of the stones –
proof of her divinity.

She made quite radical
prophecies – future wars,
famines, pestilence.

She said the planet,
which she knew
to be round, would

soon begin spinning.
She predicted
that due to the powers

of Prometheus
another sun would
someday be born.

As they thanked her
and left, she advised
men to travel light

and always treat girls –
even peasants on farms –
as if each is a goddess.

She herself, she confessed,
had been only a farm girl
before Hera came down

from Olympus
to appoint her as oracle.
You never know, she warned.

THE RITUAL

How straightforward it seems, their ritual.
Once every twelve years they journey back
from wherever they are on earth, make the trip

up the mountain, speak to the dead, say
what must be said in order to set things right,
placate the rage apparent in storms, swirl of dust,

flood of rivers, anger from so many causes.
Sometimes the dead almost speak back, using
the winds through pines. They voice accusations:

You did not carry out the plans I left for you.
You are living your life badly, with no more
care than I did. Why did you do such a thing?

Sometimes the dialogue requires a full week
before the dead are appeased and the winds
fall silent and a message of forgiveness seems spoken

on the balsam-scented air. It is good to be at peace
with the dead, all who have made the journey agree.
What could be more important, even urgent, they say.

Sometimes we too feel that something needs saying,
but we do not have a sacred mountain, and few climb
on the chance that they might return feeling blessed.

Thus we stutter through years, clearing our throats,
making room for the words, yet never speaking them
to stones, wind, stars, sea or our dead, unless you count
a few ravings near open graves eager to hear.

FLIGHT

How many homes have I fled
as if the landlord chased after us,
and just because my father
set such a good example?
We take instruction where
we find it, and try to replicate
perfect gestures we have seen.
It is always raining when I flee.

So it was with Dad. So it is
with me. He outran at least
a dozen landlords, including
one who brought the sheriff
with his shotgun—he chased
us through the night, as in
a movie, black and white.
There was no color, not
in those grim days. Would he
be proud of me at last
if he knew I took the fears
he taught to Wales and Spain
and Greece and fled the way
he did? Is that not the way
to honor such a father, to be
just like the man you swore
you would not be, yet are?

I fled both fascist landlords
and those who agreed with me,
my small boy's fears
gone global. And most times,
as if my father fled with me
through yet another storm,
the rain poured down
to overwhelm my tears.

THE SLEEPERS

"Bodies of two illegal migrants were found this morning on the Southern Pacific tracks."
--News Item, Tucson, Arizona

What they have endured, making it north
from deep in the belly of Mexico,
would make a great novel, picaresque,
the two companions trembling with hope.

After many perils they make it across
the border, manage to survive the desert,
search squads, spotlights, police dogs,
helicopters, klieg lights, and armed vigilantes.

But there is a great weariness after such
a journey, and rest is essential. Exhausted,
they lie down between rails, safe from
the hazards of snakes and scorpions.

The rotten rail ties called sleepers are like
slats of a bed, their frayed surface soft as flannel,
and perfume of the creosote is familiar,
like brush growing along *barrancas* back home.

If the last breath is inhaled in the new land
it mingles with pollen from home, and scent
of smog joins toxins acquired in the past
as if there has been no border at all to dispute.

As the two lie down in the night between tracks
they dream of how soon they will pick oranges
or lay tiles, trim trees and clip hedges. But a train
not expected is sometimes the one that arrives

as if by appointment to spare in one blow
disillusion by degrees day after day, and thus
the smiles found stiff on their faces attest
to fulfillment found mostly in immigrant dreams.

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

After James Thurber

“You can open it with a skeleton,”
someone said in the boy’s hearing
and he wondered where they would find
one small enough to fit in a lock,
and what kind of animal it might be.

Not a dog’s, he was glad to conclude.
But what did his mother mean
when she said his father was a heel –
something on a loaf of bread or a shoe.
True, the missing father had preferred
the end of the bread and if he walked out
on her, his dad must have been in his shoes.

But it was all very confusing. The preacher
swore every Sunday and Wednesday night too
that sinners would burn in hell, and yet
mother had forbidden the word and washed
the boy’s mouth out with soap for saying it.
Why could a preacher say hell while a boy
could not? His dad had left town, it was said,
under a cloud, and it must have followed all
the way to California, from where he had sent
a postcard. Mother’s friends said she was eating
her heart out for that heel, but how could that be?

They must mean Valentine hearts made out
of chocolates, the kind the heel used to bring her.
Mother had eaten one chocolate heart after another

before the heel who left with the cloud over his head
walked out in his shoes for California. Learning
to think was exciting, for the boy figured out all
by himself that the love of his parents was dead
as a doornail, the kind he pondered every time
he picked one up, flaking rust, and rough to the touch.

PORTAL

Of course the door is closed and the portal
gone as well, as if those stones dissolved

and fled along with clouds they soon became
a part of. You find small chips in rain and shards

of ancient faces if your eyes are sharp – the power
of a hawk's or owl's. Instead of looking, though,

you're best advised to banish portals from your mind
and not stare up or down or all around or where

you think the scene has disappeared to along with all
that went before. Forget that rain brings back

bodies to lave your face. Gaze not upon lost tribes
or any face particular or body fleet and agile.

In sum, it is not wise to gaze at stones or bear them
heavy on the mind. It's best to throw away the names

and greet the dead as one, and if you know it,
chant some prayer they too once sang.

THE SHARED BLISS

"Follow your bliss."
- Joseph Campbell

I have seen a child enter a room
and without a word go to the woman
in the rocking chair, the old

and shriveled woman, a stranger to the child,
and take her hand and then the two of them
sit wordless

as if no one else existed – those of the middle
distance, the muddled years –
and in a way they did not.

What Joseph Campbell had to say
about bliss was apparent in that room.
The child, the old woman, both

as one, followed their bliss, and thus
were mentors to those of us who watched
and studied long the dreamy lesson.

ON THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

She studies her garden like a scientist
bent to a microscope. "Look
at the ants," she says, "isn't it amazing,
how they never collide?"

We discuss electrons, busy bees,
lovers who don't see each other
for years, might pass in a crowd.
Now and then we catch a glimpse

of each other across a room or when
we wander the world of infinite
possibilities. Others run Olympics,
fight wars. We try to get by with

a maximum of silence, not to be
diverted from our play by grim adults.
We're never quite as frenetic as ants.
On that we can agree. Our products

are never as sweet as honey or as sure
to survive as pollen. She puts down
her trowel, presses palm to waist
for support, stands up without breaking

bones. "The world is still too big
for us," she says, and I agree
that the years flowed by with deceptive
swift currents, bearing the corpses.

We discuss it – how as children
we thought the world was too big
to hug, then for a few years believed
it was manageable, embraceable.

Now we know again what we forgot.
Once more we are amazed at how much
killing the world can accommodate,
how even when we quit noticing

the earth is breathing, burning, suffering.

THE PECKING ORDER AT GROUND ZERO

Another Prince Hamlet
carried out of the ash,

borne up from beneath
crumpled girders,

got the flags and salutes
of hands over hearts,

but not quite enough
pomp and circumstance,

say complaints launched
by firemen while the police

claimed their own got
less of a show of esteem.

The fallen, it seems,
are not really equal,

nor were those who
were vaporized, their

value debated. A waiter
for purpose of cash

to replace him is worth
far less than a broker.

A Mexican tanned
by nature, not booths

and lotions, may have
worked high in the sky,

but that is irrelevant.
Bodies lie equally limp

and flat when carried
like Hamlet off stage,

but in life not all men
are equal, as you might

think firemen would
by now have noticed.

True – on paper now
and then – as when

“All men are created…”
But when dug out of ash,

brushed off for honors,
flags and a drum roll

on the way to their coffins,
they are accorded not

equal blessings.
Respectful of rank

and income in life
angels sing souls

to their rest in dis-
proportionate song.

Some get no chorus at all
or only a dissonant

moment composed, no
doubt, by Philip Glass.

At ground zero
with brute fisticuffs

haggling and battling
settle the matter

as each litter is borne
through the dust

of distressingly
unequal molecules.

THE REMAINS

Why does it seem more pure,
more worthy of song –

the grief of those
who have salvaged nothing,

been able to retrieve
not so much as a finger or toe,

who must accept the brute fact
of oblivion, not even ash

to scatter upon the ocean of choice?
As I, in my galaxy of molecules,

whirl through another day
I can only ask what it matters –

whence we depart,
in what direction we go,

what number the route,
and whither the winds take us.

Will we not arrive back
where we set out,

in the heart of a star?

WATER GATHAS

Flood trembles, floats a great tree
and world's worth of flowers. Bees
drowned eddy and whirl. Some sink,
others follow, abuzz above fate of friends.

Love is like water, hot and then cold,
tepid unless it's churned up with passion
and soon gone to mist regardless.
Best you can do, friend, is stir what you can.

All the girls of the harem are bathing,
but one's out of step, lounging apart on the bank.
What a self-loving narcissist she is with her sly smile!
No wonder he ignores all the wet ones.

Now that I see these dancers
I recall how much I enjoyed
that shampoo
you gave me with your feet.

From the scent of her I knew
she had bathed in the river with the help
of rose-apple branches. What
could I do but make her my new love?

A woman's love dies if she's neglected
and her lover's dies if he's too quickly sated.
It's teasing that keeps passion alive. But sometimes
love just melts away for lack of that undefinable something.

Love trickles away if you're not careful.
So be sure not to spill one drop on the ground.
I would advise you to keep hands cupped and ready
and lips pursed, for who knows when love will flow in?

Just once try it under water! What's to lose? I did,
and found myself so busy I forgot to compose
three more lines of my gatha, but it's a well-known
fact that we cannot always have everything.

RANDOMNESS

> *"The person perceives the relationship, but there is no known physical cause for it. Magic is inferred when meaning is found."*
>
> \- Claude Levi-Strauss

I open the book at random and ask,
"What am I meant to see here?"

And the same question can be asked
of the streets and the faces,

the malls and the mountains.
There are those who think such

a quest is absurd, and yet if
they should look back, would they

not see it was all meant to be –
right up to the lip of hell, and also

when poised at the brink of heaven.

ESSAYS

SUBSIDIZING JEOPARDY

The survivor of a recent trip over Niagara Falls said he was depressed and intent on suicide. Ambiguity rules, for his family claims that could not be the case and that he pulled off this stunt only "for money and fame." There's speculation that the survivor himself, Kirk Jones, is not too sure of his motives and may retract his admission of a suicidal depression, thus avoiding "a possible fine of $10,OOO or jail time."

Had Jones been dashed on the rocks, the most predictable scenario, he'd have left as legacy a license for endless speculation. Perhaps, too, those who leap over the rails of The Golden Gate Bridge, that beautifully arched doorway to eternity, just think they're taking a joyous skydive. They just forgot the bungee cord. There are family members who can never accept any other version. They can admit that their loved ones may have been confused or foolhardy, but never suicidal.

We live in a society that idealizes death in many of its avatars, and we need not look far to see that we're not terribly serious about preventing either murder or suicide, though endlessly researching root causes. The risk of suicide for the mentally ill is treated as a character flaw and their condition is a stigma that keeps them from qualifying for parity on health insurance, as if the physical body is not involved in their sufferings. Quite simply, their survival is seen as a test of character.

We are willing to expend major medical resources to extend life for those in comas. We fight for the unborn, and many justify murder in that cause. However, we are unwilling to put a safety barrier up on the railing of The Golden Gate Bridge or fence a waterfall where the ignorant or foolish plunge to their deaths. Even erecting a sign on a beach to warn of dangerous currents is too much a concession to safety, as if we strengthen character by subsidizing attractive hazards, traps to be sprung. Survivors earn bragging rights.

Such policies reflect an affirmation of personal freedom to live or die, but do not reflect an understanding of the behavior of a significant percentage of our population who suffer from conditions that include suicidal ideation. Even when not encountering an alluring opportunity like that at Niagara Falls or San Francisco Bay these people daily fight a battle against despair. If we were truly a compassionate society we would do what we can to support them in their struggle against self-destructive impulses. Many come to these places specifically to commit suicide, and we make it as easy as possible for them to do so, as if we want society to be rid of them.

Perhaps it is difficult to have compassion for the mentally ill. A fetus or hospice patient in a coma seems far more helpless, and we are eager to rush to the rescue. But the mentally ill are usually appallingly unattractive. The Sylvia Plath who has the posthumous benefit of nearly as many hagiographers as Mother Teresa may be worthy of those "enamored of suicidal poets," but had you known her in real life you might have felt otherwise.

However, we don't have to feel compassion for the mentally ill to find good reasons for suicide prevention even for those who are weak of character and obnoxious in behavior. We could do it for the survivors, for those left behind, for ourselves. The life you save may wind up being your own, for just as many who never thought they would ever become homeless now are, so it is true that many who take their sanity for granted may one day join the severely depressed. Sometimes we are depressed and don't know it. I recall an afternoon in Bombay when I was feeling lonely and wound up in a restaurant on the top floor of a hotel. I was sitting at a table by a window, idly drinking from a large bottle of Pink Pelican beer, toying with its wet label. Then, made aware by a pleasant breeze that the sliding window to my left was open I edged closer to it and looked out and down many floors to street level. Quite impulsively I considered jumping out that window, and yet nothing had warned me of this state of mind. I've had similar impulses on other occasions—while standing by a door on an airliner, while walking across a swaying bridge over a gorge in Ithaca. And yet I do not think I am all that unusual—impulsiveness is part of the human condition, and we must guard against giving in to

irrational urges. It is also simple compassion to protect others as well.

We discuss everything in terms of quantitative ethics, as if taking a bet on compassion were the most foolish and wasteful of investments. Thus costs of a barrier on a bridge are cited while the expense of recovering bodies is unmentioned. Such skewed accounting is apparent everywhere: media consideration of a light rail system largely consists of catastrophic predictions of cost while subsidy of automobiles remains understated or ignored. There are dire predictions of streetcar-automobile collisions, as if cars never collide without the assistance of streetcars. Cigarettes and alcohol are cheap indeed in the military until one factors in the costs of our V.A. hospitals where old warriors are coughing out their last days. Yet no politician ranting about future health care costs suggests curtailing smoking or drinking courtesy the U.S. government.

My plea is for us not to be so selective in our policies and sympathies, and not so rigid in reserving compassion for the obviously helpless. Those who use a public facility include a predictable percentage of those who must deal daily with strong suicidal impulses. We build a safety factor into bridges on the Newtonian weight they can bear, but take little note of the mental burdens borne by those who count themselves lucky each time they make it to the other side.

Survivor Kirk Jones, counting himself lucky, said that he "learned a lot in the hospital…about depression. And I'm going to learn to conquer it, and I want all those who need the help to get it." Then why can't we offer help instead of subsidizing the hazards?

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On The Necessity Of Suitcase Locks

After a semester at the university I decided to move out of the men's dorm. It was too expensive and I was tired of the noise. Boys ran down the halls at all hours chasing one another after showers. There were more frequent rubber gun fights than I recalled from grade school. Smoking and shouting went on at all hours and though my roommate and I shared both a study and a pair of bunk beds the door

between the two rooms did not mute the all-night bull sessions which he and other loudmouths enjoyed after returning from trips to 63rd street for beer and pizza, gatherings to which I was not invited because I had no spending money.

I found a room with a widow and her daughter on Dorchester Avenue, paid a few dollars as the first week's rent, and lugged up carpeted stairs to the second floor a duffelbag containing my clothes and books and a battered cardboard suitcase stuffed with manuscripts and letters, including those from the guardian I was still carrying on a long-distance war with. Some of my diverse and chaotic writings, many barely legible, included such scenes as an account of a woman taking a shower, written with all the voyeuristic lubricity of adolescence.

My new landladies were friendly—and impressive. The woman was the widow of a lawyer who was famous for saving monstrous criminals from death row. Her daughter, softig in a pink wool-knit dress, was attractive, and the well-heated apartment seemed cozy. My room off the kitchen, once a pantry or a maid's quarters, was small but appealing. It had all I needed—desk with chair, narrow bed, reading chair and lamp in corner. I put the suitcase on an oak bureau before the only window and departed for supper on 55th street.

My favorite hole-in-the-wall restaurant, run by a Japanese family, featured hamburgers for a dime. At that price I could afford two with my cup of coffee. The attentions of the incredibly thin waitress always seemed special. I wouldn't think of complaining about the yellow grease that soaked through the two layers of white bread, staining my fingers. For a dime what could one expect?

It was dark by the time I got back. The widow and her daughter were slow in answering the door. They greeted me as if I were a drunk arousing them in the middle of the night. I knew the moment I saw their watchful and angry eyes what had happened. Through the open door as they spoke to me in the hall I noticed that the suitcase clasps were unfastened, though they had been closed when I left. They had gone through my papers, perhaps just curious and interested in knowing what sort of roomer they had invited into their

home. I'm sure they could have rationalized their invasion of my privacy.

But they felt entitled to judge me as well. "You'll have to leave," the daughter announced, clearly speaking for both of them.

"But I don't have any place to stay tonight," I said. There was no point in asking why they were evicting me. The reason was obvious and they could see that their facial expressions had made their adamantine decision clear.

They seemed to think firmness was called for. Maybe they wouldn't have felt safe with me after reading as many of my manuscripts as they had time for before the doorbell rang.

"I'm sorry," the mother spoke up, "you'll have to take your things and depart." Was this a woman whose husband had talked juries out of imposing death sentences?

Depart seemed a curious word and I've remembered it all these years, along with the pink wool-knit dress that clung to the younger woman's figure.

The widow used the word as if referring to something contaminated. Whatever stigma I bore I had to take it along with my suitcase and duffelbag.

I checked into a run-down hotel on 55th street, an ancient firetrap with one toilet on each saggy floor.

What had it been that turned these two friendly and hospitable women so quickly into defenders of their turf against someone so burdened with stigma? Had it been an act of fiction or my first love's letters or my guardian's vicious accusations of my disloyalty and ingratitude? Had it been a notebook in which my pondering suicide mingled with notes from classes?

How they must have scurried when I rang the doorbell! How they must have left off reading something that has long since been consigned to a fire fed by a bottle of brandy poured on the flames! How they may later have wished that they had closed the clasps on the suitcase so that I would have left with pure mystery, no grasp of why they had turned so suddenly against me. Such treatment seems to have been karmic, but in this case the reason was clear—something

they read when they opened that Pandora's box I lugged around from place to place.

How many others had dipped into it to enlighten themselves regarding my character?

Anais Nin kept her journals in a bank vault, and when friends asked if they could just see the pages in which she had dealt with them she seemed to get great satisfaction out of denying them that privilege.

Did I learn a lesson from that day? No way, for I have seldom defended my own privacy, and as a writer I find that neither possible nor desirable. When I hang out laundry it seems a mere character defect that leads me to drop an item or two in the mud. Life as I have lived it is a soiled affair, and I can lay no claim to clean laundry.

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CHERCHEZ L'ASCENSEUR

(Adapted from *The Endless Search: A Memoir*)

Whenever disaster strikes, regardless of its scale or nature, my first thought is of elevators, and when none are involved I breathe a sigh of relief. The casualty rate has little to do with it. No more than inland citizens who fear shark attacks do I challenge the logic of my obsession. When I think of the poor chap in the Edgar Allen Poe story, "The Cask of Amontillado," mortared by a murderer into the tomb of a wine cellar, I imagine him not in the basement but in an elevator, its doors closing upon him.

The 9/11 horror, then, was right up the alley of my Angst. That morning was, a child said, "awful all over," but for me a chief image of terror concerned elevators—those trapped in them, those who plunged downward in them, those crushed in them. When a plane smashed into the Empire State Building decades earlier the detail that grabbed me was the slicing of elevator cables.

If skyscrapers are giants, then elevators are their spines. My fondness for bucolic towns even in earthquake-prone areas is based on a number of factors, but part of the appeal is that the houses made of adobe have no elevators. As I read of plans for rebuilding at ground zero, none without elevators

among them, my dread presumes that history will repeat itself. Neither Paradise nor Utopia would have elevators.

Whatever elevators signified when I was a child I'd have preferred an attack by a mad dog rather than to be dragged into one. I recall my mother pulling me into one in Tulsa, my shoes sliding over polished marble past the dread inch of space over a shaft that in my mind led all the way down to hell. Our mission itself was no more dreadful than a visit to an optometrist, Dr. Katz. But his billboard promise, "SEE KATZ AND SEE MORE" meant no relief. The glasses only allowed me to peek more boldly into that abyss where elevators lurked like dragons. One could only guess whether they would attack from above or below as huge looping cables mysteriously creaked and agonized.

When Aunt Ruth took my sister and me Christmas shopping in Vandever's department store in Tulsa she tried her bribery techniques to overcome my terror. Knowing how I wanted a toy electric train like my cousin George, Jr.'s, she promised me one like it if I would get in the elevator. The bribe tempted, but my fear was uncontrollable.

At last my stubbornness won a round. The bronze doors slid shut and a boing boing overhead announced a quick swoop upwards. My exasperated and diminutive aunt upped her offer. She would buy me not only the toy train but several accessories. With sighs of defeat, she led up the stairs to the toy department and we looked at a display that included not only a toy train but a bridge and small town to go with it. Then she took me back downstairs and tried again to get me into the elevator. Her efforts to entice me only triggered spells of asthmatic wheezing.

Elevators had been invented, it seemed, not for convenience or extending the space available for offices into the sky, but for disaster. Sometimes people mistakenly stepped into those open shafts. In Chicago while in college I grabbed a friend as he stepped forward a moment too soon. Doors had parted while the cage was still descending. Even after ancient warehouses are abandoned such perils persist. In Kansas City the artist Dale Eldred, whose marvelous light shows reaching into the sky may well have inspired those that were for a time employed at ground zero, rented a studio in a renovated warehouse. He died when he acciden-

tally stepped into an elevator shaft. The perils today derive from outages and building collapse, rarely free falls, but to make elevators user-friendly remains a daunting science.

Gangsters, of course, plotted their crimes between floors. I didn't need movies to inform me of that. Elevators were for conspiracies, rapes, suffocation during electrical blackouts. The horrible race massacre of 1921 in my hometown of Tulsa might not have occurred save for a false accusation regarding something presumed to have taken place in an elevator, when a black man and a white woman happened to share the space.

Dr. Freud has few admirers these days, but I am still among them. I do believe that early trauma is responsible for much of the nurture part of the nature and nurture equation, and I have tried to track my phobia to some illuminating incident before my first encounter with elevators at age four, but speculation about birth trauma would not be appealing even for one inclined to study his navel.

Well into my adult years I considered anyone who voluntarily stepped into an elevator crazy, a view that's slow to die. Even today friends who go to Las Vegas seem doubly crazy, for they not only throw their money away on casinos, they stay in high rise hotels with outside elevators. For me the glass walls would just offer a chance to swap claustrophobia for acrophobia like that Mel Brooks spoofed in his movie, *High Anxiety.*

My sister grew up with a sense of injustice. "Aunt Ruth never offered me anything for NOT being afraid of elevators," she complains. Some say there's a payoff in even our most negative behavior, but I search for one in vain, since I never even got a toy train out of my fears. Alas, it is still the fearless who have a chance at Paradise and Utopia.

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Hearing and Speaking the World: David Ray's New Poems

Seanna Oakley

The fallen, it seems,
are not really equal.

Readers familiar with David Ray's essays, poems, and recent memoir *The Endless Search* (2003) will recognize the wryness and irony in the epigraph above, taken from his poem "The Pecking Order." Ray is a master of understatement, especially when addressing the most painful subject matter, and this poetic impulse of discretion reflects an ethic which refuses to appropriate and exploit the tragedies of others or of the self for artistic purposes even as it asserts the necessity to bear witness. Much of his poetry testifies to the perpetuation of "wars,/ famines, and pestilence," the harm that we wreak upon ourselves and our environments. Yet these "witness" poems are closer to Sharon Olds than they are to Carolyn Forché, two poets known for their reflections on crisis, though in different registers. Ray shares Olds's ironic sensibility, which is an irony borne not of cynicism, but of commitment—the irony of Jonathan Swift in "A Modest Proposal." Ultimately, such a stance represents respect and humility.

In addition to the latest volume *One Thousand Years: Poems About the Holocaust*, several of Ray's new poems bear witness to publicized events in which experiences of tragedy are differentially valued. Addressing the 9/11 World Trade Center bombings in New York City, "The Pecking Order" is written in couplets which formally simulate a ladder on which the dead are hierarchized. At the top of the ladder, "another Prince Hamlet / carried out of the ash" becomes the occasion for rivalry and bickering between firemen and policemen:

got the flags and salutes
of hands over hearts,
but not quite enough
pomp and circumstance.

The breezy colloquialism of "got" and the series of ceremonial clichés—"flags and salutes," "hands over hearts," "pomp and circumstance"—underscore the irony that what is fought over are formalities having little to do with persons and much to do with rank and status. Though their bodies "lie equally limp / / and flat when carried / like Hamlet off stage," the Mexican and the waiter, their "value debated," account for "far less than a broker." This understated allusion to the moral calculations of worth effected by the City of New York in compensating families for their losses powerfully conveys the reprehensibility of such calculus. The "fallen" dis-privileged dead elicit a bare minimum of recognition:

> *Respectful of rank*
>
> *and income in life*
> *angels sing souls*
> *to their rest in dis-*
> *proportionate song.*
>
> *Some get no chorus at all.*

The speaker wryly suggests that even the heavenly hosts differentiate among the lost. The alliteration of "r," "l," and "s" disappears in the last line of the above citation, which starkly and unmusically states the case. In quoting Horatio's final salute to Hamlet, the speaker underscores Ray's project: to speak for the "unequal fallen." After all, Hamlet cannot forget the dead and yet so many of New York City's dead have been forgotten. Ray's poem testifies on their behalf.

Similarly, "The Sleepers" bears witness to two illegal immigrants who crossed the North America-Mexican border. This poem adeptly illustrates how Ray's irony continually undercuts the tendency of such witness poems to appropriate and sentimentalize other people's tragedies. The dangers of such poetry are demonstrated by the television media's "special reports" which broadcast tragedy for the consumption of curious, and *temporarily* chastened, viewers. "The Sleepers" spares readers that disillusion, just as the two border-crossers are spared their own. Linking their story to literature, the speaker asserts:

> *What they have endured, making it north*
> *from deep in the belly of Mexico,*
> *would make a great novel, picaresque,*
> *the two companions trembling with hope.*

The speaker inscribes their story within a story, the adventure narrative tradition of which Don Quixote is the epitome. In picaresque, the rogue hero lives by his wits to survive a country populated by fools and villains and the dangers they impose. In contrast, the poem's heroes encounter barriers erected by a stony xenophobia and racist hostility but manage to survive "search squads, spotlights, police dogs, / helicopters, klieg lights, and armed vigilantes." What defines the heroes, however, is not the outlaw mentality of picaresque heroes but rather hope and dream:

> *If the last breath is inhaled in the new land*
> *it mingles with pollen from home, and scent*
> *of smog joins toxins acquired in the past,*
> *as if there has been no border at all to dispute.*

The beauty of the idea that a last breath "mingles with pollen from home" reveals the ethical core which underpins all of David Ray's work and drives his poetic strategies of understatement, irony, and wit: the promise and testament of a better world, invested in concrete individuals, not abstract causes. There are no borders to dispute but the ones we arbitrarily erect and substantiate. The poem ends on a paradox, and with almost a pun on the word 'sleepers' which also means railroad ties: having died in their sleep, because a train has run over them, the two companions are "spared disillusion," the "rude awakening" that a better life would ensue their successful crossing into the United States. However, as the poem's final words, the "rude awakening" represents not only the future they would have encountered, but their entire existence. On such a note, the poem holds us accountable for directly or indirectly enforcing borders where there are none at all. Our complicity lies in the bet we wager in weighing the pros and cons of comfort and grief, as the last lines in "Millennium Madness" remind the poet of the dread Malthusian triad:

. . . for who
would wish to hear of war, famine, and pestilence
when one of the marvels of television is that
it is bright and glowing and only mildly radioactive.

"Millennium Madness" recounts the frenzy at the turn of the century to descry which events, peoples, and ideas figured most prominently on the "straight line of progress." The above lines imply that in our compromise to settle for the "only mildly radioactive," our euphemistic rephrasing of evils and injustices, and focus only on "the important events" of "progress," we contribute to the perpetuation of "rude awakenings."

As powerful as Ray's work with witness and testimony is, he equally engages with local and private experience. Several of his poems address the individual's experience of the world, the interface in which our private experience is embedded in the texture of the world and vice versa. Ray's poems reveal that value and meaning are located at the intersection of these; however, we must actively seek to interpret "the dreamy lesson," as expressed in his poem "The Shared Bliss." Part of interpretation requires that we explore the adventure of the ordinary, what's taken for granted, what's assumed, beginning with language itself. In "Learning the Language," the slipperiness of idiomatic language instantiates an adventure in translation for a young boy:

But what did his mother mean
when she said his father was a heel—
something on a loaf of bread or a shoe?
True, the missing father had preferred
the end of the bread and if he walked out
on her, his dad must have been in his shoes.

Ray's trademark wittiness shines in these lines. The wide-eyed literalness with which the young boy comprehends his mother's idiomatic use playfully invites the reader to "hear" language again with the innocent ears of a child. The poem's play on language's play on words restores the charm of language, which constitutes the charm of poetry as a genre. As Russian formalist critics would say, the poem "denaturalizes" language, reversing the flattening effect that everyday use inevitably enacts. "Heel" is thus magically the

end of the bread loaf, the rear bottom of a shoe, and the truant husband and father—to the young boy, all three simultaneously. Ray spins out the clever pun to greater and greater degrees until the poem's finale, which ends on a strangely poignant note:

> *. . . Learning*
> *to think was exciting, for the boy figured out all*
> *by himself that the love of his parents was dead*
> *as a doornail, the kind he pondered every time*
> *he picked one up, flaking rust, and rough to the touch.*

Language is only "dead as a doornail" as long as we take it for granted. Poetry, like children, invites us to see the world anew; this process begins with appreciating the materiality, the "rough" and "flaking" texture of language which represents our only means of communication of, and communication with, the world. Similarly, the poem "Randomness" reflects this ethos of close attention to the ordinary aspects of experience:

> *I open the book at random and ask,*
> *"What am I meant to see here?"*
> *And the same question can be asked*
> *of the streets and the faces,*
> *the malls and the mountains.*

As in so many of Ray's poems, here the speaker makes meaning of the world by "reading" the world. Perceiving its physical contours and passively standing by in the pageant of life does not comprise meaning; it is such superficial existence that underpins the approach of a great number of people who, as in "Millennium Madness" and "The Pecking Order," weigh the pros ·and cons and values of beings according to their nominal status. Yet in "Randomness" the portrayal of reading the world explicitly shows that this process begins with reading the ordinary and thus, overlooked, aspects of experience. In forging this link, Ray's poetic oeuvre suggests that poetry itself is an act of interpretation that achieves significance for both the poet and the reader.

Likewise, the poem "A Shared Bliss" beckons us to "read" the touching encounter between two strangers, a child and

an "old / and shriveled woman," who frame the poem. Their bliss remains obscure to the speaker and we readers, "those of the middle / distance, the muddled years," that are framed on either side by child and elder and located in the center of the poem. The poem speaks for "the muddled" classes of humanity whose experience is troubled and aggrieved with private and public burdens; yet it ends with the hope that we recognize the quiet corners of life, the simple bliss of child and elder who are "mentors to those of us who watched / and studied long the dreamy lesson."

Finally, the poem "Portal" reflects Ray's refusal to exploit his subject matter, implying that in reading and interpreting and representing the lives and experiences of others, as well as ourselves, we not interpret in order to appropriate but rather to understand our inherent contingency:

> *In sum, it is not wise to gaze at stones or bear them*
> *heavy on the mind. It's best to throw away the names*
> *and greet the dead as one, and if you know it,*
> *chant some prayer they too once sang.*

Reality isn't to be deciphered as other, but to bring us to an understanding of the closeness inhering in other and self, person and world. Whether conveying the local or global, the living or the dead, the tragic or the playful, Ray's poetry hears and speaks the world, inviting his readers to do the same. As Ray describes in an interview with Nibir Ghosh, "Even when idle we are seeking and making discoveries, trying to escape the weariness, fret and fever, the banality of life, and swap it for heaven, Utopia, an epiphany. Life is at its best when this just happens. And for that we must let it."

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Mirrors and Lamps: A Conversation With David Ray

Nibir K. Ghosh

*Reading David Ray's poetry, essays and memoirs can convince you that he is not simply one of those flowers whose fate it is to be born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness upon the desert air of Arizona. Like the Grand Canyon, he stands majestically in his grand isolation. He delights in ceaselessly creating, out of the raw material of life, a fabric of exquisite beauty that offers a fine blending of agony and pain, happiness and cheer. His works do often mirror a world in chaos and disorder but his prolific genius and his love for truth provide ample light to negotiate such darkness. In this lively conversation with me at his home in Tucson, Arizona, Ray shares his priorities and concerns about life, literature and politics.- **NKG***

Ghosh: "None can usurp this height but those to whom the miseries of the earth are miseries, and will not let them rest." Would you, like Keats, confess that your poetry reflects your effort to transcend imaginatively the weariness, the fever and fret of life on earth?

Ray: Your question is a remarkable example of synchronicity, as I was just today working on a group of poems with that theme, though I was not aware of it. You have given a name to it. "Randomness" is about the meaning to be found without effort. "I open the book at random and ask,/ 'What am I meant to see here?'/ And the same question can be asked of the streets and the faces,/ the malls and the mountains…." Even when idle we are seeking and making discoveries, trying to escape the weariness, fret and fever, the banality of life, and swap it for heaven, Utopia, an epiphany. Life is at its best when this just happens. And for that we must let it. I say in "Randomness" that if life seems like hell, just wait it out and it may be heaven the next day. That is a code, by the way, that has sometimes kept me alive. In truth we are always "at the brink of heaven," but we often forget it. We need constant discipline such as we find

in Plato's dialectic of remembering what you came to this earth with or some other method of meditation. I was drawn to the Quakers because in their seeking for truth they practice what I've long employed as method for poetry, waiting for the spirit to move you, for the truth to be spoken through you. It sounds pretentious, but actually it requires real humility, nakedness before God. Jim Dickey put it more directly. "Stand out in a lightning storm and get hit by lightning." People might think you look funny, running around in a lightning storm, but gardeners considered Gerard Manley Hopkins weird because he would stand and look at a tree for an hour, no doubt seeking its inscape.

Ghosh: In a poem from *Not Far from the River* you lament that "Love dies if you can't get to see her/ or if you see her too much,/ also from the gossip of vile men./ Or from no cause at all." How do you account for such unredeemed pessimism?

Ray: That, of course, was a translation, meant to be witty, but even my own pessimism sometimes shocks me, and if I responded to it with emotional freedom I'd have been dead by suicide long ago. Odysseus had to tie himself to the mast at times. I do that regularly, having made an ethical decision to stick it out, for I know how deeply survivors are hurt by a suicide. Edna St. Vincent Millay, in "Conscientious Objector" puts it well: "I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death." Yet in my memoir I describe that period in my life when I seriously attempted suicide and got close enough to death's door to learn that the world would not grieve much. Plath and Sexton may seem to be excessively grieved, but in fact the cultish notoriety of their posthumous careers has little to do with them either as poets or persons. It's knee-jerk romanticism, thrill-seeking. Their readers can project all their own morbid fantasies of making the world stand up and pay attention by such a daring act. We do everyone a dis-service to glamorize this industry; studies have shown that there are many imitative suicides for any celebrity suicide. Whether by intention or not, then, public figures who commit suicide cause the deaths of others just as surely as if they leapt from the Golden Gate onto a boat full of admirers.

Ghosh: Actually that sounds rather optimistic, doesn't it? You are affirming life rather than getting caught up in this glamorization of death.

Ray: Yes, suicide is a copout and we should not rewrite personal histories to make it sound noble. Plath would probably still be around if medications available today had been handy, though she'd have had to go for help, and she might not have. Sexton, of course, wore out several psychiatrists, some of whom were very foolish, the one, for example, who taped her sessions and sent her home with cassettes to listen to over a pitcher of martinis. That would bring anyone down, narcissism empowered, approved, sanctified. There was no way she could get out of the trap of the self.

Ghosh: Then you think we're a death-worshiping culture?

Ray: Yes, even with our fanatic eroticism. Both pornography and capital punishment turn the body into meat. It's bad enough to see executions casually worked into the television news or documentaries. Addiction, be it to sex or drugs (alcohol--ethanol--and nicotine not considered drugs, of course), is repeating the same acts over and over without learning anything. Robert Bly once wrote an essay about James Dickey's "The Fiend," claiming that the voyeur in the poem wanted to climb in the bathroom window to rape the woman. I thought that was unfair, especially because Bly wouldn't grant the poet his claim to a persona, but insisted it was Dickey himself, the same man who had written "The Firebombing," taking pleasure in bombing civilians in World War II. But whether the poem was about Dickey himself or not, the transition from voyeurism to rape and murder is not unusual. Sex as we encourage it with promiscuity, orgies, and pornography is heartless, hardly linked at all with love. I say this not as a moralist but with a sad acknowledgement that much of what passes for sex is just a part of our death worship. "Why War?" Freud asked. Listen to the war crimes trials and you'll find out. Rape. Chaos. Abandonment of control and of respect for other beings. We people the earth with mass graves because we refuse to look deeply enough into ourselves and, in the words of a killer I discuss in my memoir, 'stop ourselves before we kill more.' Doris Lessing

thinks that “we are a race that cannot learn,” and I hope she’s wrong.

Ghosh: Then your method is exploring self as well as subjects outside the self?

Ray: Yes, and trying to write with objectivity, not the subjectivity of narcissism. I often write almost in a trance, and try not to censor. My essay about the Wright Brothers, e.g., is unbearably pessimistic and totally at odds with what anyone else has to say about them, but unfortunately I hold that view. Otherwise I think we’d have to deny the millions of dead as a result of their exponential enhancement of our ability to kill. Just recently a man was interviewed on N.P.R. because he’s invented a gun that can fire around corners so the shooter doesn’t have to expose his body. He intends, he says, for the weapons to be available only to police and the military—the good guys, of course, not the others. The Wright Brothers were more forthright. When asked what their plane would be good for they said “War” and set about trying to sell it to any nation interested.

Ghosh: King Hala’s world of the gatha poets was simpler?

Ray: No airplanes, no bombs, no guns 2000 years ago in those villages. The gatha you cite reflects the witty acknowledgement that love is transitory, but it is in no way a society’s postcoital death worship as our final war is likely to be. Thank God, though, that love is no more transitory than it is. I’m hanging on to all I can get.

Ghosh: Your poetic journey is marked by various landmarks in the form of awards and accolades. Does such recognition motivate you to continue with your “endless search” ?

Ray: Most of the people in my field are infected with viral Awarditis and competition in its many avatars, but my motives are different, I believe, than those of most. Only a small percentage of my work gets into print--I still get rejections almost daily for both single poems, stories, and essays as well as for book manuscripts. So for me an award is not an opportunity to rest on my laurels (as it would be for many), but it stimulates hope that my work will find its way

out of my files. ("To have great poets you must have great audiences," said Whitman, and you know the Keats sonnet: "When I have fears that I may cease to be/ Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,/ Before high-piled books, in charact'ry,/ Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain…." We're obsessed by the question of what we leave for posterity, so if an award improves the chances for my work finding the audience it cries out for, then bring on the award. But Epictetus reminds us that we cannot make others admire us. Maybe our friends can, but we can't.

Ghosh: What about Dr. Johnson's statement that great works of art create their own audiences ?

Ray: Had Boswell not created Dr. Johnson's audience, he probably would be known only for his dictionary. And you cite Thomas Gray, with his wonderful lines, "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

Ghosh: Your *One Thousand Years: Poems about the Holocaust* makes me recall the agony and the anguish I experienced after my visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. It's a very poignant description of the crimes perpetuated by man on his fellowmen. What motivated you into the creation of this masterpiece?

Ray: You are very generous, but I believe that if you are ever a victim (as I was as a child) you are forever trying to lose your own woes by getting caught up in somebody else's. That's a way of putting your own puny sufferings into perspective. What are a few abandonments and beatings compared to what those victims went through? And not only the Jews, to be sure, and not only back in the Forties. Someone pointed out that most of my works are about victims of one sort or another—it's not a deliberate choice and I've tried hard to overcome the hazards of subjectivity, self-pity, sentimentalizing, and so on. My friend Gerald Stern says it's very important for non-Jews, too, to discuss the Holocaust, though I'm aware that some believe otherwise.

Ghosh: What drew you into the realm of poetry?

Ray: Tough question to be honest about, but your perception is probably based on the reality that there's been more positive response to my poetry than to my other writings, though I still pursue other forms as well. I love poetry and read and write it daily, but I also love other genres. Right now I'm reading Tolstoy—*The Cossacks* and *Hadja Murad*—which document his service in Chechnya well over a century ago. It's still the same horrible conflict, atrocities and all. I wrote a satirical piece a couple of years ago reviewing *Hadja Murad* as a new novel, and only revealed in the last sentence that it had been published by Tolstoy a hundred years ago. A Russian soldier could write the same self-lacerating account today, appalled at what his comrades are doing.

Ghosh: Who are your literary ancestors?

Ray: Whitman, Lawrence, Williams, Rexroth, Jeffers, Mayo, Levertov, Stafford, Millay (much scorned today), Dreiser, Hemingway, but they are infinite. I don't consciously imitate anyone, but the hunger for insight and wisdom that pervades these workers in the word mines never fails to move me. I have poems in honor of all of them.

Ghosh: How would you underline what you may term as your ars poetica?

Ray: "Write before you think," I tell my students, then go on from there.

Ghosh: Isn't that like putting the cart before the horse?

Ray: Of course that's the conventional view, but I think teachers who make people too self-conscious have blocked them at the outset. Creativity is about disinhibition, then some reining in.

Ghosh: Sartre in *Words*, James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Richard Wright in *Black Boy* describe graphically how the artistic spirit finds in adversities of life the raw material for the nourishment of the creative imagination.

Can one look at your *The Endless Search: A Memoir* from the same perspective?

Ray: I'm sure, for in memoir one looks back on the epiphanies, the crises, the lost faces. Someone who had read *The Endless Search* recently told me I'd have to go see the movie "Sea Biscuit" because there was a scene in there that made her think of me and cry. I wondered what the devil that could be, but all of a sudden this scene came up and I broke into tears. It was the scene where the parents sell the boy, turn him out to earn his own living. Though it's at a racetrack in this movie, I call it "the blacking factory scene," which Dickens described so poignantly—his parents putting him out to work. That happened to me even before I was sold off to a sexual predator as described in *Search.* My friend Amritjit Singh also pointed out that some of my earlier experiences are similar to those Richard Wright went through. I had forgotten those scenes, but it is all too true. I didn't burn down our sharecropper shack, but I remember chasing a rat, as in Wright's *Native Son*. And as I also confessed in *Search* I could easily have become a monster like Wright's Bigger Thomas.

Ghosh: I remember having come across a remark by David Ignatow where he states "David Ray writes poems that are like a man with an injured child in his arms walking from street to street in search of a doctor or a hospital. He finds none and keeps walking doggedly, and we may tell him, David, such a cure you are looking for your injured faith in the world is in the truth of your poems. They will survive, they will survive." Your comments?

Ray: Absolutely accurate. Still true.

Ghosh: Both parts of it?

Ray: Indeed. I'm becoming confident some of the poems will survive, at least as long as many other artifacts around us, though they're not etched in bronze. But David knew I never expected to survive even my adolescence, and it is a source of daily amazement that I'm still around, now a member of that tenth of our population that's officially old. I have an essay, by the way, about David Ignatow's "Journals" and

how they reveal how hard he struggled not to kill himself during his life-long depression.

Ghosh: What rainbow of hope and cheer do you visualize for the world you live in, both real and imaginative?

Ray: 'That it will turn out to be okay for what it was, is, and will be.' As I describe in a poem in *Sam's Book,* Frost said something like that when asked if he had hope for the future, and he said he had it even for the past, that it would turn out to be okay for what it was. I don't think past and future are separable, so the best we can do is hope for both. Clearly, however, we are not in charge. We can work hard 'to do no harm,' but otherwise it's out of our hands.

Ghosh: As a poet and writer, what are the experiences of your visit to India which you can effortlessly recall?

Ray: That I felt more at home there than I do most of the time in America. Since I didn't know the languages being spoken around me I was held in a non-verbal and non-judgmental (or so it seemed) acceptance. Americans reject one another at the drop of a hat—differ with one opinion and you're blacklisted and all that. But there were none of those games. It was as welcome a respite from invidiousness as finding myself in a mountain cabin without television (as we did in the Himalayan foothills). Americans criticize the caste system, of course, but they'd have more credibility if they didn't maintain such a rigid one themselves. Judy and I still have India in the family, a daughter who married an Indian, and a family we were very close to in Jaipur—the Singhs—they're still family. They don't give up on us as easily as do some American friends and family.

Ghosh: Would you agree that for Americans privacy to the extent of isolation is an important ingredient in their pursuit of happiness?

Ray: Insofar as solitude is essential for mental growth, and happiness is very much a mental achievement. A Spanish writer, Don Ramón del Valle-Inclán, put it beautifully, worth remembering: "I loved solitude and, as is the wont of birds, sang only for myself. The sorrow that nobody would listen to

me lamenting now became my pleasure. I was assisted by the aid of the Muses." We count on those muses as good company and they definitely prefer solitude.

Ghosh: Were you inspired by the Taj Mahal, that beautiful monument of love, during your visit to Agra? One of your poems mentions you had to rest content with the rickshaw-puller's version rather than see the monument yourself.

Ray: We did see the Taj, and it is memorable. My poem about staying back in the hotel instead of going there is not quite true, but you have to see a subject slant or with peripheral vision when it's so stunning and ineffable. It was, as I said in the poem, as close to an embodied orgasm as any architectural creation could be.

Ghosh: In *Demons in the Diner* you have provided excellent word-portraits of African-American greats like W.E.B. Du Bois and the Delany sisters. How would you like to view the 'American Dilemma' from the perspective of a white American in the 21st century? Has the color line disappeared or does it continue to function within the limits of invisibility as viewed by Ralph Ellison?

Ray: Myrdal and Wright, unfortunately, are as valid today as when they wrote. Howard Dean got himself into trouble when he said that racism needs to be confronted right on, with no one left out of the discussion. But that is true. My family of origin is pretty racist, and my daughter's African-American child, a wonder, is not spoken of by some of them. But it's too late to change them. They no longer use the N word in my presence, and that's about as much progress as I can expect. My father's racism is mentioned in *Search.* Fortunately my daughter lives in an area in Ohio where my grandson is not likely to be discriminated against. And another of my daughters who's married to an Indian lives in Los Angeles and since he's on the police force, I think he can insure a certain level of respect. Though I am not an Indian, an African, or a Jew, I know what it is like to be discriminated against, treated as less than full value, disrespected, not paid attention to. I've sometimes remarked that I became a writer because people paid no attention to what I say, and that's still true to a large extent.

In any gathering (even one where I am present to receive a prize) I am often treated like an invisible man. I know the feeling. We are all Palestinians. Incidentally, Kafka's story "Before The Law" is an uncanny description of how we can be kept outside the circle for life, teased by those who repeatedly close doors in our faces. Like "The Hunger Artist," it's a writer's parable.

Ghosh: How would you respond to the most recent controversy regarding the Thurmond-Essie Mae Washington episode?

Ray: Strom Thurmond's family is rejecting her and they are infuriated that she has told the truth after decades of going along with her father's lies. There have been many exposures of the schizoid treatment of race in this country. If there's one lie there are many. Clinton's accusers who demanded impeachment had mistresses. Jefferson had his Sally, and at Monticello we went through the underground tunnel he used, his secret passage to her. I have a poem that speaks of how my drinking cronies treated black girls who were under the misimpression that they were being wooed as potential wives when in fact they rarely were. Racism is a huge fault—rift—line right across our continent, no more excusable now than when it was practiced as outright slavery.

Ghosh: Do you contemplate writing something like 'Poems about the Holocaust' about the African American experience of three hundred years to depict the collective exploitation and suffering which Blacks have undergone in a predominantly white America?

Ray: I don't choose such subjects with conscious intention, but I'd love to gather my poems on African-American themes and scenes. Essays too, such as the ones on Mbembe Milton Smith and Charles W. Chesnutt, the great novelist who quit writing because he knew he could never be taken seriously. He could have passed for white, but he had far too much integrity for that. His solution for the race problem was intermarriage--genetic mingling--and I felt a certain satisfaction when my daughter gave birth to a brown baby, but in truth tolerance should not depend on anybody muting

their color or darkening it. We should accept people as they are, unconditionally, I-Thou, not I-It. Then there'd be no more Holocausts.

Ghosh: Do you look at your function as a poet, like an "unacknowledged legislator" in the manner of Shelley or would you prefer to state like Auden that "poetry makes nothing happen"?

Ray: I do think poetry makes something happen. In other times and places it has made a great deal happen. But even here it opens the heart, enlarges the mind, provokes, can be a gadfly, and a powerful instrument of protest. The scorn directed at protest poetry is simply a sign of its power. Defenders of the status quo have to reject it.

Ghosh: How do you view the relationship between art and politics?

Ray: There are many poets whose work relates to little in the real world. If I worked at it I too might achieve irrelevancy. But it's just not my line. For me breathing is a political act and politics is often perverted art though even politics could rise to the level of art as it did with Ben Franklin and at times with F.D.R.

Ghosh: You seem to hate tyranny in all forms. Does such motivation come from anything personal?

Ray: The landlord was always after us. We were denied everything, including medical attention we couldn't afford. Doors were closed to us because of our "status" as "white trash." We were raised to live in shame, apologizing for our existence, and ever aware that others have the power of life and death over us. I've escaped, but there are millions of others who are powerless, thanks to a heartless system of welfare for the wealthy at the expense of the needy. "The sleep of reason engenders monsters," Goya told us, and it looks like reason will remain asleep well into the millennium.

Ghosh: The events of 9/11 have changed America forever. As a poet, how were your sensibilities affected or altered? How would you look at Amiri Baraka's poem "Somebody

Blew Up America," a poetic statement that deprived Baraka of his Poet Laureateship?

Ray: I haven't really read the poem so I don't know if he was writing out of irony, but I know how painful it is (and in his case expensive) to have one's irony ignored and to be held accountable in the most judgmental and punitive way. And even if he said what he supposedly said, is there not room for one non-correct point of view in poetry? God knows there's enough outrageous (and violent) nonsense in the other media. Why do we demand so much more of poetry, and why does the average person think he is an expert on aesthetics? If the men in Washington were held as accountable as Baraka was, wouldn't most of their offices have been emptied out by now? The fact is that most celebrities shoot off their mouths in all directions and it never costs them ten thousand a year or an honorific position, nor does it provoke the abolishment of one of the few roles for artists in this country. (No more laureates for New Jersey!) So I'd say that Baraka had a right to be a fool or an idiot (in Dostoyevsky's sense) or an indulger of risky irony sure to be misinterpreted. A perfectly inoffensive laureate is an appalling thought.

Ghosh: You have been an ardent pacifist. You have been very articulate, almost an activist, in condemning America's intervention in Vietnam. What do you feel about America's involvement in Iraq? Does it really justify the adage of conflict between Freedom and Fear?

Ray: Thucydides said that twenty years was long enough for forgetfulness and thus the mistakes would be repeated. How long people will tolerate the destruction of their environment and the death toll of a needless war as has ever been fought is anyone's guess. As long as there are plenty of distractions the creeping fascism may keep advancing. In 1936 Sinclair Lewis wrote *It Can't Happen Here,* about how fascism could take over in America. It sounds just like what's been happening at a frightening pace.

Ghosh: You've written directly about Iraq?

Ray: Some of my work on Iraq, including "The Death of

Sardanapalus and Other Poems," is on the Howling Dog Press website (www.howlingdogpress.com). And several of my poems are on www.poetsagainstthewar.org and in various magazines and anthologies. I'm against these needless wars, since as a Quaker I think non-violence can be more effective than violence, and it doesn't outrage the rest of the world. Consider the Middle East, for example, how much more persuasive Satyagraha, Gandhi's non-violence, would be than suicide bombers or wanton destruction of homes in retaliation. And Iraqi civilians could probably get the occupying forces out of their country if they staged a total national sit-down strike. As for going after the 9/11 terrorists, we have not even looked in Saudi Arabia (how many of them were Saudis?) or Pakistan, where Osama bin Laden is probably hiding out. I really believe we could defeat terrorism with non-violent means—isolating, hacking their communications, boycotting, negotiating—and for weeks before the bombing of Afghanistan I thought that's what we were out to do, and I respected those efforts. But then came the bombing, which only inspires more terrorists, helps recruit them, just as Israel's retaliatory strikes create more rage. We have done little to solve the problems, but we've certainly created a lot of new ones, and the world hates and fears us for it. Strangely too, we do not use the withdrawal of foreign aid funding as the tool it could be, for example, in pursuing the Middle East "road map" for peace. At the end of my poem "Boomerang" I ask if anyone ever threw out a boomerang called War and got back one called Peace.

Ghosh: In many of your poems—"Wool Highways" for instance--you have celebrated your love for animals. I remember reading somewhere in an 'about the author note' that mentioned you as living in Tucson, Arizona, "with wife Judy and dog Levi." What motivated your interest in such placid and self-contained creatures?

Ray: A reviewer of my first book, *X-Rays*, said that I seem to confuse animals and people. That's going a bit far, but I agree with Swift that horses are nicer than most people, and there was a lovely letter to the editor about dogs in *The New York Times* (December 20, 2003)--"Dogs Deserve Respect." Jeanne Isenstein listed many services dogs perform and concluded that they "provide humans with a unique and

valuable gift—unconditional love. Let's stop merely exploiting dogs and give them the respect and honor they deserve." I agree. When we treat animals with I-It mean-ness, the transition to treating people that way is an easy one. Cats are great too, but as a bird lover I'd recommend tinkly bells as the cats climb trees around the neighborhood; too many people think feline killing expeditions are amusing.

Ghosh: This sounds as if you're getting close to Gandhi's doctrine of ahimsa.

Ray: I consider that quite a compliment. I don't think my pacifism is quite that pure a philosophy. And consider this: if one believes that violence is not the solution then one must take very strong steps to prevent the need arising. You don't let a Hitler or Saddam build up his power while you sleep or even aid and abet (as was done in both cases), then send out the bombers. You don't ignore the root causes of crime, then think that executing a monster like Bigger Thomas will solve the problem. In an essay called "Is This Child Our Enemy?" I express my brand of pacifism—I can't approve the murder of a single child, whether a Jew, a Palestinian, an American, an Iraqi. There's a writer named William T. Vollmann who, in a *New York Times* interview, "offers a systematic rationale for why and when to use violence." He explains that "Shooting really is the quintessentially American experience," and he wants "to create a simple and practical moral calculus which would make it clear when it is acceptable to kill, how many could be killed and so forth." He sees the freedom to kill as an entitlement, saying "we are constantly confronted with situations not of our own making which entitle us to acts of violence." Now that's the kind of attitude, I fear, that rules today. But are we really entitled to impose violence as earlier empires have? It's never worked in the long run, and has brought those empires down. Why should we, how could we, be the exception?

Ghosh: Does poetry stand a chance of surviving in high-tech America? May I refer to your poem "Millennium Madness" in which you make a very interesting statement in this context: "who/ would wish to hear of war, famine, and pestilence/ when one of the marvels of television is that/ it is bright and glowing and only mildly radioactive"?

Ray: Well, that's one of my ironic remarks about denial, misleading perhaps. But we do indeed live in a world of denial, and contemporary poetry reflects the preference for Voice over Content (as our current Poet Laureate puts it) and a disdain for responses to current history. The previous Poet Laureate scorned those of us who wrote about 9/11, and proclaimed that poets have no responsibility to current history. That's quite a change from when Tennyson was a Poet Laureate. There's certainly little positive response to poetry of conscience. Here's an amusing and symptomatic example. In a recent reading of New York poets at the Poetry Society of America (here I quote *The New York Times* for December 5, 2002), "There was only one poem with a direct reference to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center." The poet explained "that he had started to write the poem before that attack and it was about the siege of Troy." He acknowledged the incidental contemporary parallel, but clearly took no pride in that relevance. The Trojan War, though, was a legitimate subject. But why the silence of all the other poets on this incredible event that changed all our lives? Someone reviewing a poetry anthology a few years ago pointed out that you'd never have known from its pages about the wars, ecological problems, disasters, etc., of the decades represented. Is it that sort of avoidance that earns a magazine its hundred million dollar grant from a drug company notorious for price gouging?

Ghosh: You're suggesting there's a fear of politics, of commitment to truth?

Ray: A fear of truth, a constant effort to maintain the status quo and the comfort level. We're like a big dysfunctional family that fears the child who will blurt out all the secrets. And that's why having a writer in the family is not really desirable. Thomas Wolfe found that out, but so have I.

Ghosh: As a writer where would your preference lie—political dissent in the form of parables such as *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*—or direct action/assault?

Ray: I have written some parables, including my recent "Rumi Jesus," and I'd love to be able to work at the level of

Orwell or Swift, or Lafontaine for that matter. But that's far beyond me. I certainly prefer subtlety to "assault," though. Still, sometimes shock has its value, as Ginsberg knew. He got a startled response from his readers at first, though in time they quit reacting, the way animals will run from spotlights but then become accustomed to being intrusively observed, or the way people get used to noise in public places, an incessant jabber of what I call noise and some call music. It's ubiquitous now. I pity the people who must work under these conditions. In restaurants I will ask "if the noise can be turned down," and am always informed that it is "not noise, it's music." I still say it's noise. In her memoir, *Under My Skin,* Doris Lessing says that "young men are prepared for killing by stirring marches," and so on. Theodore Roethke wrote that "The Devil today takes the form of noise." And there is no defense from the war planes overhead or the rumbles from Iraq.

Ghosh: You agree with Lessing and Roethke?

Ray: Absolutely, we must acknowledge subliminal seduction at work. In agreement with Roethke, Lessing says we're torturing ourselves with music. The F.B.I. blared music at the holdouts at Waco and at Ruby Ridge, and we endure a more subtle torture in stores as we are lulled into a trancelike submission to impulsive buying. With all the subliminal techniques appealing to our senses we have only a slim chance of avoiding the fate of the brainwashed multitudes, the millions of Americans who are happy to have the wool over their eyes. Watching television, we sit as if the lids on our skulls gape open, letting anything the corporations choose to pour into our heads come right in, unfiltered. Within the first hour of waking we've had a hundred brand names and propaganda clichés embedded in our heads, like it or not. Actually, a hundred is an understatement if you turn on the radio, TV, or thumb through the newspaper.

Ghosh: You admire Lessing, then, for consciousness raising? Even in so-called trivial matters, the writer speaks truth to power?

Ray: In truth there is no trivial matter, but we like to deny that and regard people who care as crackpots. The role of writers has become one of giving comfort to the military-industrial and corporate establishments, for that's the road to

comfort and success. In sending out my book manuscript about 9/11 recently, I prefaced it with acknowledgment of this reality. "Although poetry in response to contemporary events has been put down soundly by some of our leading critics and fellow poets, some of us do—for better or worse—express our reactions in poetry, with hope that our work will rise above polemics." The manuscript embodies this hope. In these poems I draw upon my feelings of grief and rage at the event, but also try to put it into an historical context. Tolstoy wrote in *War and Peace* that in understanding recent conflicts we never go back far enough, deep enough. Bill Stafford put it this way: "the darkness is always deeper."

Ghosh: Do you want to be known primarily as an activist poet?

Ray: Not at all. That is a small part of my work, and I'm grievously disappointed if I am perceived primarily as such. Much of my poetry is lyric, love poetry, transcreations from the poets of the past whose intensity has been underappreciated by English readers, work on a wide variety of subjects, and in several genres. It's very unfortunate that there's such a passion for typecasting. I could name any number of poets who benefit from this in the sense that their work is wholly consistent. You can always recognize their styles, their subjects, their techniques. Sometimes I envy and admire their containment, their narrowing of focus, but I couldn't do it. I have to be open to what I feel and see. I simply cannot make such a strategic decision to limit my style to a chatty, non-controversial, witty, urbane, pleasantly charming persona in order to assure the kind of success I see in some cases. Nor can I suppress my views in order not to offend those who pass out the goodies. For me writing is a calling, a spiritual quest, and I can't betray it for success.

Ghosh: Thank you. It has been my pleasure to speak with you.

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RE-MARKINGS

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If you in the treetop you can't do nothing but jump to the ground. But first you got to know how you got up there. Did you climb up to get some apples or was you run up by a bear? You got to know that cause you might have to start running when you hit the ground.

August Wilson, Jitney

(August Wilson has twice received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, for his plays *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*)

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