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Article abstract

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THE ABSENT TRAVELLER IS STILL FAR FROM THE RIVER

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Résumé

À partir de l'examen de trois traductions, deux récentes et une ancienne, d'un recueil de poèmes indiens, l'auteur s'intéresse aux diverses stratégies d'appropriation du texte, soulève des questions à propos des transformations qui résultent de la traduction et discute des formes que pourrait prendre la reprise d'un texte ancien.

Abstract

Through the examination of two recent and one older translation of an ancient Indian anthology of poems the various strategies of appropriation of the text are brought to the fore. Questions are raised concerning the transformation brought about through translation, the forms the recovery of an ancient text can take.

One of the utilities of literary translation is that it helps us to recover not entirely lost but somewhat neglected literary texts. Thus *Beowulf* or *The Owl and the Nightingale* or *The Canterbury Tales*, which were all composed in older varieties of English, are now available in a more modern form of the same language. Even the *New Testament*, which endured for a long time in the first King James's language, can now be read and savoured in the second Queen Elizabeth's English. These may not be translations in the popular sense of the term but the process has given the *arvachin* (modern) readers access to *prachin* (ancient) writing.

A very different process has achieved similar results in India, which is so much larger than England and at home to so many languages. Here the transfer of texts has most often been from an older language like Sanskrit or Pali or Tamil to a modern Indian language like Hindi or Bangla or Marathi. In some instances — like that of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki or the *Mahabharata* of Vedavyas — the original work has been ousted in popular enjoyment by their regional language versions. And in what is a very rare instance, *Brihatkatha*, an early prose work composed by Gunadhya sometime between the 2nd and 4th century A.D. in a variety of Prakrit¹ named Paisachi, has survived only in three Sanskrit and one Tamil versions. The practice of translation has, therefore, performed acts of recovery which, in some cases, developed into feats of preservation.

When the English language came to India and, from the 18th century onwards, gave signs of every intention to stay on, one clear signal was through translation. Starting with Sir William Jones's *Sacoontala*, published in 1789 from Calcutta, nearly all major literary works in Sanskrit and (Old) Tamil, Pali and the Prakrits, have been translated into English. The late 18th and 19th century translations were done mostly by the British, a few by Americans; from the late 19th century onwards Indians joined the enterprise in growing numbers. It may almost be inferred that should some Indian literary text not have been translated into English even now, it may not yet have been awarded the status of a significant work.

One unquestionably significant literary text that somehow escaped the attention of English-language translators for a long time is the compilation known as *Gathasaptashati*.

David Ray's solution is fairly simple if inadequate. Instead of worrying overmuch about the original text, he has taken Professor Basak's translation and played "with casting the poems into idiomatic American." (8) Also, after thinking "about a form that might work" (8) and trying out Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* style, he decided in favour of flexible and unrhymed quatrains. What he does not tell us is that in order to flesh out all four lines, every now and then he has had to add something to the substance if not the sense of the original. Nor does he admit that the end is not yet in sight of the pernicious influence Fitzgerald has exerted on "Orientalist translators" who have come after him. As for the criterion for selecting what to translate, he has eliminated "those verses that would require footnotes." (9) When I tallied Ray's versions with those of Basak, I found that after translating nearly all the poems of the first *shatakam*, Ray ran out of steam and became more selective, choosing poems at greater intervals. In the absence of footnotes, he has had to work a certain amount of explanation into the rendering of some of the verses. No matter how skilfully done, this mode tends to attenuate the original statement. So much so that on several occasions I found it difficult to relate a rendering to its original.

Compared with David Ray's casual, sometimes even supercilious, attitude towards the Prakrit original — he wanted no truck, for example, with 'horripilations'¹¹ — Arvind Mehrotra's attitude is far more conciliatory, even respectful. The reason for this difference could be that even though Mehrotra writes his own verse in English, by all measures he is an Indian poet and had perhaps become aware only recently of his true inheritance. In his translator's note he speaks of *Gathasaptashati* in a way that suggests he is trying to reclaim this heritage. Consequently, he has aimed at providing "an accurate and readable" version of the original. Ray feels no such responsibility, and therefore has produced a readable version without tying himself to accuracy.

All the same, Mehrotra has assumed only a partial responsibility. He has selected only 207 poems to translate and these, as announced in the sub-title, have been assembled under the description of "Prakrit love poetry." Similar headings were used by large-circulation magazines like *Debonair* or *Imprint* when they published samples of Mehrotra's translations in the mid-1980s, as if these poems would not attract attention otherwise.¹² Mehrotra's selection illustrates only one aspect of *Gathasaptashati*, which is many-faced as well as multi-voiced. He, too, has abjured footnotes but has attached end-notes to individual poems. These are useful, most so when they clarify who is speaking or when and to whom. Many of his versions are set out in four lines, some in more, and Mehrotra explains: "[If] a few of my English renderings appear somewhat longer than the others, that's because they needed a different arrangement for pauses and not because I added anything to them. Indeed, there are occasions when I did the opposite and compressed a verse by dropping a word or phrase." (xi) What such compression does to his claim to accuracy can only be accurately judged by those who can read his versions against the original. This must have been his purpose in placing the Prakrit originals just above their English versions. Or did he merely seek to create the illusion that he has indeed translated from the original?

Those who cannot read the original can at least compare Mehrotra's as well as Ray's versions with the faithful if unpoetic translations done by Professor Basak. Material for this exercise has been presented in the appendix to this article. We cannot draw conclusions rightaway, but such sampling may show our new translators as absent travellers who are still far from the river of the original text. Let us encourage them to reach the water.

APPENDIX

In the six samples given below, the heading of each consists of the name of the poet and the number of the poem in Radhagovinda Basak's edition. For each, the English versions are by Basak, Ray and Mehrotra respectively.

1. Durgaswami, I.11
 - A. When the (little) son climbed on the back of his father fallen at the feet (of his offended mother), a smile appeared even (on the face) of the householder's wife, though feeling so poignantly afflicted by anger.
 - B. Mother was angry, Father fell on his knees,
Kissing her feet. I climbed on his back.
She broke into laughter, dragged him away.
Years later, I figured it out.
 - C. The remorseful husband
Fallen at her feet
Their little boy
Climbs on his back
And the sullen wife
Laughing.
2. Avataka, I.36
 - A. Even the character of a woman, whose residence is on the junction of four roads and who is charming to look at, who is youthful and whose husband is abroad — is not (sometimes) dissolute.
 - B. She lives at the junction near the whores,
and her husband's away.
She's charming, youthful and ripe.
There's no moon. Yet she won't let me.
 - C. Lives in main street,
Attractive, young, her husband away,
A light wench her neighbour, hard up too,
And, unbelievably, still chaste.
3. Swargavarman, I.49
 - A. O traveller! look here — in the mid-day even the shadow (of a man) does not slightly come out, lying hidden under the body (itself), out of fear of the Sun's heat. Why should you now take rest (in our house)?
 - B. She let me come in,
sharing her cool room at noon,
for even a shadow seeks refuge,
and under a body's a good place.
 - C. Afraid of mid-day heat
Even your shadow
Stays under your feet:
Come into the shade, traveller.
4. Mandadhip, I.58
 - A. On this day (our husband) has left home (for going abroad) and (it is found) that wakefulness of some persons (i.e. my co-wives) had evidently commenced this day, and the banks of the Godavari also have since this day become tinged with turmeric colour (of their toilet).
 - B. He's gone on a trip, leaving his harem.
Already they're friendly as sisters,
gossip all night,
bathe together at dawn in the river.
 - C. He left today, and today
His wakeful mistresses are abroad:
The banks of the Godavari
Are yellow with turmeric today.

5. Mahadeva, II.4
 - A. The profligate woman, while shedding tears, collects the last Madhuka flowers, so painful to look at, as if they were the (last) bones of a friend (left) on the funeral pyre.
 - B. She gathers Madhuka blossoms
weeping as if they were bones
of her husband, whom she had meant
to join on his funeral fire.
 - C. Mournfully
As if at the pyre
Collecting
Her loved-one's relics
The wanton
Picked
The last
Mahua
blossoms.
6. Asamsah, III.29
 - A. Although all things have been burnt away in the village conflagration, there was (intense) pleasure in my mind because the pitcher (of water) was taken from hand to hand (by both of us).
 - B. Though the entire village burned down
we had the pleasure of seeing each other
still alive, our faces all flushed,
passing that scorched jug around.
 - C. The village
Destroyed
The heart
Ecstatic
Houses
Burning
I passed him
The pitcher.

Notes

1. Any of the ancient Indic languages, other than Sanskrit.
2. *Das Satasatakam des Hala*, Leipzig, F. A. Brockhaus, 1881.
3. *The Prakrit 'Gatha-saptasati'*, Compiled by Satavahana king Hala, edited with introduction and translation in English by Radhagovinda Basak, Calcutta, Asiatic Society, 1971.
4. *Not Far From the River, Poems from the Gatha Saptasati*, translated by David Ray, Port Townsend (Washington), Copper Canyon Press, 1990; *The Absent Traveller, Prakrit Love Poetry from the Gathasaptasati of Satavahana Hala*, selected and translated by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, New Delhi, Ravi Dayal Publisher, 1991.
5. Among his other notable publications are a translation of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* into Bangla, an edition of the Sanskrit text *Ramacharita* of Shankarnandin, an edition of the Prakrit text *Setubandha* of Pravaraśena.
6. Certain poems from this selection were published by the Rajasthan Prakrit Bharati Samsthan of Jaipur in 1983, but I have not been able to examine this publication.
7. *New Letters. India: An Anthology of Contemporary Writing*, edited by David Ray and Amritjit Singh, Kansas City, University of Missouri, 1982.
8. Thus Lee Siegel, in his *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love in Indian Traditions as Exemplified in the 'Gitagovinda' of Jayadeva* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1978) found it necessary "to translate the *Gitagovinda* because no *literal* translation of it into English has been made (although it has been translated into mediocre English 'poesy' quite useless for textual analysis)." See footnote 2 of his "Introduction."
9. *New Writing in India*, edited by Adil Jussawalla, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1974.
10. But see the same scholar's splendid exposition of the *gatha* form in the article "Desire for Meaning: Providing Contexts for Prakrit *gathas*", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 55:1 (1996), pp. 81-93.
11. This will sound racist, but, maybe, as a white Caucasian, he has little hair on his body, and thus does not know this experience.
12. At that time I used to feel vaguely revolted, as if these "regional language" verses were like some of our "regional films" which had to be promoted in a particular way in order to entice large audiences.