



VVIK Nieuws

A Thousand Years of Love

On E. Powys Mathers, *Black Marigolds*, Oxford: B.H. Maxwell, 1919

Paul Streumer

I was curious about Bilhana's poems ever since I read some of these in John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, in the leisure-filled days just before my graduation. From time to time, I thought about them, softly and in passing, as if remember-ring a meeting with a warm and beautiful lady who had drifted out of my life too soon. Recently, however, while working on my collection of old prints of tribal history and poetry, I was surprised to find that none other than William George Archer mentioned Edward Powys Mathers in a 1946 essay on the translation of poetry, in his friend Verrier Elwin's *Folk-songs of Chhattisgarh*. Here is the connection. One year earlier, in 1945, John Steinbeck (fig. 1) had published *Cannery Row*, a novel about a small establishment on the coast of California, where people lived in a mixture of deep poverty and bohemianism. Its intellectual and cultural centre was Doc (fig. 3), who made his living by selling rare sea animals to laboratories all over the land. Doc was Steinbeck's close friend, Ed Ricketts – and *Cannery Row* is a real place. The highlight of the book is a surprise birthday party at Doc's place. A smelly place, as he also kept his specimens of sea creatures there. But it was a riotous party. At the end, when everybody, even the boys and girls from next door, was tired and quiet, Doc read a couple of poems from the Sanskrit. He started:

Even now

*If I see in my soul the citron-breasted fair one
Still gold-tinted, her face like our night stars,
Drawing unto her; her body beaten about with flame,
Wounded by the flaring spear of love,
My first of all by reason of her fresh years,
Then is my heart buried alive in snow.*

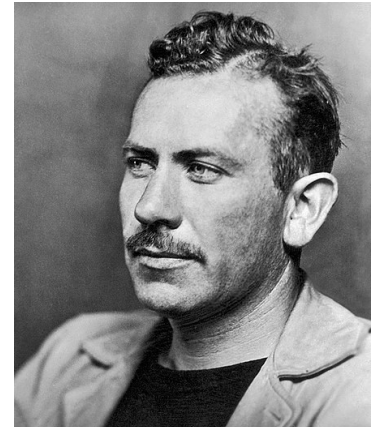
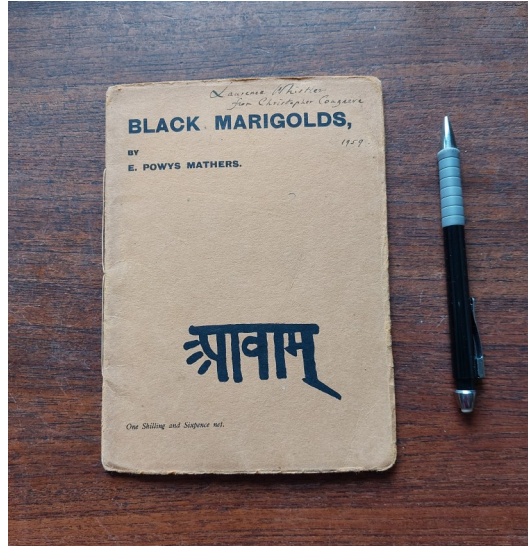


Fig. 1: John Steinbeck(1902-1968)

And, as the party listened, "A little world sadness had slipped all over them. Everyone was remembering a lost love, everyone a call."

The Brit Edward Powys Mathers (fig. 4) had done the translation. It was published in 1919 in *Black Marigolds* (fig. 2). At that time, Indian poetry was virtually unknown outside of India; so, it was a minor sensation. Once I saw the booklet on an antiquarian's website asking a crazy amount of money, as it was advertised as "indispensable for the John Steinbeck specialist". But I remembered it for the poems. I found it again on a website for a price that, after some quite irresponsible reasoning with myself, I could afford. Now it had arrived at my house. I had never thought of its appearance. It turned out to be a small booklet, 19 to 14 cm wide, not unlike the semi-official and very critical magazines we stencilled in our student

Fig. 2 The cover of *Black marigolds*

days. It could have fitted in an envelope, but it was packaged like a book. The cover was of soft, a bit oily, thick paper. Its 22 pages were not all of the same size. They were held together by a hand-knotted cord (fig. 5). An old, rustic way of publishing poetry. Occasionally, we still call a poetry collection a sheaf of verse. Well over 100 years old, the book felt fragile. To keep it in one piece, it needed a protective cover. I rushed to the shop, very happy, and everybody I encountered on my way greeted me with a huge smile. The collection is known as the *Caurapañcāsikā*, the fifty poems of Chauras, or, more informative but certainly less flattering, *The Love Thief*. Edward Powys Mathers called the poet Chauras, but by now he is more widely known as Bilhaṇa. He was a young poet, who fell in love with his pupil, the younger daughter of the king. As fathers do on discovering a secret affair of their daughter, he directed his anger towards the boy. And as kings do, he condemned the astray teacher to death. In the last night in his cell, the young lover composed fifty, completely unrepentant poems. These capture that mood of being so enraptured, that even death loses its importance. It is expressed at the start of each poem in the repetitive “*adyapi*”, here rendered as “Even now”:

Even now

*I remember that you made answer very softly,
We being one soul, your hand on my hair,
The burning memory rounding your near lips;
I have seen the priestesses of Rati make love at moon-fall
And then in a carpeted hall with a bright gold lamp
Lie down carelessly anywhere to sleep.*



Fig. 3: ‘Doc’ Ed Ricketts (1897-1948)

The poems have lost nothing of their impact. Thankfully, hardly any glossary was needed. Glossaries are, so I found, especially loved by translators who have reached the outer limits of their command of language. Edward Powys Mathers (1892-1939) was better at it. But he was cutting corners. Mathers did not mention which manuscript he had used. From his preface we can guess that he used Edwin’s Arnold’s 1896 *An Indian Love-lament*, in both Sanskrit and English. It is also possible that he had gone directly to Arnold’s source, a translation made in 1833 by Peter von Bohlen, a pioneer of Sanskrit studies in Germany. Von Bohlen’s translation was in Latin, and Arnold’s translation into English was quite loose. So, Powys Mathers had to start again from the Sanskrit text itself. He wrote defensively that, although some verses were indeed direct translations,

other should be considered “an interpretation rather than as a translation”. It was this modesty, or realism, that had attracted William Archer.

But Mathers had been on fire. He translated the fifty poems in 1915 when he was 23 years old, in “two or three sessions, sitting on a box by the stove in hutments”, not daring to disrupt the flow by moving to “more luxurious minutes and places”. He succeeded admirably. The mood and the images speak directly to us about the rush of being in love:

*Even now
I seem to see my prison walls come close,
Built up of darkness, and against that darkness
A girl no taller than my breast and very tired,
Leaning upon the bed and smiling, feeding
A little bird and lying slender as ash-trees,
Sleepily aware as I told of the green
Grapes and the small bright-coloured river flowers.*



Fig 4: Edward Powys Mathers (1892-1939)

How did it end for the people involved in the poetry reading in Cannery Row?

Edward Powys Mathers went on to make a long translation, over 2,000 pages long, from a French version of *The Thousand and One Nights*; then he continued as a composer of cryptic crosswords for *The Observer*. He died in his sleep in 1939, at the age of 46. Doc, the marine biologist and philosopher Ed Ricketts, died in 1968 at the age of 50, when his car was hit by a train. John Steinbeck continued as an author and received the 1962 Nobel prize for literature. He died in 1968, then 66 years old, of heart failure. He had been a heavy smoker. Is it

important? In the end, maybe not. The verses of the love thief were written long before Bilhana finally disclosed his name. It is said that poetry transcends times and places. From nearly 1000 years ago in a dark cell in India, to a bit over 100 years ago on a box in a hutment in England and on to a reading,

What about our poet and his lover? The sources are not unanimous. Mathers presents Chauras’ poems as composed in the last few hours of his life, but that could well be an embellishment of history, as poems have to be polished after the first rush of writing. Luckily, there is also a South Indian collection (E. S. Ariel, below) with a happier ending, in which Chauras was merely exiled. Some say he even married his princess, but, contrary to the opinion of the poet, in these translations, she appears as a minor character. Each source gives her another name. Our poet ended up at the Cālukya court, composing the *Vikramāṅkadeva Caritam*, the history of Vikramāditya VI.



Fig. 5: The hand-knotted binding

In it, he reveals himself as Bilhaṇa, hailing from Kashmir. Some say that was in the year 1080, others prefer 1120 instead. A difference of forty years! That is a huge gap for a historian. Is it important? In the end, maybe not. The verses of the love thief were written long before Bilhana finally disclosed his name. It is said that poetry transcends times and places. From nearly 1000 years ago in a dark cell in India, to a bit over 100 years ago on a box in a hutment in England and on to a reading, 80 years ago, in a storeroom with preserved fishes on the coast of California. Scholarship can be frightfully exact, but it can not compete with the beats of the poet's heart:

Even now
I know that I have savoured the hot taste of life
Lifting green cups and gold at the great feast.
Just for a small and a forgotten time
I have had full in my eyes from off my girl
The whitest pouring of eternal light.
The heavy knife. As to a gala day.



Fig. 6. Leela Shiveshwarkar, *Chaurapañchāsikā: a Sanskrit Love Lyric*, Plate 3

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First comes the Sanskrit text (pp. 469-489), followed by the French translation (pp. 490-505). After "un préambule étendu destine á expliquer l'occasion de ses amours", the French translation of the fifty poems starts on p. 498. It has a happy ending as, at the very end, the king gives his daughter (p. 505). Then follow "Notes, Variantes, metres employés, commentaire, Observations de detail", par Éd. Ariel, Pondichéry, 8 Octobre 1847 (pp. 505-534). In the same volume we find a description of the manuscript of the poems on p. 70: "Avec préambule. Sur papier Européenne".
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Festschrift (Ellen Raven)

Al vanaf haar studietijd is ons VVIK lid Ellen Raven in de ban geweest van de kunst van de Guptas, in het bijzonder van hun gouden munten. Dat begon met een excursie voor studenten naar het muntenkabinet van het British Museum onder leiding van Prof. de Casparis, de hoogleraar die onderwijs gaf over de oude geschiedenis van India aan de hand van inscripties. Daar bevindt zich een van de beste collecties ter wereld. Met



Ellen krijgt het *Festschrift* uitgereikt

een opstapje via haar doctoraalscriptie en een eerste eigen systematische benadering in haar proefschrift, heeft Ellen tijdens haar lange loopbaan bij de Universiteit Leiden deze muntkunst niet meer losgelaten. Haar Indologische achtergrond is altijd van belang geweest om zowel de iconografie van de koningsportretten alsook de Sanskriet teksten op de munten goed te kunnen doorgronden. Inmiddels is Ellen afgezwaaid van haar universitaire werk, maar haar onderzoek en publiceren over Gupta munten gaat gestaag door. Om haar betrokkenheid bij de Gupta muntkunst te ondersteunen, ontving Ellen op de jaarlijkse bijeenkomst van de Oriental Numismatic Society, gehouden in Leiden op 9 september j.l., een fraai geïllustreerd *Festschrift in honour of Dr Ellen Raven*, met daarin bijdragen over Oosterse munten, Gupta en anderszins. Een inspanning van de Diestse Studiekring voor Numismatiek waar ze trots op mag zijn!



Jayastambha

Victor van Bijlert

Sinds 2007 promoten de Verenigde Naties 2 oktober, de verjaardag van Mahatma Gandhi, als Internationale Dag van de Geweldloosheid. Rond die datum worden overall officiële en minder officiële bijeenkomsten georganiseerd, ook in Nederland. Een mooie gelegenheid voor ambassadeurs, burgemeesters, voorzitters van aan Gandhi gewijde stichtingen, om te spreken over het belang van inclusiviteit, geweldloosheid, zorg voor de aarde, milieubewustzijn etc. Allemaal zaken waarvan men stelt dat Gandhi die ook al voorstond. Een cynicus zou kunnen opmerken dat de vrome woorden zelden serieus genomen worden, laat staan in de praktijk gebracht. Iedereen wijst overigens terecht op het alomtegenwoordige geweld in de huidige wereld (in Gandhi's tijd was het niet anders). Ook ironie ontbreekt niet bij zulke officiële Gandhi-bijeenkomsten: een burgemeester die geweldloosheid roemt terwijl zijn politie soms behoorlijk hard tegen vreedzame demonstranten optreedt; ambassadeurs die verklaren dat in hun landen Gandhi's gedachtegoed nog springlevend is en zelfs de G20 inspireert; organisaties en groepen die wandeltochtjes maken om de zoutmars van 1930 dunnetjes over te doen; politieke partijen die Gandhi's inclusiviteit prediken, terwijl je weet dat ze in werkelijkheid het tegenovergestelde doen. Cynisme is geen goede raadgever: moeten we inderdaad de jaarlijkse rituele verering van Gandhi afdoen als goedbedoelde onzin en hypocrisie, of hebben deze evenementen toch zin? Een optimist kan erop wijzen dat iedere aandacht voor geweldloosheid toch maar mooi meegenomen is. Allicht wordt iemand geraakt door de figuur van Gandhi. En soms zie je iets hoopgevends: een Gandhi-viering geleid door een dame uit Tunesië; schoolkinderen die dansen op muziek van oude Indiase antikoloniale liedjes ook van moslim dichters; in het Vredespaleis in Den Haag een jonge scholier die een toespraak houdt over de Europese Unie en Gandhi's ideaal van geweldloze conflictoplossing en vreedzaam overleg. Je hebt kennelijk vooral geïnspireerde tieners nodig voor een betere wereld.

A Living City and Living Texts

Olli-Pekka Littunen

The famous Hindu pilgrimage destination of Vārāṇasī, a city in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, has a reputation of being an ancient, specifically Hindu city; the city of the god Śiva who grants liberation to his devotees there. The earliest settlement at Vārāṇasī goes back to about the 8th century BCE. It first became a commercial center before turning into a religiously important site between the 4th and 6th centuries CE.¹ Also, from its population of almost 1.2 million people,² almost 500.000 are Muslim.³ Further, the most picturesque and well-known parts of the city, the *ghāṭs*, that is, the steps leading down to the Ganges River flowing by, have been predominantly built only after the 17th century.⁴ So, Vārāṇasī is not only a “Hindu” city, and from the point of view of architecture, not very ancient either. Ancientness and Hindu-ness, however, can be very attractive qualifiers for the city from both a religious and a political point of view.

The Purāṇas (“primordial texts”) are texts that evolved gradually over time and adapted to those religious,



Ken Wieland 2009. “Dashashwamedh and Prayag Ghats, Varanasi.” CC BY-SA 2.0

spatial, or temporal contexts that were needed. Because of this adaptive nature and their enduring importance in Hindu traditions, Purāṇas can be understood as “living texts.” Texts called Māhātmyas, which often glorify different pilgrimage destinations, are found within the Purāṇas. Māhātmyas have also been adapted to fit different contexts. An example can be seen in one such text about Śiva and religious locations in Vārāṇasī, which is now found in a compendium of Māhātmyas (discussed below) and is also present in an earlier form in the *Matsyapurāṇa*.⁵ In this earlier form, the Māhātmya praises the god Viṣṇu and a vow related to him and is not in

any way connected with Śiva or Vārāṇasī. That is, in its newer form, the text has been changed to fit a new sectarian and spatial context.

In my current PhD project, I investigate Māhātmyas about Vārāṇasī by editing, translating, and interpreting their contents. My main primary source is a unique but problematic 12th-14th (?) century palm-leaf manuscript containing a compendium of Māhātmyas that have been attributed to various Purāṇas.⁶ The manuscript is currently in the Kaiser Library in Kāṭhmāṇḍū.⁷ The Māhātmyas of the compendium cannot, for the most part, be identified in the Purāṇas they are attributed to. Often, they cannot be identified in any other extant textual sources either. However, due to the intertextual and adaptive nature of Purāṇas and Māhātmyas in general, parallels can be found with some other texts.⁸ It is possible that the names of the Purāṇas these Māhātmyas have been attributed to have changed over time. It could also be that the Purāṇas in question have become assimilated into other Purāṇas, or just disappeared. The Māhātmyas also contain multiple layers of later changes and corrections alongside irregular Sanskrit that is not in line with the usual grammatical rules of the language.⁹ The process of researching Vārāṇasī through such Māhātmya texts is both troublesome and rewarding. Although I cannot claim to reach a full understanding of all the texts that I investigate, I can find important information about the city and the development of its religious sites. I can find out more information about intertextuality and the creation and adaptive usage of Māhātmyas (and through them also Purāṇas) by looking into the adaptations and attributions of the texts of the compendium.

Also, by seeing which sites have been focused on, and by attempting to date the texts discussing them, I can find out more about important sites in Vārāṇasī, the history (whether that is an idealized history or a concrete history comparable with known historical developments) surrounding them, and how power can be localized and focused on specific sites through textual descriptions. The irregular language and layers of corrections can tell me about scribal conventions and how different people at different times understood and used Sanskrit.

If we compare the evolving, living nature of Māhātmyas and the compendium with that of the city of Vārāṇasī, we can see how change has always been a constant. Whether Vārāṇasī is thought of as an ancient Hindu city or as a multi-religious city of Banārasīs (the people of Vārāṇasī), it has never been stagnant. Vārāṇasī is a living city in the same way as the Māhātmyas and the physical manuscripts containing them are living entities. They all collect, reuse, and change their contents over time, and can, in this way, be a part of a living tradition – both from the point of view of physical reality and idealized textual depictions.

Of course, by thinking of Vārāṇasī as a living city, all changes can be justified, even if they might not be accepted by people at the current time. We should not condone, let's say, the discrimination or displacement of Muslims (or anyone else for that matter), or the demolition of entire neighborhoods in Vārāṇasī (as happened during the current government's Vishwanath Corridor Project). My aim here has been to compare the living nature of the city to that of the Purāṇas and the multi-layered Māhātmya compendium. In the end, change becomes inevitable, regardless of how ancient or fixed a location or a textual work might seem from a present-day point of view.

FOOTNOTES

1. Bakker 1996, 33.
2. Directorate of Census Operations – Uttar Pradesh 2011, 25.
3. Based on census data from 2001, see “C-01: Population by religious community, Uttar Pradesh - 2001”.
4. See Desai 2017 for a detailed discussion on this topic.
5. The text in question is Chapter 36 in the compendium, and its earlier form is found in *Matsyapurāṇa*, Chapter 100.
6. The manuscript was most likely created in Vārāṇasī itself. Its current dating is unclear. An estimate based on comparable (and more easily datable) manuscripts from Vārāṇasī dates the physical manuscript to the 12th-early 13th century CE (Bisschop 2021, 5). However, Diwakar Acharya (personal communication) would give the manuscript a later, perhaps 14th-century date, mainly based on the quality of the palm-leaves. Getting access to the physical manuscript would likely help in establishing a slightly more precise dating.
7. Kaiser Library access number 66. The manuscript has been microfilmed by the NGMPP (Nepalese German Manuscript Preservation Project) on reel no. C 6/13. I have been able to use color photographs taken in 2010, kindly provided to me by Peter Bisschop. A privately-owned paper copy of the compendium also exists (Praveen Sharma, microfilmed by the NGMPP on reel E 766/7). Peter Bisschop (2021) and Sanne Mersch (2013) have also worked on parts of the manuscript compendium. It should also be noted that the condition of the manuscript after the Nepal earthquake of 2015 is unknown, and the manuscript might have been damaged or even destroyed.
8. For example, the *Kūrmapurāṇa*, the *Padmapurāṇa*, and the early *Skandapurāṇa*.
9. For example, the irregular use of noun genders or the abnormal usage of cases. See Bisschop 2021, 16-19 for a list of non-standard features of the language used in the first Māhātmya of the compendium.

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