



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.*

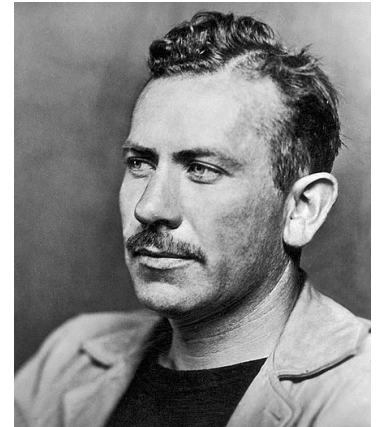
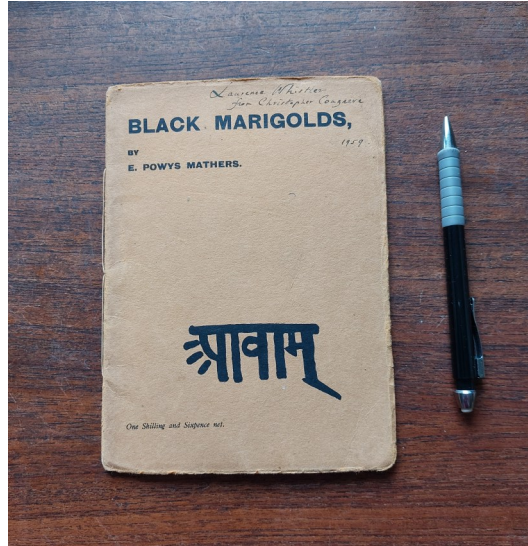


Fig. 1: John Steinbeck(1902-1968)

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 destiné à 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 détail", 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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